



**Faith Communities and Climate Change:  
A Call for Climate Justice**

Report on the Interfaith Forum on Faith and Climate

The Canadian Council of Churches

October 2011

This public event is organized by a collaborative interfaith committee on climate justice, including The Commission on Justice and Peace of The Canadian Council of Churches, Citizens for Public Justice, Faith and the Common Good, The Hill Times, and Embassy magazine.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 24, 2011, faith community representatives, Members of Parliament, and concerned citizens gathered together for an Interfaith Forum on Faith and Climate to address the crisis of climate change. Organized by a collaborative interfaith committee on climate justice, including The Commission of Justice and Peace of the Canadian Council of Churches, Citizens for Public Justice, Faith and the Common Good, The Hill Times and Embassy Magazine, the event's main purpose was to consider climate change as an issue of justice and reflect on the moral responsibility faith communities have to address global warming.

Four panels resourced the forum. The Faith Perspectives on Climate panel underscored the moral implications of climate change and the urgent need to seek justice for the environment and for our global neighbours. The Political Perspectives on Climate panel discussed current political initiatives and policies on climate change in Canada, illuminating the great need for change in public policy on the issue in Canada. A working lunch highlighted the experiences and climate justice initiatives of faith communities across the globe. The final panel addressing the question: What does climate justice mean for faith communities? Panelists emphasized the need to act on behalf of the poor and offered practical examples of how faith communities can work towards climate justice. All panels urged faith communities to use their influence and resources to take action. The forum ended in a group discussion on what faith communities should do next to respond to the problem of climate change.

With more than 50 attendees from diverse religious backgrounds like the Jewish Community of Canada, the Baha'i Community of Canada, and the Mennonite Church of Canada, along with organizations like Climate Action Network Canada, KAIROS, and Faith and the Common Good, the forum represented an historic event in its breadth of cooperation. Panellists highlighted both the urgency of the climate change crisis and the profound hope for change that collaborative action of faith communities can offer.

The forum was constituted in two parts:

- The main forum on Monday, October 24, 2011 that consisted of four panels addressing climate change from a variety of perspectives. These included considerations from numerous faith and political backgrounds and gave attention to the implications of climate justice both in Canada and across the globe.
- A public meeting on Sunday, October 23, 2011 addressing the question: can Faith Communities Change the Climate?

## FORUM ON FAITH AND CLIMATE

### WELCOME AND OPENING PRAYER

Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton, General Secretary of The Canadian Council of Churches started the morning off with a warm welcome to the forum. An interfaith prayer followed, offered by representatives from the Muslim, Christian, Bahá'í, Judaic, and Métis communities. After opening prayers, the Chair of the Commission on Justice and Peace, Joy Kennedy, provided an overview of the day's events, speakers and topics of discussion. She highlighted the need to call governments to take action on climate change and acknowledged the role of the Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change as a part of this process. However, Kennedy urged that making a statement is not enough and that it must be accompanied by action. With this in mind, Kennedy made clear that the forum was designed as an opportunity not just to listen, but to engage and work together.

### FAITH PANEL: FAITH PERSPECTIVES ON CLIMATE

Chair: Zul Kassamili, The Association of Progressive Muslims of Canada (APMC)

- Mardi Tindal, Moderator, The United Church of Canada
- Dr. Victor Goldbloom, Jewish community of Canada
- Don Hutchinson, Director, Centre for Faith and Public Life, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada
- Susanne Tamás, Director of Government Relations, The Bahá'í Community of Canada

The first panel offered theological and spiritual perspectives of climate change. The prevailing message was that climate change is not just a scientific or political issue, but an ethical issue. The fact that it has been caused by humans who are responsible for their actions and that it is jeopardizing future generations, endangering species, wreaking havoc for the poor among other difficulties, makes it a question of justice.

**Zul Kassamili** highlighted the moral context of climate change, suggesting that the sacred relationship between humans and earth has been broken by humanity's turn to greed and economic systems that bring destruction instead of harmony. **Don Hutchinson** discussed the responsibility of Christians to act as stewards of the environment. He suggested that "unlimited greed is a cancer" and does not reflect God's care for all creation.



