

Faith for Nature Conference 2020 – Asia Australia Hub Discussion C: "The way forward for Faith-Based Organisations to work for the Sustainable Development Goals"

Putting Our Values into Action for Nature

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I pay my respects to Elders of all First Nations past, present and emerging, to Rev Nobuhiro Nemoto, Professor Des Cahill and to all the distinguished faith leaders and representatives participating in the Asia and Australia regional hub discussion. I am honoured to be here, and deeply heartened to hear these discussions during this global Faith for Nature conference.

People from all corners of the world feel called by their faith to care for the living world. Central to many diverse faiths is a core belief that we humans have been given great gifts, and with this comes great responsibility, the responsibility to be loving stewards for all life on Earth.

Within the very word *responsibility* lies the key – our *ability to respond* compassionately and lovingly to the increasing suffering we see around us in this world, with worsening conditions caused by escalating climate change, biodiversity decline and ecosystem collapse. Our capacity to respond effectively will be enhanced by integrating the combined wisdom and skills sets of our faith and our scientific communities, thus bringing together good science and goodwill.¹

The Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda provide a robust and valuable framework for directing our faith-led efforts to care for the world. Much has been said and written on how these 17 interconnected SDGs can shape and focus our combined efforts in key areas of need around the world – water, food, equity, violence, education for women etc.

The call to care for the earth and for the poor and the vulnerable is beautifully written in *Laudato Si'* where climate change is described as a fundamental issue of intergenerational equity. Pope Francis speaks of *Integral Ecology*, just as Buddhist Thich Nhat Hahn speaks of *Interbeing* – both understanding deeply the interconnectedness and sacredness of all life. Buddhists, Hindus and many other eastern faiths are inspired by the twin values of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Karuna* (compassion) to practice acts of *dana* (giving) and *karma yoga*, while central tenets of Islam like Zakat lead to weekly generosity by Muslims, and at least seven verses in the Quran stress our human role as caretakers of the environment, connecting our stewardship role (*khalifa*) to the care of the earth (*fil ardh*). During this pandemic, Sikhs around the world fulfil a core teaching of their faith by continuing to feed thousands of vulnerable students, migrants, refugees, those who have lost their jobs and the homeless.

¹ Rowland,P (2019) Ecosystem Services and faith communities in Oceania. Elsevier
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoser.2019.100994>

Aid projects generously funded by Act for Peace, Caritas, Green Crescent, Muslim Aid reach out to provide support to communities in dire need across our Asia-Pacific Oceania region. Yet, however helpful, these funds are like a drop in the ocean in the face of the increased frequency and intensity of extreme events now driven by escalating climate change. Rev Dr Steven Robinson, the National Disaster and Recovery Minister for the Uniting Church of Australia Assembly of Australia provides regular updates on disaster chaplaincy responses to bushfire and heatwave emergencies across Australia². He trains and supports people on the climate frontlines across Oceania, and wrote movingly of the Tongan traditional concept of *Takiama*³, as a metaphor for chaplains, people with the ability to ‘catch the light’, and – in the darkness – walk with the people, steering them at night by navigating by the stars in the sky.

Rev Dr James Bhagwan, General Secretary of the Pacific Council of Churches spoke in a webinar hosted by the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, and shared how many communities wonder where they will go, as life on their small island nations becomes increasingly uncertain.

Eloquently described by many during this conference, evidence reveals the perilous state of our world, as rising greenhouse emissions of anthropogenic climate change exert a destabilizing force driving extreme conditions across the world. Professor Mark Howden, IPCC Co-Chair and ANU Climate Institute Director, explained the importance of the IPCC 1.5°C target and its explicit mention of the role of lifestyle change at an Interfaith event in Parliament House, Canberra⁴. His last slide was telling:

- Every choice matters
- Every half degree matters
- Every year matters

This identification of our collective lifestyles as a significant contributory factor underlines the potential of global faith-led initiatives such as Living the Change⁵, which encourages people of all faiths to make voluntary commitments to make wise Energy, Transport and Food choices.

Adding the element of consciously choosing to care for the earth, for example by planting trees, growing diverse gardens, practising regenerative agriculture⁶, protecting rivers and watersheds, we can help to preserve forests, protect habitats and the vital biodiversity that underpins all healthy ecosystems.

² <https://www.unitingearth.org.au/climate-pastoral-care-conference-2020-recordings/>

³ <https://stephenrobbo.wordpress.com/2015/05/16/catchers-of-the-light-a-new-word-for-chaplaincy-from-tonga/>

⁴ Prof. Mark Howden, Director, Climate Change Institute ANU - “Every Half Degree Matters” <https://vimeo.com/320717385> during *The Human Face of Climate Change – the Real Costs of Our Inaction*, An Interfaith Climate Briefing supported by the Parliamentary Friends of Multiculturalism, Australian Parliament House, 29 Nov 2018.

