

# The Climate Crisis:

## The Anglican Communion, the United Nations, the World

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The climate crisis is neither new, nor “news” to the Anglican Communion, although its meaning and consequences might vary with the contexts and circumstances of our lives. The people served by Bishop Jonathan Casimina of the Philippines – people who have lost their lives, livelihoods, and homes to record-breaking Pacific typhoons – know exactly what it means for them. They know, first-hand, that climate change is felt most severely by people in marginalized, developing, and least developed parts of the world, including indigenous peoples. Last year, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba and the Anglican Communion Environmental Network (ACEN) invited Bishop Casimina and 16 other “Anglican Bishops for Climate Justice” to gather near Cape Town – bishops whose congregations have already been affected, many in drought-stricken or coastal regions and cities vulnerable to rising seas. Their official statement, *The World Is Our Host*, is presented to you here, with resolutions submitted by the ACEN.

Numerous religious leaders have described the climate crisis as the most urgent moral issue of our time -- and of any time in human history. In fact, “urgent” is an understatement. Writers for *The Economist* (Nov. 28, 2015, p. 9) prefer “colossal” involving changes taking place now that will continue generations to come. The United Nations, which has been working on this for decades, has said, rightly, that climate change is “potentially catastrophic.” This means that changes we have made in the climate system could put so much stress on local ecosystems and human societies that we may not be able to adapt quickly enough. The loss of life would be immense. Yet, through no fault of the UN, the possibility of a global climate catastrophe has increased in our lifetime. Over the last nearly 25 years, I’ve worked with many of the prominent scientists and policy-makers, and I know first-hand that every part of this crisis is as unnerving for them at the UN, as it for us in the Anglican Communion. Our conversations here in Lusaka and theirs at the UN may use some different words and represent different faiths, but the underlying meaning of the emergency we face, the profound concern, and the hope are very much the same.

*Acknowledgments: I want to thank the ACEN and everyone who participated in the 2015 gathering of “Anglican Bishops for Climate Justice” for their actions and profound concern about the climate crisis. Among them, I am also grateful for the very helpful comments of Dr. Andrew Leake of the Church Mission Society, Anglican Diocese of Northern Argentina, and member of the ACEN, in the preparation of this paper. Thanks also go to Moisha Blechman of the Atlantic Chapter of the Sierra Club in the United States for her honesty in so many personal and public discussions about the climate crisis.*

Here, I want to draw attention to a few basic facts and principles that have guided the UN's work and ours; but primarily, I want to emphasize the seriousness of the climate crisis and make four broad recommendations about how we can respond most effectively as the church. These recommendations – *the world needs us to be the church, everyone can be part of the solution, create sustainable congregations and places of worship, and our diversity is an underlying and unifying source of strength* – will be discussed momentarily. Obviously, we need to be more attuned to environmental realities, but we're not an environmental organization. **We are the Anglican Communion, and the world needs us to be who we are, especially now.** We live at a decisive turning point. We must make good, wise decisions about the future of our church and of God's green earth; and we must act upon those decisions, as the church, deliberately, without hesitation or delay. But first, here is some background.

### **The United Nations and the Anglican Communion**

Archbishop Sir Paul Reeves of New Zealand was a great leader and diplomat. Frequently, he told me that the while the UN may have some shortcomings, it is the only organization like it that we have, and we desperately need its processes of debate and consensus building with its agreements, treaties -- all of it. To make that process work well, the UN needs a collaborative relationship with us, and we need one with them. Going back to the 1980's, the UN spelled out, succinctly, in a hugely influential document with a great title – "Our Common Future" – why this is the case:

*"We share one Earth, but we're not one world."*

They were speaking of the struggle, a decade earlier, when Member States began to take seriously sustainable development, the environment, poverty, and human rights, all as one interwoven web of relationships. They knew that having a "life together" (borrowing from the great theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer) means doing what needs to be done, together. *For example, we will be unable to reduce greenhouse emissions enough to avoid a global catastrophe, unless we also take into account poverty and human rights, and unless we invest our energy, money, time, and commitment in just, sustainable economic development.* The climate crisis is not only about fossil fuels and greenhouse gases, but also food and agriculture, water and drought, forests and deforestation, oceans, fish, rising sea levels, rising extinction rates, biodiversity, human population growth, and environmental refugees. They also realized that the underlying cause of the environmental crisis is not that people don't care about God's green earth. The reason is all the small and large ways that we exploit and pollute -- considerably more in some countries than others, which is one reason "climate justice" is so crucial. Our lives are shaped by behaviors and values that drive us apart as a people, and drive a wedge between God's creation and us.

