

Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change
Statement of Conscience, Final Form
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
Monday, June 26, 2006

Earth is our home. We are part of this world and its destiny is our own. Life on this planet will be gravely affected unless we embrace new practices, ethics, and values to guide our lives on a warming planet. As Unitarian Universalists, how can our faith inform our actions to remedy and mitigate global warming/climate change? We declare by this Statement of Conscience that we will not acquiesce to the ongoing degradation and destruction of life that human actions are leaving to our children and grandchildren. We as Unitarian Universalists are called to join with others to halt practices that fuel global warming/climate change, to instigate sustainable alternatives, and to mitigate the impending effects of global warming/climate change with just and ethical responses. As a people of faith, we commit to a renewed reverence for life and respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

A Matter of Science

There is scientific consensus that the Earth's climate is changing due to global warming/climate change caused primarily by the human use of oil, coal, and natural gas. The burning of these fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which traps more heat from the sun. Global warming/climate change is accelerating as planetary temperatures reach record highs. The melting of polar ice and mountain glaciers may cause sea levels to rise by at least three feet, probably much more, and by eighty feet in coming centuries if the average temperature rises five degrees, warming that will be difficult to avoid. Half of the world's plant and animal species are at risk of extinction by 2100 as habitats are destroyed and ecosystems unravel. The huge Siberian permafrost peat bogs are apparently starting to melt, releasing methane and accelerating global warming/climate change. Antarctic glaciers are sliding into the ocean faster than previously expected, which may result in worldwide coastal flooding. Rapidly melting polar ice caps and glaciers provide visual evidence of global warming/climate change. Indirect effects due to melting polar and Greenland ice can upset the delicate salt balance in the North Atlantic Ocean, triggering a shift in the thermohaline current, which ironically may result in a local ice age in Northern Europe and parts of North America.

Increasing temperatures can devastate human communities and wildlife habitats. Warmer climates are extending toward the poles, dramatically altering ecosystems. Melting polar ice caps raise sea levels and upset the delicate balance of ocean salinity. This imbalance may lead to a shift in ocean circulation patterns, which could wreak havoc with regional climates. Recent increases in sea surface temperatures are linked with more intense hurricanes.

Global warming/climate change can cause both increases and decreases in local temperatures and precipitation. Until now the effects of global warming/climate change have been proportionate to increases in greenhouse gas concentrations. We can minimize the damage of climate change only if we act vigorously and soon--in the next decade according to top climate scientist. Since human-generated greenhouse gases are at a level not seen for at least 600,000 years, effects will persist and increase for a while even as we begin to control emissions. Climatic changes, combined with habitat destruction and pollution, are causing loss of species,

forests, human settlements, glaciers, and coastal heritage sites. All living organisms depend on ecosystems that can be sustained only in relatively narrow temperature ranges.

The recent rapid global average temperature increase is indeed the result of human activity. While the climate is always changing, attribution studies using sophisticated supercomputer global climate models show that natural causes do not account for the recent rapid temperature increase and that human activity does. See the 2001 IPCC/SPM report, Figure 2.4.

A Matter of Faith and Justice

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called by our seventh Principle to affirm and promote “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” We envision a world in which all people are assured a secure and meaningful life that is ecologically responsible and sustainable, in which every form of life has intrinsic value. In other words, Unitarian Universalists are called to defer to a balance between our individual needs and those of all other organisms. Entire cultures, nations, and life forms are at risk of extinction while basic human rights to adequate supplies of food, fresh water, and health as well as sustainable livelihoods for humans are being undermined. To live, we must both consume and dispose. Both our consumption and our disposal burden the interdependent web of existence. To sustain the interdependent web, we must burden it less while maintaining the essentials of our lives. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are painful omens of how racism, sexism, and poverty worsen the effects of global warming/climate change. Our world is calling us to gather in community and respond from our moral and spiritual wealth; together we can transform our individual and congregational lives into acts of moral witness, discarding our harmful habits for new behaviors and practices that will sustain life on Earth, ever vigilant against injustice.

A Matter of Policy

Global warming/climate change is not only an environmental phenomenon; it is a hotly contested policy issue. All countries, in particular developing countries, will be unable to protect their residents from sea level increases, frequent and intense droughts, heavy rains, and violent hurricanes and tornadoes. Species worldwide face extinction from these same events. It is a bitter irony and a grave injustice that economically developed countries that are most responsible for global warming/climate change possess the wealth, technology, and infrastructure to cope with its negative effects, while those who have the least will have the largest burdens to bear.

In 1992, the United States ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Convention calls for its signatories to stabilize their greenhouse gas emission rates. It also states that economically developed countries will take the lead in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and not use scientific uncertainty about some aspects of climate change as a cause for delaying an immediate response. While the scientific evidence is solid, there seems to be an effort by some to confuse the public. To date, the United States has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol to the Convention, which sets milestones for reducing greenhouse gas emission rates. International cooperation is critical for addressing this global dilemma.

