



# Religious Americans Demand Climate Action

By Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons and Maggie Siddiqi July 21, 2021

President Joe Biden has pursued a bold agenda to address the climate crisis. On his first day in office, he had the United States rejoin the Paris climate agreement.<sup>1</sup> A week later, he signed an executive order to “Tackle the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad.”<sup>2</sup> On Earth Day, April 22, he convened world leaders to address the urgent need for collective action on the climate crisis. During that summit, he announced that the United States will target reducing planet-warming emissions by 50 percent to 52 percent across the economy by 2030 compared with 2005 levels.<sup>3</sup> The Biden administration also proposed the American Jobs Plan,<sup>4</sup> part of the administration’s economic recovery proposals that includes historic investments in climate action through infrastructure that would create good-paying jobs while making the American economy more equitable and sustainable.<sup>5</sup> These positive actions have been well-received by religious leaders, who continue to call for bold action in defense of God’s creation.

Pope Francis, who attended the Earth Day summit, encouraged the leaders of the world’s largest economies to “take charge of the care of nature, of this gift that we have received and that we have to heal, guard, and carry forward.”<sup>6</sup> These words are increasingly significant because of the challenge the world faces in the post-pandemic era. As the pope said, “We need to keep moving forward and we know that one doesn’t come out of a crisis the same way one entered. We come out either better or worse. Our concern is to see that the environment is cleaner, purer, and preserved. We must take care of nature so that it takes care of us.”<sup>7</sup>

The majority of religious Americans share Pope Francis’ and President Biden’s concern for taking urgent action on climate change. Sixty percent of Christians and 79 percent of Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims believe that “passing a bill to address climate change and its effects” should be a top or an important priority for Congress, according to a Politico/Morning Consult poll conducted in April 2021.<sup>8</sup> The broad support for Congress to take action on the climate crisis includes 57 percent of evangelical Americans, who tend to be the most conservative of the United States’ religious blocs.<sup>9</sup>

These findings are mirrored in another national survey. According to a Climate Nexus poll, the majority of religious voters think that “passing a comprehensive bill to address climate change” this year should be a top or an important priority for Congress and the president.<sup>10</sup> This includes 84 percent of Black Protestants, 81 percent of non-Christian faith groups, 64 percent of white Catholics, 58 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 53 percent of white evangelical Protestants.<sup>11</sup> The majority of religious voters also support Congress passing legislation that would set the goal of achieving a 100 percent clean U.S. economy—which entails eliminating fossil fuel emissions from the transportation, electricity, building, industry, and agricultural sectors—by 2050. This includes 88 percent of Black Protestants; 76 percent of non-Christian religious groups; 61 percent of white Catholics, 53 percent of white mainline Protestants; and 50 percent of white evangelical Protestants.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that climate change is happening as a result of human activities is indisputable.<sup>13</sup> And while climate denial may be profitable for elected officials who receive support from the fossil fuel industry,<sup>14</sup> polling shows that there is broad consensus among religious Americans that the world is facing a climate crisis. Majorities in every major religious group believe the truth that climate change is happening, according to the Public Religion Research Institute.<sup>15</sup> Majorities in every religious group—with the exception of white evangelical Protestants—also believe climate change is caused by humans.<sup>16</sup>

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## Calling for climate-ready infrastructure

Against this backdrop of widespread faith community support for action, faith leaders are raising the issue of climate justice through advocacy directed at Congress. More than 3,400 faith leaders have signed a new statement organized by Interfaith Power & Light in support of significant investments in climate action and climate-ready infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> The letter states:

*As leaders from many diverse faith traditions, we are united in our call for a bold economic recovery and infrastructure package that creates family and community sustaining jobs while caring for our climate and our neighbors. It is the moral responsibility of our nation, and our sacred task as people of faith, to protect our ecosystems, work for environmental justice and public health, and address the climate crisis.*

The demands of these faith leaders come as Congress considers historic investments in climate action, jobs, and justice through a major bipartisan infrastructure bill and the budget reconciliation process.

