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Climate Justice: Recognizing our responsibility as global neighbours



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This article first appeared on Willard Metzger's blog at www.willardmetzger.blogspot.com

Foreword: On October 25, 2011, Willard was invited to address a breakfast meeting of Members of Parliament and Senators in Ottawa, on the topic of climate justice. Many responded positively to Willard's address, including Senator Grant Mitchell, who wrote, "Thanks for this. It is exceptionally good. And thanks for your leadership and inspiration on this important issue." Many others have asked for Willard's address to be made available. It has also been translated into French and circulated to all Members of Parliament and all Senators. - Dan Dyck on behalf of Willard Metzger.

Climate change debates are quickly becoming unnecessary and aristocratic exercises. As debates continue, International aid organizations are necessarily busy responding to increasing climate disasters. Simply put, whether individuals believe that climate change is human induced or not, the facts remain that sea levels are rising, deserts are expanding, violent storms are becoming stronger and more frequent, and that the poor, especially children, are paying the highest price. Faith based relief organizations like World Vision and Mennonite Central Committee see the devastating reality of climate change every day.

A report by World Vision Australia in May 2009 concluded, reluctantly, that in its own right and in its capacity to exacerbate all other challenges, climate change constitutes one of the greatest threats ever faced by the poor. Climate change is occurring at a speed and on a scale that will affect not tens of millions of people, but billions, many of them the poorest people in the world.

Developing nations are at greatest risk from climate change. Climate change and global poverty reinforce each other: climate change makes it harder for poor communities to grow crops, access water, food and shelter, and avoid conflict.

According to Sir John Holmes, UN's emergency relief chief, the number of disasters has doubled from around 200 to over 400 per year over the past two decades, with nine out of every ten being climate related. Such events are no longer considered abnormal but reflect "the new

normal". In 1950 there were 50 natural disasters in South East Asia alone. In 2006 there were 250. By 2009, hydro-meteorological events represented 46% of all operations supported by the Red Cross Disaster Relief and Emergency Fund. In 2010 that has risen to 57%.

These statistics are pointing to a grim reality. World Vision has concluded that climate change has the potential to undo the last 50 years of work that international humanitarian organisations have helped to achieve.

Forests are disappearing at unprecedented rates globally, displacing indigenous peoples from their native homes and uprooting their livelihoods. The collapse of fisheries around the world threatens to exacerbate hunger and poverty among poor coastal communities throughout the developing world. Currently, more than 1 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.6 billion people lack access to proper sanitation. Lack of safe water, sanitation, and adequate hygiene contribute to the leading killers of children under 5, including diarrhoea, pneumonia, neonatal disorders, and under nutrition (see here).

According to a report by Mennonite Central Committee, about 50 years ago a farmer in Kenya could expect to produce 25 bags of maize from one hectare—each bag weighing 90 kilograms. With the current climate change effects of rising temperatures, unreliable rainfall, soil erosion and droughts, today a farmer is lucky to get even five bags per hectare.

It is those who are already experiencing poverty, live in vulnerable settings and have limited access to resources to help them cope with increased disasters, that are most at risk of increased drought and other extreme events such as floods, hurricanes and cyclones.

Bruce Guenther, who works with Mennonite Central Committee's food and disaster program concluded by identifying these dynamics as an equity issue, "Those who are the least responsible for the [climate] crisis are most affected."

Although climate change will disproportionately impact the poor, the impact will affect us all. Just

as we are becoming aware of the interconnectedness of our global economies, so too are we realizing the “globalized” nature of our environment. Therefore any nation’s failure to significantly reduce greenhouse gases will have severe implications for us all.

This is especially evident as we look at Asia with its massive coastal capitals, including Manila in the Philippines, Jakarta in Indonesia, and Dhaka in Bangladesh. A one-metre rise in sea level would inundate 800,000 sq km of land in Asia displacing more than 100 million people. In Vietnam alone 11% of the population would be displaced.

If climate change is not taken seriously enough the world will be forced to cope with mass migrations of millions and most likely the political and social upheaval associated with poverty and displacement.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, the Creator has arranged the world in such a way that we must recognize our responsibility as global neighbours. The call of living out love through action is central to the identities of faith based organizations. They have helped remind us that as privileged people who witness the great suffering that our lifestyles of consumption have caused we have a particular responsibility to express God’s love to those impacted by climate change. Faith based organizations have recognized that serving God by caring for creation and each other is a moral obligation.

Whether the developed world takes responsibility for the effect of climate change or not, we have no other option but to take responsibility for our consumption patterns. With the increasing strain on natural resources, everyone must accept responsibility for individual and corporate consumption practices. The globe is able to provide enough food, water and clean air for all its’ inhabitants. For any people group, faith community, religious structure, political power, or geographical entity to sanction the use of more than its fair share becomes a moral and ethical failure. To ignore such a reality of disparity is a moral and ethical violation. In an interconnected global community, injustice for one becomes injustice for all. It is the health of the globe itself that will assess our compliance to this shared moral obligation.

It is easy to fall into despondency, despair and cynicism when responding to climate change. This is understandable, but it is also, in a sense, the easy option. Many people go straight from denial to despair, and interestingly, both positions lead to apathy, where little is demanded of us. Denial says nothing needs to be done. Despair says nothing can be done. But between denial and despair there is hope.

As people of faith, and faith based organizations, we must choose to hope. Denial is no longer intellectually defensible, and things are too dire for despair. We must choose to hope, because when we hope we look for solutions. When we hope, we don’t give up. When we hope,

we choose to believe that a different path is possible and we start to explore that path.

Cooperation between religious and political entities can contribute to the some necessary correction. Together we can help develop an environment of hope by fostering a posture of gratitude. As global inhabitants we have taken the earth for granted. We have assumed that it will always be there and that it will always be able to produce that which is needed to sustain us. However, reckless abandonment of our responsibility to care for the earth has put the health of the earth in great risk. A renewed posture of gratitude for the earth will generate a sense of responsibility for its health. If it is true that “we exploit what we value but we defend what we love,” then what better way to generate a renewed love for the earth than by strengthening a sense of gratitude for the earth.

Governments and faith organizations can cooperate in increasing public awareness. We can cooperate in educating the public to our global responsibilities. We can celebrate and reward the many greening and environmental sustainable initiatives of groups and individuals. Together, as a moral imperative to care for the poor and disadvantaged, we can work to mainstream concern for our environment and responsibility for individual consumption practices.

Can we increase the marketing and encouragement of green solutions? Can we remove economic barriers from the development of sustainable options for transportation and agricultural practices and foster commitment to their success?

People are quicker to turn away from negative messaging. So can we better fast track an embrace of responsibility by making environmental concern a positive and celebrative response? This is not to deny the dire need we are in. Rather it is to consider the need for response so great, that we must make it as palatable as possible.

We know we can solve this problem. Our pollution, excessive consumerism and lethargy all play a role in this crisis and we will have to take courageous looks at our behaviour if we are to seriously change anything. But through concerted effort, we can provide an active role in making this earth a more hospitable place where current and coming generations of children can thrive and experience life in all its fullness. I pray we will all embrace the will to make it so.

Thank-you.

This opportunity to address Canadian government leaders was enabled by the Interfaith Council on Climate Change and the Canadian Council of Churches. You can view documents related to the interfaith climate justice event at

www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/Browse/1690