

# A Call to Be Faithfully Disruptive

Wellspring: Moving Forward on Climate Justice  
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It's great to get to be here with you today. I was raised in the United Church, in Vancouver. And it is within the church that I was taught to work for justice. So it is an honour to get to be part of moving the conversation on climate justice forward with you.

I've been thinking and talking about the environment since I was a teenager. But I wasn't always so concerned about climate change.

I remember when David Suzuki started talking about the top 10 things you can do for the planet. They were pretty easy little lifestyle changes – recycling, buying organic, using cloth grocery bags, driving less, ect. These things are the secular, ecological equivalent of “private, personal salvation.” Do your part. Save yourself.

Last summer I got to hear eco-theologian Joanna Macy speak, and one of the things she said was:

*“there are a lot of nice people who are tending their gardens, and caring for their children, and trying to do their part. But they are caught up in this broken, toxic system, this late-stage capitalism, in which these individual efforts are insufficient in challenging and changing the system.”*

I think she's right. In fact, even David Suzuki is no longer suggesting that these individual consumer and lifestyle choices, these private acts of salvation, are going to solve the problem. Not fast enough. Increasingly, we have realized that we need major systemic change. My sense is that most of you know that. It's what we've been talking about all morning.

## **Collective Liberation**

I have been trained to think about everything theologically. And climate change, I think, is the greatest theological challenge of our time. It is our role as people of faith to be part of naming the challenge, and to take bold and courageous leadership in addressing it.

When I was growing up in the church we talked boldly about injustice, but we didn't speak much about the environment. Now we do, a little more. But we speak very politely. Rather than challenging power, we speak about consumer choices – recycling programs, and green sanctuaries, and community gardens. We speak about doing locally things, the low-hanging-fruit.

These are good. But they aren't enough. As people of faith, we need to be thinking bigger, more systemically, to take that message that the environment matters up a few

notches. We need to be disrupting economic and political systems in which too few people are winning, and too many people are losing. We need to be organizing and pushing within our institutions, and we need to be playing to win.

Fortunately, we are not alone. Across the globe people are finding their voices, and speaking up against an economic and political system that diminishes them to mere consumers in a soul-less market. More than that, they are speaking up in favour of alternatives that put the planet and it's people before profit.

Theologically speaking, people are challenging this notion of private salvation. And in its place they are preaching the gospel of collective liberation.

It sounds a lot like what I was taught in church sanctuaries, camps and youth retreats. And these folks are preaching it with their hands and their feet, with strategic eloquence and passionate anger, all over the place:

The Occupy movement. The Maple Spring. The youth activist *Dream Defenders* in the southern United States. The Canadian Youth Climate Coalition. The Yinka Dene Alliance. Communities defending the land in New Brunswick. Anti-tar-sands activists. 350.org groups. And Idle No More.

We are not alone. And we should draw strength from these groups, as we too step up our game.

### **Canadian Context**

Canadian faith institutions have a long history of justice-seeking through moral, political and economic means, from which to draw inspiration. Many of you know this too.

In addition to forming the Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility (TCCR) in 1975, many faith institutions have applied a negative screen to their holdings, refusing to invest in alcohol, gambling, pornography, tobacco, and weapons.<sup>1</sup>

And when student activists, and theologians, called the churches to action in response to South African apartheid, we rose in response. In 1985 a group of black South African theologians issued the *Kairos Document*, which said:

*Our present kairos calls for a response from Christians that is biblical, spiritual, pastoral, and, above all, prophetic. It is not enough in these circumstances to repeat generalized Christian principles. We need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a*

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<sup>1</sup> The United Church of Canada. *History of Responsible Investment*. Available at: <http://www.united-church.ca/local/congfin/investment/history>

*response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand.<sup>2</sup>*

In 1986, amid intensifying opposition to apartheid, and a wave of successful divestment campaigns on university and college campuses, the United Church of Canada decided to divest the shares it held in companies with investments in South Africa. Many faith institutions acted similarly.

