

Episcopal Response to Climate Change

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“Episcopal Response to Climate Change,” presentation by the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas for *Scientific, Religious, and Cultural Implications of Global Warming*, a conference sponsored by National Religious Coalition on Creation Care (co-sponsors: Interfaith Moral Action on Climate, and Presbyterian Synod of Southern California and Hawai’i), held at Saint Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Washington, DC, on April 23, 2012

I would like to express my thanks to Lisa Palmer, whose recent article in the Yale Forum on Climate Change and the Media about the ways that Episcopalians are confronting climate change¹ was a very helpful resource as I prepared these remarks.

[Lead body prayer (allow the body to pray; practice inner and outer sustainability; our bodies are the first bit of nature with which we are entrusted)]

I am an Episcopal priest from Massachusetts, and I was ordained at the cathedral in downtown Boston in 1988. That was the spring when the popular media broke the news that scientists were becoming alarmed about what would happen to the planet’s climate and ecosystems if we continued to burn fossil fuels. Like many of you, I read with uneasiness the scattered reports that began appearing in *The New York Times*. Articles showed up in the science section first, then in the sections for national and international news, then even in the pages devoted to finance and real estate, as journalists began to realize that every aspect of American life -- of human life, of life itself -- was going to be dramatically affected. For the first time, ordinary citizens began reading grim lists of what the world could anticipate if global warming went unchecked. When Bill McKibben’s seminal book, *The End of Nature*, was published in 1989, the term ‘global warming’ really began to enter public consciousness.

As I remember it, in those days the Episcopal Church was just beginning to awaken to the gravity of environmental degradation. Our governing body, General Convention, had passed resolutions about energy, the environment, and land conservation, but twenty-five-some years ago Christians in my neck of the woods didn’t hear much in sermons or Christian education about the connection between faith in God and love for God’s creation. The same year that McKibben published *The End of Nature*, what would turn out to be one of the Episcopal Church’s most ardent and eloquent voices on the sacredness of the natural world, Dr. Anne Rowthorn, published the first of her many books on the topic, *Caring for Creation*. Led by pioneers like her, the rest of the Episcopal Church had a lot of catching up to do – as did other Christian denominations. Theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson has observed that basically creation “got lost” in the thinking of western Christianity: “For the last five hundred years,” she writes, “the religious value of the earth... [was not] a subject of theology, preaching, or religious education.”²

In 1989, a year after my ordination, I stepped into the pulpit of my suburban church and launched into the first sermon that I had ever preached – or ever heard – about the environment. Two weeks before,

1 Lisa Palmer, “Episcopalians Confronting Climate Change,” *Yale Forum on Climate Change and the Media*, March 6, 2012: <http://www.yaleclimatemediaforum.org/2012/03/episcopalians-confronting-climate-change/>

2 Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (distributed for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions), 2000, p. 4.

on Good Friday, the Exxon Valdez supertanker had struck a reef in Alaska and spilled nearly eleven million gallons of crude oil across hundreds of miles of sea. Into that sermon I poured my outrage and sorrow about our disturbed relationship with the earth, and made an ardent appeal for eco-conversion, for a transformation of consciousness and behavior as radical as the conversion that St. Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. When I sat down, I thought rather smugly that I had done a pretty good job of it, but after the service was over, a baffled parishioner came up to me and said, “I don’t get it. What does religion have to do with ecology?”

With chagrin I saw that it would take more than one sermon -- however impassioned -- to persuade people of God’s urgent call to reclaim the sacredness of Creation, and I saw how much more work and thinking I still had to -- and all Christians had to do -- if we wanted to respond effectively to the world’s enormous environmental challenges. I settled into the work of trying to figure out how to do that.

