



Resilience and Resolve
A Climate Justice Training for New York City Faith Communities
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Themes & Issues for Climate Justice Training

Tory Field, Karennia Gore, & Alyssa Ng

Introduction

Faced with the circumstances of the global climate crisis, our work must be multi-layered: to prepare for what is coming, to work towards the necessary changes to prevent it from getting worse, and to explore the ethical issues that it raises in a way that opens possibilities for deeper positive transformation.

Climate change is already affecting New York City, and the scientists who study it, including in the [United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) and the [New York City Panel on Climate Change](#), warn that more harmful impacts are on the way. How much more depends on whether efforts to reduce global greenhouse gas pollution (and restore and protect carbon sinks such as forests and soils) are successful. Currently, scientists project that by 2050 New Yorkers will experience triple the current average number of days warmer than 90 degrees. Sea levels around the city have risen about 12 inches since 1900 and are predicted to rise by at least 6.25 feet by 2100. Storms are expected to become heavier and more frequent, leading to significant flooding.ⁱ

This city is intimately connected to the impacts of climate change all over the world, both because of the diverse global roots of its population and because it is a destination for many who are displaced by climate-related factors elsewhere. The smoke from wildfires in Canada that inundated the air shortly before this training demonstrated yet another aspect of the transboundary and unpredictable nature of this crisis.

Faith communities (a term which includes spiritual and values-based groups as well as traditional religious institutions) have long been central to communal responses to crisis. They organize and offer space for disaster relief, activate, and maintain volunteer and mutual-aid networks, run shelters, distribute food, and resettle refugees. Faith leaders provide emotional and spiritual support through counseling, ritual, and community-building. Faith communities can be centers of civic discourse. They

influence behavior in various ways, including engaging moral lessons in sacred texts and teachings as well as leading different kinds of services that bring people together around common concerns.

Key Areas

The Center for Earth Ethics is hosting a one-day training to support New York City faith leaders engaging with their communities in the context of the climate crisis.

We will focus on three key areas:

- **Practical** sessions will focus on disaster preparedness and resilience efforts.
- **Spiritual Support** sessions will focus on how the climate crisis is affecting people mentally and emotionally as well as the specific ways that faith communities are called to respond, including through pastoral care, chaplaincy, leading ritual, and creating community spaces.
- **Ethical Communication** sessions will engage the prophetic—or truth-telling—aspects of faith traditions, including the exploration of sacred texts and teachings, storytelling, and application of moral reasoning.

Climate Justice

Underlying our planetary ecological crisis is the moral issue that those who are being hurt first, and threatened most intensely, are those who have done the least to cause it and have the least resources to adapt and recover. This includes low income and politically marginalized people, future generations, other-than-human species, and the land, air, and waters of our planet that sustain all life.

Conversations about climate justice can be highly charged and contentious, making it especially helpful to understand the layers of responsibility that are invoked. China is currently the largest carbon emitter in the world (in part because of the many factories manufacturing globally consumed goods that are located there). Some developing nations such as India have rapidly rising emissions. The U.S. is the largest source of historical emissions and has disseminated a flawed development pattern that is emulated around the world. The climate justice discourse is sometimes framed around nation-states, with emphasis on ways in which those in the Global North bear more responsibility for the crisis, but it is also true that inequity within nations is an important factor. A 2020 Oxfam report showed that the world's wealthiest 10% were responsible for 49% of global carbon emissions, and a full half of the world's population are responsible for only 10%.ⁱⁱ

Within the U.S., the highest income 10% pollute 16 times more than the lowest-income 10%, reflecting lifestyles that involve more consumption of all kinds, including travel. This segment of society is also more likely to hold financial investments in the systems that drive patterns of depletion, extraction, and

combustion that are accelerating the crisis. And when legislative and policy solutions to change those systems are proposed, powerful interest groups push back, relying on donations from stakeholders and on public apathy to maintain the status quo.ⁱⁱⁱ

Low-income communities are the most dangerously impacted by climate change but have the least economic and political power to deal with it. Those living in these communities are the least able to afford to move to safer ground, to access food and water during shortages, to find new homes after storms or in the face of rising seas, or to access resources necessary to survive. Their communities already experience economic stress and environmental injustice, and climate change worsens housing and health risks.

