

How can faith communities address the climate crisis?

by the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

*Imagine there is a fire in your house.
What do you do? What do you think about?
You do whatever you can to try to put out the fire or exit the house. You make a plan about how you can put out the fire, or how you can best exit the house. Your senses are heightened, you are focused like a laser, and you put your entire self into your actions. You enter emergency mode.*

These are the opening lines of an essay that every climate activist and every faith leader should read.

[“Leading the Public into Emergency Mode: A New Strategy for the Climate Movement”](#) recognizes that when we face an existential or moral crisis, we can fall into inertia or rush about in a chaotic, ineffective frenzy. But choosing between paralysis and panic is not our only option. Instead, we can enter a state of consciousness in which we become highly focused and purposeful, pour our resources into solving the crisis, and accomplish great feats.

Margaret Klein Salamon, the article’s author and the Founding Director of [The Climate Mobilization](#), calls this “emergency mode.” She considers emergency mode a particularly intense form of flow state, which has been described as an “optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best.” She cites Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the psychologist who pioneered the study of flow and who described it as: “Being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one... your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”

When we enter emergency mode, inertia or panic is replaced by focused, productive action toward a few critical goals. Non-essential functions are curtailed. Failure is not an option. People work together because we face a shared and urgent threat.

In ordinary times, a country is governed in what Salamon wryly labels “normal political-paralysis mode.” We experience a lack of national leadership, and politics is “adversarial and incremental.” By contrast, when a country is in emergency mode, “bipartisanship and effective leadership are the norm.”

Salamon accurately calls the climate crisis “an unprecedented emergency.” She writes: “Humanity is careening towards the deaths of billions of people, millions of species, and the collapse of organized civilization.” Her article and her organization, The Climate Mobilization, are devoted to developing strategies to mobilize an emergency response. Although I don’t agree with all her policy recommendations, I believe that her basic framing of the challenge is just right.

(To read the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change, visit [this NASA site](#) and this [site from the American Association for the Advancement of Science](#).)

Most faith communities do not recognize the climate crisis and are not in emergency mode. Yet when faith communities enter this heightened state of awareness about our planetary emergency, we have significant gifts to offer.

I. When faith communities understand the climate crisis and enter emergency mode, what roles do we play? We...

• Address helplessness

People who are secretly worried about climate change often don't take action because they feel helpless and overwhelmed ("The situation is dire. What difference can I possibly make?"). Faith communities address helplessness in multiple ways, both directly and indirectly. For instance, during worship we turn toward a Higher Power (God, divine Mystery, Creator, Source) in whose presence we are uplifted and feel our strength renewed. Entrusting ourselves to God can release within us unexpected power "to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).

• Face facts

People of faith are committed to the search for truth. A Zen Buddhist might speak of facing reality as it is. A Jew, Muslim, or Christian might speak of relating to an all-seeing, all-knowing God who is truth and who leads us into all truth. At their best, the Abrahamic faiths believe that God has given us the capacity to learn about the created world through the lens of science. Science is one important avenue to discovering what is true. People of faith try to see through self-deception and illusion in their quest to discover what is true and to live their lives in accordance with the truth.

Truth includes both material and spiritual realities. By definition, facts are true until proven otherwise. We have no right to our own facts.

Science has established that climate change is real, largely caused by human activities, already inflicting widespread damage, and, unless we change course fast, on track to make it difficult for civilization to continue to exist. We know that 80% of known fossil fuel reserves must stay in the ground, lest we catapult into catastrophe. We know we must make a just and swift transition to a clean energy economy.

Such facts are difficult to face and absorb. But faith communities have the capacity to face facts, tell the truth, and dismiss denial. We trust, and are accountable to, a sacred reality that includes and transcends the material world. From this vantage point, faith communities are uniquely positioned to pierce the lies of climate denial. Thanks to our commitment to the truth, we can let go the comfortable fantasies we may be tempted to tell ourselves ("I don't need to change; I can continue with business as usual; climate change is someone else's problem"). We also seek to uncover the confusion, misinformation, and lies about climate change that are deliberately spread by the fossil fuel industry and by the political leaders they fund. Not to do so is to participate in idolatry and to betray our commitment to bear witness to the truth.

As a Christian, I believe that a religion that directs our gaze to a suffering, dying man on a cross is a religion that can face painful facts. As a Christian, I also believe that perceiving God's presence in the very midst of suffering and death is a gateway to transformation and new life.

