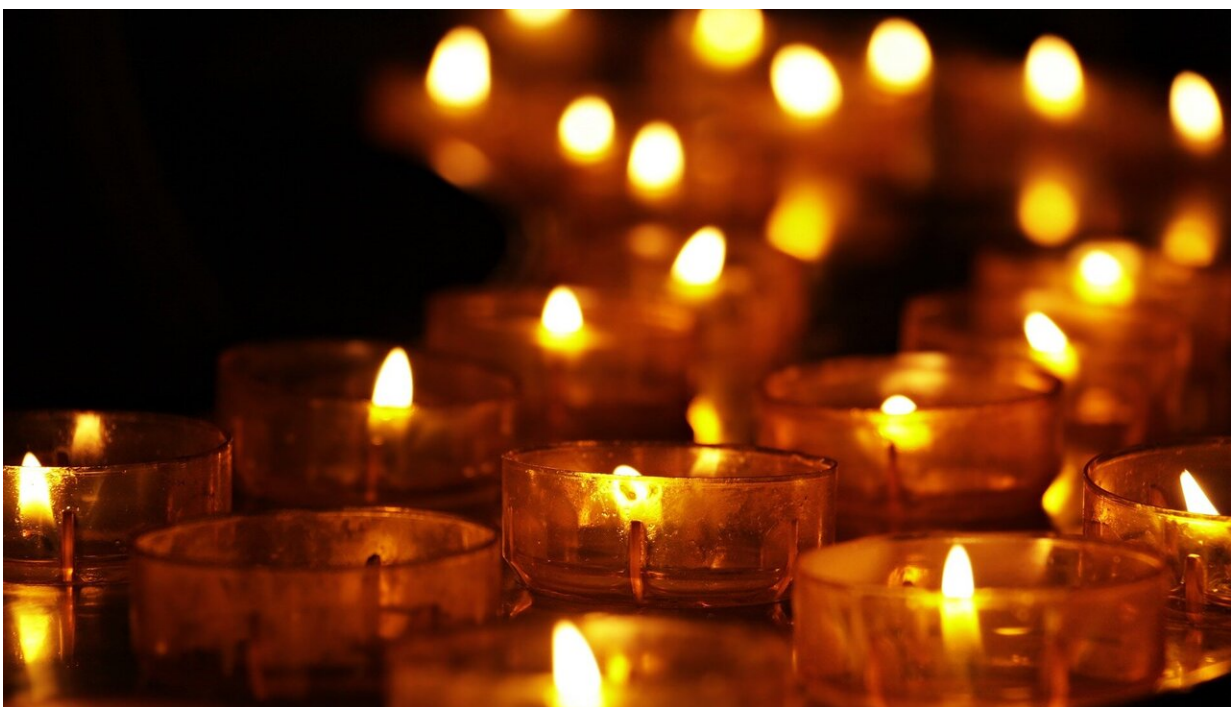


Faith communities are rallying to check climate change—their size and influence counts

November 28 2023, by Rachel Mash



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According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), more [than 80%](#) of the global population are motivated by faith or spirituality. Faced with the triple planetary crises of pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change, what role can faith communities

play in saving the planet?

In a recent [publication](#), we looked at the role of two faith-based organizations—the Green Anglicans movement, which is present in 13 African countries, and UNEP's [Faith for Earth Initiative](#), a UN program which partners with faith-based organizations on development goals. Our aim was to find out what role faith and religion can play in addressing [climate](#) change both at the grassroots and within the UN.

Our paper outlines lessons learned, challenges, and opportunities for local and global engagements. We found that churches can move from local action into advocacy. Particularly in Africa, [faith leaders](#) have status in the community and can speak out on issues. For instance, the Bishop of Namibia was one of the first to raise awareness of the threat of drilling to the [Okavango Delta](#) by Canadian company Recon Africa.

The Anglican Communion was one of many faith voices calling for loss and damage funding at the [COP27](#) climate change meeting.

Based on our findings, we argue that faith communities have the potential to make a significant impact on climate action for the following reasons:

- they are accessible—to be found in every community
- they are affordable, with existing structures and potential volunteers
- they are acceptable, grounded in the local culture
- they can bring hope—combating eco-anxiety and providing spiritual sustenance through [spiritual practices](#), as explained by [Gopal Patel](#), co-chair of UN Multi-faith Advisory Council.

As a result, faith groups can facilitate behavior change based on their spiritual teachings. They have the potential to reach their huge

constituencies with environmental education and action.

The actors

The Green Anglicans movement has three aims: to connect faith to the environment, to inspire local actions, and to encourage advocacy.

When faith is connected to the environment, it is often referred to as eco-theology, or "care for creation", and this can be taught on a number of levels.

Starting with children, Green Anglicans developed a curriculum for Sunday school called ["Ryan the Rhino"](#) which links the Biblical story of creation with teachings about water, land, trees and climate change.

A recent online eco-theology course for clergy had speakers from 12 different African countries. Each week focused on the biblical response to issues such as deforestation, waste, and climate change. The sessions featured both an activist and a theological response, linking theology and science.

The Church of South India celebrates World Environment Day every year, providing sermons and prayers on the theme of the year.

A key development in eco-theology has been the growth of the global ["Season of Creation"](#). Initiated by the Orthodox Church, the season has been embraced by many other churches as a month when preaching, prayers, and action are focused on the environment. Local actions focus on issues such as reforestation, waste management, promotion of solar energy, and water harvesting—underpinned by spiritual teaching.

For instance, bishops from many churches are now blessing tree saplings for confirmation or baptism as a symbol of spiritual growth. Anglican

Archbishop Jackson Sapit of Kenya is one of the key leaders in forest protection and tree growing. This movement across the Anglican Communion is known as the [Communion Forest](#).

Another UNEP-affiliated interfaith group, Greenfaith, recently released a report on the potential spiritual violation of the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline in [disturbing graves](#).

The Anglican Communion and Greenfaith are just two of the 85 faith-based organizations that are now affiliated with the [Faith for Earth Coalition](#). This is an interfaith program of the United Nations Environment Programme promoting faith leadership and faith-based organizations as custodians of key value-based first-ever perspectives on environmental sustainability.

Launched six years ago, the coalition promotes dialogue and collaboration between faith-based organizations and the UN system. This year the faith communities will have a significant presence at COP28 in Dubai from 30 November to 12 December 2023.

UNEP and the Muslim Council of Elders, together with the COP28 Presidency, have formed a strategic partnership with faith-based organizations and civil society partners to host the first ever "Faith Pavilion". Religious representatives and climate activists will be able to engage around innovative solutions to the climate crisis. Pope Francis, one of the global faith leaders who has been most active in challenging climate change, will be [addressing](#) COP28.

We have all the scientific knowledge we require to halt [climate change](#), but the emissions curve is not yet bending downward. The barriers are no longer technical—we face moral challenges such as greed, selfishness, and apathy. We need to reject an extractive world view that sees Nature as a resource to be exploited and embrace a spiritual transformation,

recognizing that we are profoundly connected with the web of life that sustains us.

Rallying faith communities to check climate change

Faith communities are already acting, but their actions are rarely documented. Successful faith programs and best practices should be researched, so that they can quickly go to scale. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change should include more social science research, including a working group on changing human behavior. Western agencies, often from countries where faith is not a significant part of civil society, should include [faith](#) groups in their strategic planning.

The window of opportunity is narrowing fast. Can [faith communities](#) be empowered to inspire their billions of members, helping to bring about the spiritual transformation that is needed to save the planet?

Can we reweave the ecological web of life?

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