



How are we called to be public advocates for climate health?

On behalf of the volunteers serving on the Earthcare Team of St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos, California, I'm pleased to welcome you to Session 5 of "A Beginner's Guide to Creation Care and the Climate Crisis." This session addresses the question: How are we called to be public advocates for climate health?

I'm Don Maruska. My experience in public advocacy began in the 1960s with the civil rights movement and in the 1970s as a legislative assistant in the U.S. Senate. After a career as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, I turned to coaching others and climate action. I've learned from experience how very important grass-roots voices like yours are to gain policies that steward creation. I'll share a few examples at the end of this video.

We appreciate that advocacy can feel like a tough issue for some people in the church.

In today's session, you'll be learning how we are called to advocate for climate health, ways you can be constructively political, examples of advocacy in action, and concrete steps you and your congregation can take.

We're delighted to have as our special guest a true expert on this topic, The Reverend Doctor Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, an Episcopal priest and a long-time climate activist. She is Missioner for Creation Care of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and a leader in faith-based organizing around the Climate Crisis. . We came to appreciate Margaret's expertise when we invited her to the West Coast for a ten-day tour during which she conducted a series of workshops and retreats in the dioceses of Los Angeles and El Camino Real. Subsequently we based a study group on the excellent book she co-edited, "Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis." For today's session, Margaret has prepared a superb, annotated list of resources for her presentation. You'll find it on the website with the study guide for this session.

Margaret, please guide us forward.

I've been engaged in public advocacy around climate change for many years. I was ordained in the Episcopal Church back in June 1988. This happened to be the month that NASA climate scientist James Hansen testified to the Senate that global warming was a threat to life on Earth. From the beginning, my vocation as a priest has felt intimately connected with the call to save life as it evolved on this planet.

I believe that God is calling the followers of Jesus to help build – and lead – a bold, unstoppable movement to protect the beautiful world that God entrusted to our care. Public advocacy to protect God's Creation and to create a more just and livable future has never been more urgently needed than it is today.

We are in a climate emergency, which means that we are living at a decisive moment in history, a time when the collective choices we make will affect the wellbeing, even the survival, of the people who come after us, and the life – or death – of the countless species with whom we share the planet. Of course, it's important that all of us make personal changes to live more eco-friendly lives – such as cutting back sharply on our use of fossil fuels, protecting trees, and eating lower on the food chain – but the scope and speed of the climate crisis demand more. They require collective action and political engagement. That's where we can really make a difference.

Some Christians worry that climate change is a partisan issue. So, let's take a look at that. I'm sure you've heard phrases like these:

"Churches should stay out of politics."

"Churches can't get involved in elections because of the separation of church and state."

"Churches should lose their tax-exempt status if they take political positions."

If you'd like to look closely at these claims and to learn where they fall short, please read an essay by the Rev. Leslie Sterling, ["The Intersection of Church and State."](#)

She explains, for instance, that "churches are not allowed to campaign for or promote specific candidates or specific political parties by name. But there are ... many ways churches can be politically active that are allowable under the law."

In fact, I would argue that being politically engaged and joining the struggle for social and ecological justice is fundamental to being a Christian.

As Christians, we share Jesus' vision of a world filled with justice, mercy, and peace. Like the earliest Christians, we seek to be Jesus' ongoing presence in the world and we share his longing for the reign of God.

I hope you'll take a look sometime at a document circulating in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, ["Not only with our lips, but with our lives,"](#) a document that explores why doing justice is not just an option for Christians, but an essential aspect of Christian discipleship.

“There is no such thing as ‘staying out of politics.’ Everything we do or refrain from doing has political impact. Withdrawing from civic and political engagement may serve to perpetuate an unjust status quo. Remaining silent or staying “neutral” can mean colluding with oppression.”

-- “Not only with our lips, but with our lives”: The Church and Social Justice

https://www.diocesewma.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Not_only_with_our_lips.FINAL_.pdf

In a time of unprecedented climate emergency, how will we bear witness to the loving, liberating, and life-giving Way of Jesus?

[The Episcopal Church has many helpful online resources](#) to help us care for God’s Creation. Our Church has a long history of advocacy for social and ecological justice, from [resolutions passed at General Convention](#) to actions taken by dioceses, parishes, and individuals. If you’d like to join other Episcopalians in public advocacy, you can sign up with EPPN, the [Episcopal Public Policy Network](#).