A Call to Action

Affirming that we are of this earth and that humankind has brought about global warming/climate change, we, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, pledge to ground our missions and ministries in reverence for this earth and responsibility to it as we undertake these personal practices, congregational actions, and advocacy goals.

Personal Practices

- Reduce our use of energy and our consumption of manufactured goods that become waste;
- Use alternative sources of energy to reduce global warming/climate change and to encourage the development of such sources;
- Choose the most energy-efficient transportation means that meet our needs and abilities (e.g., walk, bike, carpool, use mass transit and communication technologies, and limit travel);
- Determine our personal energy consumption and pledge to reduce our use of energy and carbon emissions by at least 20 percent by 2010 or sooner and into the future;
- Reuse, recycle, and reduce waste;
- Plant and preserve trees and native plants and choose sustainably harvested wood and wood products;
- Eat and serve energy-efficient food that is locally produced and low on the food chain;
- Use financial resources to encourage corporate social responsibility with reference to global warming/climate change;
- Model these practices by committing to a life of simplicity and Earth stewardship;
- Consume less, choose appliances that are rated energy-efficient (e.g., by the EPA Energy Star Program), and choose products and materials that are made from renewable resources and can be recycled at the end of their usefulness; and
- Commit to continue to learn about the science, impact, and mitigation of global warming/climate change and communicate this knowledge by teaching about and discussing the problems and dangers of, and actions to address, climate change.

Congregational Actions

- Celebrate reverence for the interdependent web of existence in all aspects of congregational life;
- Treat environmentally responsible practices as a spiritual discipline;
- Seek certification through the Green Sanctuary Program of the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth;
- Educate ourselves, our children, and future generations on sustainable ways to live interdependently;
- Whenever possible, plan congregational facilities around proximity to public transportation and encourage congregants, as they are able, to travel by public transportation, walking, biking, and carpooling;
- Seek U. S. Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for all new congregational building projects and use LEED guidelines for renovation projects;

- Use congregational financial resources to positively address the global warming/climate change crisis;
- Practice environmentally responsible consumption and encourage voluntary simplicity among members;
- Build a broader base for environmentally mindful policies and practices through congregational alliances within Unitarian Universalism, through interfaith channels, and with secular entities; and
- Maximize the energy efficiency of congregational facilities by enrolling in the EPA's Energy Star for Congregations Program.

Denominational Affairs

We call upon our denominational leaders to provide:

- Leadership, by calling upon the major political parties to develop energy and climate change policies and to make them central topics of debate in state, congressional, and presidential elections;
- Education, by providing spiritual, educational, and technical resources for congregational and individual responses;
- Justice, by seeking opportunities for public witness for environmental justice, including joining interfaith and public events promoting a just response to climate change;
- Sustainable practices, by exploring the options for performing environmental audits of all UUA properties and for modeling appropriate management and purchasing practices;
- Sustainable investing, by exploring the potential for using the ownership rights of the denomination's financial resources to positively address the global warming/climate change crisis;
- Support, by assisting congregations in evaluating and addressing the risks and challenges they face as a result of global warming/climate change;
- Recognition of congregational action, by encouraging, honoring, and publicizing the work of UU congregations, including those that achieve Green Sanctuary accreditation; and
- Ministry, by recognizing and supporting the need for UU leaders to help others understand the urgency and severity of addressing global warming/climate change, the resulting potential for despair, and places to find hope for the future.

Advocacy Goals

- Full compliance with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, with the understanding that because human activity is affecting global climate change, it follows that the greater our total population the greater the impact;
- Ratification of and compliance with the Kyoto Protocol;
- Funding for research and development of renewable energy resources and energy-efficient technologies that includes a shift of federal subsidies from fossil fuel industries to renewable energy technologies and improved energy efficiency;
- Funding of regional, national, and international programs to assist in mitigating the effects of global warming/climate change;
- Safe and responsible development of power sources with low greenhouse gas emissions;

- Policies and practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase forestation and other forms of carbon dioxide sequestration;
- Funding for development of energy-efficient mass transit and encouragement of its widespread use;
- Global warming/climate change impact studies (including physical, social, and economic effects) to be conducted by local and regional governments, with the findings to be incorporated into local government processes;
- Urban and regional planning designed to reduce energy consumption;
- Access to family planning services in the United States and around the world;
- Significantly strengthened Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) standards for automobiles and light trucks;
- National greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets of 10 percent below current levels by 2015, 20 percent by 2020, and 60 percent by 2030;
- United States policy that takes a leadership role in future global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the negative impacts of global warming/climate change;
- Monitor, propose, and support legislation at the local and state level related to global warming/climate change and opportunities to reduce emissions; and
- Provide information on legislative advocacy opportunities to members of the congregation.

Given our human capacity to reflect and act upon our own lives as well as the condition of the world, we accept with humility and determination our responsibility to remedy and mitigate global warming/climate change through innovation, cooperation, and self-discipline. We undertake this work for the preservation of life on Earth.