Racism—historical and contemporary—plays a role in every one of these issues, from the location of polluting facilities, to redlining, to various modes of discrimination in services such as health care and law enforcement that are vital to human health and well-being. The environmental justice movement, which is led by those who have experienced this directly, has made a powerful contribution to deeper understanding of the root causes and moral dimensions of climate change that informs our work.

Finally, climate justice involves consideration of future generations. The youth climate movement has given voice to this generational justice issue. As home to the United Nations, New York City has been home to robust demonstrations of youth climate activism reminding us that climate justice involves sustained concern for those who will be living with the consequences of our decisions, long after we are no longer alive.

Themes

Storms, Sea-Level Rise, Rainfall, and Flooding

More powerful storms have led to death and destruction. Superstorm Sandy in 2012 was the most destructive in New York City's recorded history, causing 43 deaths, stranding nearly two million people without power, flooding 51 square miles, and causing \$19 billion in damages. In 2021, Hurricane Ida caused 46 deaths across four neighboring states, including 11 people trapped in Queens basement apartments that quickly became inundated by the sudden, unprecedented downpour.^{iv}

The devastation of recent storms has brought home the reality of climate change for many New Yorkers and brought many into the climate justice movement, just as Hurricane Katrina jolted many into awareness of climate justice when it hit the Gulf Coast in 2005. An estimated 20% of New Yorkers live in, or are adjacent to, projected 2050 coastal floodplains and are at risk of displacement from flooding; about 20% of these residents live in low-income neighborhoods. Another 20% live in low-income areas and are at risk of displacement by gentrification as others abandon high-risk coastal areas.^v

Congress has mandated that the Army Corps of Engineers address this issue, and the Corps has produced a plan to build storm surge barriers in local waterways to protect New York City. Many community-based organizations are challenging this large-scale construction project as ecologically and culturally damaging as well as shortsighted.^{vi} They are concerned that prioritization of economic interests will result in protecting real estate rather than communities.

Heavier and more frequent rainfalls are expected to increase in New York and the Northeast.^{vii} Heavier rains threaten the region's agriculture as well as roads, homes, and other infrastructure. Increased runoff from fields, yards, and septic systems contribute to water contamination and problems, such as larger algae blooms in New York waters that are harmful to humans and aquatic animals.

Heat Waves

An estimated 370 people in New York City die each year from heat-related causes, and last summer 725 New Yorkers visited emergency rooms because of heat. Elders and certain workers, such as construction and transportation workers, are most at risk, as are communities with less green space.

Some New York City neighborhoods are particularly vulnerable to the "heat island" effect. The places that provide relief in heat waves—parks, public pools, shady streets, libraries, and air-conditioned spaces—are less commonly found in low-income neighborhoods. In New York City, the communities of Harlem, central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx are particularly at risk.^{viii}

Increased heat makes air pollution worse and exacerbates underlying health conditions, which themselves are often linked to environmental injustice and racism (including the shameful pattern of locating toxic facilities in communities of color). Heat waves also are associated with higher levels of stress, anger, fatigue, sleep problems, and aggression.^{ix}

Heat waves also increase the demand for air conditioning, which puts pressure on power grids, sometimes causing black outs and power outages which can have deadly consequences. This is one of many areas of need that faith communities are addressing and can help address more, including providing cooling centers in houses of worship.

Heat waves significantly affect other species as well, causing widespread deaths, particularly of birds, amphibians, and fish. Heat disrupts seasonal cycles that wildlife depends on, like the blooming of plants and the ripening of seasonal foods.^x The effects on other species inevitably affect human populations, including creating imbalances in the population of pollinators and other species that affect food production, and changing patterns that can produce bacteria and viruses.