*From left to right, Zul Kassamili, The Association of Progressive Muslims of Canada, Mardi Tindal, The United Church of Canada, Don Hutchinson, Centre for Faith and Public Life, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Dr. Victor Goldbloom, Jewish community of Canada, & Susanne Tamás, The Bahá'í Community of Canada*

**Mardi Tindal** agreed that climate change is a symptom of broken relationships and suggested that faith communities are called to participate in God's healing and mending on earth. She also emphasized that faith cannot be extricated from pressing moral issues of the day. Like many other contributors, Tindal referenced historical measures in which the church has responded to widespread injustices, such as the movement to abolish slavery and the civil rights movement in the United States. She urged listeners to set aside fears and respond to today's moral challenge of climate change. To do so is to obey the Biblical call to do justice, she said. Reflecting the sense of urgency shared by many panelists and participants, Tindal reminded listeners

that this pursuit is time-sensitive.



*Susanne Tamás, The Bahá'í Community of Canada*

**Dr. Victor Goldbloom** echoed Tindal's sentiments in referring to the call in the Hebrew scriptures to "choose life". He urged listeners to choose life by engaging both the political community and public in addressing climate change.

Within the focus on reframing climate change as a moral issue, the role of science was not forgotten. **Susanne Tamás** proposed that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and emphasized the need for both. Science without religion can lead us to materialism and cause us to see humans as a brute force.

Conversely, religion without science can lead to superstition, resistance to change, and "othering". Tamás also noted that while science has put climate change on the agenda, it has not brought about behavioural change. She concluded that both science and the voice of prophecy are needed to spark action on global warming.

#### POLITICAL PANEL: POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CLIMATE

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Chair: The Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton, General Secretary, The Canadian Council of Churches

- MP Laurin Liu, New Democratic Party of Canada
- MP Kirsty Duncan, Liberal Party of Canada
- MP Elizabeth May, Green Party of Canada

The second panel was an opportunity to hear from politicians about Canada's involvement in addressing climate change. Key questions included:

- How will Canada contribute to achieving a new binding international agreement that reduces carbon emissions and sets clear targets?
- What will Canada's national renewable energy policy be?
- How will Canada assist the most affected countries to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change?

**Laurin Liu** stated that we have a duty and obligation to act as stewards of the land and water and expressed the NDP's commitment to a healthy and balanced environment for future generations. Liu reported that while Canada has supported some climate adaptation efforts, there is a need to invest equally in adaptation

and mitigation efforts. Moreover, these investments could take new forms, such as offering more loans instead of just grants. Resources could also be derived from new sources, such as a Financial Transaction Tax. Liu also highlighted the current government's efforts to undermine attempts to mitigate climate change effects, citing as an example the failure of Bill C-311, the Climate Change Accountability Act, to pass through the Senate. Liu also said she felt encouraged by the support of faith communities and the interfaith call to action.



*Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton, General Secretary of The Canadian Council of Churches, addresses a panel of MPs, including Elizabeth May (Green Party), Laurin Liu (NDP), and Kirsty Duncan (Liberal).*

**Kirsty Duncan** of the Liberal Party and former member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change emphasized the impact of climate change on the developing in the world. She stressed that climate change is not just environmental issue but a human rights issue, with those least responsible suffering the most. Duncan echoed Liu's disappointment with the Conservative government's abdication of leadership on responding to climate change. She called listeners to ask the government: where is the long-term plan for our environment? Where is the progress on air quality, biodiversity, and water quality? On a positive note, Duncan discussed the recent formation of the first ever all-party environmental climate change caucus which she has worked on – a step in the right direction.



**Elizabeth May** stressed the urgency of present environmental conditions and warned that Canada must make climate change a priority or risk runaway global warming. She also urged that with the next election a long four years away, time does not allow for more traditional tool of partisanship in this matter. She concluded that partisanship be put aside in favour of cooperation with those who share our concerns. Moreover, the immediacy of climate change requires more unconventional approaches to political avenues such as asking MPs to raise the issue behind the closed doors of caucus.

