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ARTICLE

## Presbyterians and Climate Change

By [Julie Halpert](#) | Apr 19, 2012

Presbyterians, 'a microcosm of the larger country,' are taking an aggressive approach to the climate, including a 'radical act' in 2006 of urging carbon-neutrality.

**B**ruce Gillette's Junior High 1971 yearbook shows a photo of him celebrating the first Earth Day with classmates.

"I've always been concerned about the environment," he says. Now co-pastor, with his wife, of the [Limestone Presbyterian Church](#) in Wilmington, Delaware, Gillette spearheaded efforts to make it the first solar church in the state. He says his progressive views on the environment are founded on biblical teachings, and on the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. constitution, the Book of Order, which states that Earth's resources must be used responsibly.



*Wilmington parishioners salute their church's becoming Delaware's first solar church.*

Gillette is one of numerous Presbyterian pastors who are vocal when it comes to protecting the environment.

Presbyterians are engaged in many activities to combat climate change, from Earth Forums to hunger programs addressing food and climate crises and protests against practices that encourage reliance on coal. Since 2010, the Presbyterian Church has given 80 congregations an Earth Care Congregation Certification for demonstrating a strong commitment to environmental care.

## Earth ... 'Really Good ... A Huge Gift'

Presbyterians, a branch of the Protestant faith, are influenced by the teachings of John Calvin, a 16th century Protestant reformer who challenged the Catholic Church and advocated following the Bible as an authoritative scripture. Calvin believed everything that exists is a gift of God's grace, Rebecca Barnes-Davies, associate for Environmental Ministries for the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., said in a phone interview. "So for me and others in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., you engage this work not out of a sense of total guilt or panic or feeling some heavy burden, but rather that the Earth is really good and it's a huge gift.



*Rebecca Barnes-Davies point to work 'not out of a sense of total guilt or panic ...'*

Preserving it is a way to respond to God's goodness," she says.

She adds that Psalm 24:1, "The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," makes clear that Earth is God's creation, "not ours to use however we see fit."

There are roughly 2.3 million Presbyterians in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, with nearly 11,000 congregations and more than 21,000 ordained ministers. They are a diverse group spanning the full range of political and ideological preferences. And they celebrate this diversity, even though it has led to some pitched battles on environmental issues.

"You can look at the breadth of our political ideology as a microcosm of the larger country," Leslie G. Woods said in a phone interview. A representative for

Domestic Poverty and Environmental Issues for Presbyterian Church U.S.A.'s Office of Public Witness, she focuses on public policy advocacy based on General Assembly mandates. The rich diversity "is a strength of our denomination," she said.

## In 2006, Presbyterian's Carbon-Neutrality Goal Set

The Presbyterian Church is set up somewhat along the lines of the U.S. government, with positions determined by the Biennial General Assembly. Presbyteries, regional bodies that provide support and network for local Churches, send a voting member to the Assembly, where commissioners gather every other year to approve new policy, helping to ensure a representative government system.

In 2006, the General Assembly voted to recommend that Presbyterians become carbon-neutral. “It seemed a radical act for the Church to take in the Bush years,” says Patricia K. Townsend, who is preparing a research paper, “How Many Presbyterians Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb?” for an upcoming issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Culture and Nature*.

She said in a phone interview that the move made Presbyterians the first religious denomination to encourage members to seek to become carbon-neutral in their lives. “The action was all the more remarkable because Republicans substantially outnumber Democrats among the generally conservative membership of this mainline denomination,” she said, adding that “the people in the pews are politically conservative, while the ministers tend to be Democrats who are more liberal.”

She said the religion’s progressive environmental stance goes back to 1981, with development of an energy policy, “The Power to Speak Truth to Power,” calling for members to live frugal lives of energy efficiency, and insisting that the churches provide an educational role on energy efficiency. Describing Presbyterians as a very intellectual denomination, with a long history of requiring clergy to have an undergraduate degree before going to seminary, she cited figures from a May 2008 survey of Presbyterians by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.: it shows 100 percent of clergy have a graduate degree. She’s said most Presbyterians’ keen interest in science and technology makes them more likely to embrace climate change as a problem that needs addressing.

