



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Statement on Climate Change

December 31, 2009

“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.”

- Isaiah 24:4-5

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing all of God’s creation. The evidence is mounting that earth’s climate is changing dramatically—sea levels are rising, rainfall patterns are changing, polar ice and glaciers are melting, weather disasters are increasing.

The impacts of these changes are falling most heavily on people and nations struggling in poverty, those least able to adapt to changing conditions because they have few resources to do so. We see their stories in the news: drought in Africa; hurricanes in Central America; coastal flooding on small Pacific islands. People are hungry, forced to leave their homes. Perhaps we are moved to act: to give money to a disaster appeal; to write a letter to our member of Congress urging international aid. But are we called to do more in the face of mounting evidence that this problem is growing worse?

The great paradox of climate change is that those least responsible for the emission of pollutants harmful to the earth will be most severely affected and least able to adapt

Our response to climate change must heed this call to justice, particularly for those living in poverty, around the world, who are least responsible for climate change and most likely to suffer greatly from its impacts if we do not act now.

As Christians, we are called to protect what God has created, and we are obligated to speak and to act in response to this growing crisis. As Lutherans, we are freed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ to serve our neighbor and all of creation.



What is climate change?

Climate change is real. A report released in 2007 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), confirmed that global average temperatures are growing warmer due to increasing levels of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases... and that human use of fossil fuels is the main source of the increase.... Every time we burn gasoline, use electricity from coal- or gas-fired power plants, or heat our homes with oil or natural gas, we release carbon dioxide.... At normal levels greenhouse gases make Earth’s temperatures moderate enough to support life, but at these increased, human-caused levels, more of the sun’s heat is trapped by our atmosphere and less escapes into space. The increase in trapped heat changes the climate, causing altered weather patterns that bring unusually intense precipitation, droughts and severe storms. The United States produces about 25 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions.

What are the impacts of climate change?

In 2007, the IPCC painted a bleak picture of the future for God's creation and those already struggling with hunger, poverty and disease. They predicted that a changing climate will increase food insecurity, while reversing progress made in the fight against hunger.... Rising temperatures will increase freshwater scarcity in some regions and the spread of diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and West Nile virus in others. More severe storms and long-term drought will lead to increased migration, and rising sea levels will lead to the permanent displacement of coastal communities and even entire small island nations.

Some of these impacts can already be seen and measured. For example, smallholder farmers in western Nicaragua are struggling to adapt to increasingly unpredictable rainfall: where they once were able to plant and harvest two crops during the rainy season, they are now facing crop failure and hunger.

Families in these communities are struggling to survive, and many of the men have left their communities—or even the country—to seek work as their crops fail season after season. For these farmers climate change is a reality. As this example illustrates, climate change impacts will fall most heavily on those living in poverty and other vulnerable populations who are dependent on their natural environment for survival. Wealthy countries will be better able to adapt to these changes, but as Hurricane Katrina proved in 2005, even in our country, low income people are highly vulnerable.

As Lutherans around the world accompany our neighbors in their journeys out of poverty, the reality of climate change presents new challenges and requires new strategies.... For example, Lutheran World Relief's (LWR) projects aim to improve peoples' lives and resiliency to climate change by increasing access to water, food security, reducing risks to disaster, and preventing and treating malaria.

How are we called to respond?

As a nation, we bear moral responsibility for this crisis. Scientists tell us that it is consumption of energy and resources in industrialized countries that is the primary cause of climate change.

Although the United States has only about five percent of global population, we consume 30 percent of the world's resources and create 30 percent of the world's waste. The U.S. is the largest historic emitter of carbon dioxide and we emit more carbon dioxide per person than any other nation. The planet is in danger unless we are willing to face this reality and to take responsibility by reducing our use of energy and our emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. If we don't, all of creation will suffer. As a leading industrialized nation that has disproportionately contributed to greenhouse gas emissions, it is incumbent upon us to rectify this injustice through legislation that meets the following goals:

Follow scientific recommendations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

! Currently this means legislation must ensure that we do not increase the Earth's temperature by more than two degrees Celsius. Scientists say we can achieve this goal by reducing emissions by between 20 and 40 percent by 2020 and by 80 percent by 2050.

! Legislation must ensure that low income Americans do not bear a disproportionate burden of increases in energy costs, and that increased costs do not push more people into poverty....

! As a nation we should work for a strong international agreement that requires all nations to reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Any agreement should provide aid to developing nations to reduce their emissions even as they lift their people out of poverty, and help them adapt to the inevitable impacts of a changing climate on food, water and other basic human needs. And finally, as individuals we must examine our own responsibility for climate change.

This resource is produced by the Office of Church in Society, a unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, dedicated to promoting peace, justice, and the care of creation in Christ's name in the global community.

Learn More

The ***ELCA social statement*** “Caring for Creation” states our concerns about climate change and its potential impacts on God’s creation and calls us to act (www.elca.org/environment). Stay informed and join the ELCA’s e-Advocacy network (www.elca.org/advocacy).