- **Provide vision**

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18, KJV).

Climate science has done its job, giving us essential facts about the potentially catastrophic consequences of continuing to burn fossil fuels. But facts alone are not sufficient to persuade people to take meaningful, concerted action. For that, we need vision – a shared goal, purpose, and values. This is what faith communities can do: lift up a vision of people living in just and loving relationships with each other and with the whole Creation, a vision energized by a deep desire for God's love to be fully manifest in the world. Faith communities have a vital role to play in inspiring action to safeguard the world that God entrusted to our care.

Antoine de Saint Exupery observed, “If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” Simon Sinek makes the same point in his terrific TED talk, [“How Great Leaders Inspire Action,”](#) when he says, “Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the ‘I have a dream’ speech, not the ‘I have a plan’ speech.”

- **Offer hope**

Human beings hope for so much: we want a healthy future for our kids; we want a livable world; we want the web of life to remain intact. The climate crisis challenges all our cherished hopes. It challenges the future of the whole human enterprise.

Faith communities offer a context in which to explore and take hold of the kind of hope that does not depend on outward circumstances but that emerges from a deep and irrepressible place in the human spirit. Animated by a radical, God-given hope, people of faith throw themselves into healing the Earth and its communities, human and other than human. Active hope – actively embodying ones deepest values and being ready at every moment to welcome and to build the longed-for future – is a path to joy.

- **Renew love**

Climate change is a “threat multiplier” that exacerbates existing problems, such as poverty, hunger, terrorism, refugees, and the spread of infectious diseases. Racism, militarism, and xenophobia – the fear of what seems foreign or strange – may increase as the planet warms and as various groups battle over depleted resources, such as arable land and clean drinking water. Like every other group, religious groups can be hijacked by fear and become sources of discord and violence.

Yet the deep message of the world's religions is that we are interconnected with each other and with the Earth on which all life depends. Faith communities can help to restore our capacity to love God and our neighbor. The climate crisis is already bringing together leaders and members of many faiths in a unified call to protect Earth and all its inhabitants, human and other than human. Pope Francis' landmark encyclical on climate

justice, *Laudato Si'*, generated enthusiastic responses from diverse faith communities around the world.

In a sermon, a D'var Torah, or a dharma talk, in prayer circles, worship services, and meditation groups, in pastoral care, outreach, and advocacy, faith communities can renew our intention and capacity to act in loving ways, to respect the dignity of every human being, and to cherish the sacredness of the natural world.

Faith communities speak to the heart of what it means to be human. When people are going mad with hatred and fear, only love can restore us to sanity.

- **Give moral guidance**

The climate crisis raises existential questions about the meaning, purpose, and value of human life. What is our moral responsibility to future generations? What does it mean to be human, if human beings are destroying life as it has evolved on this planet? How do we address the anger, self-hatred and guilt that can arise with this awareness? How can we live a meaningful life when so much death surrounds us? How determined are we to radically amend our personal patterns of consumption and waste? What does living a “good” life look like today, given what we know about the consequences of over-consumption, inequitable distribution of resources, and being part of (and probably benefiting from) an extractive economy that depends on fossil fuels and unlimited growth?

Faith communities provide a context for wrestling with these questions, for seeking moral grounding, and for being reminded of such old-fashioned values as compassion, generosity, self-control, selfless service, simple living, sacrifice, sharing, justice, forgiveness, and non-violent engagement in societal transformation.

Maybe we should think of the climate crisis as our doorway to enlightenment. The climate crisis challenges us, individually and collectively, to expand our consciousness and to live from our highest moral values. As Jayce Hafner points out in an article published in *Sojourners*, [“I’m Ready to Evangelize... About Climate Change,”](#) “The act of confronting climate change calls us to be better Christians in nearly every aspect of our lives.”

I expect that this is true not only for Christians, but for people of every faith.

- **Encourage reconciliation and seek consensus**

The coal miner who just lost his job... the CEO of a fossil fuel company who is making plans to drill for more oil... the woman whose home was destroyed by Hurricane Sandy... the farmer watching in despair as his crops wither from a massive drought... the construction worker laying down pipeline for fracked gas... the activist arrested for stopping construction of that pipeline... these are just some of the people who probably have wildly divergent views about the climate crisis and who may feel harmed by and angry with each other.

