

From Carol Sherwood
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Presbyterian National NEWS

National Religious Coalition's Conference on Creation Care

The NRCCC's annual conference was held in Washington, DC the week of April 22, 2012. The focus this year was the warming of the earth (global warming) due to increasing releases of carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the atmosphere, primarily as a result of burning fossil fuels (especially coal and oil).

Sunday's programs were held in the National Cathedral. Between the services there was an interview with conservationist and author Wendell Berry. Most of us then attended the beautiful worship service at the cathedral which highlighted various aspects of God's creation and Earth Day. Following worship, we had a luncheon at which Wendell Berry was honored.

Monday's schedule was packed with many more presentations than anyone could possibly take in. There were three simultaneous tracks of speeches during most of the day. Scientific knowledge was presented in one track. As a biologist and having taught ecology courses, I was familiar with most of this information. One of the most compelling sources of data is derived from layers of ice (ice cores) going back thousands of years from Antarctica and other ancient glaciers. By analyzing ice samples from various ages, scientists are able to determine the amount of atmospheric CO₂ trapped in the ice and the temperature of the environment at that time. There is a good correlation between the two. Naturally there have been fluctuations over the ages. However beginning with the industrial revolution, scientists see first a gradual, then an increasingly steep (exponential) rise in both atmospheric CO₂ levels and ambient temperatures. Another indicator of global warming is the migration of climate zones in a polar direction (and also upward on mountains). Sometimes species of plants and animals follow these migrations, but sometimes the living species cannot move or adapt fast enough and then they face extinction. As our atmosphere warms, glaciers melt, resulting in a rise of ocean levels. This will affect coastal and island communities around the world. Part of the Sacramento Delta is already below sea level, and much of California's rich farm land will be in jeopardy. Long term changes in climate and weather patterns are being noticed. For example, the Sahara Desert is expanding southward and displacing people.

A second track of talks presented the response by various faith groups. All of the major religious groups in this country have issued statements to the effect that we are entrusted with the care of God's creation, that we humans have caused major problems, including the problem of global warming, and that we are called to act responsibly to correct the situation. Presenters were from the Catholic, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Evangelical, and Presbyterian groups. (The Presbyterian Synod of Southern California and Hawaii was one of the sponsors of this event.) Additional faith groups, such as Moslems and Native Americans were also represented at the interfaith

service later in the week. Having heard many of the speakers, and having read many of the official statements, I am impressed by the unanimity of concern and sense of responsibility on this issue.

The third track of presentations focused on “cultural” issues related to global warming. There are health and psychological impacts, changes affecting agriculture (i.e. economic issues and food supplies), and national security and military implications. As we shift to sources of energy other than fossil fuels, we need to upgrade our electrical grid in order to move energy from locations where electricity can be produced cleanly (solar, wind, etc.) to where it is used. Another social implication of global warming involves the migration of large numbers of people from areas which will be uninhabitable (desertification, sea level rise, etc.)

I met one person, a business executive from Guadalajara, Mexico who told us that due to drought during the past year, over a million people in Mexico have become displaced because they can no longer farm their land. The despair is so great that over fifty people have jumped off the cliffs of Copper Canyon because they can no longer feed their families. Thus, our response to global warming is imperative, not only because we are stewards of God’s earth, but in concern for God’s people.

This conference provided a marvelous mix of different perspectives on climate change, ranging from medical doctors, scientists, psychiatrists, a general from the U.S. Army, and a variety of clergy and religious leaders. I found this conference to be one of the most delightful arrays of informed perspective and clearly presented information that I have ever experienced.

Monday ended with vespers in our host church for the day, the Orthodox Cathedral.

On Tuesday smaller groups of us visited the offices of various representatives and senators. In each case we delivered a packet of official statements of various faith groups stating concern about the warming of our planet. In some cases we were being persuasive, and in others we were supportive. Some of the people we visited were encouraged by our position and said that facts speak to the mind, but the religious community reaches people’s hearts, where decisions are made.

A suggestion we proposed is a “carbon tax”, i.e. a tax on fossil fuels (coal and oil) to discourage the use of these sources of CO₂ release. Proceeds from the tax could be rebated to citizens and also used to encourage research and development of alternative energy sources. There is some legislation being prepared on this issue. After visiting congressional people, we met with some of the president’s staff and had a very good, mutually supportive discussion.

Wednesday morning began with an interfaith service at the Presbyterian church, then a visit to headquarters offices of NOAA (the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration). They were very glad to converse with us and our meeting lasted for two hours. The issues of global warming affect the oceans in so many ways. As mentioned, there are increases in sea level as glacial ice melts with major impacts on coastal areas and coastal (and intertidal) populations of plants, animals, and people. Approximately thirty to forty percent of CO₂ dissolves in the oceans, and as CO₂ levels rise, this increases the

acidity of the water, which is harmful to shell-producing animals (the acid tends to dissolve shells and coral). The warming of the oceans also affects coral reefs, as corals live within narrow temperature ranges. Fish populations and fishing activities will also be affected. Ocean currents in the north Atlantic may shift as cold, fresh water is poured into the ocean (especially as Greenland's glaciers melt), this could severely change weather in Europe. And arctic animals such as polar bears which depend on the ice, may face severe population decline. Changes in penguin populations have been noted in Antarctica. (I, personally saw remnants of the Larsen B Ice Sheet which had broken up the year before I journeyed to Antarctica.) We are affected by the oceans in so many ways: food, shipping, recreation, climate and weather patterns, and we understand so little about how we are affecting the oceans by our activities.

Attending this year's NRCCC conference was a wonderful experience for me, and I hope I contributed some by being one of the official photographers for the event.

Carol Sherwood

enclosed: Photos of the meeting with the president's staff

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