Displacement, Migration, and Climate Refugees

Climate impacts are already forcing people to leave their homes and homelands. In 2017, as many as 24 million people were forcibly displaced because of “sudden onset” weather events. “Slow onset events” caused by climate change—including “increasing temperatures; desertification; loss of biodiversity; land and forest degradation; glacial retreat and related impacts; ocean acidification; sea level rise; and salinization”—will displace millions more. Within the U.S. it is predicted that, due to climate change, at least 20 million people will be forced to move by the end of this century.^{xi}

New York City often prides itself on being a city of immigrants, and many New Yorkers are related to people in other regions that are being hit hard by climate change. In recent years, a surge of people—fleeing situations caused by a combination of economic, political, and ecological factors—have arrived in the city. At the same time, New York faces internal displacement challenges. The economic aftershocks of Superstorm Sandy forced many New Yorkers to leave their homes. Rising flood insurance rates and inadequate post-storm assistance forced many home foreclosures. Displacement due to gentrification is an issue because investors and developers buy up properties in distressed areas, while those moving out have few options because of high housing costs.^{xii}

Food Accessibility

Extreme weather disrupts food cultivation, production, and distribution. The city currently relies on six major distribution centers that stock the grocery stores and bodegas; the largest of these are in flood hazard zones.^{xiii} While food shortages and distribution problems will affect all New Yorkers, the situation will once again be exacerbated for low-income communities.

Almost 14% of New Yorkers live in poverty, exceeding the national average over the last eight years. Some city food pantries already are struggling to keep up with demand.^{xiv} Challenges to local food systems not only will magnify health issues but also will threaten mental and spiritual health as well as community coherence.

Many faith communities have made a practice of providing food for the hungry; now they must anticipate and plan to meet these increased needs. Others may choose to step into this role as part of a commitment to their values or provide more volunteer support the places who already do so.

Biodiversity Loss

Upholding environmental and climate justice involves commitment to the intrinsic value of other species and all interconnected life within ecosystems. The first principle of environmental justice that was articulated in the historic “First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” in 1991 is

“Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.”^{xv}

In 2020 scientists reported that in each year during the last century we lost the same number of species typically lost in previous 100-year periods; extinction rates continue to accelerate, in large part due to habitat loss, climate change, and the use of pesticides and other toxins. The U.S. and Canada have three billion fewer flying birds than in 1970. A recent World Wildlife Fund study showed that wild animal populations have declined by 69% since 1970. Studies predict that if greenhouse gas emissions stay the same, more than a third of plant and animal species could become extinct in the next 30 years.^{xvi} Shifting wildlife habitat and migration may go initially unnoticed by many New York City residents, but the lifeways of many regional species are already being dramatically affected. For example, the Hudson River is a major migratory pathway where fish return from the Atlantic to spawn each spring, but many of the Hudson’s fish are now considered in serious long-term decline and at risk of collapse due to overfishing, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change.^{xvii}

Biodiversity reflects planetary health, and the decline of any species diminishes the wider ecosystem. The effects of biodiversity loss will be wide-reaching and unpredictable, for the planet and for humans, threatening food security, access to clean drinking water, and the spread of infectious diseases, among others. Faith communities can help people understand and process these inherent moral concerns about other-than-human life as well as the canary-in-the-coal-mine lessons they hold for us all.

Trauma, Ecological Grief, Climate Anxiety, and Other Mental and Emotional Issues

Hand in hand with the physical impacts are psychological and emotional experiences. Following Superstorm Sandy, many New Yorkers reported experiencing the grief and anxiety that came not only from losing material needs like shelter, but also from losing a sense of safety. For individuals and communities holding multiple layers of trauma, these experiences are especially difficult to process. The extreme stress of severe weather events often contributes to other social harms, including suicide and domestic violence.^{xviii}

Mental and emotional health effects are on the rise even among those not immediately impacted or threatened by extreme weather. A 2021 survey of 10,000 young people in ten countries showed that 60% felt “very” or “extremely” worried about climate change and 75% felt the future was frightening.^{xix} The fear, anger, and grief being experienced is affecting people in many ways, from low-grade anxiety and depression to severe panic attacks and overwhelming feelings of impending doom. For some people, the discomfort of these emotions can lead to a desire to avoid the subject altogether.

