



## The 2014 National Prayer Breakfast Report

Washington, DC

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by Diana Van Vleet

“In the face of an absolutely unprecedented climate emergency, society has no choice but to take dramatic action to avert a collapse of civilization,” declared keynote speaker Dr. Richard Miller, from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

“Either we change our ways and build an entirely new kind of global society, or circumstances will change our world for us.”

During this 16<sup>th</sup> annual national prayer breakfast celebrating religious concern for God’s creation, people of faith from across America gathered at the Capitol Hill Lutheran Church in Washington, DC, on Monday, May 12, 2014 to pray for peace on earth. Over twenty speakers highlighted cutting edge issues that religious groups are emphasizing.



Dr. Tom English, representing the Presbyterian Church USA from San Diego, California, said that Presbyterians are making climate change their number one issue. “Climate change,” he reported, “will cause a massive extinction of species. Food shortages will result. People will die from heat and starvation. Even the U.S. military reports that this will cause clashes between nations and so climate change represents a primary national security threat.”

Patrick Carolan, executive direction of the Roman Catholic Franciscan Action Network, observed that we Franciscans do not care for the term “creation care.” Instead we see a community relationship with land and water and animals. These things are all connected. All across our country, we are inviting Catholics to take the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor and to join the Catholic Climate Covenant. The St. Francis Pledge is both a promise and a commitment by Catholic individuals, families, parishes, organizations and institutions to live our faith by protecting God’s Creation and by advocating on behalf of people in poverty who face the harshest impacts of global climate change.

Allen Johnson, from the Christians for the Mountains organization in West Virginia, described an epidemiological survey that his group has been conducting using students in the areas where mountaintop removal in taking place in Appalachia. “We’re finding a strong linkage between the fine particle dust in mountaintop removal areas and public health. The costs to local people is often greater than the value of the coal extracted,” he explained.



Psychiatrist Dr. Lise Van Susteren, MD, delivered a keynote address to the gathered religious leaders. She described her extensive research on the psychological implications of global climate change. “In the coming years,” she declared, “global warming... will foster public trauma, depression, violence, alienation, substance abuse, suicide, psychotic episodes, post-traumatic stress disorders and many other mental health-related conditions.”



Some additional insights from Dr. Van Susteren: “The U.S. mental health care system is only minimally prepared to address the effects of global climate change-related disasters and incidents:

“It is not a matter of whether these problems will occur, but rather how frequently and with what intensity...

“We are witnessing an unraveling of climate stability, and therefore human stability, and are seeing physical changes that are unprecedented in all of history.”

Every year the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care presents its “Steward of God’s Creation” award to an individual who has excelled in the care and keeping of God’s creation in a manner that is exemplary and effective. This year members voted to honor Reverend Tom Carr, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Hartford, Connecticut.



Rev. Carr started his personal journey into climate activism by writing every Baptist minister in his state of Connecticut about the seriousness of climate change. He explained why each congregation should begin addressing this urgent issue in their congregations. He then organized the Interreligious Ecojustice Network of Connecticut which stopped the building of several proposed coal-fired power plants. Next, he helped to strike an alliance between faith groups and labor unions to multiply the impact of the moral message about

climate change. He then coordinated a statewide conference on religion and climate change that brought together religious leaders and faith activists. The conference developed a forceful declaration on the dreadful consequences of climate change. He volunteered to act as liaison between the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care and other organizations. An early result of this activism is that the legislators from his state now unanimously support strong measures to address climate change.

For all of these reasons, plus his service, energy, and success at moving the attitudes of his state, NRCCC co-chairs Rev. Owen Owens and Rabbi Warren Stone presented Reverend Tom Carr with a 2014 Steward of God's Creation award.

As a sign that the religious ecology movement is gaining more widespread acceptance, for the first time participation included Hindu and Islamic leaders. Swami Arjun Bhargava spoke of how Hindus are beginning to teach ecological awareness in their temples and making lifestyle changes. Imam Seyyed Mohammed, director of the Islamic Society of North America, spoke of the intensity of prejudice against Muslims in America and how glad he was to meet hospitality. He spoke of how Muslims are forming a Green Deen organization, which will teach the importance of addressing climate change in the mosques of America.

Other speakers included Teresa Eickel who explained the strategy employed by the Connecticut campaign;

Rick Velleu from the Our Voices interfaith climate movement from London, UK and their goal of reaching out internationally on climate change.

Dr. Eric Gopelrud from Alexandria, Virginia will mobilize religious groups from across the State of Virginia in a campaign on climate change.

Dave Carroll and Jim Davidson, businessmen from Saint Paul, Minnesota, announced plans to organize the churches and synagogues across their state to address climate change. They will convene a great conference in September as part of the Minnesota 2015 climate program which has Governor Mark Dayton as its honorary chair. The conference will demonstrate how business, local governments, religious groups and individuals can work together to reduce the carbon emissions that contribute to global warming. In Minnesota, this program will change the dialogue about climate change.

Dave Carroll demonstrated a new lightbulb he has just invented. His LED lightbulb, called the Forever Bulb, uses less energy, costs less and provides brighter light. What makes this bulb unique, he says, is that it lessens atmospheric pollution and reduces human impact on climate change. This will help us all to live an environmentally caring lifestyle.

The musical highlight of the program occurred when international opera star Teresa Eickel sang “For the Beauty of the Earth” and then led in singing “America, the Beautiful.”

Following this sixteenth annual National Prayer Breakfast on Creation Care, members adjourned to the U.S. Friends House where they developed a national declaration on the urgency of global climate change. Titled, “Coming to Terms with our Moral Responsibility for Climate Change and the Future of Civilization.” (See that text).

Delegates from a variety of faith groups met at the Environmental Protection Agency where they extended thanks to EPA leaders for their courageous work in upholding health standards for Americans at a time when there are many assaults on clean air and clean water. Churches and synagogues are keenly aware of health standards as their members reflect the health standards of our nation. After a most cordial discussion regarding the need for strong power plant emission standards, as well as more vigorous efforts to restrain carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere, an impromptu prayer was offered so that the EPA might remain strong and vigorous in its efforts to preserve a health environment for America’s citizens.



At the US Department of Energy, religious leaders discussed energy policy as it relates to carbon emissions and greenhouse gases. According to DOE officials, this was the first time America’s faith leaders had presented their views on energy and climate policy. Dept. of Energy officials were particularly concerned about hearing the language and terminology that faith groups used to discuss energy policy. Roman Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals and Jewish leaders joined together for what turned out to be a most productive discussion.

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The next National Prayer Breakfast for Creation Care will take place on May 6, 2019 and will be followed by what has come to be known as “Washington Week.” Numerous meetings will take place with Congressional leaders and officials within the Administration.