As we celebrate Earth Day 2012, I am glad to say that much in the Episcopal Church has changed since 1988 and 1989. In September 2011, the bishops of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Quito, Ecuador, sent a pastoral letter³ to Episcopal clergy worldwide that begins with a call to repentance “as we face the unfolding environmental crisis of the earth.” The letter affirms “God’s abiding and all-encompassing love for creation” and recognizes that “we cannot separate ourselves as humans from the rest of the created order.” Giving particular prominence to the mounting urgency of addressing climate change, and acknowledging that “the poor and the disadvantaged... suffer most from callous environmental irresponsibility,” the letter commits the bishops and urges every Episcopalian “to lift up prayers for environmental justice, for sustainable development, and for help in restoring right relations both among humankind and between humankind and the rest of creation.” The letter calls for commitment to energy conservation, to the use of clean, renewable sources of energy, and to efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle, and it challenges us “to seek to understand and uproot the political, social, and economic causes of environmental destruction and abuse.”

This letter from the House of Bishops – which includes all the bishops of the Episcopal Church -- drew some of its language and ideas from a pastoral letter on the environment entitled “To Serve Christ in All Creation,”⁴ that was released by the bishops of New England (Province One) in 2003. I was the principal author of that first-ever Episcopal pastoral letter on the environment. I also helped to edit a pastoral letter⁵ that was released in 2009 by a group of Episcopal bishops from the other side of the country, in dioceses extending from Hawaii and Alaska to California and Arizona, a letter that focused on taking action “to avert catastrophic and irreversible changes to life on this planet” because of global warming.

The Episcopal Church includes about 1.9 million people in the United States, and its leaders have tak-

3 “A Pastoral Teaching from the Bishops of the Episcopal Church,” meeting in Province IX, in Quito, Ecuador, September 2011, : <http://episcopalmn.org/NEWS/EPISCOPAL-CHURCH-HOUSE-OF-BISHOPS-ISSUES-A-PASTORAL-TEACHING/>.

4 <http://eenonline.org/download/p1-ltr-030227.htm>

5 http://king.azdiocese.org/digital_faith/news/150573

en a strong public stand on the spiritual, theological, and moral grounds for combating climate change. Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, the soon-to-retire leader of the Anglican Communion (the worldwide ‘family’ of Churches of which the Episcopal Church is a part), has spoken frequently about global warming.⁶ In the strongest possible terms, he has warned that the price of our continued failure to protect the earth will be violence and social collapse.⁷ The Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, decided to fast from flying for a year⁸ in order to reduce his carbon footprint. And the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., Katharine Jefferts Schori, has repeatedly addressed climate change in sermons, speeches, and public testimony.

Jefferts Schori was an oceanographer before she was ordained to the priesthood, and when she speaks about the climate crisis, she brings together a respect for science with a deep faith in God. At a U.S. Senate environment committee hearing in 2007,⁹ Jefferts Schori explained that “no life form can be studied in isolation from its surroundings or from other organisms. All living things are deeply interconnected, and all life depends on the life of others.” Jefferts Schori is a champion of the Millennium Development Goals developed by the United Nations, which include preserving the natural environment as an essential part of relieving human suffering around the world. Her Senate testimony focused on the ways that climate change and poverty are “intimately related.” On behalf of the Episcopal Church and of the many denominations that are part of the National Council of Churches, she expressed “a profound concern that climate change will most severely affect those living in poverty and the most vulnerable in our communities here in the United States and around the world.”

“I want to be absolutely clear,” she said; “inaction on our part is the most costly of all courses of action for those living in poverty.”

Statements like these are the latest in a series of communications about climate change that have been consistently framed by the Episcopal Church as a matter of stewardship of creation, social justice, and loving service in response to human need -- three of the so-called “Five Marks of Mission” that guide Episcopalians, and indeed all members of the Anglican Communion.¹⁰

(Incidentally, last Saturday, April 21, the Episcopal Church organized a two-hour live Webcast, led by our Presiding Bishop, on “The Intersection of Poverty and the Environment,”¹¹ which featured religious, environmental, political and community organizing experts and is available on demand.)

