

# The Episcopal Church – standing up to climate change denial?

## Margaret Daly-Denton writes:

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*In May 2017 President Donald Trump announced that he intended to withdraw the United States of America from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord which was signed by 195 countries. The landmark Paris agreement was a remarkable first step toward averting a critically dangerous two-degree rise in global warming. The President's decision was a major blow to the international effort to battle rising temperatures. We thought that readers of SEARCH would be interested to know how The Episcopal Church is responding, not only to this watershed moment, but also to the climate crisis generally. We begin with the statement that the Presiding Bishop issued on 1 June 2017 immediately after the president's announcement. We then learn of an Episcopal diocese that has linked up with the local conference of the United Church of Christ to sponsor the work of a full-time Missioner for Creation Care. We gather from the Executive Director of an interfaith environmental organisation that divestment from fossil fuel industries will continue to be a work in progress as long as there are church leaders who conscientiously oppose it, while still insisting that it is immoral to deny the conclusions of climate science. And finally, we hear from a seminarian whose preparation for ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church of the future includes the study of ecology at Yale University.*

## Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry wrote on 1 June 2017:

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WITH the announcement by President Donald Trump of his decision to withdraw the commitment made by the United States to the Paris Climate Accord, I am reminded of the words of the old spiritual which speaks of God and God's creation in these words, "He's got the whole world in his hands." The whole world belongs to God, as Psalm 24 teaches us. God's eye is ever on even the tiny sparrow, as Jesus taught and the song says (Luke 12:6). And we human beings have been charged with being trustees, caretakers, stewards of God's creation (Genesis 1:26-31).

The United States has been a global leader in caring for God's creation through efforts over the years on climate change. President Trump's announcement changes the U.S. leadership role in the international sphere. Despite this announcement, many U.S. businesses, states, cities, regions, non-governmental organisations and faith bodies like The Episcopal Church can continue to take bold action to address the climate crisis. The phrase, "We're still in," has become a statement of commitment for many of us who, regardless of this decision by our President, are still committed to the principles of the Paris Agreement.

Faith bodies like The Episcopal Church occupy a unique space in the worldwide climate movement. In the context of the United Nations, the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, we are an international body representing 17 countries in the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia and the Pacific. We also are an admitted observer organisation to the UNFCCC process, empowered to bring accredited observers to the UN climate change meetings. Furthermore, The Episcopal Church is a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion, the third-largest Christian tradition, and we remain committed to ensuring that Anglicans everywhere are empowered to undertake bold action on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

We know that caring for God's creation by engaging climate change is not only good for the environment, but also good for the health and welfare of our people. The U.S. is currently creating more clean jobs faster than job creation in nearly every other sector of the economy, and unprecedented acceleration in the clean energy sector is also evident in many other major economies.

My prayer is that we in The Episcopal Church will, in this and all things, follow the way, the teachings and the Spirit of Jesus by cultivating a loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, all others in the human family, and with all of God's good creation.

In spite of hardships and setbacks, the work goes on. This is God's world. And we are all his children. And *He's got the whole world in his hands.*

## Rev Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, missionary for creation care in Massachusetts, writes:

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I WAS ordained in June 1988, the same month that renowned climate scientist James Hanson testified to the U.S. Senate that rising greenhouse gas emissions were destabilising the global climate. Somehow God placed that concern upon my heart. Seeking to address climate change became part of my ministry from that point on.

After 25 years of parish ministry and part-time climate activism, I finally became a full-time, faith-based climate activist in 2014. As Missioner for Creation Care, I serve both the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ – an unusual ecumenical platform from which to mobilise a religious response to the climate crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after President Trump announced his decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accord, leaders across the Episcopal Church mobilised a vigorous response. I helped lead the charge from my corner of the Church, co-writing the following day an ecumenical statement, “An opportunity for which the church was born”, that was released by the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ.<sup>2</sup> It reproaches the President for making a tragic mistake that violates the values and vision of Christian faith. Yet the statement is primarily addressed not to politicians, but to followers of Jesus. It issues three calls to the Church:

### **1. Accept the mantle of moral leadership**

This means that clergy speak from their pulpits about the moral obligation of our generation to protect God's creation. The web of

life is unravelling before our eyes. If we keep to our present course, climate change will likely render parts of the world uninhabitable by the end of this century. Now is the time for the Church to rise up and to proclaim that the Jesus movement will not back away from God's call to protect our common home.

I travel from church to church, preaching about the climate crisis. I am sorry to say that when I ask people to raise their hand if they have ever heard a sermon about climate change, too often not a

single hand goes up. For many reasons – including fear of being deemed 'too political', fear of losing pledges, fear of stirring up controversy, and fear of not knowing sufficient science or theology – many preachers avoid the topic, leaving their flock to grope for hope and direction all by themselves.

