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# Humbly Changing Our Lives in Response to Climate Change

The challenges of global climate change provide a timely opportunity for education that motivates changes in our actions in order to better care for the integrity of God's creation entrusted to us. Our Catholic tradition and recent church documents call us to humility in recognition of our interdependence with all life. We are invited to change at many levels: our personal choices, our parishes and faith-based institutions, and our advocacy for policies that support a sustainable energy and environmental future.

Addressing climate change also provides a learning lens for the faith community, for it offers an opportunity to gain knowledge in environmental science principles as well as the consequences of our local lifestyle choices on the global community. As we grow in understanding our role as humans in the web of life, we can be guided by the Scriptural maxim to *act justly, and love tenderly while walking humbly with our God* (Micah 6:8). In this article, I highlight the ecological context of climate change and provide examples and resources that can be implemented in educational programs to inspire actions to preserve God's creation.

## THE ECOLOGICAL HUMAN – AN INVITATION TO HUMILITY

Our very name as humans derives from the root shared with humus, the top layer of soil. Our bodies are made up of the earth: the vitamins and minerals that plants took up from the soil along with the carbon that plants took from the air. Our Ash Wednesday rituals remind us that we are of the earth, and to this dust we shall return. Humility invites us to recognize that humans are part of, not apart from, the web of life. What happens to the rest of the ecosystem impacts us and what we put into our air, soil, water and earth becomes part of us. The field of ecology, which is the study of the relationship between organisms and their environment, expresses this intrinsic connection between all parts of our surroundings. Derived from *oikos* meaning house, ecology shares meaning with the dynamics of our Christian communities having the same root as the house churches in Acts. We are invited to see our entire natural environment as a part of our communities.

Humility also invites us to recognize our appropriate role as humans and the importance of each member. Each part of the web of life is needed for the functioning of the whole, and parts together are of service to the others. The term "ecosystem services" has been developed by ecologists to

describe these free services (see Ecological Society of America (ESA), [www.esa.org/ecoservices](http://www.esa.org/ecoservices)). Ecosystems (e.g., forests, lakes, wetlands) give numerous services to humans including: air and water purification, mitigation of floods and drought, soil generation and preservation, waste detoxification and decomposition, nutrient cycling and movement, seed dispersal, pollination, control of pests, maintenance of bio-diversity, and providing aesthetic beauty that lifts the human spirit. Preserving natural ecosystems and thus these free services will help ensure the common good and can help lessen the impacts of global climate change.

## HUMILITY IN ADDRESSING GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

Over the past 150 years since the Industrial Revolution, the burning of fossil fuels (the releasing of the carbon preserved in dead plants) and removal of plants that take up carbon (through deforestation and urbanization) has increased atmospheric carbon dioxide. Because carbon dioxide gas holds heat, the increased thickness of this "blanket" is contributing to a global warming. Ways that enhance photosynthesis (e.g., conserving forests and other ecosystems, decreasing urban sprawl) or that decrease fossil fuel use (e.g., use of renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, geothermal) are all actions that confront global climate change.

We have a moral responsibility since the impacts of climate change will be disproportionate on the poor, both locally and globally. Along with higher temperature, increases are predicted in rainfall, storms, flooding,





droughts, and coral reef bleaching. Together these will impact agriculture, natural resources, health and shipping. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their 2001 report highlighted the environmental justice dimensions, stating that “Those with the least resources have the least capacity to adapt and are the most vulnerable.” It is the poor both in our own regions and globally that will often suffer the greatest exposure to heat impacts because of already having a higher sensitivity, and lower resistance, resilience and coping ability. With temperature increases, the melting ice caps will increase ocean levels. This in turn will particularly impact those in coastal and small island communities, as they will be ravaged by storms. We could lose entire cultures when low-lying areas disappear into the ocean.

Since the USA disproportionately uses fossil fuels and other resources, we are called to responsible action. Globally, the USA has less than 5% of the population but emits 25% of the carbon. Similarly, we are using four times more than our fair share of global resources to meet our lifestyle needs of transportation, food, buildings and goods and services. The ecological footprint illustrates this as it converts an individual’s lifestyle choices to acreage of land required (c.f. [www.redefiningprogress.org](http://www.redefiningprogress.org) for an interactive tool). As of February 2005, the average American relies on 24 acres of land. Since the biologically productive acres available worldwide is 4.5 acres per person, we would need four more planets if all lived as Americans do. Another interactive tool to calculate our carbon footprint

from our mobility and housing ([www.safeclimate.net](http://www.safeclimate.net)) has been produced by the World Resources Institute, and includes a tree-planting equivalence. Decreasing our resource use (and preserving ecosystems and arable land) while recognizing that there are limits we should not go beyond, will help us to walk humbly.