In 2011, the leaders of 26 of Canada's largest faith communities signed an Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change<sup>3</sup>. This strong and eloquent statement named the deep spiritual dimensions, and the justice implications, of the climate crisis. And it acknowledged a need for political and economic action, stating:

*We call for leadership to put the long-term interest of humanity and the planet ahead of short-term economic and national concerns. [...] Our environment is the natural source of our wealth and the home of millions of species for which we are planetary stewards. How long can we barter this priceless inheritance for the promise of growing economic returns? [...] We cannot wait for others to act but instead must lead by example.*

That was three years ago. And we're a ways from living up to this statement.

Still, I think it's important to remember our history.

Speaking about their recent divestment motion, Justin Whelan from Paddington Uniting Church in Australia, described it as, "a little nudge to help them be the radical, prophetic people they want to be".

We too have been those radical, prophetic people before.

### **Global Justice**

There are lots of arguments for climate action, and particularly for divesting from fossil fuels and re-investment in alternatives. It is, I think, an argument worth having. So here are my reasons:

Like many in the church, I come from more of a justice background. It was only when I started to see pictures and hear stories of areas of the world already being impacted by climate change that I began to pay closer attention.

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<sup>2</sup> The Kairos Document, 1985. *Challenge to the church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*. Available at: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/challenge-church-theological-comment-political-crisis-south-africa-kairos-document-1985>

<sup>3</sup> Available online at: <http://www.councilofchurches.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/InterfaithCallforLeadershipandAction.pdf>

Climate change is a massive global justice issue. If global temperatures increase by even 2 degrees, entire island nations will be under water. And already the communities being impacted most are poor communities, and communities of colour, the world over.

Climate change is a global justice issue, and a racial justice issue, and an economic justice issue. Issues that we, as a faith institution, have a theological and relational commitment to. It's a justice issue. And across the globe, communities and nations are rising up, demanding action from developed countries like Canada. Fighting for their lives.

### **Intergenerational Justice**

Climate Change is also a serious intergenerational justice issue.

I'm 30 years old. I have an 11-year-old stepdaughter. And a little 8-month-old baby. For the last 27 years, nearly all of my life, each year has been warmer than the one before it. Dangerous and unpredictable weather events are increasing at an alarming rate. As you all know, the stats are terrifying.

We don't know exactly how much time we have to act. Except that every time the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change produces a report, they find that we have less time than they had previously thought. And every time, it's within my lifetime. I will see the very real results of our action or inaction in my lifetime.

I'm unsure quite how to describe the fear and the urgency I hear from other young folks about the climate crisis. We don't have the luxury of avoiding the issue, or being too polite, or procrastinating taking action until some theoretically future date when our budgets are more stable, or the economy is stronger. We need to change course, to do a U-turn and begin reducing the carbon dioxide in our air, within my lifetime.

Climate change is a serious intergenerational justice issue. Young people are leading the climate justice fight. Through the divestment movement, and through various other creative means of challenging power and building alternatives.

These young people who we yearn to have fill our buildings again, who we hire bands and set up Facebook pages to attract. These young people are learning to raise their moral voices, to speak to the conscience of a country yearning for something better than the status quo.

These young people too are fighting for their lives. The challenge is for faith institutions to take them seriously. And to be bold enough to follow their lead.

### **Reconciliation**

And of course, climate change is an issue of reconciliation and right relationship. In Canada the communities most impacted have been Indigenous communities, already devastated by an atrocious history of colonization and of Residential Schools. Aboriginal

communities across Canada, and especially here in BC, are at the front lines of the impacts of, and movements for, climate justice.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission arrived in Vancouver a year-and-a-half ago, there was significant tension around the fact that various oil and gas companies were sponsoring official and unofficial events. And there was some really clear naming that the atrocities committed against Aboriginal populations in Canada are not a matter only of the past, and that reconciliation means more than simply saying sorry.