6 <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2259/archbishops-video-message-for-climate-change-talks-in-durban>

7 <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/rowan-williams-a-planet-on-the-brink-489537.html>

8 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jun/14/religion.leohickmanonethicalliving>

9 http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/79425_86667_ENG_HTML.htm

10 <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/five-marks-mission>, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>

11 <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/04/21/people-of-faith-called-to-be-environmental-activists/>

Over the years, the governing body of the Episcopal Church, General Convention, has passed many resolutions¹² on renewable energy, conservation, environmental sustainability, and environmental racism -- resolutions that are directed both at our own life as a religious community and at our nation's public policies. The Church is engaged in many other efforts relating to climate change,¹³ but perhaps its most significant project right now is the Genesis Covenant.¹⁴ Initiated by Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, and adopted unanimously in 2009 by our Church's General Convention, the Genesis Covenant commits the Church to reducing the greenhouse gas emissions in all church facilities -- including places of worship, schools, offices, camps, and retreat centers -- by 50 percent within ten years.

The Genesis Covenant has the potential to make a big difference across the Church's 7,000 parishes in the U.S., and it also has the potential to inspire and bring together people of many faiths. The vision of the Genesis Covenant¹⁵ is that people of all religious traditions can work together to save the earth, and the initiative was named "Genesis Covenant" as a way "to honor the sacredness of creation as embraced by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike in the Genesis story. The word 'covenant' is an ancient term used to signify a religious pledge made between God and humanity."¹⁶ Just as the Episcopal Church has made this commitment, so the national leadership of *every* religious community in the U.S. is invited to make its own public commitment to the Genesis Covenant.

I am an enthusiastic supporter of the Genesis Covenant and I served for a time on its steering committee, but its weakness is that it is a strictly voluntary program, and depends entirely for its success on local leadership.¹⁷ What's more, it's almost impossible to track the reductions. Still, the Genesis Covenant holds great promise, and just a couple of days ago, the Church's Office of Environmental and Economic Affairs released a resource guide¹⁸ to make it easier for church communities to get started. The Episcopal Church in New England (Province One) will soon launch a campaign to "Turn Off the Lights for God's Sake."

Many organizations founded and/or led by Episcopalians have sprung up over the years to empower households and faith communities to take the plunge and move toward energy efficiency and conservation. For instance, Earth Ministry,¹⁹ an ecumenical, non-profit organization founded in Seattle in 1992 by three Episcopalians -- the Rev. Carla Berkedal Pryne, Ruth Mulligan and Jim Mulligan -- has become a national leader in cultivating environmental awareness and ecological stewardship among

12 http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_topic_search.pl?topic=Environment

13 <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/?s=climate+change>

14 http://gc2009.org/ViewLegislation/view_leg_detail.aspx?id=958&ctype=Final

15 <http://genesis.eds.edu/about.htm>

16 Ibid.

17 So far only a few dioceses and churches have formally started to implement the Genesis Covenant. According to Lisa Palmer, op. cit., these include the Dioceses of Chicago, Olympia (Washington), and Arkansas; the Diocese of Massachusetts has also expressed its support: <http://www.diomass.org/diocesan-news/diocesan-convention-focuses-answering-gods-urgent-call>.

18 <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/eco-justice>

19 <http://earthministry.org/>

Christians. Earth Ministry programs and resources are in use across the U.S. and in Canada, and are available to all.

Another Episcopal priest, the Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, is motivating and equipping people to address climate change by helping churches around the country to lead by example. The environment minister at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco, Bingham is the founder and president of The Regeneration Project, an ecology and faith group that oversees Interfaith Power & Light,²⁰ a national non-profit that helps congregations become better stewards of energy. Chapters of Interfaith Power and Light now operate in 39 states and involve more than 14,000 congregations.

As one last example, I'll mention yet another Episcopal priest, the Rev. Harper Fletcher, who is the Executive Director of Greenfaith,²¹ one of the oldest religious-environmental organizations in the U.S. Centered in New Jersey, the Greenfaith Fellowship program offers religious-environmental training not often found in seminaries or universities, and the Greenfaith Certification program offers diverse congregations a roadmap and resources for becoming certified as a Greenfaith sanctuary.

