

**RELIGIONS FOR THE EARTH CONFERENCE
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 2014
Conference report**



**Religions
for the Earth
CONFERENCE**

The conference coincided with New York climate week and the UN climate change conference. Delegates were welcomed by Rev. Serene Jones, President of the Union Theological Seminary. The conference explored the role of faith traditions in caring for the earth. All faith traditions teach reverence for the earth and the conference gave space to seek guidance from those teachings and from each other.

What Moves Us: Values, Narratives & the Climate Crisis

Speakers from the indigenous people of America welcomed guests and called for reconciliation between people and the earth. The spirit of life and regeneration is vital and our voracious consumption has upset the balance of life. 'There can be no peace as long as we wage war on our mother the earth'.

Rabbi Ellen Bernstein explored Jewish teachings about care for the earth. Biblical ecology is founded in ethics and concentrates on treatment of the land; for the land read the earth. When it calls upon people to respect the land; it calls upon us to respect the earth but for too long this message has gone unheeded.

Speakers questioned the purpose of the economy, how it allocates resources in America and how economic growth does not benefit the poor. Keith Warner (a Franciscan) spoke of the legacy of St. Francis and how Christians now wait for church leaders to make the connection between care for creation and the person of Jesus Christ.

Environmental considerations traditionally have been 'backgrounded' by religion. Can we realign our understanding so that the earth is not in the background but becomes the grounds on which we build faith?

In Harm's Way: How Climate Change Hurts People & Planet



Vandana Shiva spoke of the current impact of climate change on India. Agriculture and the food industry is one of the major contributors to climate change; it has become highly carbon intensive. Corporate power is promoting a new form of carbon intensive agriculture in India. Navdyana is a campaign group in India seeking to counter the spread of this new western style of farming and the political power it is associated with.

Edwin Gariguez of Caritas Philippines reported on the development of environmental action and the role of indigenous spirituality. The vulnerability of the Philippines to climate change was demonstrated by typhoon Haiyan; the greatest impacts fell upon the poor and the duty of the church is to care for the poor. What gives us hope? In a time of pessimism a great contribution of faith is to give hope. This can galvanise human activity to resist

In Harm's Way

Climate change and poverty workshop

Community empowerment is a crucial component in helping communities affected by poverty to respond to climate change. Rather than tackle climate change in communities where its importance may seem remote, it is better to start with issues that affect the community: transportation, food, flooding, community energy.

Economic development ; tackling poverty and responding to climate change are not in opposition. There are complexities but a response rooted in faith can help resolve these issues. This is the starting point for work with congregations.

Making the Connections:

Spiritualities of Leadership & Transformation Towards a New Global Community

The islands of Micronesia are in the forefront of climate change impacts. Low lying atolls are most at risk, with coastal erosion and salt water encroaching on fresh ground water. Precious but fragile environments and their populations are at risk. This has become a principal concern for Micronesia and a diplomatic challenge it is pursuing at the UN.

Jackie Huggins brought greeting from the aboriginal populations of Australia. In aboriginal belief the land is sacred; the relationship between people, society and the land is crucial. Ownership of land is a social act but also a spiritual act.

Melanie Harris

Black feminist history offers new insights into the environmental crisis. The logic of domination in slavery is now reflected in dominion over the earth and systematic violence is part of this history of domination. People of colour in America are rarely recognised as part of the environmental movement yet they have insights from a history of oppression and violence and the response that seeks justice. Seek a new justice; take action for the earth.

Our Voices.Net

Tessa Tennant asked why faith groups have had so little impact on the climate change debate so far. Most faiths are not talking about this issue. It remains of marginal importance for most mainstream faith groups and the impact on politicians and the CoP process has been minimal. *Our Voices* is a new tool for people of faith. This will include digital on line action (a 'preet' or prayer tweet); an email campaign will start in the USA, sharing stories of actions within churches. Hindu Buddhist and Muslim speakers pledged support to the our voices campaign.

From Belief to Action: conservation advocacy and divestment

Speakers highlighted the work of Interfaith Power and Light, founded over 20 years ago in the USA, the longstanding commitment of the Church of Sweden where work started on green issues in 1992, Greenfaith, eco-congregations and other groups. Guillermo Kerber Mas reported on the decision by the WCC to divest from fossil fuels, one step in a long process of responding to climate change and its work with the UN Human Rights Council and the CoP process.

Closing plenary

Rajendra Pachauri, Chairman of the IPCC addressed the conference calling upon faith groups to make a difference: business as usual is not an option. He reiterated key messages from the IPCC, whose synthesis report on the fifth assessment will be published in October.