*The Jesus movement will not back away from God's call to protect our common home*

The Church is a sleeping giant. We don't need to be driven by fear! If we take hold of our faith in the risen Christ, we will be given the words and the will to lead people out of the tomb of denial, despair, and inertia and into faith-filled, purposeful action to build a just and sustainable future. Because clergy sometimes need to be equipped to preach about climate, I've

helped to organise workshops for clergy in which a scientist explains current climate data, a teacher or preacher speaks about theology, and activists share ways that Church members can join the climate movement.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Incarnate change**

This means that individuals and congregations set a moral example by living more sustainably and reducing consumption, especially consumption of dirty energy. Forming a Green Team or Creation Care Committee in your congregation is one way to raise awareness, help your community take stock of its environmental practices, and change behaviour. Making personal choices to live more lightly on the Earth – and supporting each other to do so – is a fundamental way to align our lives with gospel values and to live with greater integrity. At the same time, because of the scope and speed of the climate crisis, making individual changes in lifestyle is not enough to solve the problem. We also need to work for systemic change – to join with other justice movements, to form coalitions, and to press

for the political and economic transformation that alone can give us a chance to preserve a habitable, governable planet.

### **3. Proclaim truth in the public square**

Our third call to the Church reminds us of the role that faith communities have historically played in organising for systemic change, from ending slavery to pushing for civil rights, labour reforms, LGBTQ rights, and other just causes. Episcopalians, other Christians, and members of many other faith traditions are banding together to resist expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure and to demand new sources of renewable energy that are accessible to all communities. Here in Massachusetts, many people of faith are taking direct action. Some lead weekly prayer vigils to protest construction of a natural gas compressor station in metropolitan Boston; others engage in peaceful civil disobedience to resist new natural gas pipelines. Meanwhile, clergy and lay leaders of many faiths, inspired by Pope Francis' climate encyclical *Laudato Si'*, are building ad hoc coalitions to push for legislative progress at the state level.

These three calls to the Church only begin to sketch the vital role that followers of Jesus must play in the years ahead. The Church was made for a time like this. God is calling us to become an Easter people, to step out of despair and inertia and to join – maybe even to lead – the joyful, justice-seeking, Spirit-led, unstoppable movement to protect the world that God entrusted to our care.

### **Rev Fletcher Harper, executive director of GreenFaith, writes:**



DURING the summer of 2014, a small group of activists within The Episcopal Church began planning to bring fossil fuel divestment resolutions to the Church's 2015 General Convention, due to take place five months before the Paris Climate negotiations. These activists, who called themselves Episcopalians for Fossil Fuel Divestment and Renewable Energy Reinvestment, developed plans to support divestment resolutions within their dioceses during the nine months prior to General Convention.

The resolutions from the dioceses, while not identical, shared the following characteristics. They called on the Episcopal Church

Pension Fund, which manages over \$9 billion in clergy retirement funds and the trust assets under the management of The Episcopal Church, totaling over \$380 million, to adopt a policy to refrain from purchasing any new holdings of public equities and corporate bonds of the world's leading 200 fossil fuel companies as identified by the Carbon Underground, and to divest from all such holdings within five years. They also called on the Pension Fund and The Episcopal Church to develop and implement plans to begin or increase 'impact investing' in the renewable energy sector, with a particular focus on investments that would create access to electricity in energy-poor regions of the world.

Each resolution based its call for action on a theological foundation that affirmed God as Creator of the Earth and of humanity as stewards of creation. The resolutions all relied on the widely respected analysis of Carbon Tracker, which had conclusively demonstrated that fossil fuel companies would need to leave at least two thirds of their reserves underground to avoid a global temperature rise of more than 2<sup>o</sup>C, the consensus limit of the world's scientific community, and on research by a range of NGO's that demonstrated clearly that the fossil fuel industry was failing to align its business models with plans that would achieve this result.

*Climate change represents a titanic threat to all life, and especially to the poor*

By the end of January 2015, resolutions had been adopted by the dioceses of Nebraska, Newark, Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts, laying the groundwork for debate about the issue at General Convention. The team of activists proceeded to arrange a meeting with leaders of the Church Pension Group (CPG), including the CEO; Managing Director and Chief Investment Officer; Chief Legal Officer and CPG Secretary; and Chief Ecclesiastical Officer. The meeting revealed clearly that CPG leadership was opposed to fossil fuel divestment.

In late spring 2015, the Church's Executive Council Investment Committee sent a memo to the General Convention in which it recommended that Convention rebuff calls for fossil fuel divestment and continue to express its concern about climate change through shareholder advocacy. The memo, initially confidential, became widely available in the lead-up to General Convention.

