



 ARTICLE

# The United Church of Christ and Climate Change

By [Christine Woodside](#) | Apr 5, 2012

Humans carry responsibility -- and should take action -- United Church of Christ tells its members.

**T**he head of the Massachusetts conference of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Jim Antal, says he was not undone for having spent three days in jail last August. He and a number of like-minded others were arrested for refusing to leave Lafayette Park in Washington D.C., across from the White House, where they had joined in a large protest of the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline.

Driving back north after his release, Antal now recalls how he had felt energized. He called the church's communications writer in Massachusetts so she could write a dispatch about the conditions of the jail. And he continues to rail against what he sees as oil excesses.

"The overall effort against Keystone is [protesting] turning loose the second largest carbon bomb on the planet," Antal said in a recent phone interview. That is, oil locked in shale in Canada.

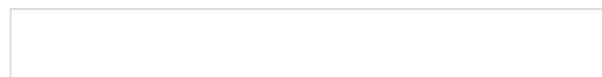
It's a pretty strong statement — but it appears to reflect attitudes of many members and pastors in the United Church of Christ around the country about the relationship between the search for energy and climate change.

## In 2005, Environmental Focus Added Climate

Although the UCC for a number of years has worked to publicize its concerns over the effects on the poor of toxic wastes, it is only over the past seven years that the wider church started talking seriously about climate change.

At first, the conversation had its bumps. It started in 2005 at UCC's national meeting, called the General Synod, held that year in Atlanta. Four regional UCC conferences introduced a broad environmental resolution that included global warming on a list of "unprecedented negative changes" to the planet.

"There was as big floor debate at that synod," recalls the Rev.



Gordon S. Bates, a retired UCC Connecticut conference staff member who was at that 2005 meeting. “For all of the resistance that we met, which was considerable, a lot of churches did stuff [to save energy] but had not claimed ‘green’ status, and a lot of people changed their behavior at home,” Bates recently told *The Yale Forum*.



*Rev. Gordon S. Bates*

As a result of that dialogue, the UCC formed a national energy task force that met starting in 2006. In an interview at the office of the UCC Connecticut conference, Bates said that his work on that task force awakened him to the role of fossil fuels in climate change. Bates, of East Hartford, said he previously had known little about climate science. (He spent much of his career focusing on criminal justice issues and is a retired director of the Connecticut Prison Association.)

## **Motivating People to Act: Save Money, Not Save the Planet**

As a member of the task force, Bates in 2006 attended its first meeting in Berkeley, California, where speakers addressed peak oil and climate science. Bates now says he was struck by facts about fossil fuel use and carbon emissions, the potential to talk about them with people who don’t necessarily agree, and the difficulties of communicating them.

As the task force gathered information, Bates recalls being disappointed in realizing that saving money, rather than saving the planet, better motivates most people when it comes to energy conservation.

“We realized that was part of humanity. People responded to what was closest to them. We found it hard to communicate it in a consistent way.”

The energy [task force’s report](#), released at the 2007 General Synod, in Hartford, describes a mounting world crisis. “The environment which we have chosen to impact is the entire life support system,” the report says.

## **‘Profound Concern’ for Pending Warming-Induced ‘Social Tragedies’**

At that 2007 synod, officially the 26th General Synod, the Connecticut conference introduced the denomination’s first major climate change resolution.

Members passed “[A Resolution on Climate Change](#),” calling for the U.S. government to take action to slow carbon emissions.

Perhaps its strongest point was that the UCC “admits Christian complicity in the damage human beings have caused to the Earth’s climate system and other planetary life systems, and urges recommitment to the Christian vocation of responsible stewardship of God’s creation, and expresses profound concern for the pending environmental, economic, and social tragedies threatened by global warming, to creation, human communities and traditional sacred spaces.”

Another resolution the same year affirmed “the United Church of Christ as an environmentally conscious entity.” This commitment set a course for individual churches, though not bound to the General Synod resolutions, to take action. Although the church doesn’t keep statistics, the most common response seems to involve churches saving energy in running their buildings.