This common understanding formed the background of the UN's landmark 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. There, UN Member States formulated a broad vision for everything we have subsequently done in response to the climate crisis. That foundation was rapidly followed, one year after another, by global conferences on human rights, small island states,

population, women and development, cities, as well as forests, deserts, oceans, biodiversity, climate change, and much more. The broad vision was established. Blueprints for action were written in all these areas. Everything depended on whether we were willing to do what needed to be done. Speaking to our Peace and Justice Network in 1994, Anglican Bishop Michael Hare Duke (Bishop of Perth, Scotland) summarized the obstacle very well:

*“... No one government was prepared to risk being disadvantaged for the sake of the common good. So, decisions which required concerted action were undermined by individual rivalry. Yet this is in direct contradiction to the perception that global survival requires global action.”*

After participating in many of these meetings, and recognizing the truth of Bishop Duke's comments, we convened the first global meeting of any denominational church on these issues: In 2002, “The Global Anglican Congress on the Stewardship of Creation,” hosted by Bishop Geoff Davies, met near Johannesburg. A year later, the ACC formed our Environmental Network, through a resolution submitted by the Congress. Then, under the leadership of Bishop George Browning from Australia, the ACEN met in Canberra; followed by a second meeting (2011) in Lima, Peru, hosted by Bishop Bill Godfrey. Three years ago, Bishop Godfrey, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, and Bishop Apimeleki Qiliho from Fiji addressed ACC-15 on the climate crisis, with the Anglican Alliance, which had been working on the climate crisis for several years. Most recently, as mentioned at the outset, the ACEN hosted a gathering of “Anglican Bishops for Climate Justice” in Cape Town, just last year.

### **The 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris: Successes and Shortcomings**

UN Member States have generally said “yes” to vision statements and blueprints for action; but in too many cases, “no” to taking the action required. One of the reasons for the climate emergency that we face has been the long delay in moving beyond step one. Last year, the UN achieved a provisional breakthrough in political leadership at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris. Outlined below are the high points of the Paris agreement, with comments on its substantial shortcomings.

*First, 195 countries agreed that to prevent a climate catastrophe, the previously agreed upon 2 degree C limit (above preindustrial levels) to additional global warming was dangerously high. At the insistence of the most vulnerable nations and other groups, they agreed to try to limit warming to 1.5 degrees, if possible.*

*Second, the agreement includes what the Union of Concerned Scientists calls a “down payment” from the 195 countries that committed to begin cutting greenhouse emissions. For major carbon polluting nations, this down payment generally means cutting emissions around 20-30% below 2005 levels by 2025 or 2030. That is an awkward way to put it, but it's how it's done. Because Member States recognize that these cuts are not enough to avert catastrophic climate change, they agreed to renew their commitments every five years, beginning in 2025. The agreement doesn't go into effect for 4 more years, in 2020, but the commitments have been made.*

**Comment:** The UN agreement, in its current form, will not avert a global climate catastrophe. The amount of carbon dioxide already stored in the atmosphere ensures another 2.7 and possibly 3 degrees C warming, at a minimum, even if Member States meet their initial commitments. In addition, since the beginning of 2016, climate scientists have observed abrupt and alarming global temperature increases. In February of this year, the global average temperature (for that month) actually passed 1.5 C (above the pre-industrial average); the Arctic was 5.36 C above its average. Some scientists believe that these dangerous increases are the combined result of oceans no longer storing additional excess heat, methane released from melting permafrost, and methane leaking from natural gas/fracking wells.

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/future\\_tense/2016/03/01/february\\_2016\\_s\\_shocking\\_global\\_warming\\_temperature\\_record.html?utm\\_medium=email](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2016/03/01/february_2016_s_shocking_global_warming_temperature_record.html?utm_medium=email)

The implication is that even the 1.5 C threshold is too high to avoid a global catastrophe -- reducing global temperatures to 1 C is required. However, polar ice sheets have been melting for some years near or at the 1 C mark. This is not a surprise to many climate scientists. Some coastal cities could be endangered within 50-75 years (much sooner than expected). The science alone suggests that we must discontinue the use of fossil fuels immediately (which as a practical matter is not going to happen), while using new technologies to remove carbon from the atmosphere. Geo-engineering has not been sufficiently tested and it carries major ecological risks. **Therein lies the core of the climate emergency that we face.**

<http://www.carbonbrief.org/scientists-discuss-the-1.5C-limit-to-global-temperature-rise>)

*Third, with regard to accountability, the agreement implies “naming and shaming” of Member States who do not meet their emission cut commitments on the basis of a shared monitoring, verification, and reporting.*

*Fourth, wealthier nations are called to provide funds and technology to assist poorer, more vulnerable nations lower their emissions, adapt to climate impacts, and make the transition to sustainability.*

**Comment:** Because the Paris agreement is not legally binding, political transparency is the best that can be expected. The agreement as a whole has been favorably compared to the UN’s Universal Declaration on Human Rights, in the sense that subsequent climate agreements could lay the groundwork for a new understanding of what a “life together” means. However, financial assistance for sustainability is complicated by expected global population increases. Today, more than half of the world’s population lives in cities – this is expected to increase substantially by 2050. Coastal cities are vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Current spending on urban adaptation to climate change apparently focuses less on people at risk, and more on the protection of financial assets.

