

## Yale Divinity School Symposium Religion and Environmental Stewardship

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### Movements, the UCC and the Vocation of the Church

The history of the United Church of Christ and our forebears is marked by the movements our congregations and members have initiated. While there has always been a progressive thrust in the UCC, it's our "permission giving" polity that has allowed these initiatives to take hold. Congregations are free to join in or ignore the prophetic calls to action which have been trumpeted over the years. For example:

- In 1700 we published the first anti-slavery pamphlet;
- In 1773 we launched the original Tea Party... which some describe as the first act of civil disobedience in US history.
- In 1785 we ordained the first African American
- In 1810 we founded the first foreign mission society [the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions]
- In 1853 we ordained the first woman since New Testament times
- In 1972 we were the first historic Protestant denomination to ordain an openly gay pastor.
- and in 1987 the UCC released a study that coined the term "environmental racism" to describe how communities of color were intentionally selected as locations for waste disposal sites and polluting industrial facilities.

These initiatives cast a vision that reoriented the lives of individuals, the politics of parties, and the hope of humanity.

Shifting to the urgency of our day, all creation is groaning in the hope that people of every faith tradition will embrace a new vocation for the church, the synagogue, the mosque and the temple. More and more of our denominational and church leaders recognize that religion is creation's last hope if humanity is to preserve a creation that even remotely resembles the one into which I – and many of you – were born.

If people of faith are to engage this hope, the popular understanding that religion exists "to meet my personal spiritual needs" must be exchanged for the recognition that religion can be the "delivery vehicle" for a redeemed earth.

Such a shift in the vocation of the church is not without precedent.

- In the mid-19th century, many congregations devoted half their budget to minister to people they would never meet who lived an ocean away.

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- What if today's church members pledged to contribute all the money they saved by reducing their carbon footprint to creating an irrepressible climate change movement?
- In the 1970s and 1980s the churches in South Africa played an essential role in ending apartheid. Many families chose to repurpose the funeral liturgies of their loved ones in order to declare the need for political change.
  - What if the lawns of every church became community gardens?
  - What if we re-wrote our sacramental liturgies to declare our partnership with and obligations to all beings alive and yet to be born?
  - What if every Sunday we invited a one minute testimony from someone who had taken an action to help sustain the earth, and each church cataloged those testimonies on their website?

We are the first generation to foresee and the final generation with an opportunity to forestall to most catastrophic effects of Climate Change. Humanity now has the technological means to end the tyranny of oil and coal and natural gas.

What is missing – what I believe God is waiting for and calling us to (particularly we Americans) – is to muster the spiritual and moral resolve to make choices about how we will live out what I like to call Golden Rule 2.0 – the recognition that future generations are no less our neighbors than those who live next door to us today.

How do we do that? The church must advance spiritual practices that value:

- resilience in place of economic growth;
- collaboration in place of consumption;<sup>1</sup>
- wisdom in place of progress;
- vision in place of convenience;
- accountability in place of disregard; and
- balance in place of addiction.

Every time I meet with any of our 800 UCC clergy in Massachusetts, I tell them that within 3 or 4 years, every 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> sermon must lift up these values in the context of climate change. And when they look at me like I have 2 heads – as if I'd forgotten all the theology I had learned while at YDS – I continue: because if we don't focus our life-together in this way, then in perhaps 10 years – but not more than 15 – every single sermon will be on grief over our dying planet – killed by greed, acquisitiveness, and the silence of the church.

I'll leave you with the other thing I share whenever I speak at any of our 375 UCC churches in Massachusetts. What if the first announcement at every worship service – whether in a

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church, synagogue, or mosque – went something like this:

As we do every week, I'd like to ask those who contacted either their congress-person or the White House this past week to advocate for new laws that will make our earth sustainable.... would you please rise as you are able and receive our applause.... Thank you, and I hope to see all of you rise next week<sup>2</sup>.

If we pray for one another, why would we not encourage one another – every Sunday – to advocate for laws that will preserve the beauty and wonder of a gracious world where the divine and the human can meet one another in their full expression?<sup>3</sup>

Once again, many thanks for the opportunity to share in this work with you. I look forward to your questions.

1. See Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers *What's Mine Is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way We Live*. The book documents the increasing popularity of the collaborative consumption model and the ways its growth will fundamentally change the workings of our economy. See also this 16 minute lecture on collaborative consumption: [http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel\\_botsman\\_the\\_case\\_for\\_collaborative\\_consumption.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html)

2. Note: I suspect many evangelicals would support this. See the recent post by Dr. Russell Moore, Dean of the School of Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.  
<http://fore.research.yale.edu/news/item/an-evangelical-crusade-to-go-green-with-god/>

3. Thomas Berry. *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*. Orbis, Maryknoll, NY; 2009. p. 67.