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/>

The Episcopal Church has also produced a fine new document, “From the Pew to the Public Square,” to help support our efforts in public advocacy.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/social-justice-advocacy-engagement/>

I’d like to name six ways that we as individuals and communities of faith can advocate for a stable, healthy climate. As you listen, please hold the question: How is God calling you to be a public advocate for climate health?

1. We can vote. We can engage in the election process and vote our values. We can encourage other people to vote, and we can protect people’s right to vote. Did you know that many environmentalists fail to vote? It’s true. That’s one reason I support [Environmental Voter Project](#), a non-partisan get-out-the-vote group that targets millions of environmentalists who don’t usually vote. [The Episcopal Church actively encourages voting](#) to protect God’s Creation and to secure a stable climate.

2. We can contact decision-makers. Engaging with elected officials is part of our civic responsibility as Americans and is also part of our calling as faithful Christians. So, we can send emails and write letters to lawmakers on a local level, statewide, and nationally. To have greater impact, we can arrange to visit them in person. Like some of you, I’ve done a fair bit of lobbying over the years. Several years ago, I learned that climate lobbying can actually be a spiritual practice. So, I’ll tell you a story.

A while back, I traveled to Washington, DC with a small group of fellow Christians. We joined almost 1,000 other people from all over the country who had gathered for the annual day of lobbying organized by [Citizens Climate Lobby](#). Citizens Climate Lobby (or CCL, for short) is a nonpartisan group working to build support in Congress for putting a price on carbon, which is one of the policies that many economists say is essential to accelerate the transition to a clean energy economy.

Honestly, I was used to taking a somewhat adversarial, even confrontational stance when I lobbied elected officials, but CCL takes a very different and disciplined approach: CCL asks its volunteers not to browbeat members of Congress but instead to build relationships and find common ground. CCL tells volunteers that if you can't find something to respect and admire in the politician you are lobbying, then you should not be in that person's office.

Well, wouldn't you know, Citizens Climate Lobby matched me with four members of Congress – several of them Episcopalian – who represented states with a strong interest in protecting the coal, gas, and oil industries. As I looked over their voting records, I was dismayed to see that just about everything these men had voted for, I was against. Just about everything they had voted against, I was for. Politically, we stood on opposite sides of the aisle. How in the world was I going to connect with them? ... I had to slow down. I had to look more carefully at their voting records and try to exercise some empathy and imagination. What could I appreciate about each person? What did this person seem to value, and why? Where might we meet on common ground?

As I wrote in [a blog post about this experience](#), lobbying with CCL ended up renewing my commitment to constructive dialogue and to the spiritual practice of seeking to connect with people whose views I oppose.

<https://citizensclimatelobby.org/>

<http://revivingcreation.org/lobbying-as-spiritual-practice/>

What else can we do? We can get published. We can write letters to the editor about current events or in response to an article. We can write opinion pieces and send them to our local newspaper. We can write about the spiritual and moral call to tackle climate change and share news of what our congregations are doing. This is good news, good news worth sharing, and it can help to shape public perception.

4. We can testify at public hearings. When policy decisions are being made at a local, state, or federal level, we often have opportunities to voice our opinions at a public hearing. I've spoken at many public hearings, and I encourage all of us to make it clear that we speak not only as concerned citizens, but also as people of faith. A spiritual and moral perspective is what's so often missing in debates about public policy.

I remember standing up years ago to speak at a hearing in Boston about a proposed federal policy on fossil fuels. At the end of the hearing, one of the presenters headed straight toward me, evidently wanting to have a word with me. I was a bit nervous, for I had strongly critiqued the proposal, but to my surprise, he thanked me for speaking on behalf of the Church – in fact, he told me, when he arrived and scanned the crowd and didn't notice any clergy collars, he'd wished he could secretly phone the big Episcopal church in downtown Boston to see if one of their priests could hurry over and testify. He was glad that I was there. We need religious leaders to speak out publicly on climate issues.

