

## INTRODUCTION

# A Pentecost Moment of Change

MALLORY MCDUFF

**T**HE CLOCK SAID 8:45 AM, which meant we had fifteen minutes to make the ten-mile drive to church. We might miss the first hymn but would arrive before the Gospel reading. Getting to church shouldn't result in a racing heart or a speeding ticket, I told myself, glancing at the speedometer and settling into the rhythm of shared time with my daughters, Maya and Annie Sky.

I turned on the radio as a report broadcast grim statistics about global warming—ice caps melting, habitats disappearing, floods destroying communities. For a second, I considered changing stations to *American Top 40 with Ryan Seacrest*. “Is that guy saying that the Earth is getting hotter?” asked Maya from the back seat. “Is that going to be a problem?” It was 8:55 AM—five minutes until the church bells rang. I searched for clear language to describe climate change to my middle-school daughter, knowing her younger sister was listening too.

This was my dilemma as a mother, teacher and person of faith: How could I talk to my children about something that seems complex and downright scary? Could I translate the science of climate change into opportunities for empowering action rather than paralyzing despair?

I believe that moral values of faith communities are key to harnessing collective acts to confront climate change. So I decided to explain the basic science of climate change but also illustrate religious actions to address global warming. This conversation didn't

happen in five minutes (we made it to the church on time). Instead the discussion has been incremental, explaining a news story about food scarcity and climate, participating in a weatherization project at church and joining an interfaith protest against the expansion of a coal-fired power plant.

When I was Maya's age, I watched the apocalyptic film *The Day After* at school and became convinced a nuclear winter was coming to my hometown of Fairhope, Alabama. I don't want my children to feel alone and powerless against the impacts of climate change, because they aren't. Much is being done.

Diverse faith communities—Muslim, Jewish and Christian—are working to love their neighbors as themselves through sacred acts of justice: installing solar panels on mosques and temples, tilling church gardens, conducting energy audits on low-income homes, lobbying against mountaintop removal and supporting reforestation projects in countries on the front lines of climate change. These acts reveal a shared moral mandate to care for God's Earth, especially since climate change will have a disproportionate impact on the world's poor.

Our religious traditions teach us that it is a sin to unjustifiably cause human suffering, and almost every faith tradition has issued a public statement calling for climate solutions. Yet we need to share and replicate the range of actions that congregations can take to convert communities to a low-carbon future.

The contributors to this book include a farmer, a climate scientist, teachers, clergy, academics, activists and directors of nonprofit organizations. They are practitioners doing the work of climate justice from a variety of faith backgrounds: Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, evangelical and United Church of Christ, among others. Though many of the organizations described in this book, such as Interfaith Power & Light and GreenFaith, are nonsectarian, this book focuses on the acts of Christians confronting climate change.

People of faith have been instrumental in societal changes such as the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement. We live in a time with enormous capacity for grassroots mobilization based

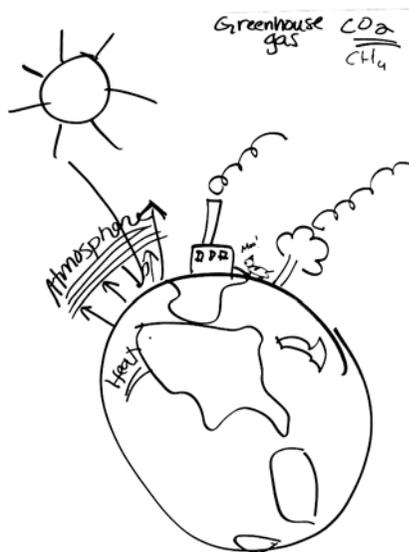
on justice. This movement to protect Earth's climate is built on both joy and love for the world God created and called good.<sup>1</sup>

### The Greatest Moral Crisis of Our Time: Climate Change 101

Several years ago, I attended a workshop called the “Climate Leaders Initiative,” organized by the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program.<sup>2</sup> The participants wondered aloud how churches would mitigate and adapt to climate change, given its impact on core ministries such as work with disaster relief, immigration and food security.<sup>3</sup> I recalled my daughter's inquiry about climate change and posed my own question: “What is a simple way to explain climate change? What's the elevator speech?”

Without hesitation, staff member Tyler Edgar grabbed a marker, turned to a flipchart and drew a picture of a globe. “When I'm speaking to an adult Sunday school class, I use this simple drawing,” she said, sketching the sun and a smokestack and writing “atmosphere, heat and greenhouse gases (CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>).” In her presentations, she explains that since industrialization, our Earth has been warming; scientists have documented this rapid pace of global warming due to actions taken by humans. Climate change is caused by the release of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, with carbon dioxide the most common gas.