- We are 95% certain that we are bringing about changes that are not natural.
- Oceans have absorbed 90% of the energy generated by climate change and sea level is rising.
- In 2010 49 gigatonnes of CO₂ was emitted, an increase of 10 gigatonnes in a decade.
- CC amplifies world conflicts.
- It is a myth that responding to climate change will reduce economic growth and there are real economic benefits in acting now. Mitigation technologies will create jobs and reduce risks of damaging impacts
- The impacts are not equal and fall most heavily on the poor; the greatest impact of disasters are in developing countries; small island states are particularly vulnerable.

How can we bring about a transformation? Only by the intervention of people of faith; we need a spiritual transformation and faith groups must speak up about this.

Interfaith Statement

After the conference faith leaders from around the world joined together to sign the statement: *Climate, Faith and Hope: Faith traditions together for a common future.*

This is attached as an appendix.

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Climate, Faith and Hope: Faith traditions together for a common future

As representatives from different faith and religious traditions, we stand together to express deep concern for the consequences of climate change on the earth and its people, all entrusted, as our faiths reveal, to our common care. Climate change is indeed a threat to life, a precious gift we have received and that we need to care for.

We acknowledge the overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is human-induced and that, without global and inclusive action towards mitigation and unless fully addressing its fundamental causes, its impacts will continue to grow in intensity and frequency. At the same time, we are ready to dialogue with those who remain skeptical.

In our communities and thanks to the media, we see the manifestations of climate change everywhere. From our brothers and sisters around the world, we hear about its effects on people and nature. We recognize that these effects disproportionately affect the lives, livelihoods and rights of poorer, marginalized and therefore most vulnerable populations, including indigenous peoples. When those who have done the least to cause climate change are the ones hardest hit, it becomes an issue of injustice. Equitable solutions are urgently needed.

We recognize that climate change stands today as a major obstacle to the eradication of poverty. Severe weather events exacerbate hunger, cause economic insecurity, force displacement and prevent sustainable development. The climate crisis is about the survival of humanity on planet earth, and action must reflect these facts with urgency.

Therefore, as faith leaders, we commit ourselves to the promotion of disaster risk reduction, adaptation, low carbon development, climate change education, curbing our own consumption patterns and reducing our use of fossil fuels. Based on our spiritual beliefs and our hope for the future, we commit to stimulating consciences and encouraging our peers and communities to consider such measures with urgency.

We share the conviction that the threats of climate change cannot be curbed effectively by a single State alone but only by the enhanced co-operation of the community of States, based on principles of mutual trust, fairness and equity, precaution, intergenerational justice and common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities. We urge the rich to support the poor and the vulnerable significantly and everywhere, especially in Least Developed

Countries, Small Island States and Sub-Saharan Africa. Significant support would include generous financial resources, capacity building, technology transfer and other forms of co-operation.

We encourage Heads of State and Ministers attending the Climate Summit to announce pledges for the Green Climate Fund, including commitments to increase them thereafter, to establish new partnerships for climate resilience and low carbon development, and to assure access to renewable energies for all people.

As people of faith, we call on all governments to express their commitment to limit global warming well below 2° Celsius. We emphasize that all States share the responsibility to formulate and implement Low Carbon Development Strategies leading to de-carbonization and the complete phase-out of fossil fuels by mid-century.

Consequently we encourage world political and economic leaders to exercise their leadership during the Climate Summit by announcing joint actions such as important short-term emission cuts, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, coal caps or coal divestment, forest protection, increased energy efficiency in construction and transportation, and other concrete steps. We further call on all governments to identify medium and long-term adaptation needs and to develop strategies to address them based on country-driven, gender-sensitive and participatory approaches to better manage residual loss and damage due to adverse climate impacts.

Ultimately we request all States to work constructively towards a far-reaching global climate agreement in Paris in 2015, building on transparency, adequacy and accountability. The new agreement must be:

- ambitious enough to keep temperature from rising well below 2° Celsius;
- fair enough to distribute the burden in an equitable way; and
- legally binding enough to guarantee that effective national climate policies to curb emissions are well funded and fully implemented.

As religious representatives and citizens in your countries, we hereby commit ourselves to address the climate change threat. We continue to count on your leadership, and we encourage and expect you to make the right decisions. When difficult decisions need to be taken for the sustainability of the earth and its people, we are ready to stand with you. We pray for you and for all humanity in caring for the earth.

New York, 21 September 2014