“Pain for the world and love for the world are two sides of one coin,” says eco-activist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy.^{xx} Overwhelming grief and anxiety, and relentless exposure to bad news, leave many feeling hopeless and stuck. And yet, climate anxiety also can be understood as a natural, healthy response to an existential threat, warning us that our survival is at stake and that we must act. Many

people find that the most powerful ways to work with climate anxiety include channeling the energy into collective organizing for climate justice, making changes in our daily lives, and re-enlivening our relationships with the natural world. In this way the antidotes for climate anxiety are the same healing tools that address root causes of the crisis.

Faith communities have so much to offer in helping channel the deep emotional and spiritual hardships of this crisis into the generative energy of collective action. Just as they have played integral roles in historical movements for social change, faith communities are essential for building collective engagement in addressing climate change.

Ethical Communication

As we grow in our understanding of climate change, we are faced with fundamental questions. How can we effectively raise consciousness about these issues, both within our communities and in society at large? How can we apply the wisdom and ethos of our specific traditions in a way that is expansive and helpful? Many faiths have prophetic traditions that make space to elevate the telling of difficult truths and challenge people to change accordingly. Others emphasize inner work and creating space for contemplation. And still others draw on ancestral knowledge to create community around biocultural heritage and respect for nature. We are in an unprecedented time in which people are coming together in new ways, respecting difference, and learning across cultures.

We understand ethical communication to encompass the many ways we articulate and offer moral reasoning, framing questions, and guiding principles within our communities and to the public—via sermons, spiritual talks, convening small groups for reflection, storytelling, writing, guiding ritual—as well as the various ways we contribute to civic discourse.

In preparing a just response to the effects of the climate crisis, we must also sharpen our focus on its causes, the main one being greenhouse gas pollution from fossil fuels.^{xxi} Although this training will not go into specifics about advocacy to accelerate the transition to renewable energy and energy efficiency (which can be done on global, national, state, and local levels, and in the private sector), we will provide resources to understand and communicate about it. As in key times in the past, such as the Civil Rights movement, faith communities can be spaces for people to face the systemic nature of injustice, to organize, and to inspire people to embody and create change.

Our Convening

Throughout New York City, dedicated people, organizations, and communities are doing powerful work in response to the climate crisis. They are creating innovative proposals for protecting communities from storms, working for new laws to reduce the city's emissions, leading campaigns for fossil-fuel divestment, protecting the city's green spaces, and creating economic support systems and mutual-aid networks. They are protecting and restoring local ecosystems and joining global campaigns. And more.

Our gathering will bring together people engaged in different aspects of this work from the vantage point of communities that are grounded in faith, values, or spirituality. The arc of our discussion will take us from the practical work of preparing for disasters (and other impacts), to processing mental and emotional dynamics, to honing our intentions and skills regarding how to communicate responsibly and effectively about this issue. On Friday, June 9, 2023, we will create a space to learn from each other and to strengthen both our dedication to resilience and our resolve for justice.

Additional Articles and Resources

Atlas of Disaster, Rebuild by Design: <https://rebuildbydesign.org/atlas-of-disaster/>

Center for Earth Ethics: <https://centerforearthethics.org>

Climate Psychology Alliance: <https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org>

The Climate Reality Project: <https://www.climateRealityproject.org>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): <https://www.ipcc.ch>

New York Disaster Interfaith Services: <https://www.nydis.org>

New York Environmental Justice Alliance: <https://nyc-eja.org>

New York Renews: <https://www.nyrenews.org>

New York City, Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice: <https://climate.cityofnewyork.us>

New York City Panel on Climate Change (NPCC): <https://climate.cityofnewyork.us/initiatives/nyc-panel-on-climate-change-npcc>

Resilient Coastal Communities Project: <https://csud.climate.columbia.edu/research-projects/resilient-coastal-communities-project>

Riverkeeper, Storm Surge Barriers: <https://www.riverkeeper.org/campaigns/river-ecology/storm-surge-barriers/>

Seawalls: <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/news/sea-walls-could-be-installed-around-nyc-to-protect-us-from-coastal-storms-020123>

We Act for Environmental Justice: <https://www.weact.org>

Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology: <https://fore.yale.edu>

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