History provides some additional context for understanding our warming planet. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reflects infrared radiation and warms the planet, bringing about what we know as the greenhouse effect,



A drawing illustrates the basics of climate change at a training for faith leaders organized by the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program. Photo by Mallory McDuff.

which maintains the Earth at a livable temperature. A British physicist named John Tyndall discovered the role of carbon dioxide in the late 1850s. We now also recognize that methane is another gas with strong greenhouse properties.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1950s, Charles David Keeling measured carbon dioxide levels of 315 parts per million (ppm) in winds off the Pacific Ocean. We know that 350 ppm is the maximum number we can reach and still keep the Earth's temperature from rising further, yet today the level has reached 390 ppm.<sup>5</sup> The higher concentration of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere is primarily the result of our burning fossil fuels at increased rates.

With the rising gas concentrations, we have seen an increase in average global temperatures of more than one degree F. The warming has caused significant changes such as melting of Arctic sea ice, rising sea levels and increased floods.<sup>6</sup> The National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences has stated that the risks of inaction outweigh the risks of action, in terms of damage by climate change to Earth's life-support systems.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the overwhelming consensus among scientists, climate change has been imbued with political agendas. Powerful lobbying by the fossil-fuel industry has stalled efforts to consider federal climate legislation in the United States. The stakes are high: Exxon-Mobil, for example, made more money in 2009 than the recorded profits of any company in history.<sup>8</sup>

While the science reflects the urgency of climate change, many choose to ignore the evidence. It turns out that rational thought does not always guide decision-making, as emotions and values play a significant role in human choice.<sup>9</sup> We need to achieve a low-carbon future, whether people "believe" in climate change or not. In the film *Carbon Nation*, an Alaskan man asks, "Do I believe man is causing global warming? No. But that doesn't make any difference. I want clean water and clean air."

Ultimately, climate change is only a symptom of the difference between our own human interests and the natural world. Wendell

Berry maintains that if we were given a limitless supply of cheap, clean energy, we would continue our destruction of the world by agricultural erosion, chemical poisoning and other forms of “development.”<sup>10</sup> He calls us to come into conformity with “the nature of places” on a local scale. Nowhere is this role of values and place more apparent than in our congregations.

### **A Conversion: Churches Responding to Climate Change**

Across the globe, the Christian community has called for climate solutions based on justice. In the United States, the Evangelical Climate Initiative was released in 2006, stating that the moral beliefs of evangelicals demanded a response to climate change. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops declared that destruction of the atmosphere by climate change dishonored God and creation. In 2008, Southern Baptist leaders released a similar public statement that Christians must be held accountable for our actions that harm the environment.<sup>11</sup> The Evangelical Environmental Network launched a campaign called “Creation Care: It’s a Matter of Life,” which emphasizes the connection between creation care, climate change and the poor.

Translating words to actions, Georgia Interfaith Power & Light (IPL) leveraged \$400,000 in federal stimulus money for matching grants to weatherize houses of worship and save 20 percent of their



The Evangelical Environmental Network launched a campaign entitled “Creation Care: It’s a Matter of Life.” Photo courtesy of Evangelical Environmental Network.

congregations' energy budgets. Georgia IPL has completed 76 energy audits, 11 of Jewish schools and synagogues, with 200 additional congregations in the pipeline.

St. Patrick's Episcopal Church in Atlanta reduced its \$36,000 annual energy bill by 15 percent, due in part to energy-efficient upgrades at Malachi Storehouse, one of the largest food pantries in the city. Georgia IPL has collected data from 56 participating congregations, revealing an average annual savings on energy bills of \$2,593. These conservation measures have resulted in savings of 4,238,139 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>, the equivalent of taking 377 cars off the road.<sup>12</sup>

This growth of religious environmentalism comes at a time when religious institutions are seeking ways to make faith relevant to modern audiences. Harvey Cox, author of *The Future of Faith*, asserts that Christianity needs to return to its roots and become spiritually fluid, less hierarchical and more countercultural, willing to criticize power structures.<sup>13</sup> For many faith leaders, the calling to address climate change has increased the relevancy of their ministries. Pastor Carol Jensen of St. John United Lutheran Church in Seattle, Washington, notes that new people come to her church because the environment is part of the church's identity.<sup>14</sup> A conversion to reduce a congregation's carbon footprint might also bring more people walking through the church doors.

### **Four Strategies for Religious Action to Address Climate Change**

The authors in this book speak from diverse theological and political perspectives; indeed, many hold conflicting views on issues such as gay marriage or abortion, topics that typically divide believers. Yet their writings reveal overwhelming support for confronting the climate crisis, a powerful force if we can hold our differences in creative ways.

We don't have the option to stay within our religious comfort zones. There is no time for caricatures of each other's religious

beliefs, which will squander our collective power to revision our communities on higher moral ground. We need all voices, all sacred acts. This book uses a framework of four avenues for climate action: stewardship, spirituality, advocacy and justice. Within each of the four themes, contributors provide concrete examples of their own efforts to live out religious values of climate justice.