The climate crisis includes both victims and offenders. To some degree (though to quite different degrees) all of us bear some responsibility for the crisis. At the same time, all of us have a part to play in healing the damage and contributing to a better future. As we work to transition to a clean energy economy whose benefits are available to all communities, we need all hands on deck. Entering emergency mode requires that people work together toward a shared and deeply desired goal, and we need the participation and input of every sector of society as we try to protect our common home. As an African proverb puts it, “Two men in a burning house must not stop to argue.”

Faith communities can provide settings for difficult conversations, active listening, and “truth and reconciliation” groups modeled on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formed in South Africa in the 1990’s after apartheid was abolished. By expressing compassion while also holding groups and individuals morally accountable, faith communities can create possibilities for reconciliation and collaboration that would otherwise never exist. What’s more, because of their historic commitment to the oppressed, marginalized, and poor, faith communities can give voice to the needs of people and all creatures who are generally ignored or exploited by the people in power.

- **Allow emotional response**

The climate crisis can make us go numb. Why think about the enormous stretches of coral reefs in Australia that just died in less than two months? What can we possibly feel in response to the acidifying ocean, the children choking from asthma in our inner cities, the rising seas, the ever-increasing droughts and floods, and the cascade of species going extinct? It is hard enough to face our own mortality or to mourn a loved one’s death. How do we begin to explore our fear and grief in response to the ecocide going on around us – much less express it? How do we move beyond despair?

Faith communities can give us practices, teachings, and rituals that allow us to feel, express, accept, and integrate the painful emotions evoked by climate change.

To ignite and sustain an emergency response, society needs to overcome what Salamon calls our “affect phobia,” our tendency to repress our feelings and to react to climate change only in terms of intellectual analysis and facts (How many heat records were broken last month? How many parts per million of CO₂ are in the atmosphere now?). With the support of communities of faith, we can protect our human capacity to feel our emotional responses to the crisis without being overwhelmed by grief. Our emotions can also become a source of energy for constructive action to address the emergency.

(For an overview of the psychological impacts of climate change, take a look at [“Beyond Droughts and Storms,”](#) prepared by ecoAmerica and the American Psychological Association.)

- **Offer pastoral care**

Faith communities can provide practical and spiritual assistance during climate-related disasters such as hurricanes, floods, and wildfires. Congregations can make “disaster preparedness plans,” prepare a response in collaboration with local agencies, and develop networks of communication. One leader involved in this kind of preparation comments that congregations can be [“sanctuaries of hope in times of disasters.”](#)

In some areas of the world, the need is already urgent: within only five months after the Paris climate talks in December 2015, at least five Pacific islands had disappeared under rising seas. The Anglican Church in that area is developing “[a clear resilience strategy](#).” Faith communities can also provide comfort and solace day by day. We can develop networks of pastoral care and spiritual outreach to address the rising rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological challenges that are associated with climate change, being mindful that low-income communities may be particularly vulnerable to climate-related stressors.

- **Heighten reverence for nature**

In a society that treats the natural world as an object to master, dominate, and exploit, faith communities can call us back to the sacredness of the Earth.

Faith communities can support the efforts of land trusts to preserve farms, woods, wetlands, and open space (to locate your local land trust, visit [Land Trust Alliance](#)); can partner with organizations to bring inner-city children into natural settings; and can sponsor retreats and hikes that explore the wonders of Creation. Faith communities can learn, and help others to learn, what a stone or cloud or bird can teach (see, for instance, “[Opening the Book of Nature](#),” developed by National Religious Coalition on Creation Care). They can train people of different religious backgrounds to become environmental leaders (see, for instance, the programs of [GreenFaith](#) and of [The Center for Religion and the Environment at Sewanee](#)). Some communities of faith gather for spiritual practice outside. For example, [Church of the Woods](#) in Canterbury, NH, founded by the Rev. Steve Blackmer, is a new kind of church, “a place where the earth itself, rather than a building, is the bearer of sacredness.”

- **Inspire bold action**

Faith communities have a long history of leading movements for social and environmental justice, from child labor to women’s rights, peace, the abolition of slavery, and the civil rights movement. Faith communities tap into our capacity to dedicate ourselves to a cause that is greater than our personal comfort and self-interest. Faith in God (however we name that Higher Power) can inspire people to take bold actions that require courage, compassion, and creativity.

Faith communities can model best practices for “going green,” such as to get an energy audit, increase energy conservation and efficiency, look into installing solar panels, put in bike racks, replace lawns with community gardens, and so on. But taking care of our immediate buildings and community is just a start. An adequate response to the scope and speed of the climate crisis requires collective action and political engagement.