5. We can pray. We can plan special prayer services, indoors or outdoors, that focus on climate change – ecumenical services, interfaith services, services that invite the general public to find a place to lament and grieve, to name their hopes, to renew their resolve to take action. People who might never set foot inside a church may be moved to join us outside as we lament the desecration of Earth and renew our resolve to protect it.

Prayer services can be organized BEFORE an important event, such as this night-time prayer vigil we held on the steps of a small church, each of us holding a candle as we prayed for the UN climate talks that would begin the next day. Prayer services can be held AFTER a tragic event, such as the outdoor service we held on a town common to protest a massive oil spill on the Gulf Coast.

We can also pray in the places where political decisions are made. I've joined climate activists in fasting and prayer outside the White House. A few years ago, I helped create an interfaith worship event that we held on the steps of our state Capitol, where we prayed for an Exodus from Fossil Fuels and then headed inside to lobby.

Prayer is a mighty force that links us to a power greater than ourselves, giving us courage to feel our outrage and grief, to name our losses and strengthen our determination to restore God's Creation. Public prayer is a form of advocacy as we turn to God in hope and gather with people of faith and goodwill.

6. Finally, we can engage in direct action. This could include boycotts, divestment, marches, sit-ins, rallies, and non-violent civil disobedience. The purpose of direct action is to draw attention to an issue, to challenge an unjust law, or to disrupt an unjust system.

Direct action can be creative – for instance, years ago I helped organize a 100-mile “Interfaith Walk for Climate Rescue” from Northampton to Boston to raise awareness about the climate crisis, ending with worship at a church in downtown Boston and what was until that point the biggest climate rally in US history.

Fast forward to recent years, and climate marches are growing in impact – just think of the hundreds of thousands who marched through the streets of New York City in the People's Climate March of 2014 - including 10,000 people of many faiths - or the massive Global Climate Strike in 2019 that involved millions of people around the world.

Direct action is not only effective – it can also be fun and deeply meaningful to create and carry out, especially if you join with people from different churches and different faith traditions. I put together a series of 13 steps to help you organize an interfaith environmental action.

How to organize an interfaith environmental action – 13 steps: <http://revivingcreation.org/how-to-organize-an-interfaith-environmental-action-13-steps/>

Not all of us will feel called to participate in civil disobedience, but historically that is one powerful way that countless people of faith, walking in the footsteps of Gandhi and of Martin Luther King, Jr., have challenged an unjust status quo and roused society out apathy and inaction. Many people of faith have been arrested in acts of non-violent resistance to fossil fuels.

This photo is from 2001, the first time that I was arrested. Twenty-two of us, from a range of faith traditions, blocked the entrance to the Dept. of Energy in Washington, DC, as we urged the Administration to stop drilling for fossil fuels and to move swiftly to clean, renewable sources of energy. As far as I know, this was the first public protest in the U.S. against fossil fuels. The photo was taken shortly before our arrest, as we sang and prayed.

We were supported by a circle of friends, and I share this photo to suggest that there are many roles we can play in the struggle to heal the Earth.

15 years later I traveled to Standing Rock, the encampment in North Dakota, for the Interfaith Day of Prayer in December 2016. #NoDAPL

The protest against the Dakota Access crude oil pipeline was historic. A wave of solidarity was sweeping the world, as hundreds of once-estranged tribal nations and jurisdictions stood with the Standing Rock Sioux and proclaimed with one voice that water is sacred; water is life. By the time I got there, thousands of Native and non-Native people had already come to the camps near the Missouri River to resist construction of a pipeline that would endanger the river, Native lands, and the whole of Mother Earth.

It was a deeply spiritual struggle, in which activism was a form of sacred ceremony. Nearly everything of importance at the camp took place around the fire, which never went out: storytelling, singing, dancing, drumming and praying. Daily activities were steeped in prayer, rooted in appeals to the Creator and to Mother Earth, the grandmother of everything. The nonviolent struggle to stop Dakota Access pipeline was sustained by prayer — and it is part of a long struggle against genocide.

This a photo of joy. Late in the day we heard the welcome news that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had denied the final permit that would have allowed the Dakota Access pipeline to cross the Missouri River at Lake Oahe, a vital source of drinking water for the Native communities. Everyone gathered around the sacred fire to dance and rejoice.