What else is going on in the Episcopal Church? We have an Episcopal Ecological Network,²² a grass-roots online community that has the potential to grow in effectiveness as it carries out its mission to “educate, encourage, and facilitate” the Episcopal Church in the stewardship of God’s Creation.” The Anglican Communion Environmental Network²³ is a good source of environmental resources and news from the worldwide Anglican Communion, and is a powerful voice for challenging and transforming systems that spoil the earth. Earlier this month, after meeting in Lima, Peru, the Anglican Communion Environmental Network published a manifesto “committing its members to taking concrete steps in support of Anglican efforts to achieve environmental justice.”²⁴ Believing that “creation is in crisis,” the group wrote in a subsequent publication: “Among those systems most in need of transformation is an economic system that knows no alternative to continual growth. Rather than having an economy that serves the well-being of communities, our communities (human and other-than-human) serve the well-being of the economy.”

Meanwhile, many Episcopal dioceses are taking creative steps to address climate change. The Diocese of Chicago has set up a Sustainability Task Force²⁵ that seeks to integrate sustainable practices throughout the diocese. On April 30 the Diocese of Vermont will celebrate the installation of a huge solar array at its diocesan retreat center, with – yes – Bill McKibben as the keynote speaker.²⁶ The Diocese of Olympia (in Washington State) is encouraging energy efficiency and conservation, and has also

20 <http://interfaithpowerandlight.org/>

21 <http://greenfaith.org/>

22 <http://eenonline.org/>

23 <http://acen.anglicancommunion.org/index.cfm>

24 <http://acen.anglicancommunion.org/news/index.cfm/2012/4/2/Anglicans-publish-their-manifesto-to-fight-for-environmental-justice>

25 <http://www.episcopalchicago.org/at-work-in-the-world/sustainability/>

26 http://www.diovermont.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=256:rock-point-solar-installation-dedication-april-30-2012&catid=36:episcopal-diocese-of-vermont-news&Itemid=219

established a carbon offset cooperative mission in partnership with the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Philippines to support reforestation.²⁷ My home Diocese of Massachusetts, thanks to the inspired leadership of recently retired Bishop Bud Cederholm (whom we affectionately call our “green” bishop), has dedicated the season of late Pentecost as a “Season of Creation,” in which sermons and educational offerings focus on restoring a right relationship between human beings and the rest of the natural world. The Diocese of Massachusetts is also encouraging parishes in very tangible ways through its new Creation Care Initiative,²⁸ which provides grants and loans to assist congregations in funding their purchase of energy-saving equipment and supplies.

When it comes to the average Episcopalian in the average pew – if there is such a thing – I dare to hope that more and more congregations are awakening to the call to love God, our neighbors and our dear, God-given earth as ourselves. I continue to be amazed by the creativity and persistence of so many people of faith. One church installs solar panels and invests in geo-thermal energy; another encourages parishioners to walk, bike, or car-pool to church. One parish arranges visits to political leaders to advocate for environmental justice; yet another organizes an outdoor, interfaith prayer vigil in response to a tragic oil spill.

I particularly enjoyed a story that I learned this week about an Episcopal church in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.²⁹ The rector of St. James’ Church, the Rev. Francine Hills, told me that in 2008 the outer, stone wall of the church collapsed, and the congregation was evicted per order of the building inspector. Rather than hustling to raise the huge sum of money that would have been required to restore the building, the congregation sold the building and began holding Sunday worship services in a reception hall. St. James’ had an informal relationship with a local farm, which invited the children over every Advent to make wreaths for people who were sick and shut-in. Over pizza at one of these gatherings, one of the parish kids remarked, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a garden to feed hungry people?” Thus was born what came to be known as Gideon’s Garden: the farm donated one-third of an acre of land to the parish, along with plants and expertise, and the youth and other members of St. James’ began to plant and harvest food for local food pantries, a local multicultural day camp, and a project for at-risk children.