Because of the current gridlock in Congress, it can be tempting either to quit participating in democracy or to stay engaged but demonize our opponents. A blog post by my bishop, [the Rt. Rev. Doug Fisher, persuasively contends that because Christianity is a “world-engaging faith,”](#) people who follow Jesus must stay politically engaged and also encourage civil, non-partisan, political discourse that serves the common good.

The climate emergency is propelling people of different faiths to organize and to lobby for strong legislative action. See, for instance, the national work of [Citizens Climate](#)

[Lobby](#) to put a fair and rising price on carbon, whose volunteers include clergy and members of congregations, and also the national work of [Interfaith Power & Light](#), which has an [affiliate here in Massachusetts](#). [MA Interfaith Coalition for Climate Action](#) (MAICCA) (full disclosure: I'm on the Leadership Team) is pressing for timely, high-impact changes in laws and systems in our Commonwealth.

In the footsteps of trailblazers such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., hundreds, maybe thousands, of people, including countless people of faith, have been arrested in recent years as non-violent resistance to fossil fuels continues to grow. With fifteen other religious leaders, I was arrested on May 25, 2016, at a prayerful protest against construction of Spectra's West Roxbury Lateral pipeline in Boston. On June 29 twelve faith leaders – Buddhist, Jewish, Protestant, and Unitarian Universalist – were among 23 people arrested in another protest of the same pipeline. In solidarity with the hundreds of people who recently died from deadly heat waves in Pakistan and India and were buried in mass graves, the clergy led a climate 'mass graves' funeral, featuring eulogies, prayers, and mourning, with some of the resisters lying down in the grave/trench for nearly two hours.

By inspiring significant action, such as divesting from fossil fuels and engaging in civil disobedience, faith communities can challenge the deathly status quo of "business as usual" and rouse society out of its apathy and inaction.

*(Religious leaders who want to network with colleagues to engage in visionary and prayerful civil disobedience can sign up at [Clergy Climate Action](#).
Tim DeChristopher's powerful reflection in word and video, "Grief and Resistance: The Mass Grave Pipeline Action" is [here](#).
To help build the global grassroots climate movement, join [350.org](#).
To help build the interfaith climate movement in Mass., join [MAICCA](#).
To help build the climate movement in Mass., join [350Mass for a Better Future](#).
If you live in the Pioneer Valley, join your local grassroots climate group, [Climate Action Now](#).)*

II. When faith communities understand the climate crisis and enter emergency mode, what tools do we offer?

• Storytelling

The myths, tales, parables and stories of religious traditions give us powerful ways to re-imagine our selves and our situation, and to absorb deep (not necessarily literal) truths. Stories speak not just to our rational mind but also to our affections, will, and imagination. From the Judaeo-Christian tradition, stories of Moses confronting Pharaoh and of Jesus healing, teaching, suffering, dying, and rising again – all these and more can be brought to bear to address the climate crisis and to give us courage, guidance, and motivation to act. For example, [activists fighting to stop construction of a trash-burning incinerator in a low-income neighborhood of Baltimore are using the story of Naboth's vineyard \(1 Kings 21:1-21a\) to illuminate their own experience of social and environmental injustice and to inspire their own acts of resistance](#).

• **Prayer and silence**

Every faith tradition offers practices that teach us how to move out our habitual narrow orbit of self-involvement and to connect with a larger, sacred reality. The climate crisis invites people who until now may have felt immune from any desire to pray, to explore practices of prayer and meditation.

Expressive forms of prayer empower us to move beyond denial and numbness and to acknowledge the full range of our feelings. My article, "[Feeling and pain and prayer](#)," originally published in *Review for Religious*, presents four ways that Christians can pray with difficult feelings. The article also describes how expressive prayer can change us over time, deepening our sense of intimacy with God, our experience of a peace that passes understanding, and our capacity to move from helplessness and hopelessness to effective action.

Contemplative forms of prayer (such as Centering Prayer and mindfulness meditation) strengthen our capacity to sit in silence with the unknown, to accept impasse, and to keep listening and trusting even in the darkness. Practices that lead the mind into silent awareness offer more than a respite from thinking about the climate crisis. They can open us to an intuitive, non-verbal experience of communion, even union, with others, with the natural world, and with ultimate reality. Experiencing our unshakable union with a love that is stronger than death is the great gift of contemplative prayer. Rooted in that fierce and openhearted love, we are guided to actions commensurate with the emergency we're in.

