



 ARTICLE

# Episcopalians Confronting Climate Change

By [Lisa Palmer](#) | Mar 6, 2012

## Series on Climate and Major Religions

*Leaders of American Episcopalians point to ‘mounting urgency’ to address climate change and develop more compassionate and sustainable economies to support stewardship of all of God’s creation.*

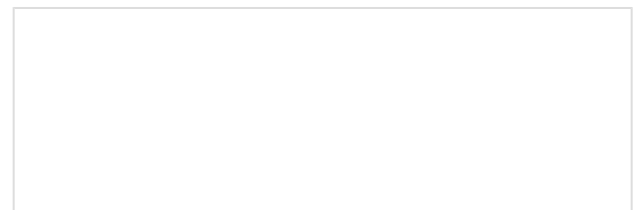
In September 2011, the House of Bishops in the Episcopal Church, attending a meeting in Quito, Ecuador, sent a [pastoral letter](#) to Episcopal clergy worldwide expressing “mounting urgency” to address climate change within church membership. The letter argued the critical need for Christians to care for all of God’s creation and urged that justice be sought for the poor, who it said will suffer most from climate change.

That pastoral letter was the latest in a string of climate change and environmental sustainability communications that have consistently framed action on climate change as a matter of stewardship of creation and social justice, comprising two of the “[Five Marks of Mission](#)” in the Episcopal Church. But despite strong messaging from the top, many clergy are cautious of preaching on climate change.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowen Williams, the leader of the Anglican Communion, which includes the global network of Episcopal Churches, has been [publicly outspoken](#) in supporting action on climate change adaptation and mitigation. He has made individual and joint announcements, with the World Council on Churches and [with the Vatican](#), to urge policy action by governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, [stopped flying for a year](#) because he wanted to reduce his greenhouse gas footprint. And the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., Katharine Jefferts Schori, repeatedly addresses climate change.

### **Making connections: ‘All Life Depends on the Life of Others’**

An oceanographer prior to her ordination to the priesthood, Jefferts Schori brings a unique blend of science and theology to climate communication. As a scientist, she understands linkages, including between global poverty and the need to



address global warming. At a U.S. Senate environment committee meeting in 2007, Jefferts Schori explained that “no life form can be studied in isolation from its surroundings or from other organisms. All living things are deeply interconnected, and all life depends on the life of others.”



*Jefferts Schori testifies before the Senate environment committee in 2007.*

Her Senate testimony centered on how global poverty and climate change are “intimately related.” She told the committee she and her colleagues share “a profound concern that climate change will most severely affect those living in poverty and the most vulnerable in our communities here in the United States and around the world.”

“I want to be absolutely clear; inaction on our part is the most costly of all courses of action for those living in poverty,” she testified.

That message of interconnectedness has been an ongoing tenet of the Episcopal Church’s ministry, whose members total about 1.9 million in the U.S. It was the basis for a resolution in 1991 to oppose drilling and mining in Alaska’s Arctic Wildlife Refuge, an area important to the Gwich’in people, 90 percent of whom are Episcopalian. Connectedness was also the basis for the church’s justice, peace and the integrity of creation initiative and the formation of a committee on environmental stewardship, both of which laid an early foundation for the church’s work on climate, Michael Schutt, Economic and Environmental Affairs Officer for the Episcopal Church in the U.S., said in a telephone interview.

“When you think of our call to ‘Love thy neighbor,’ I also think there is some motivation among Episcopalians to see other parts of creation as our neighbor, including endangered species and healthy ecosystems,” Schutt said, “because they ultimately influence human health and our ability to sustain human life.”

## **Episcopalian’s ‘Genesis Covenant’ Calls for GHG Reductions**

Episcopalians have called for international policies to combat climate change since 2000, including backing conservation-based energy legislation and financial support for developing nations to control carbon emissions, among many other efforts. But the Genesis Covenant may be the most significant proposal. It was

adopted unanimously by Episcopal Church's main governing body four years ago and requires that church facilities — including places of worship, offices, schools, camps and retreat centers — reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent within 10 years.

The Genesis Covenant has potential for big change across the church's 7,000 parishes in the U.S., but it's a voluntary program and therein lies the problem. Local leadership is necessary for it to take off, explained Schut. So far a limited number of districts and individual parishes have signed on to the agreement; these include the Diocese of Chicago, the Diocese of Olympia (Washington), and the Arkansas Diocese. ([Watch a video](#) of Bishop Charleston's Sermon on the Genesis Covenant given at Washington D.C's National Cathedral on February 24, 2008.)

The Rev. Canon Sally Bingham has helped promote enthusiasm for climate action by helping churches lead by example. An ordained Episcopal priest and the environment minister at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco, Bingham is also the founder and president of The Regeneration Project, an ecology and faith group that oversees the [Interfaith Power and Light](#) campaign. Chapters of Interfaith Power and Light now operate in 39 states and involve more than 14,000 congregations that work to reduce energy use from fossil fuels.

### **'Right Information' Leads to 'Right Thing'**

"When people have the right information, they do the right thing," Bingham said in a telephone interview. She added that the Episcopal Church has always been concerned for the poor and the suffering.

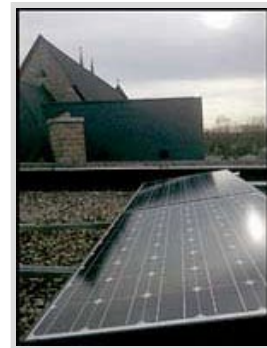
"Anybody who professes a love for God and creation will respond when they know it's an insult to God and a crime against creation to destroy the climate," she said. "If you know that when you are wasting electricity, and you are depriving people in the developing world, and the poorest of the world's poor are being hurt by our behavior, you are harming those folks. If you know that, you are not going to do that. You are going to be much more responsible."