⁵ Living the Change, a voluntary faith-led global climate initiative <https://livingthechange.net/>

⁶ See <https://regenerationinternational.org/why-regenerative-agriculture/>

Following Australia's recent devastating summer bushfires, 119 animal species⁷ were identified as high priority for urgent management intervention⁸, with growing concern that several species, potentially including our iconic koala, were pushed one step closer to extinction. Almost 1 in 5 Australian species are on the threatened species list. In 2020, the high level of concern about fire has been accompanied by increased interest in the ancestral cultural knowledge of our First Nations, understanding country and carefully choosing safe times and places to practice indigenous cool burning techniques⁹. A Water Justice Hub¹⁰ was recently launched in Australia to respond to water injustice and to promote truth-telling in relation to water. While its primary focus is Australia, especially justice for First Peoples, it will also respond to global challenges of 'delivering water for all' as laid out in [\(SDG\) 6](#).

In this world yearning to recover from our current global COVID-19 pandemic, decisions made by our governments, our economies and our communities may soon determine the fate of our precious Earth, which hangs in the balance. Nobel Laureate Jeffrey Sachs recently spoke at length during an Australian webinar on Globalisation and Economic Recovery Post Covid-19¹¹. It is clear that the scale and direction of the enormous global investment on Covid-19 stimulus recovery plans will have a critical bearing on the future stability of our global climate system.

On 20-21 November, World leaders from the G20 nations, economies comprising 80% of the world's GDP, will meet in Saudi Arabia to discuss spending for the global economy. Their 2020 agenda will be dominated by the post-COVID19 economic recovery. Investment decisions in the next 6-18 months may [determine the course of the climate crisis](#), influencing whether our world moves swiftly towards clean energy or continues to rely on fossil fuels at a time we need to move swiftly to avert climate catastrophe. [Christiana Figueres](#), former UN lead negotiator of the Paris Agreement, recently echoed this urgency.

A global, multi-faith coalition of established and emerging leaders in faith communities - across 14 countries - has come together in response to create [an ambitious climate statement](#) "Sacred People, Sacred Earth"¹² with an accompanying [day of action](#) that reflects our deepest values and beliefs.

All in the global faith community are invited to help magnify this global day of action in three key ways:

1. *Warmly invite senior high-level religious leaders in your faith traditions to co-sign this document* (by 10 Nov), delivering a clear collective moral imperative through a spiritually based call to action (NB His Eminence Cardinal Turkson, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Prof. Azza Karam, Secretary General, Religions

⁷ See <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/bushfire-recovery/priority-animals>

⁸ See <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/bushfire-recovery/research-and-resources>

⁹ Eg. Firesticks Alliance <https://www.firesticks.org.au/> and <https://culturalburning.org.au/2020/06/10/indigenous-fire-methods-protect-land-before-and-after-the-tathra-bushfire/>

¹⁰ See Water Justice Hub website <https://waterjusticehub.org/>

¹¹ Jeffrey Sachs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyOmVDOKh9k&feature=youtu.be> & Fairtrade ANZ, Global Compact Network Aust & Sustainable Development Solutions Network "[Five Critical Outcomes on the Road to Recovery](#)".

¹² Sacred People, Sacred Earth is [available in English, Japanese, Bahasa, Arabic, French, Spanish & other languages](#).

for Peace International and Rev. Dr James Bhagwan, General Secretary, Pacific Conference of Churches have already signed);

2. *Participate in a global, COVID-friendly peaceful action in local places of worship and our homes* around midday local time on Wednesday 18 November, inviting temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, places of prayer and reflection, and households to ring bells¹³, sound chimes or gongs, blow horns, carry out silent meditations or issue a public call to prayer...
3. Help amplify our message through significant local and international media outreach, contributing regional op eds and share photos, stories and short videos on social media, using the hashtag #SacredPeopleSacredEarth

As faith leaders, we need to make our voices heard. Will you join by signing the statement? Please sign here: https://actionnetwork.org/forms/sacred-people-sacred-earth?source=direct_link&

¹³ On #*Earth Overshoot Day* 22 August 2020 in in South Australia [*St Francis Xavier Catholic Cathedral*](#), [*St Peter's Anglican Cathedral*](#), [*Pilgrim Uniting Church*](#) & [*St John the Evangelist*](#) each tolled a bell to mourn the depletion of Earth's resources. The Children's Choir St Peter's Cathedral sang John Rutter's "[*For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies...*](#)"