“That garden is the main thing that has kept us together and hopeful,” Rev. Hills told me. “It is a palpable experience of God being with us.”

Last September, when Hurricane Irene roared across New England, the farm’s entire crop of pumpkin and squash was ruined by flooding. The leaders of St. James’ Church quickly voted to donate \$12,000 to the owners of the farm, set up a \$5,000 matching grant, and applied for and received grants from the Episcopal Relief and Development Crisis Fund to help pay for such things as a tractor.

As Rev. Hills put it, “We in the church were in the middle of a wilderness journey, and in that context

27 <http://www.ecww.org/carbon-offset-cooperative-mission>

28 <http://www.diomass.org/creation-care-initiative>

29 This story was reported in *Pastoral Staff*, a publication of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts.

the people had the spirit to reach out. They helped a local farmer from going under.”

I hear many things in this story, but what especially heartens me is that -- in a time of uncertainty and rapid change, when climate change threatens to unravel life as we know it – people and communities are reaching out to each other in love and building new collaborations that are mutually life-giving. Connecting churches and farms -- connecting people with each other, with the land, and with the God they love -- is what builds resilience in uncertain times.

What about the future? Who will help to teach and train the religious leaders that we need in the years ahead so that churchgoers will be informed in both theology and science, and motivated to place care for God’s Creation at the center of their moral and spiritual concern? There are eleven Episcopal seminaries nationwide, and I’ll say a word about four of them. Church Divinity School of the Pacific, out in Berkeley, California, is participating in the Green Seminary Initiative,³⁰ which is “dedicated to building a nationwide coalition of theological schools that infuse care of the earth into all aspects of theological education.” It’s one thing to have one popular teacher teach one popular course about Creation care; it’s quite another when a seminary’s entire faculty, staff and students work together to “green” all aspects of their community life. So I hope that more Episcopal seminaries will get involved in this initiative, though several seminaries are embarked on creative projects of their own.

Berkeley Divinity School at Yale³¹ has raised \$1.5 million dollars so far in its campaign to create a chair in faith and ecology, and it offers a very unusual joint degree program with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. The University of the South (Sewanee)³² runs a Center for Religion and Environment that “seeks to transform individuals and society by helping them integrate their faith with care for the environment.” Finally, my alma mater, Episcopal Divinity School,³³ where I taught for many years, has a fierce and long-standing commitment to social justice that is expanding to include environmental justice, as well. In addition to striving to reduce its carbon footprint, the seminary offers courses such as “God and Creation,” in which students study ecological theology not only in the classroom, but also by engaging in hands-on practice and learning, as when they visit an organic farm and learn directly about the interconnectedness of soil, sun, water, and plants, and about the kinship of human beings with the rest of the natural world.

As far as theological resources go, we can all be grateful for the groundbreaking work of Sallie McFague, an Episcopalian, who is one of the leading figures in ecological theology. Her latest book, *A New Climate: God, the World, and Global Warming*, is a powerful and persuasive call to Christians to think, act, and pray in new ways as we face potentially catastrophic climate change.

A quick survey of the Episcopal response to global warming would be incomplete if it didn’t mention the many times that Episcopalians have taken their love of God and God’s Creation out of the sanctuary and into the streets. My own engagement in climate activism began in 2001, when I joined a newly

30 <http://www.greenseminaries.org>

31 <http://berkeleydivinity.net/>

32 <http://www.sewanee.edu/cre>

33 <http://eds.edu/>

formed interfaith network, Religious for the Earth,³⁴ and was arrested outside the Department of Energy here in DC during a vigil to protest our government's energy policy and its intention to drill for more oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Episcopal Church has long affirmed the sanctity of the Refuge and opposes drilling there for oil.³⁵ I've been an ally of Bill McKibben since 2001, when we marched outside car dealerships in Lynn, a city north of Boston, to protest the auto industry's promotion of SUV's, and Bill is on the advisory board of Religious Witness for the Earth. Since 2001 Religious Witness for the Earth has organized several significant acts of public prayer and witness in which Episcopal bishops, priests, and lay people participated -- most memorably, for me, in 2007, when we organized a one-hundred mile Interfaith Walk for Climate Rescue that ended with an interfaith worship service and rally in downtown Boston.