*MP Elizabeth May, Green Party of Canada*

## WORKING LUNCH: SPECIAL INTERFAITH PRESENTATION FROM AFRICA

Hosted by Paul Gehrs, Assistant to the Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

- Rev. Dr. Johnson A. Mbillah, The Anne Duncan Gray Visiting Scholar at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto & Presbyterian Church of Ghana
- Jim Davis, Africa Partnerships Coordinator, Kairos

A working lunch provided an opportunity to hear a more global perspective of faith community action on climate change. **Rev. Dr. Johnson A. Mbillah** gave a report on efforts and perspectives in Africa. He touched on the problem of corrupt resource extraction in Africa and the difficult question of whether abundant resources are a blessing or a curse for Africa. He reported that even as people who are disproportionately suffering the effects of climate change, African faith communities “are not going to play the victim card.” Instead, they are choosing to take an active role in seeking climate justice, engaging in a concerted move toward responsible development. He also touched on the upcoming talks on climate change in Durban, urging that the world cannot afford to bury Kyoto at this important conference.



*Rev. Dr. Johnson A. Mbillah, Program for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa*

**Jim Davis** spoke of partners and allies in global south impacted negatively by climate change. He noted that jobs and political power in Canada depend on the denial of climate change. He emphasized that logic is not enough to bring about action on climate change. He reported that one of Kairos’ main concerns is engaging the youth on the issue.

#### PANEL: WHAT DOES CLIMATE JUSTICE MEAN FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES?

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Chair: Dr. Lois Mitchell, Canadian Baptist Ministries

- Graham Saul, Executive Director, Climate Action Network Canada
- Alicia Cundall, Organizing Partner, Youth Caucus, 2008-2010 UN Commission on Sustainable Development
- Dr. Ted Reeve, Executive Director, Faith and the Common Good
- Rev. Willard Metzger, General Secretary, The Mennonite Church of Canada

**Dr. Lois Mitchell** began the final panel by highlighting part of the social context that has contributed to the problem of climate change. She touched on the idea of progress and its challenge to the idea of reliance on the divine. Mitchell also noted that it is not possible for the whole world to live as we do and that even in developed countries, progress has come with a price tag. Mitchell emphasized that climate change is connected to other issues like consumerism and we need to be aware of those connections. She echoed the need for both science and faith to address the environmental problems and justice issues surrounding global warming.

Throughout the day various speakers touched on the Canadian context of the climate change issue. **Graham Saul** identified climate change as predictable, avoidable, and as a “profoundly moral decision” in Canada, and boiled it down to making a choice between phasing out fossil fuels and adopting renewable resources, or continuing to expand the oil industry. He explained that Canada presently has a public policy that is oriented toward radical expansion of the oil industry. At the same time Saul was encouraged by the level of action

against climate change in Canada and hopeful that with more people acting on the issue, Canada could make the right choice. In pursuing further action on climate change, Saul cautioned against cloaking climate change in environmental jargon and percentages that most people don't understand.



*From left to right: Alicia Cundall, UN Commission on Sustainable Development, Graham Saul, Climate Action Network Canada, Rev. Willard Metzger, The Mennonite Church of Canada, Dr. Lois Mitchell, Canadian Baptist Ministries, and Dr. Ted Reeve, Faith and the Common Good.*

While much of the day's discussion provoked sobering reflection, contributors also brought stories of hope. **Alicia Cundall** lifted the spirits of the forum by sharing from her experiences at the Youth Caucus of the UNCSO. She pointed out that a discussion on climate justice must include those who are most affected by climate change and highlighted the Caucus's efforts to put together an international, representative group to dialogue on the issue. Cundall also spoke of the need for moderation simply because it is healthier than living with excess. She closed by reminding listeners that while resources on earth are finite, "human capacity for good is infinite."

**Dr. Ted Reeve** offered more hope with examples of faith community initiatives to fight climate change. From churches that conduct green audits that provide a holistic perspective of the well-being of buildings to a youth group that does dishes for a community kitchen so that Styrofoam would not need to be used, it was apparent that there are countless practical ways to promote a greener future. Reeve pointed out that our new understanding of earth and its processes requires faith communities to ask, "how do we worship in new ways in light of newly understood cosmology?" He suggested that part of this response is to change the neoliberal agenda on the issue of climate change.

**Rev. Metzger** identified climate change as "an issue of equity" with those who are the least responsible – most of whom are poor – being the most affected. At the same time, he said that we must choose to hope because "when we hope we look for solutions." He suggested that a renewed posture of gratitude will generate a renewed concern and sense of responsibility for earth. He also suggested that changing our emphasis from climate change as a very negative issue to environmental concern as a positive action might be effective in "fast-tracking" the issue of climate change.