### **2009 Resolution: Carbon-Neutral by 2016**

The most recent, and strongest, of the UCC national resolutions, “[A Resolution on the Urgency for Action on Climate Change](#),” points to scientific consensus.

Passed in 2009, it points to “the overwhelming accumulation of evidence concerning the danger presented by the changes in the global climate.” It points to “the urgency of the issue, asking for redoubled efforts on the part of the denomination, conferences, and churches to stem the effects of global warming and to achieve a carbon-neutral footprint in the next seven years.”

### **Revelations Beyond Printed Scripture**

The United Church of Christ consists mainly of Congregational Churches. Its U.S. membership of about 1.1 million people makes up about one-half of one percent of American adults, [according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#). The UCC formed in 1957 as a merger of the Congregational Christian churches and the Evangelical and Reformed churches. It counts as one of its main callings “to seek justice and liberation for all.” It is widely regarded as among the most socially progressive religious denominations.

Nationally it is one of the smaller of the mainline Protestant denominations, and its strength and membership numbers lie particularly in the Northeast. It is the largest Protestant denomination in Massachusetts, where it traces its roots to the Pilgrims and Puritans, said Antal, the Massachusetts conference president.

“We’re the Mayflower,” Antal said in a phone interview. But he added that the traditional image of the austere Puritans would be a wrong impression of a Congregationalist today. The Puritans “did have issues of discipline and austerity,” he said. “They had all sorts of values that we don’t have now. I think there was a lot of tension in their theology between the more austere sides of things and the more progressive.”

What clearly survives from the 1600s is the idea that God’s revelations to humankind have not stopped with printed scripture. “That is manifested in the current slogan of the UCC: ‘God is still speaking,’” Antal said.

Such ideas help explain the church’s engagement with climate science as part of its policy activities. UCC communicates through its state conferences and meets to discuss national policies, but the church is structured as a loose coalition of individual parishes, each free to run itself as it sees fit.

## **Climate Seen as Moral and Ethical Issue**

“We say we speak to our churches and not for them,” says Jim Deming, UCC national minister for environmental justice. Deming said in an interview with *The Yale Forum* that UCC started working extensively on environmental justice campaigns about 13 years ago, and that UCC now accepts climate change as nothing short of a moral and ethical problem.

“The people who are the most affected by climate change are the people who have the least resources,” Deming said. “The people who have been responsible for it will be the last ones to be affected.”

As the church focuses its ethical arguments on injustices to various parts of the world, it appears that skepticism about climate science could be diminishing throughout UCC even as such doubts were increasing over recent years among the general public.

“When I began [five years ago] the opinion polls, as good as they are, had the greater percentage of the public opinion acknowledging climate change, and a great percent of people acknowledging that it’s anthropogenic,” Deming said. Despite surveys and poll results over recent years pointing to declining interest and concern, “my experience in the conference is that it has been the opposite.”

## **Local Churches Take On Climate Change**

For a church whose individual congregations are not tightly bounded by its national resolutions, many individual UCC parishes nonetheless appear to have taken climate resolutions to heart, according to Deming. And many have started with their own congregations’ buildings, for which UCC’s [Cornerstone Fund](#) program loans money for energy-saving systems.

Deming said he helped launch a UCC “green justice congregations” movement. An ambitious version of an education program, it asks churches to undertake actions in their communities. Doing so might mean holding workshops or lectures on energy use or climate change. It also usually means the churches themselves strive to cut energy use. But, Deming added, it is “not just changing your light bulbs, but really understanding that

justice is part of this.”

The [Massachusetts conference](#) in 2011 began a yearly “Lenten carbon fast” during the period of fasting and introspection leading to Easter. Those who signed up focused on saving energy, and daily e-mails tracked their progress.

“Last year we had over 6,000 people from 14 different countries sign up for that,” Deming said.

### **‘Not Waiting for Someone Else to Do It’**

In another activity, UCC has opened a camp near Seattle to train environmental justice leaders. “We give people the tools to go back in their communities and hold workshops on the foundation of our faith that leads us to environmental justice,” Deming said.

