

WHAT DOES RELIGION HAVE TO DO WITH LIVING SUSTAINABLY?

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Why are we seeing so much religious leadership on climate change and caring for the Earth at the moment? Why is there so much talk about the encyclical *Laudato Si'* that Pope Francis has just released?

In our current world we see a lot of violence and environmental destruction. Much of this is done in the guise of following religious teachings. Conflict between religious groups tends to highlight perceived differences between them.

And yet we have more in common than we have differences between us.

We all live on – and share – the one finite planet.

We are all part of, and dependent upon, the Earth's ecosystems. We are not separate from them. All forms of life, including our own as humans are entirely dependent on the natural world that sustains us maintaining its ecological integrity. Despite what some people think, that means that civilisation also depends on the natural world.

Because of this, religious faiths have at their core a love for this planet and its inhabitants and a deep reverence for life. They share a common teaching that we have a responsibility to care for our world (which faiths often called Creation). In virtually all religions, we humans are called to be caretakers or stewards of the Earth.

Regardless of whether you have a religious faith or not, we have a responsibility to care for the ecosystems on which life depends. We especially need to do this for future generations and other species with which we share the Earth and for people who are bearing the negative impacts of climate change and other environmental damage earliest and hardest. (It is important to note here that those who bear the impact most are usually the least likely to have caused it – and the least able to mitigate it.)

People of all faiths can take on this caretaker responsibility - as individuals, congregations and communities.

That is because faith is about attitudes and actions as well as words.

In the face of immense and increasing ecological damage and social injustices, **we all need to need to affirm our love for this planet and its inhabitants and our deep reverence for life** – and make decisions and take actions that foster and drive positive change for a healthier and more peaceful world. Our faith – if we have one – can help us with this.

That is what groups such as Faith and Ecology Network (FEN) and Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) do. They are groups of people of a range of faiths who share a common commitment to care for the Earth. Similar organisations exist in other countries and internationally.

Much of what ARRCC members believe and work toward extends beyond climate change and serves as a model for why people of faith should care about our environment – and how they can go about it. (This is how it should be, because ARRCC draws on religious teachings and applies it to climate change and so this process should therefore be easily applied in reverse – and that is why this article draws heavily on material on the ARRCC website. I also acknowledge help from the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute website.)

Like many issues we face today, climate change and all environmental damage is not only a scientific, environmental, economic and political issue – it is also a profoundly moral and spiritual one:

- Creation – the Earth's ecosystems and all their components – is intrinsically precious and beautiful and deserves protection;
- the wellbeing of human beings is dependent on Earth's ecosystems and their components maintaining their integrity and flourishing; and
- it is the vulnerable people of the world who are most impacted by climate change and other environmental degradation and crises.

People of all faiths can and should be at the forefront of protecting Creation and reinstating the ecological integrity of Earth, including its physical elements such as a safe climate. That's because people of faith are dedicated to the common good, inspired by their beliefs and energized by their spirituality.

While celebrating the uniqueness of their different traditions, people of faith can stand together in working for an ecologically and socially sustainable future. This can help us envisage embracing a sustainable future, one that is based on a more ethical understanding of human prosperity and the flourishing of all.

To achieve this vision of sustainability, people of faith and religious communities more generally need to actively reflect their love for our precious planet and its inhabitants and deep reverence for life in their day-to-day choices.

People of faith can also advocate, from a faith perspective, for public policies that contribute to ecological sustainability and justice.

Ways in which we see this leadership on environmental sustainability range from grand gestures such as public statements and divesting from fossil fuels to individual practical actions such as being thrifty, growing our own food or buying it from local producers, and walking, riding a bus or catching public transport instead of driving cars.

As then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said in his sermon at an international ecumenical service in Copenhagen Cathedral during the 2009 UN climate change talks:

We cannot show the right kind of love for our fellow-humans unless we also work at keeping the earth as a place that is a secure home for all people.

That is why religious leadership and action on environmental sustainability is so important.

We are seeing increasing leadership from people of faith, for example:

- In 1984 the Anglican Consultative Council adopted the Five Marks of Mission, which includes 'To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.'
- A global multifaith network, **Our Voices**, went online on 7 May 2014 to call for action on climate change. It is focussed on generating the biggest possible upsurge of support for a strong international climate agreement to come out of the UN climate change talks in Paris in December 2015.
- Australian faith leaders, including our own Bp Stephen Pickard and Dr Beth Heyde, **called on G20 leaders to put climate change on the agenda** of the November 2014 meeting in Brisbane and to commit to a rapid transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy.
- On Good Friday 2015 a group of Anglican bishops from around the world issued **The world is our host: A call to urgent action for climate justice**.
- The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, launched the **Lambeth Declaration 2015 on Climate Change** by UK spiritual leaders on 16 June 2015 and then **joined Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew** in a New York Times article on 19 June in calling for action on climate change (local times).
- 360 mainly American rabbis issued **A Rabbinical Letter on Climate Change** on 17 June 2015 (local time).
- Pope Francis released his encyclical **Laudato Si'** on 18 June 2015 (local time), supported by **a range of leaders** before and after the event.

In this critical year for decisions that will affect the future of life on Earth as we know it, there cannot be enough pressure and action to protect the habitability of our Earth.

If everyone speaks up – more than just a few faith leaders, more than just Roman Catholics – we could make this a turning point for global action on climate change. In particular, all faith leaders need to back the moral urgency of climate action.

Here are **3 things you can do right now**:

1. Ask your local religious leaders and communities to join this global call for action on climate change. Especially encourage your local Anglican ministers, congregation and Roman Catholic community to protect our precious Earth. You could do this:
 - In person
 - By phone
 - By **letter**
 - Using social media, for example:

Dear *[insert name or Twitter handle of your church/leader]* will you join Pope Francis *[@Pontifex]* and speak out about the moral urgency of climate action?
#PraisedBe #AllAreCalled

(#encyclical, #LaudatoSi, #popeforplanet, #climatechange, are also good for connecting with others and getting messages and images to share)

2. Urge your local religious groups to divest from fossil fuels. As Bill McKibben says, if it's wrong to wreck the planet, then it's wrong to profit from that wreckage. Over **45 religious groups** have already committed to divest from fossil fuels. You can join a local campaign or start one in your own community by **signing up** with 350.org – they'll send you the information you need.

3. Join the groundswell of people of faith calling for strong action to protect our Earth. Good places to start are:

- **Australian Religious Response to Climate Change**
 - **Our Voices**
 - Green Anglicans (**Anglican Communion Environment Network**). Sign up for the newsletter. Join them on **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **LinkedIn**.

This is an edited version of an article that originally appeared on Sustainable Jill. This article was incorrectly attributed to Pamela Phillips.

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