## TAKING ACTION FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

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Facilitator: Peter Noteboom, The Canadian Council of Churches

With the understanding that talk about climate change must be accompanied by action, a day of both challenging and inspiring dialogue finished in a circle discussion to answer the question: how will we promote this in our communities?

At a foundational level, one contributor suggested, is the need for faith communities to continue (or, in some cases, begin) to explore what their own theology says on the issue of climate change. Correspondingly this theology must be lived out. This means asking critical questions about our own lifestyles, such as what we should buy and how we should travel.

In engaging other faith communities, many agreed that the *Canadian Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change* should be used as a primary tool for moving forward. If this call to action is continuously and consistently promoted, it can be influential in sparking further dialogue and action on the issue of climate change. The upcoming climate change talks in Durban, South Africa, were identified as another critical forum to urge immediate action on global warming.

More traditional avenues of action were also discussed, including writing letters to Members of Parliament or articles for newsletters, newspapers and websites. Some also identified social media as a useful vehicle for advocacy. Other ideas included setting up sub-committees to spearhead specific initiatives, or creating workshops on climate change for faith communities and other groups.

A number of contributors identified the importance of supporting political parties and politicians that are already taking action on climate change. As was emphasized earlier in the day, this does not demand partisanship but requires asking politicians, “what are you doing to address climate change and how can we help?” Others pointed out that political initiatives must be balanced with efforts to engage the wider community and influence public opinion. Related to this is the need to be clear and specific about what we want the Canadian government and Canadians to do. As **David MacDonald** of the United Church of Canada noted, “if we want a low-carbon or no-carbon future, we need to say that.”



*Joy Kennedy, The Canadian Council of Churches, addresses the forum.*



*Joe Gunn, Citizens for Public Justice, addresses the forum*

Dialogue continued on the need to reframe the issue of climate change. **Kathryn Guindon** from Greening Sacred Spaces emphasized the need to change our perspective of climate justice advocates. “We need to get over this idea that we are the radicals, the fringe group and that these ideas have nothing to do with our faith,” she said. Faith communities and concerned citizens need to realize that it is not crazy to think that climate change needs to be addressed.

A key concern of the day was the need to engage youth in the discussion on climate change. Some proposed creative solutions, such as a mock parliament or model UN in which

youth could practice empathizing with varying political or regional views. Earlier in the day, **Alicia Cundall** from the UNCSO encouraged advocacy through the arts as a means of connecting with the human spirit and piercing intellectual veils. She gave the example of organizing an art exhibition by

youth about climate change. **Cameron Gray** from the Youth Climate Coalition emphasized the power of narratives within social change and social movements. He pointed out that minute scientific details can often be debated but stories rooted in common ethics and values move people. He suggested that we need to use the power of narrative in advocating for climate justice.

The use of narrative relates to another forum conclusion: faith communities can benefit greatly from the narratives and resources of other groups. Correspondingly, faith communities must reach outside of their comfort zones and faith circles and partner with other groups. Moreover, an alliance of both faith and non-faith communities serves as a more potent force for climate justice. A specific mention was the need to partner with indigenous communities whose experiences and storytelling capacity are of great value to the pursuit of climate justice.



*Kevin Doyle, KAIROS, addresses the forum*

Within this discussion, the power of prayer was not forgotten. **Carol Dixon**, Presiding Clerk of the Canadian Yearly Meeting, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) closed the event with a moving, interfaith prayer in the Quaker tradition: silence. However, as was highlighted throughout the day, prayer must go hand-in-hand with action. Faith communities must not only pray for a miracle in the area of climate change, but also be willing to participate in that miracle.

## LINKS

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The Canadian Council of Churches  
<http://www.councilofchurches.ca>

Climate Action Network Canada  
[www.climateactionnetwork.ca](http://www.climateactionnetwork.ca)

Citizens for Public Justice  
<http://www.cpj.ca>

Greening Sacred Spaces  
<http://www.greeningsacredspaces.net>

The Hill Times  
<http://hilltimes.com>

Kairos  
<http://www.kairoscanada.org>

SmartMeme  
<http://smartmeme.com>

