

Rev. Dr. Janet L. Parker
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Panel on Responses to Climate Change
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I would like to begin my remarks on an autobiographical note. In 2005, I made an abrupt turn in my career and vocational path and moved back into parish ministry, after a 13-year sojourn in academia. It's a fascinating experience to move from the academic world, where my work was necessarily highly intellectual and conceptual, into the world of a local church where the currency of lived experience, emotion, spirituality, and highly localized and concrete ethical dilemmas holds sway. Suddenly, what mattered was not sustainable development theory, for example, but whether it is more ecologically responsible to use compostable, biodegradable paper plates and cups or to wash dishes in the church dishwasher. I learned that such dilemmas can quickly paralyze the church eco-justice committee.

And what energizes people in the parish tends to be equally local and concrete— tackling solvable problems like retrofitting the church campus with energy-saving lighting, heating and cooling systems is eagerly embraced, and measurable reductions in our energy consumption are celebrated. Addressing issues on the policy and advocacy level is more challenging, though. Creating and tending an organic garden and sending the produce to the local food pantry fires more passion than postcard campaigns supporting EPA limits on carbon pollution. Both are important. And yet, which has more impact on climate change?

The truth is that I have found that it can be challenging to get people in the parish fired up about climate change, even though the *fact* of climate change would

be disputed by virtually no one in my progressive UCC congregation. New efforts are emerging, however, to fill the gap between traditional church creation care efforts and bold action to address climate change. This past spring, I was engaged in the efforts by a new multifaith coalition to organize a “Day for the Climate” in DC during Earth Week. IMAC, [Interfaith Moral Action on Climate](#), is motivated by the insight that overcoming the politicization and polarization around climate change requires reframing this crisis as a moral issue rooted in the conviction of virtually every religion that human beings are morally obligated to be good stewards of the earth.

This multi-faith coalition developed an eloquent Call to Action which I highly recommend you to consider endorsing on the IMAC website; we organized a lobby day in DC and held an inspiring multi-faith service with participation across the entire religious spectrum. The effort included a White House briefing that brought in college students to unfurl a new [“Green the Golden Rule” quilt](#) that they will take to Christian campuses across the country. It may have been a coincidence but two days later, President Obama indicated for the first time that he would make climate change part of the presidential campaign. IMAC is a new movement to watch. But how successful will it be in turning out people from local congregations and leveraging their power for social transformation? That remains to be seen. The church is, to borrow a phrase from Larry Rasmussen, a “slow womb.”¹ What is clear to me now is that although churches have been making great strides in greening their campuses and preaching environmental stewardship, that is only a down

¹ Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 25.

payment on what must be accomplished—and soon—if we are to begin to turn the nose of the Titanic away from the looming climate catastrophe.

Despite their weaknesses as climate advocates, the importance of local faith communities was underscored by a study just published in the journal, *Nature Climate Change*. This study indicated that scientific data and literacy has much less impact on a person's attitudes and choices regarding climate change than their cultural orientation and their community of peers. It turns out that a person's values as well as their relationships are the greatest indicator of their views on climate change.² This is causing a fair degree of hand-wringing among scientists, but hope may be found in the burgeoning movement in faith communities to nurture a stewardship ethic that has the potential to transform people on a deeper level than fact-based communication. In one of his earlier books, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community*, Larry Rasmussen identified churches as "anticipatory communities":

"Anticipatory communities are those who work out, in nuts-and-bolts, trial-and-error fashion, ways of life that just might map the ecology of community for greater numbers of people on the far side of a jangled, precarious, extended time of transition. The purpose of such anticipatory communities is to give present social form to a hoped-for future...."³

I want to conclude with a story about an experience I have just had with the faith community as an anticipatory community that can also be powerfully effective in making real change. My congregation is part of a local community organizing

² Dan M. Kahan, Ellen Peters, Maggie Wittlin, Paul Slovic, Lisa Larrimore Ouellette, Donald Braman, and Gregory Mandel, "The Polarizing Impact of Science Literacy and Numeracy On Perceived Climate Change Risks," in *Nature Climate Change*, published online 27 May 2012 at <http://www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/nclimate1547.html>

³ Larry Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 143.

group, an IAF affiliate named VOICE—Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement. On Sunday, VOICE held a public action in Prince William County on the foreclosure crisis that has had a devastating impact on this County. Three top executives from Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase and GE stood up in front of a standing-room only crowd in a historic Baptist sanctuary in downtown Manassas, VA. The room was filled with over 400 Black, White, Latino, Christian, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist and Jewish people from four different counties in Northern VA. One by one, the bank executives came up to the podium and answered yes/no questions about whether they would be willing to work in partnership with VOICE in concrete and targeted ways to offer relief to homeowners in the form of principal reductions, mortgage refinancing and housing counselors.

The outcome was extraordinary. As the Washington Post reported, due to VOICE's pressure, Bank of America and JP Morgan Chase alone have identified 1,000 families as eligible for assistance and have pledged to work with VOICE to help these families.⁴ The energy built throughout the event, and the achievements of this campaign are measurable and significant.

As I sat in this gathering on Sunday, the thought that formed in my mind was clear and simple: we need this kind of energy, this kind of people power, this kind of faith-based, multi-ethnic cooperation, and this level of tangible, measurable results if we are even going to slow the pace of climate change. We need to figure out how

⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/va-activists-press-banks-for-foreclosure-aid-in-prince-william-county/2012/06/03/gJQA7KUhAV_story.html?wpisrc=emailtoafriend

to do community organizing for the planet and for the climate, on a massive scale!⁵

We need to make it local, to stir the heart, to effect change in individual lives, to place organized, grassroots pressure on the corporate and political players contributing to climate change, and to build energy by achieving tangible successes. Ideas and facts are not sufficient weapons against the spectre of climate change. We need the currency of values, beliefs, and emotions, and the relational support that local communities of faith can offer in order to live our way into a post-carbon age. If we can combine the value-shaping function of faith communities with the political efficacy of community organizing, we may just have the chance to speed up that slow womb enough to spare us the worst effects of the coming climate catastrophe.

⁵ For a fascinating example of how community organizing can address environmental issues, including climate change, while also addressing unemployment and high energy costs to the consumer, see the SustainableWorks project of the Spokane Alliance in Washington State, <http://sustainableworks.com/about>