



CLIMATE CHANGE AS A MATTER OF FAITH AND JUSTICE

Climate change is a tremendous challenge for the global community. Many see it as *the* critical issue of our time. As people of faith, it is an issue that reaches to the core of who we are and how we are to live in God's world.

"Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods; it represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day."
—Pope Francis

What is climate change? Climate change refers to the human-induced increase of atmospheric greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations beyond normal, life-supporting levels of variation. Although earth's climate has always fluctuated, the average surface temperature has increased dramatically – by roughly 0.85°C¹ – due to human activity since the industrial revolution.

Why is climate changing? GHGs exist naturally to help keep the Earth warm enough to support life. They do this by absorbing some of the solar energy entering and exiting Earth's atmosphere. The increased concentrations of atmospheric GHGs have now exceeded the assimilation capacity of Earth systems, causing the planet to warm at an accelerated rate.

Why is climate change a problem? Climate change is negatively impacting physical, biological, and human systems everywhere. Ocean acidification, caused by the increased uptake of CO₂ by oceans, is negatively affecting marine ecosystems and fisheries. Increased average global surface temperatures are changing precipitation and snowmelt patterns, impacting the quantity and quality of water resources required to support human life and the ecology of the planet. They are also increasing the risk of both flooding and drought. Permafrost is melting, glaciers and sea ice sheets are shrinking, sea levels are rising, and the frequency of heat waves is up, producing a negative feedback loop that further exacerbates the problem.

Further warming presents increased risk to coastal systems and low-lying areas, marine systems, food security and production systems, urban and rural inhabitants (particularly the poor), economic sectors and services, and human security.

The year 2019 was the second hottest in recorded history. It was also the year with the highest ever levels of CO₂ emissions. Canada's arctic regions are warming three times faster than the global average.

Why is climate a justice issue? Developed nations have contributed most GHG emissions to date by using industrialization as a vehicle for national wealth. These emissions have put pressure on nations in the Global South, where rising temperatures increasingly threaten food and water security. The socially and economically marginalized are the most vulnerable to climate change due to systemic inequalities. In this way, climate change is also a matter of social and economic justice.

What is the solution? In December 2015, the Paris Agreement on climate change was established, and with it, world leaders agreed that all nations must work together to "strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change ... [by] holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" (striving for 1.5°C). The urgent need for accelerated action was reiterated in the fall of 2018 by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in a historic report that set 2030 as the scientific deadline for significant reductions in global CO₂ emissions. Canada, along with the rest of the global community, must act quickly to reduce GHG emissions.

What is the Canadian contribution? The government of Canada has committed to reduce GHG emissions 30% below 2005 levels by 2030 (to 524 megatonnes-Mt of carbon dioxide equivalent-CO₂e emissions annually) and has developed a national climate action plan. Though a significant step in the right direction,

¹ If you are reading this as a hardcopy, see cpj.ca/for-the-earth for references.

government accounting released in January 2019 indicated that Canada is on track to miss the emissions-reduction target by at least 79 megatonnes or 11%.

In 2017, Canada emitted 716 mt, (up 1.75% over 2016) or 19.5 tonnes of GHGs per capita (down 2.5% from 2016). To keep warming within 2°C, the Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project (DDPP) calls for all nations to limit GHG emissions to 1.7 tonnes per capita by 2050. The DDPP has suggested that to reach this target, Canada needs to reduce its emissions by around 90% (to 73 megatonnes by 2050).

Canada must now meet and exceed emissions reduction targets. We must enact policies and support advanced technologies that encourage energy efficiency and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable economy. Potential solutions include: expanding renewables, increasing carbon pricing, integrating biofuels from organic waste, enacting policies against deforestation and illegal mining, as well as introducing new green jobs for all people - including those who have been historically excluded in the energy sector.

How should Christians respond? As Christians, we are called to respect the dignity of every human being as image-bearers of God. We know that God gifts every person with both rights and responsibilities. We all have a rightful claim to live in dignity, be respected by others and have access to resources needed to live out God's calling. We also have a duty to act justly, care for creation, and work for just relations within society.

Throughout scripture we read of repentance, community, and loving compassion: from the Genesis call "to work and take care of [the Earth]" (Genesis 2:15) through to the Psalmist's celebration of "God's handiwork" (Psalm 19:1) and the rejoicing too of the trees (Psalm 96:12) to the prophets' devastation at the destruction of the land (Hosea 4:3) and the New Testament message of renewal and life eternal (Romans 8:22).

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."
John 3:16

This must inform the way we live, work, and play. Future generations have a right to the abundance of creation; we cannot over-consume and deny our children's children a healthy and secure life.

We must seek to live into God's call to love and care for all the Earth; to respond to the human and ecological devastation of climate change with love and justice.

Our economy, ecology, and society are all wrapped up in one another. So, we need to take a holistic approach that considers the health of the economy, the well-being of plants and animals in the natural environment, and the livelihoods, lifestyles, and health of individuals, families, communities, and future generations.

This means looking at how we, as individuals and communities consume, waste, and navigate our landscape. Also essential, however, is acknowledging that the scale of the climate crisis requires more than individual action. It is a Christian imperative that we engage as citizens in advocating on behalf of creation.

According to the Rev. Dr. Mishka Lysack, "Creation advocacy [protecting what God loves] is a modern Pentecost where God's Spirit calls the church to listen faithfully and act courageously to protect creation and participate in the Holy Spirit's redemptive healing of all of creation."

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Isaiah 58:6-7,11-12