## 2008 Policy ‘Overwhelmingly’ Critical of Fossil Fuels and Nuclear

The most significant recent action by Presbyterians involves its 2008 energy policy, “The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming,” which has become the major policy document guiding Presbyterian environmental work. The document includes many initiatives for Presbyterians to follow, including practicing energy conservation, purchasing such items as energy-efficient appliances, fuel-efficient vehicles, and sustainably-grown food, and advocating for change and leadership within the church and government regarding energy policy and global climate change.



That document urged “a strong green path,” Reverend Christian Iosso, with the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy of the General Assembly Mission Council, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., said in a telephone interview. Iosso said that in the mass General Assemblies of the Church, they’re “overwhelmingly voting for green initiatives that are very critical of fossil fuels and nuclear power.”

*Reverend Christian Iosso notes concerns over fossil fuels, nuclear.*

The strong wording in the energy policy has given Presbyterians leverage to engage in policy work involving global warming. Though it supported ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and has supported comprehensive climate legislation, it isn't currently focusing on this endeavor, since it's not a

policy reality, says Woods. Instead, she says, efforts now focus on programs to help reduce carbon emissions over time, like supporting EPA's endangerment finding that found CO<sub>2</sub> endangers human health, and pushing for renewable energy development and air and water regulations that will reduce harmful pollutants.

## No Single Voice among Presbyterians

Much of the support that Presbyterians have in protesting practices harmful to the environment is found in 17-year-old group, Presbyterians for Earth Care, (PEC) established by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to support grassroots work.



*PEC group president Diane Waddell points to 'sacred care of Earth.'*

Consisting of roughly 1,000 members and supporters, the group focuses on "sacred care of the Earth," Diane Waddell, group president, said in a phone interview. PEC has taken positions against mountaintop removal, fracking, and the Keystone XL pipeline.

Still, despite the support of many Presbyterians for action to combat climate change, the denomination is by no means single-minded.

"We do have people in the oil and gas industry who would not be happy with our criticism of the overdependence on fossil fuels and the fact that we're in favor of a carbon tax," Iosso said. Robin Blakeman, an ordained Presbyterian minister working full-time at The Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, has seen this conflict unfold as she has campaigned vigorously in

West Virginia against mountaintop removal. Her primary concern involves health risks from the dust that results from the process and contamination of water.

"We're getting increasingly alarmed about the health risks," she said in a telephone interview. In 2006, the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. recommended against the practice in light of what it sees as environmental repercussions. But Blakeman points out that many powerful Presbyterians, especially those advocating for coal miner jobs, favor continued reliance on coal as an energy source. For instance, West Virginia Democratic Senator Jay Rockefeller's Energy Policy advocates for ensuring that coal is a key part of the U.S. energy future.

Bill Raney, a member, along with Rockefeller, of the First Presbyterian Church in Charleston, and president of the West Virginia Coal Association, said in a phone interview that the science of climate change doesn't justify taking coal miner jobs. "Coal doesn't endanger the environment," he said. "The good Lord blessed us with these resources," he added, arguing that coal provides the least expensive and most reliable source of energy. As long as proper stewardship is practiced, he says, the country should continue relying on this resource. (Critics, of course, will argue that health care costs associated with coal are externalized and therefore not adequately included in the economics of coal mining and combustion, and they will argue too that "proper stewardship" too often is lacking.)

Divisions among Presbyterians are also surfacing on hydrofracking. The Synod of the Northeast Presbyterian Church, representing New York, New Jersey, and New England, in 2009 approved a resolution to study advantages and disadvantages of fracking, but outright disputes are being fought in some areas among Presbyterians. In December 2011, for instance, the Pittsburgh Presbytery imposed a moratorium on any church's entering into a contract agreement for natural gas and oil well exploration until March 2013. The move followed initial negotiations by a church camp, Crestfield, in Butler County, to lease its land for fracking.

Randy Bush, senior pastor of the East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, who spearheaded the moratorium, said the church had not been open about the talks with the developer, which he said could bring the church \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year from a drilling agreement. Bush, who is concerned the drilling could potentially cause water pollution, and even lead to more earthquakes from unsettling the layers beneath the ground surface, believes there needs to be "fuller discussions on the topic."

"It didn't seem to be the good Christian response to be drilling and destroying the land," Bush says.

Chris Martin, treasurer of the Pittsburgh Presbytery, declined to comment on the potential revenues from drilling. But he said that the signing bonus, in addition to providing ongoing royalties as the drilling occurs, could produce significant revenues at a time when churches are struggling, so it's a practice that warrants consideration.