Episcopalians were among those arrested last summer at the Tar Sands protest against the Keystone XL pipeline, and in November Episcopalians were among those who followed up that protest by making a human chain around the White House that was 10,000 people strong, an effort that met with at least short-term success. But the battle to stop that pipeline, to stabilize the climate, and to protect and heal God's Creation is far from over, and I anticipate that public marches and non-violent civil disobedience may well become an increasingly significant part of the religious environmental movement in the years ahead.

The Episcopal Church has come a long way since the days when most churchgoers perceived no connection between religion and ecology, but we still have a long way to go. The urgent need to tackle climate change has yet to be grasped by every church leader, every organization, every congregation, and every heart. A few weeks ago, when I visited a church in the Boston area and preached a Lenten sermon about Jesus challenging us to transform the social and economic structures that propel climate change, two people in the congregation walked out. When I mentioned this to a sympathetic friend, she suggested that maybe the two people walked out because they were overcome with sorrow for planet Earth and needed a place to weep in private. Of course that wasn't the case -- as folks who knew were quick to tell me, the two were climate skeptics.

To put it mildly, there is work to be done.

It seems to me that human beings are on a long journey back to understanding our connection with the earth. That's the challenge before us: how to find our way to union with God and all God's creation, how to reclaim our partnership with other humans and with all living creatures.

You know as well as I do that we live in a time of endings. It is increasingly clear that to persist on our current course -- to devour the planet's resources faster than they can be replenished, to dig a chasm between the wealthy few and the impoverished multitude, to depend on non-renewable energy and to produce a killing level of greenhouse gases -- is to leave a devastated world to our children and grandchildren.

34 <http://rwearth.org/>

35 http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1991-D125

I am grateful for the many faithful actions already taken by the Episcopal Church, and I hope that there will be many, many more – that we will be part of the healing and transformation of human societies and human consciousness that we -- and the world -- so badly need. There is much that we need to do, but I must add, in closing, that our efforts must always be infused with prayer. Prayer helps us to know that we are more than chaplains at the deathbed of the old order -- we are also midwives of God's new creation. In prayer we can drink from the wellspring of divine love that flows within us, and can ask the Spirit's guidance in our quest to heal a broken world. In prayer we can receive what we so deeply need: a dose of the sweet, surprising discovery that we and our fellow human beings can be more than a cancer on the earth -- that God loves us and empowers us to re-claim who we really are: creatures made in the image of God, created to be a blessing to each other and to our other-than-human kin.

I would like to close with a prayer from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer:

“O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature; Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*” (BCP, page 239)



The Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Ph.D., is a Priest Associate at Grace Church (Amherst, MA), and an author, educator, and retreat leader. Margaret contributed to two pastoral letters on the environment issued by bishops of the Episcopal Church (“To Serve Christ in All Creation,” Province I; A Letter on the Environment, Province VIII), and helped to draft and launch the Genesis Covenant. A long-time environmental activist, she has been a leader in Religious Witness for the Earth (www.rwearth.org) since her arrest in 2001 at the Department of Energy in Washington, D.C., and she helped to organize the Interfaith Walk for Climate Rescue. Her latest book, Joy of Heaven, To Earth Come Down (daily devotions for Advent and Christmas that focus on the sacredness of Creation) will be published in the fall of 2012 by Forward Movement/Church Publishing. She maintains a website: www.holyhunger.org.

*Episcopal News Service reported on the conference:
<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/04/24/episcopalians-join-religious-voice-at-climate-change-conference/>*