Understanding our own home place, the impacts of climate change, and how we can address these impacts are all an important part of living humbly. Resources produced by the Union of Concerned Scientists can help us understand global impacts as well as those in our own regions. A global warming “early warning signs” map and curricula are found at ([www.climatehotmap.org](http://www.climatehotmap.org)) and other educational resources including comprehensive regional reports for the Great Lakes, Gulf Coast and California are available through the Union of Concerned Scientists website ([www.ucsusa.org](http://www.ucsusa.org)).

### WALKING HUMBLY, ACTING JUSTLY

Actions in the areas of transportation, food and “green” energy-conserving buildings have been highlighted for confronting climate change (*Consumer’s guide to effective environmental choices* at [www.ucsusa.org](http://www.ucsusa.org)). For each, I outline steps that can be taken at several levels and resources to consult.

**1) Transportation Choices.** Personal automobile use in the USA makes up about one-quarter of our nation’s carbon dioxide emissions and contributes approximately



5% of global carbon. Choosing a place to live that reduces the need to drive, thinking twice before purchasing another vehicle, choosing fuel-efficient low-polluting cars, setting goals to reduce travel (including public transport, walking or bicycling) and ensuring tires are inflated are all personal lifestyle actions that reduce fuel use. As parishes, we can encourage carpooling and car-sharing, purchase fuel-efficient vehicles and speak out in favor of public transportation and other incentives that reduce gas consumption such as hybrid cars and bio-fuels. The interactive website [www.travelmatters.org](http://www.travelmatters.org) provides public transportation information and calculates the number of trees required to take up the carbon dioxide produced by your car model and transportation patterns.

**2) Food and Land Use.** Food choices have direct relationships to use of fossil fuels and land. Eating in season, locally grown and bio-regionally all can reduce transportation fuel use. By eating organic produce, the fossil fuels expended in fertilizers are reduced. Because animals require plant foods and grazing land (greater needs for larger bodies), reducing meat consumption also reduces resource use. Parish and community events provide opportunity for corporate witness when we use fair trade products, minimize disposables and packaging, use washable dishes and utensils, and feature locally-grown, bio-regional and vegetarian options. In our landscaping, choosing plants native to the region, maintaining natural areas and minimizing fertilizer use also promotes conservation.

**3) Energy Conservation.** Resources for energy use audits and with advice for saving both energy and money are readily available from the EPA: ([www.energystar.gov/smallbiz](http://www.energystar.gov/smallbiz)) and interfaith sources ([www.theregenerationproject.org](http://www.theregenerationproject.org)), [www.nccecojustice.org](http://www.nccecojustice.org). Easily implemented are efficiency solutions in appliances and lighting such as compact fluorescent lighting and motion-sensors. Environmental costs of heating and hot water can be reduced, and choices made for electricity supplier offering renewable energy. Sustainability in construction and renovation of homes and institutional buildings helps reduce fossil fuel use in both production and maintenance. Solar panel installations, careful placement of windows and use of natural lighting and recyclable carpet are all means that reduce energy consumption.

### ACTING JUSTLY, LOVING CREATION

Many of these choices we can make immediately as individuals, and are congruent with a simpler lifestyle. Because it is difficult to effect change alone, parishes and religious communities that make communal choices can be powerful institutional witnesses of our social teachings. Finally, being a voice of justice in public policy decisions ensures there are systemic incentives to promote the changes that better care for creation. Providing a prophetic voice that speaks for the impacts on the poor, the global community and future generations is a key role of the faith community.

It is easy to become overwhelmed at the immensity of the challenges before us. Yet we must keep walking forward, one step at a time, supporting one another and trusting in our God who continues to beckon us to change our lives to address the impacts of global climate changes. Humbly remembering our place in the web of life, convinced of our interconnections with all life throughout the planet and across the generations, may we ever respond to God's call to tenderly love all of creation by our acts of justice. ■



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