### **Some Areas, Some Clergy Slow to Take Action**

Bingham says some areas of the U.S. are less receptive to hearing direct addresses on climate change issues than others, and she point to parts of Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Tennessee as places clergy encounter the most opposition to climate change issues. "They say that God would never let the Earth be destroyed again," Bingham said. When asked to preach in more conservative areas, she said she often focuses on less controversial aspects of environmental stewardship, such as saving money through energy efficiency, "something everyone agrees on."

Individual clergy have been slow to address climate issues, Schut said. Yet he said some Episcopalian priests have been surprised by positive reactions from among members of their congregations. Young parishioners at St. Luke’s Church in Dixon, Ill., sought ways to “green” their Gothic stone church and discretely installed solar panels on the roof to reduce use of fossil fuels and save on energy.

They then undertook a community outreach campaign, and The Rev. Michael Greene communicated with parishioners and community groups using church facilities during the week, about benefits of renewable energy, energy efficiency and recycling. The local newspaper ran a front-page story on the project, and St. Luke’s received so much public attention that it resulted in increased membership.



*Solar panels installed in St. Luke’s Church in Dixon, Ill.*

## Some Say Climate Change ‘Doesn’t Seem Religious’

The Rev. Chris Epperson, of Bruton Parish Episcopal Church in Williamsburg, Va., has taken climate change into the pulpit many times over the past decade.



*Rev. Chris Epperson, of Bruton Parish Episcopal Church in Williamsburg, Va.,*

“My approach has been to be careful and nuanced when preaching about global warming, and to understand that there’s real religious content there and on the need to address how we care for creation,” said Epperson. “When I get pushback, it’s usually when people tell me, ‘I come to church to be religious and this doesn’t seem religious.’”

Epperson said there’s a tendency among some church members to think about faith as “private” and not consider how it relates more broadly to the world. “Some people tell me they go to church from 9 to 12 on Sundays for spirituality and religion, and then they want to live the rest of their lives however they want,” said Epperson. “I think in terms of less tidy categories. We are called to see, and I think of it as a Venn diagram. There’s much more overlap — with climate change, our

call to care for creation, and seeking justice — than people realize.”

## Overcoming Criticisms ... On Politics in Sermons

A big challenge in the Episcopal Church involves getting the word out and having more of its clergy talking about climate change as an issue.

“One woman called me and said, ‘I don’t want to hear about politics when I come to church.’ If you have

folks like that in your parish, or if you have the head of an oil company, or big donors who are Republicans, as clergy you are sometimes afraid,” said Bingham. She often is asked to be a visiting minister to help carry the burden: “The message gets delivered and the clergy member doesn’t have to take the brunt of it,” she said.

In recent years, the Episcopal Church has faced strong criticism from conservative members who have opposed having gays and lesbians openly serve as bishops and clergy. While climate change has raised some hackles, it has not caused divisions among bishops and clergy.

“When you look at the abolition of slavery or the civil rights movement, if people had been afraid to talk about that from the pulpit, we wouldn’t be where we are today,” Bingham said.

“And getting off fossil fuels is the same kind of an issue. It is harming people. It is killing people. It is only going to get worse as time goes on. It is a matter of life or death. We as clergy have a responsibility to tell the truth and a responsibility to talk about it. If you ask Episcopal clergy if they think it’s a problem, they’ll tell you yes. But will they get up and give a sermon about it? Sometimes, but certainly not always. They are afraid to.”

### **A New ‘App’ ... and an Upcoming Ecumenical Forum and Webcast**

The Episcopal Church recently stepped up its communications efforts to further engage members on climate change. In February it launched a new iPad magazine app called “Wayfarer” to tell stories that concern Episcopalians around the globe. The first issue highlights the plight of residents of Kivalina, Alaska, and chronicles the story of indigenous Alaskans faced with having to move their entire village to higher ground because of rising sea levels.

On April 21, the Episcopal Church plans to further explore poverty and the environment during a two-hour ecumenical forum that is to be available as a live webcast. “We will explore the differential effects of environmental degradation and changing climate patterns on the poor — in this country and around the world,” Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said in a press release.

Preaching about climate change poses clear challenges for Episcopalians, just as it does for other faith communities addressed in this ongoing *Yale Forum* series.

The science is complex. The specter of upsetting parishioners is real. But faith leaders, who deeply believe that the connection to creation is clear, seem determined to persist.

*Also see:*

Nationwide Climate 'Preach-In' To Target Broad Faith-Group Congregations

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['Green Muslims,' Eco-Islam and Evolving Climate Change Consciousness](#)

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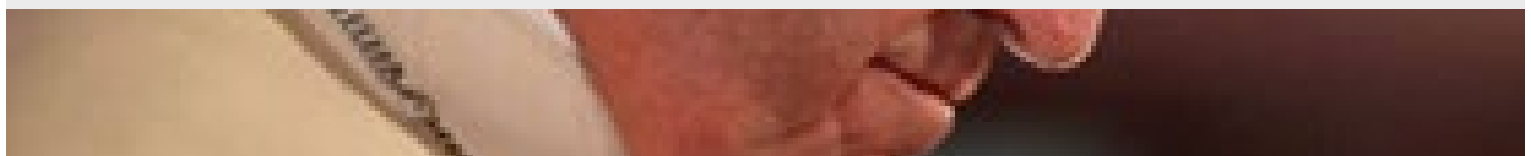
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