"I think as time goes on, governments will develop better regulations to make fracking much safer," Martin said in a phone interview.

"We don't have to find other faiths to argue with, since we argue so well among ourselves," said Susan Gilbert Zencka, a minister at Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, whose church in 2010 became one of the first to get an Earth Care Congregation certification. She said her congregation, like

many in the Presbyterian faith, consists of a mix of social liberals, conservatives, “and everything in between.” She says working with that dynamic can be a challenge, but ultimately, “we believe in a God that’s big enough to love us all.”

## Wide Range of Grassroots Efforts

In some instances, Presbyterians have joined forces with mainstream environmental groups. The [Presbyterian Hunger Program](#), for instance, allied with the secular group [WhyHunger](#). “The Presbyterian Hunger Program has been a valuable asset in advancing U.S. food sovereignty,” Tristan Quinn-Thibodeau, Outreach and Partnerships Coordinator, Global Movements Program, for WhyHunger said in an e-mail. He said the efforts helped spread the message to the broader faith community, and have “emphasized certain language in messaging to resonate with religious ideas, and found the natural synergies between the ‘secular’ food sovereignty movement and religiously inspired social justice.”

Susan Chamberlain, who started “Cool Planet” to mobilize the First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto to reverse the direction of climate change, has worked with the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) (UCS) and [350.org](#), and also with California Interfaith Power and Light. And Rachel Medema, [California Interfaith Power and Light](#)’s Northern California Outreach Director, says she’s helped a few Presbyterian congregations go solar. But she says Presbyterians tend to “work better locally with their own mainline congregations.”

John Preston, a retired Presbyterian Minister and a northeast representative on the steering committee of [Presbyterians for Earth Care](#), said in a phone interview, “We just haven’t made a strong move in that direction.” He’s pushing for more alliances with secular environmental groups, which he thinks are particularly vital in helping progressive Presbyterians advocate for change amidst a generally conservative constituency. He said pastors have been criticized by some of their members for being political when they preach environmental protection.

Some Presbyterians who are secular environmentalists are also working within their church to raise awareness of these issues. Liz Perera, a public health analyst with the UCS climate and energy program, volunteers for a group called Earth Stewards at her suburban Washington, D.C., Church, Chevy Chase Presbyterian, working to reduce the church’s carbon footprint. “It’s a way to further my belief in taking actions to combat climate change,” she said in a phone interview. But she says she is careful to take off her lobbying hat, as the church would be wary of anything that would be perceived as a grassroots effort. At the same time, most work colleagues don’t know she’s Presbyterian. “People rarely talk about their actual religious connections.”

Presbyterians interviewed for this article say they have not been contacted by climate “skeptics.” E. Calvin Beisner, a Presbyterian member of The Cornwall Alliance, which takes issue with the belief that climate



change is significantly and adversely impacting the environment, would agree to be interviewed only if a set of conditions he specified would be met. That proved unacceptable, so no interview resulted.

It's unlikely that the majority of Presbyterians would be receptive to a message of continuing and long-term heavy reliance on coal. The Presbyterian Church is ready to see action to combat climate change "as part of their mission," Barnes-Davies said. "Faithful Presbyterians are planting seeds for decades on how much this is a part of our scripture.

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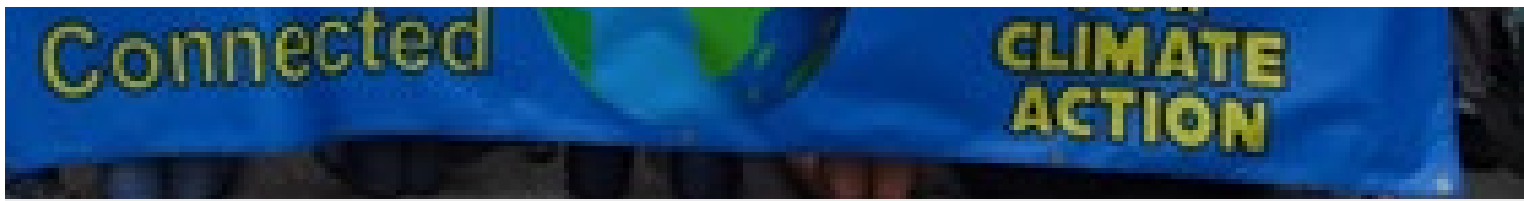
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