In the face of opposition to divestment from these centres of leadership within the church, debate took place at General Convention, with the House of Bishops debating the resolution first. The bishops removed the Church Pension Group from the resolution and passed the amended measure. Then, the Convention's House of Deputies voted to support divestment by a 618-204 margin. However, the Episcopal News Service, the Church's official press office, did not feature the divestment commitment in its reporting on Convention. In response, Episcopalians for Fossil Fuel Divestment and Renewable Energy Reinvestment issued a statement commending Convention's action, from which the following quotations are taken:

Climate change represents a titanic threat to all life, and especially to the poor. This resolution puts our church on record that it's wrong to profit from an industry whose business causes climate change. (Archdeacon Betsy Blake Bennett, Diocese of Nebraska)

God calls us to "tend and keep the earth" (Gen 2:15). Jesus teaches that we must care for those who are most vulnerable as if we were caring for him (Mt 25:40). This resolution means that the church is aligning its investments with its values. (Bishop Bud Cederholm, Diocese of Massachusetts)

God calls us to be stewards of earth's diverse community of life. By voting to divest, The Episcopal Church is showing that we take this responsibility seriously. (Rev. Stephanie Johnson, Diocese of Connecticut)

The time has come to bear our witness in this new, faithful, courageous manner. For the sake of life and of justice, the time has come for the church to divest, and also to find ways to reinvest in clean energy access for the world's poor. (Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Diocese of Western Massachusetts)

Following General Convention, Episcopalians for Fossil Fuel Divestment and Renewable Energy Reinvestment wrote to the Church's newly elected Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, urging him to publicise the Church's divestment commitment and requesting a

meeting to explore ways in which the group might support increased climate action by the Church.

## Nathan Empsall, Yale Divinity School seminarian writes:

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GOD WILLING and the Episcopal Diocese of Spokane consenting, I will be ordained a priest in The Episcopal Church in two years. First, I need to finish seminary at Yale Divinity School. I also need to finish my Master of Environmental Management at Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

When I describe this joint-degree program to former co-workers from my first career, working in politics in Washington DC, I am often met with confusion. "Wow," they say, "I've never thought about that. That's... an interesting combination!" I used always to give the same easy reply: "Well, you know that churches try to help the poor, right? And you also know that pollution and climate change hurt the poor more than anyone? I'm exercising my Christian duty to social justice by focusing on environmental justice."

That used to be my reply, but over the past two years at Yale, I have found that my answer has grown. I am still deeply committed to environmental justice, but it is no longer my sole focus. I have now also adopted the theological and scientific viewpoint that humans are not separate from or above nature. We are part of it, and deeply embedded in it. Everything on this planet is interconnected. This is basic ecology: Carbon, water, soil, nitrogen, and rock cycles are all intertwined. Earth's systems are a house of cards, and changing just one piece can cause the whole thing to come tumbling down. This is especially true of the global climate. Everything from our transportation habits to our diet choices, as both individuals and as nations, has an impact on sea levels, storms, wildlife extinction, and more. Climate change is not an environmental issue - it is an everything issue.

When it comes to interconnection, in many ways the environmental sciences are only just catching up with religion. I have learned from Professors John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker that interconnection is a central concept in many forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and indigenous lifeways. Pope Francis reminds us that it is also a vital Christian concept, writing in *Laudato Si*, "Everything



is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.”

This means that everything Christians care about, from liturgy to helping the poor, is impacted by climate change. Until we realise we are a part of nature, not just its masters or stewards, and act accordingly, we will not be able fully to live into our Christian responsibilities.

I don't know yet if God is calling me to be a parish priest; but I do know that I will continue my career in politics and organising, now from an ordained perspective. That's not always easy here in the United States. We have what we call “the separation of church and state.” While I do support keeping the two formal institutions separate from one another, many confuse ‘church and state’ with ‘faith and politics’. No one should be expected to set aside their understanding of creation when engaging with the social issues that are part of that creation. Nevertheless, many American ministers are skittish about addressing social issues, including the politics of climate change. Some fear offending their congregants, while others have a misplaced but understandable fear of running afoul of our Constitution.

This skittishness holds us back from engaging with the issues that matter most to God's people, including climate change. As the Rev. William Barber, a noted progressive leader, said here at Yale, “To be a pastor and then not be concerned about the social and public conditions that create the pastoral needs of your people is a form of malpractice”. There are thousands of Episcopalians, both lay and ordained, who are active on climate change. At the same time, we could be doing even more to care for the whole of God's creation, especially when the threats to that creation are political. I pray each morning that the Spirit will give us the tools, the conviction, and the will to begin that work anew, today.

#### NOTES

- 1 Margaret Bullitt-Jonas' website <http://revivingcreation.org/> offers articles, sermons, books, blog posts, and more.
- 2 <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/opportunity-which-church-was-born-0>
- 3 For preaching resources, visit <http://blessedtomorrow.org/>  
See also Leah D, Schade, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2015).