## More than 3,400 faith leaders are calling for federal investment in 4 priorities

In the Interfaith Power & Light letter, faith leaders detail four necessary federal investments as follows:

- 1. Expanding clean, renewable energy and modernizing our electric grid.** We can accelerate the transition to clean energy by passing a national Clean Energy Standard that achieves 100% renewable, pollution free electricity by 2035, while also expanding investments in wind and solar power.
- 2. Electrify transportation and expand public transit.** Now is the time to invest in American-made electric vehicles, build charging stations across the country, and make sure they are affordable to all. We can also connect our communities and reduce pollution by electrifying and expanding public transit.
- 3. Clean water infrastructure for all communities.** Too many communities, especially in low-income urban neighborhoods and in Indigenous communities, don't have access to clean water. We must invest in lead pipe remediation, as well as programs that provide clean water to rural communities.
- 4. Invest with justice.** BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and other non-Black people of color] and low-income communities have been harmed the most by both this pandemic and our centuries of investment in fossil fuel infrastructure. Our understanding of justice demands that these communities must be at the center of our investments going forward. Specifically, we call for these communities, forced to bear an unequal burden of pollution and pandemic, to receive at least 40% of the investments. Additionally, to ensure a just transition, we must support dislocated workers and investment [must be made] in communities historically dependent on fossil fuels.<sup>18</sup>

### Faith groups speak out from their specific traditions

Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action, a new organization made up of American Jews,<sup>19</sup> has embarked on a “just, green recovery” campaign:<sup>20</sup> “As Jews we have faced devastation, disruption, and destruction throughout history. ... Now, as we move from COVID relief to economic recovery, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our society and our economy.”<sup>21</sup>

Last month, 100 faith leaders, including those from the Jewish community and beyond, joined together for a moral action on the steps of Congress to call for investments to put the United States on the path to 100 percent clean electricity. The *National Catholic Reporter* described the moment as “the start of an escalated push by environmental groups to press members of Congress to support Biden’s

ambitious infrastructure plan and a clean electricity standard at a moment they see as critical for the legislative futures of both.”<sup>22</sup>

Two of the faith leaders who participated in the event, Mike Tidwell of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church and Rabbi David Shneyer, wrote in an op-ed for *The Washington Post* that, “Our faith traditions teach us that the Earth is a sacred gift and that human communities are only whole when no one is left behind. Unbridled climate change mocks these moral precepts. ... Congress, with growing support from America’s religious voters, must heed these wise and ancient values and pass the American Jobs Plan.”<sup>23</sup>

John Kerry, former secretary of state and currently President Biden’s climate envoy, met privately with Pope Francis earlier this year and called him “one of the great voices of reason and compelling moral authority on the subject of the climate crisis.” Kerry went on to say that the pope, because of his unique authority, “hopefully can help push people to greater ambition to get the job done.”<sup>24</sup>

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## Leading by example

Faith-based climate activism is not new. In 2009, CAP published a column on how faith groups were combating global warming through projects such as lo-watt Shabbat, a Jewish community program for energy conservation, which went hand in hand with religious leaders testifying on Capitol Hill.<sup>25</sup> Faith-based organizations have been among the most steadfast advocates for environmental justice, and more groups continue to add their voices to the choir.

For example, more than 1,200 institutions across the globe have committed to divest a total of \$14.5 trillion from fossil fuel companies<sup>26</sup>—and one-third of the institutions are faith-based. The United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church have all divested at least some of their denominational funding from fossil fuels.<sup>27</sup> In a joint statement released in 2020, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu and former Vice President Al Gore said, “Any organisation committed to operating responsibly in this new decade has a moral imperative to stop participating in financing the destruction of human civilization’s future.”<sup>28</sup>

Five years earlier, in 2015, the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change was issued at a symposium organized by Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science, and GreenFaith.<sup>29</sup> It called on Muslims around the world to take action on climate change in accordance with their faith, “recognis[ing] the corruption (fasād) that humans have caused on Earth in our relentless pursuit of economic growth and consumption.”<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, in 2016, the African Methodist Episcopal Church passed its first resolution devoted to climate change,<sup>31</sup> stating that the climate crisis “puts the health of children, elderly, and those with chronic illnesses at greater risk and disproportionately impacts African Americans.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, *The New Yorker* recently profiled Molly Burhans, the young Catholic cartographer who started GoodLands, an organization focused on environmental activism. “If the Church were a country, it would be the third most populous, after China and India,” she said of the importance of engaging the church in the climate fight.<sup>33</sup> She met with Pope Francis and has called for the Catholic Church to ensure that its millions of acres of land are more environmentally sustainable.

Burhans has allies in her fellow Catholics, including Secretary Kerry and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is one of the most vocal climate activists in Congress and roots her activism in her faith, telling the *National Catholic Reporter*, “We do know that the Earth is sacred. We do know it is a sacred gift. We have a responsibility to steward it and protect it.”<sup>34</sup> She said that climate change is “fundamentally a moral issue” tied to concern for future generations and questioned whether Americans are “willing to make changes to our present lives” to help those future generations and the planet.<sup>35</sup>

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## Local faith-based activism