• **Rituals**

Faith traditions offer a range of ceremonies and rituals that seek to awaken our awareness and revive our relationship with a sacred presence or power beyond the limited world of "I, me, and mine." In a time of climate crisis, people need rituals that address our fear of death and give us courage to trust in a life greater than death. We need rituals that ask us to name our guilt, that grant us forgiveness, and that give us strength to set a new course. We need rituals that remind us of our essential connection with each other, with the rest of the created world, and with the unseen Source of all that is. We need rituals that remind us of how loved we are, how precious the world is, and what a privilege it is to be born in a time when our choices and actions make such a difference.

Faith communities have a heritage of holy days, festivals, days of atonement, and liturgical seasons that gain fresh meaning in light of the climate crisis.

• **Sermons**

It takes courage to preach about climate change. If you're a faith leader who speaks or preaches frequently about the climate emergency, then yours is a rare and much-needed voice. If you're a member of a faith community whose leaders rarely speak about climate justice, then please give them steady encouragement to say what needs to be said.

As my climate activist friend and colleague, [the Rev. Dr. Jim Antal](#) (Conference Minister and President, Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ) often says: If clergy

don't preach about climate change every few weeks, then in ten or fifteen years every sermon will be about grief.

(My own efforts to preach a Christian perspective on climate are collected [here](#). "A New Awakening," an ecumenical initiative in 2015-2016 to promote climate preaching across New England, has a Web page of preaching and liturgical resources, sermon tips, and more, available [here](#). [Creation-Crisis Preaching, by Leah D. Schade](#) looks like indispensable reading.)

• **Public liturgies and outdoor prayer vigils**

Over the years I've led or participated in many outdoor interfaith public liturgies about climate change. In the aftermath of environmental disasters such as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill or Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, or on the eve of significant environmental events, such as Pope Francis' visit to Washington, D.C. or the U.N. climate talks in Paris, people of all faiths often feel a need to gather so that we can express our grief, name our hopes, and touch our deep longing for healing and reconciliation. Faith communities can lead the way in providing public contexts for renewing our spirits, both indoors and outside.

III. What does this add up to?

Faith communities can become agents of transformation.

Humanity stands at a crossroads. As individuals and as a species we face a decision of ultimate importance both to our souls and to the future of life. *"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live"* (Deuteronomy 30:19).

This is not a fire drill. This is an actual emergency. Martin Luther King, Jr. got it right: we face "the fierce urgency of now." *"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Armed with this knowledge, faith communities can enter emergency mode. Speaking as a Christian, I envision a church in which every aspect of its life, from its preaching and worship services to its adult education and Sunday School, from its prayers to its public advocacy, grasps the urgency of protecting life as it has evolved on this planet. That is the kind of Church that the world needs today. ∞

"The huge West Antarctic ice sheet is starting to collapse and slide into the sea in a way that scientists call 'unstoppable.' ... If ever there were a time to bear witness to our faith that life and not death will have the last word, now would be the time. If ever there were a time to take hold of the vision of a Beloved Community in which human beings live in right relationship with each other and with all our fellow creatures, now would be the time. The collapse of the ice sheet in Antarctica may be 'unstoppable,' but so is the love that calls us to stand up for life."

-- From a sermon, "[Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Climate Movement](#)," preached by the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, January 18, 2015

The Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas is Missioner for Creation Care in the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and in the Mass. Conference, United Church of Christ. This article is based on her blog post, "[What roles can faith communities take on in a time of crisis?](#)", which is on her Website, [RevivingCreation.org](#). Visit [RevivingCreation.org](#) to sign up for Margaret's blog posts and to read sermons, articles, etc. To contact Margaret by email: mbj@revivingcreation.org.

NOTE: I was prompted to write these reflections after serving on a panel of faith leaders at the 2016 conference of [Citizens Climate Lobby](#) in Washington, DC. The panel's moderator, [Peterson Toscano](#), asked two questions: What role(s) do you see faith communities take on in times of crisis? What tools does your faith tradition offer that can be used to address climate change? The four panelists included Dr. Steven Colecchi (Director of the [Office of International Justice and Peace, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)), Rachel Lamb (National Organizer and Spokesperson, [Young Evangelicals for Climate Action](#)), Joelle Novey (Director, [Greater Washington Interfaith Power and Light](#)), and me. The hour was over well before we'd finished exploring the topic. This essay is a bid to extend that conversation.