Still, the struggle to stop the pipeline is not over. Soon after he took office, President Trump allowed construction to continue. Right now, the future of the Dakota Access pipeline is being battled out in the courts, and we have a new President who understands the dangers of fossil fuels and seeks to respect Indigenous rights.

But I will add that even when it seemed that the pipeline could not be stopped and that the protest at Standing Rock had been defeated, the call went out: Standing Rock is everywhere.

And it's true – in places all over the country, all over the globe, indigenous peoples are rising up to stop fossil fuel pipelines and projects and to protect sacred land and trees and water. Our calling as Christians is to stand with them and with all the Black, Indigenous, Brown, and working-class communities that are bearing the brunt of fossil fuel pollution and climate disasters.

We need to join the Spirit-led movement across race and class to protect life on this planet. We can join groups like 350.org, the first global grassroots campaign to address the climate crisis and a leading voice in the climate justice movement.

We can also learn from, join, and support groups like Poor People's Campaign, Creation Justice Ministries, GreenFaith, and Sunrise Movement, which is led by young people. Building partnerships and collaboration is an important part of effective advocacy.

What is the Church called to do in this perilous time? If you haven't done so already, I hope you'll form a book group to read Jim Antal's *Climate Church, Climate World*, which I consider a soon-to-be-classic book on the vocation of the Church in a time of climate emergency.

I also hope you'll read a new book that I co-edited, [*Rooted & Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*](#), an anthology of 21 essays by colleagues in the faith and climate movement who share stories of struggle and strength as they fight to protect a habitable world. The book is divided into seven sections and it includes study questions and spiritual exercises, making it useful not only for personal reflection but also for classes, book study groups, and interfaith dialogue.

As Peter Sawtell (founder and Executive Director of [Eco-Justice Ministries](#)) writes: “Think about where you live. Where do you hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor coming together? Where is there ecological injustice? Who are some of the poor, the marginalized, the most severely impacted, who give voice to that injustice? How can your church join with others to name the desecration, and to proclaim hope and healing?”

Global warming is the moral crisis of our time.

What is your next step? How is God calling you to advocate for a stable climate and a world in which all children thrive?

Thank you, Margaret, for sharing your story and explanations about different forms of advocacy. We invite viewers to pause the recording and share your experiences with these forms of advocacy. What insights do you have to share with one another?

To stimulate your thinking and planning for advocacy, I’m going to share a few examples about how to get connected and move forward into action. First, for us at St. Benedict’s is prayer. On the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, we offered an informal online interactive prayer service. We were delighted to have 40 locations connect for the live service, including people from congregations in the eastern United States. It was encouraging to know that we had kindred spirits.

If you haven’t already joined the Episcopal Public Policy Network, please do so. Both clergy and laity are welcome. And you’ll have opportunities for continuing dialogue with staff specialists from the Office of Government Relations as well as your peers. The 18-page booklet, “[Faith and Citizenship: A Guide to Effective Advocacy for Episcopalians](#)” is an excellent online resource.

It provides helpful suggestions on many of the forms of advocacy that Margaret discussed. Networking with other congregations can support your efforts and provide access to useful tools like this example that any of you can tap from the Midwestern dioceses of Province V.

Personally, I’ve found interfaith groups like Interfaith Power & Light, of which the Episcopal Church is a member, to be a great source of strength. In our polarized political world, it helps to demonstrate a broad coalition of support. You can join as an individual or as a congregation with other congregations in your state.

At St. Benedict’s, our Earthcare Team has promoted efforts like the Faith Climate Justice Voter Pledge to all members of our congregation. Interfaith Power & Light even offered easy to create online videos to express support and it was to do fun. Instead of railing at the TV news, I felt like I was making a difference.

And, of course, it’s important to demonstrate your support. Here are a couple of illustrations. Contrary to what some may fear, my experience is that our advocacy efforts have brought members of our diverse congregation together rather than splitting us apart.

So, the important question for you is how will you and your congregation engage in public advocacy? Which of the possibilities call to you? Remember that when God called Moses to speak to the people, Moses worried that he didn’t have the skills to speak out. God assured Moses, as I believe God assures each of us, that we will have the words and the spirit to advocate for creation care.

We invite each of you to go forth boldly. Creation needs each of us to be faithful advocates.
Thank you for participating. May we be joyful and blessed as stewards of God’s creation.