In this, there is a poetic appropriateness, because one of the keys to successfully tackling climate change is embracing a true recognition of Aboriginal Rights and Title, and in so doing, making real our promise of Reconciliation.

Aboriginal communities are fighting for their lives and for the land, as they step up their resistance to dangerous and gratuitous resource extraction, from New Brunswick to Alberta to Northern British Columbia. As the ‘Truth’ portion of the TRC begins to wrap up, and the ‘Reconciliation’ portion lies ahead, surely our faith calls us to take action.

Climate change is an intergenerational justice issue. It’s a global justice issue, a racial justice issue, and an economic justice issue. It’s a reconciliation issue.

And here’s what makes it so challenging: In the face of devastating statistics, and deadly impacts, we’re still being told that the answers are easy. We’re still being sold lifestyle changes and private salvation. LED lightbulbs and community gardens.

The difference in scale between the problem and the proposed solutions is enormous, and paralyzing.

### **Carbon Bubble**

So in my opinion it’s about being bold and making the right choices – being on the right side of history. I would love for us to do it for those reasons alone. However, fortunately, climate action, and particularly fossil fuel divestment and re-investment are increasingly making economic sense too.

Now, I’m not an economist. But I’m married to one, so I’m getting a home-school economics education. And economically, taking climate action now is going to make a whole lot more financial sense than putting it off for a decade or two. Particularly as a coastal region with aging infrastructure, and particularly as people and institutions with financial investments that likely contain many fossil fuel holdings, which look to be leading toward increased financial uncertainty and a massive drop in returns.

More and more studies, from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, to the University of Oxford, to the World Bank, note that a “**carbon bubble**” presents a huge

long-term risk for fossil fuel investments.<sup>4</sup> Current prices are inflated based on reserves that are widely considered un-burnable. About 24% of the Toronto Stock Exchange is fossil fuel companies, whose market valuation is linked to assets that will have to stay under ground. That's a market bubble ready to burst.

A recent Forbes Magazine article articulates that:

*There will be a day of reckoning when it comes to fossil fuels, and investors need to take far stronger steps to avoid the climate cliff. Fundamental shifts in investment are warranted, and investors must begin diverting capital away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy at a much faster clip.*<sup>5</sup>

### **A final reality check**

Many people will tell you that divesting from fossil fuel companies can't be done. Of course it can – it is already being done. And it's already having an impact on the social license of the fossil fuel industry. It hasn't been, and won't be, easy. It will take courage and leadership. It will demand much from us. It is a lot like our faith itself.

Climate change isn't primarily a technical or a scientific challenge. We have the knowledge and capacity to address it. It is a profoundly ethical and theological challenge, with huge moral implications. Oil dependence, and over consumption, has polluted the soul of our country, and furthered a physical and spiritual disconnect from the natural world.

At a time when governments seem unwilling to take significant action on climate change, increasing numbers of young people see divestment as a tool for putting climate justice back on the radar. And their call for could use additional moral voices. Our voices.

As most faith institutions are losing members, and losing social license, now is the time for churches and people of faith to be bold in their proclamations of what a better world could look like. Fred Small, minister of the Unitarian Universalist First Parish Church in Cambridge recently said:

*“With the civil rights movement, the youth led and the churches followed. The students are leading — now it's time for religious institutions to follow.”*

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<sup>4</sup> For example: Lee, Marc and Brock Ellis. “Canada’s Carbon Liabilities: The Implications of Stranded Fossil Fuel Assets for Financial Markets and Pension Funds”. March 2013.  
<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/canadas-carbon-liabilities>

<sup>5</sup> Lubber, Mindy. “Fossil Fuel Divestment is a Timely Issue for Investors”.  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/mindylubber/2012/12/17/fossil-fuel-divestment-is-timely-issue-for-investors/>