Deming said the UCC has become a follower of [an international grassroots initiative](#) and its workshop in Chapel Hill, N.C. on “transition congregations,” aimed at supporting town and city energy conservation initiatives. It’s a version of a British movement “that basically says climate change and peak oil are here,” Deming said. “It’s about building local food systems, transportation, health care — not waiting for someone else to do it. We feel like our congregations can take the lead to help people do it.”

Many UCC churches get their members involved with environmental action through the national ecumenical organization called [Interfaith Power and Light](#). (See [Yale Forum article](#).)

### **Politics Aside ... ‘Everyone Wants to Take Care of the Earth’**

As an example of some local efforts, a small “green movement” at the United Church in University Place, Washington, has, since Japan’s 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, drawn in hundreds of area residents to programs on nuclear energy and another on spirituality and the environment, said church member Nancy Davis. The church, near Tacoma, also had an energy audit (with support from Interfaith Power and Light) and, for example, has begun to boost its already high rating by shutting off sections of the building when not in use.

“We are looking at how our relationship to creation is an essential component of our faith,” Davis said. “You cannot separate the two.” The pastor of United Church, Jen Walters, has preached on environmental ethics and late last summer followed a liturgy based on the seasons and creation.

At another church trying to cut its energy use, the Dummerston Congregational Church in Dummerston, Vermont, Pastor Susanna Griefen said, “Our members are very concerned about the environment. We don’t always agree on the politics of what to do, but everybody wants to take care of the Earth.” Griefen said

members took part also in the Lenten “carbon fast,” and Dummerston also sponsored workshops for the town on the British low-energy movement “Transition Towns” activities.

In addition, UCC pastors preach on the climate on Sunday mornings. It’s not clear that they know just how their congregations perceive their strong words. But they make numerous references to the Bible and their message is clear: humanity ought to act.

Griefen, for instance, said she had recently delivered a sermon about the climate called “Slouching Towards Crisis,” a play on the William Butler Yeats poem, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem.”

She drew on verses in the 24th chapter of the Old Testament book of Isaiah that says, in part, “The Earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the Earth; its people must bear their guilt.”

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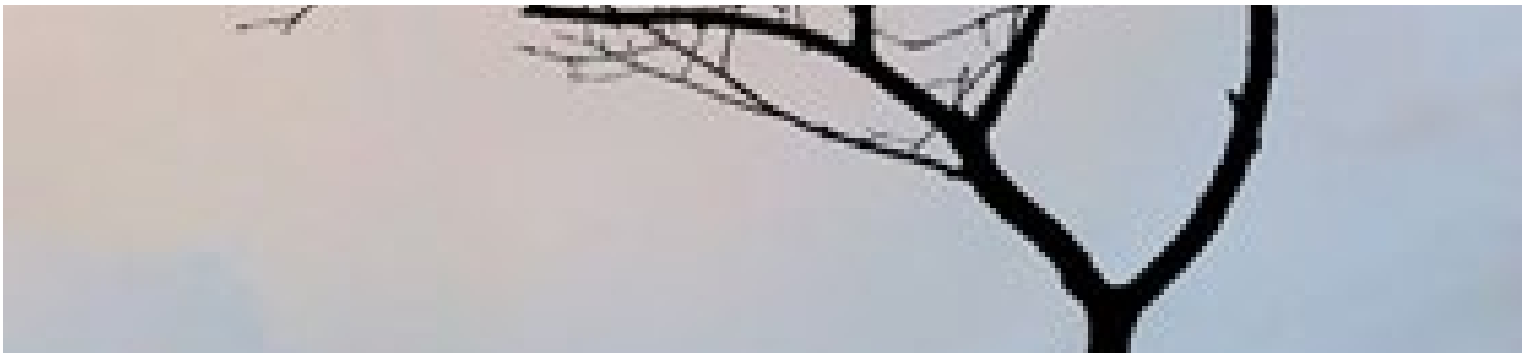
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