### ***Stewardship***

As faithful stewards of God's creation, we recognize that the natural world belongs to God, and our stewardship will protect creation for future generations. Promoting connections between food and faith is one action taken by Christians heeding God's call. In Chapter 1 Ragan Sutterfield, a farmer in Arkansas, highlights the work in church gardens and kitchens to foster healthful food whose production conserves natural resources. Through stories of congregations in Chapter 2, the Reverend Fletcher Harper of GreenFaith challenges churches to decrease their carbon emissions and conserve financial and energy resources. Conservation of land is another way to address stewardship, and in Chapter 3, I examine the role of natural burials in connecting the faithful to the natural world.

### ***Spirituality***

Many people have their most profound spiritual experiences in nature: God's creation inspires reflection and our inspiration to care for the Earth. In Chapter 4, Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, a climate scientist and an evangelical, explains the science of climate change and shows how science and our Christian faith can support each other in our protection of God's world. Dr. Norman Wirzba of Duke Divinity School reflects in Chapter 5 on how we can live the Good News in a changing climate by considering God as a gardener. The Reverend Brian Cole turns to scripture and challenges us in Chapter 6 to rethink sermons about the natural world amid the anxiety of climate change.

### ***Advocacy***

God calls us to be witnesses to our faith, and Christians are advocating for policies and practices that protect the climate. Religious environmental advocates achieved a major legislative victory with the Coal-Free Washington bill, as described by LeeAnne Beres and Jessie Dye of Earth Ministry in Chapter 7. On the forefront of a green economy, Michele McGeoy, executive director of Solar Richmond, illustrates in Chapter 8 creative partnerships with churches to provide green jobs for youth in Richmond, California. Father John S. Rausch in Chapter 9 examines the decade-long work of churches to advocate for the people of Appalachia impacted by mountaintop removal mining.

### ***Justice***

The impacts of climate change, such as increased natural disasters and food insecurity, fall most heavily on the poor and vulnerable across the globe, an injustice given that the United States has been the world's largest contributor of greenhouse gas emissions over the past century.<sup>15</sup> One consequence of climate change is increased immigration, with a new category of migrants called climate refugees. In Chapter 10, Jill Rios describes the work of her church, La Capilla de Santa Maria, in North Carolina, to confront the injustices of a broken immigration system in the context of global climate change. Environmental justice leader Peggy M. Shepard of West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT) chronicles in Chapter 11 the collaboration with churches to address environmental health issues linked to climate change. And lastly in Chapter 12, the Reverend Mitch Hescox, with the Evangelical Environmental Network, relates his experiences with people of faith on the Gulf Coast after the British Petroleum oil spill.

### **The Momentum of a Pentecost Moment**

We may not think it's politically viable to create public transit, community gardens and renewable energy sources in our land-

scapes, dominated as they are by Walmart, CVS and Burger King. But the Christian faith asks us to imagine a world that does not degrade God's resources or harm His people. We can bear witness to prophetic voices, not the politics of the practical. Ten years ago, no one could have imagined that a religious environmental organization, Earth Ministry, would be the lead organizer for legislation to transition the state of Washington off coal-fired power.

The prophetic becomes possible because churches are grounded in place with physical addresses. In my home of Asheville, North Carolina, Oakley United Methodist Church created a church garden to serve its local community. First Congregational United Church of Christ installed 42 solar panels as a public witness in the neighborhood. The church is no stranger to radical acts of justice, rooted in place.

Our challenge reflects the question of Pentecost: How will God's spirit move in our lives? Pentecost marks the seventh Sunday after Easter—50 days after the death of Jesus—when the Holy Spirit descended to the disciples. As humans, we may feel threatened by the mystery of the Holy Spirit in our lives today. With climate change, our stability has been interrupted. We face a true Pentecost moment.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the coming of the Holy Spirit is marked with winds, tremors of the earth and fire, but people from all nations come together. As a youth, I remember entering St. James Episcopal Church to find flames of red, orange and yellow construction paper hanging from the ceiling. Pentecost Sunday marked the end of the Easter season, with Lent a memory from early spring.

In our family, my parents would sometimes give up practices, such as driving, for Lent. One year, my father bicycled the 30 miles to work each day, showered in the basement of his office, put on a suit, and then changed his clothes to bike home each evening. On Sundays, my mother insisted on driving him to church, as she didn't approve of attending church in sweaty clothes. Our friends

found my father's Lenten discipline both entertaining and perplexing. I now realize that he was practicing an act of redemption, a Pentecost moment.

God's work of redemption is a mystery, but it happens in a community of people; the Holy Spirit is made incarnate in human experience. We must be ready to become transformed, and in turn, transform our communities. Our congregations are the testing grounds for conversion. Let us imagine and act together.