Faith-based climate activism is deeply rooted at the local level, particularly in communities that bear direct witness to the harms that the climate crisis inflicts on the environment in their immediate surroundings. One ongoing faith-based campaign in Minnesota is attempting to stop the Line 3 pipeline project, a 340-mile rerouting of a larger pipeline network that connects tar sands oil in Canada to Lake Superior; the project received its final approval under the Trump administration.<sup>36</sup> More than 500 faith leaders have signed a letter organized by Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light and the Minnesota Poor People’s Campaign in opposition to the pipeline’s continued construction, stating that they believe the pipeline constitutes “a moral issue.”<sup>37</sup>

The Line 3 pipeline, like the Dakota Access Pipeline and associated protests by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in 2016, is being protested by Native Americans—specifically, the Ojibwe—as an infringement on tribal sovereignty.<sup>38</sup> The faith leaders who signed the Minnesota letter acknowledge this, stating plainly that, “Many of us signing this letter come from Christian and other traditions that in recent years have taken formal positions acknowledging the role of our faith institutions in the mistreatment and deep trauma done to Indigenous peoples.”<sup>39</sup>

Much of this faith-based activism is focused on ways in which threats to the environment are also threats to religious freedom. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline was based in part on religious freedom claims.<sup>40</sup> In Arizona, the San Carlos Apache Tribe and other Indigenous groups are protesting attempts to allow Oak Flat, a sacred site, to be decimated in order to create a copper mine.<sup>41</sup> Their struggle has attracted the attention of environmental groups and both conservative and progressive religious liberty advocates. Similarly, in central Pennsylvania, a group of nuns with the Adorers of the Blood of Christ made religious freedom claims in opposing the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline, after the pipeline company "used eminent domain to seize the congregation's property."<sup>42</sup> Said Sister Janet McCann on behalf of the order, "We were stunned that eminent domain could be used for something that is not for the common good. It's just for this multibillion-dollar for-profit company."<sup>43</sup> The nuns are part of a growing Catholic voice for climate justice that draws inspiration from Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* encyclical, which was issued in 2015 and focuses on caring for God's creation.<sup>44</sup>

Faith-based organizations are also working at the state level to call for national climate legislation. In Arizona, a coalition of groups came together during the 2020 election to develop a nonpartisan voting guide for people of faith who care about the environment.<sup>45</sup> At an event promoting the voting guide, Bishop Deborah Hutterer of the Grand Canyon Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America spoke of the need to protect the environment: "From our Lutheran tradition, we have this idea of care of creation, the interdependence of each one of us, and the fact that without caring about creation, we have actually denied our neighbors. Our lives depend on the life that surrounds us."<sup>46</sup>

At the same event, evangelical pastor Chris Gonzalez of *Missio Dei* in Tempe spoke of how American Christianity has "a theological strain that basically says this world's gonna burn up anyway, and so the goal is to believe some right stuff, to get up there and get out of here"—a belief that does not prioritize protecting this planet. But God, Gonzales says, created this planet, and "the original creation is good and God doesn't make junk and he doesn't junk what he's made."<sup>47</sup>

In 2019, Utah's *Deseret News*, which is owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, issued a powerful editorial underscoring faith support for environmental action:

*Where faith groups excel is in their ability to remove the discussion from the political arena and push it to principle. They give the climate debate a moral tone and energize worshippers to make individual choices out of respect for the earth, not out of political fidelity. Nearly all the world's religions espouse doctrines that affirm the sanctity of the planet and admonish adherents to act accordingly. Religions give humanity to the victims of drought and flooding, treating them not as numbers on a spreadsheet but as humans with divine worth.*<sup>48</sup>

Faith groups in West Virginia are taking this mandate seriously. As the White House and Congress negotiate an infrastructure bill and reconciliation process that together will lead to massive investments in the state, four faith-based organizations—the American Friends Service Committee, the West Virginia Council of Churches, West Virginia Interfaith Power and Light, and Christians For the Mountains—have joined other groups in the West Virginia Climate Alliance to call on the state’s U.S. senators to support the climate priorities in the Biden administration’s infrastructure plans.<sup>49</sup> The alliance is urging Sens. Joe Manchin (D) and Shelley Moore Capito (R), who play a leadership role in negotiations on this issue, to seize this “once-in-a-generation opportunity” to take action on climate change.

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## Conclusion

Meeting the scale and scope of the climate crisis will require all religious leaders and activists, along with elected officials of all faiths and no faith, to unite around climate justice priorities. Fortunately, and most importantly, they have the support of the majority of religious Americans to take action and a clear vehicle in the form of congressional legislation to make a significant investment in climate and infrastructure.

The moral case to address the climate crisis is resounding in the halls of Congress and in faith communities around the world. It’s up to federal and state leaders to make the investments and changes necessary to safeguard and secure humanity’s survival and protect God’s creation.

*Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons is a fellow with the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center for American Progress. Maggie Siddiqi is the senior director of the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center.*

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