## What The Climate Crisis Means for the Anglican Communion

The language of climate policymaking at the UN is generally organized around *mitigation* (reducing greenhouse emissions) and *adaptation* (adapting in every respect to profound changes emerging from the climate crisis). These are perfectly good words, describing a large part of what everyone must do; however, their practical meaning must be interpreted so it integrates into “our life as the church.” Otherwise, we might take two steps forward, but several backward. For that reason, I suggest four areas where we can effectively focus our attention as the church and which take into account mitigation and adaptation.

### The World Needs Us To Be The Church

It is obvious that the years ahead will be tumultuous and difficult. If all goes well, historians will look back and say that we, as the church, came together and responded as true people of faith. The climate crisis is, in fact, a colossal and urgent moral issue – and a survival issue. *To realize this hope, we must work as collaboratively as possible with the UN for climate justice, and where our churches are dependent on fossil fuels, eliminate those greenhouse emissions as soon as possible.* But the crisis is not only about levels of carbon and methane. *The world needs us to be the church in ways that express the power of the Holy Spirit at an unprecedented time.* This involves more than advocacy and activism. It includes deeper levels of pastoral guidance, innovative visions of financial and environmental stewardship, and strategic planning on every level of the church based on creative ways of organizing ourselves with spiritual and ecological vision. The world is desperately looking for faith in God, confidence in our institutions to carry us through this crisis, and truthfulness about the realities of life. The younger generation, especially, needs that from us now for their sake and for the world’s sake. The good news is that we already know how to do much of what needs to be done -- and about what we don’t know, Jesus will show us the way.

### Everyone Can Be Part Of The Solution

People sometimes assume that all we need to be good stewards is more environmental “expertise.” This assumption contains a grain of truth, but it can also be misleading. What we need more is for everyone to realize that she/he can be part of the solution that we make together. In that sense, everyone has a distinct voice and a leadership role to play -- lay and ordained, young and old, at every level of the church. Leadership by example is the best, especially in times of crisis: by the example of how we live and work together and learn from each other, by the example of the love we express, and by the example of the respect we demonstrate for God’s green earth. For those called to influence political decision-making, especially in the major polluting nations, the most effective place to do

that is with our own governments on local and national levels. For those called to weave together and create sustainable congregations and communities, we have thousands of congregations in the Anglican Communion, including those where we worship.

### **Create Sustainable Congregations and Places of Worship**

Leadership by example applies not only to individuals, but also to our life together “on the ground” – places of worship, retreat centers, church offices, and especially, our congregations. How we transform our life together in just and sustainable ways will vary from place to place, but here I’ll mention a few examples that apply to us all, in our congregations. It goes without saying that we need some soul-searching about the intrinsic value and sacredness of God’s creation. Present and future generations will experience and understand those places where we worship in ways that differ from the past. What is “the church,” after all, and where do we find it? In countries that are dependent on fossil fuels, younger (and older) churchgoers already regard renewable, green energy as an essential ingredient of “the sacred” in church buildings. Policymakers also understand that energy is inextricably linked to water and food. For us, in our congregations, this relates, first and foremost, to the water of Holy Baptism and the shared meal of Holy Eucharist. In other words, survival needs – water, food, and energy -- are already interwoven in our sacramental life. The water in the baptism font actually is the water of life. Do we know from where the water in our baptismal fonts comes? Do we know if it is polluted? What does that tell us about the well being of our communities? Survival needs in this world are present as visible signs in sacramental worship, and the full range of meanings expressed in our worship relates to the survival of the communities and environments where our congregations are found.

### **Our Diversity Is A Source Of Underlying and Unifying Strength**

Because we inhabit diverse worlds in an ecological sense, it is difficult to make very specific recommendations to the Anglican Communion as a whole. However, this is not a problem to be solved, as much as it is an opportunity that we need to take. The fact of our ecological diversity means that there are many different ways to be good stewards of God’s creation. This kind of diversity is not a reason for division, but a source of unifying strength. The irony is that to strengthen this diversity -- building up the sustainability of the congregations, communities and ecosystems where we live -- will also strengthen our unity as the Anglican Communion. In doing this, we have great opportunities, especially through the ACEN, to learn from each other by asking very basic and compassionate questions of each other: Have you discovered how to solve a particular climate problem where you live? Have you tried a particular solution or approach? Is there some way that we can help, or help each other? In all this, we can encourage, support, build mutual understanding, and in many cases, mentor each other, while *celebrating the Body of Christ* that brings us together as people of faith and *nourishing the web of life* that holds us together as humankind.