

## RELIGIONS FOR THE EARTH CONFERENCE REPORT

Friday 19th and Saturday 20th September 2014

Union Theological Seminary

NEW YORK

*"Have the courage of your convictions to move."*

- Chief Oren Lyons, Faith keeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation

During the Climate Change week in New York, on the weekend before the United Nations Climate Summit there was the "Religion for the Earth Conference", conference.

All the major faiths were represented: Hindus, Catholics, Christians, Jewish, Muslims, Sikhs and Indigenous peoples and Brahma Kumaris.

Conference participants from diverse traditions came together to provide leadership for the earth at an historic and critical time. The moral imperative is to care for our natural world: to bridge social justice issues with environmental activism,

Valeriane Bernard, Switzerland represented Brahma Kumaris in this colorful event, which proved to be a very rich experience of the American Faith movement. In many ways this meeting was created to help the American Faith movement to understand how important the Climate Change threat. It affirmed how essential the action of the faith leaders is, in mobilizing public awareness to awaken political leaders to our global plight. People arrived from all over the world, and many were old friends of Brahma Kumaris. Rich meetings and conversations happened on the side of the conference.



### **Friday 19<sup>th</sup> September**

#### *Opening plenary*

"While our belief systems may differ, there is a common thread in the teachings to care for the most vulnerable, and for the health of our natural world. Our traditions call us to live in a way supports human flourishing in healthy ecosystems. Spirituality can prompt us to do difficult things that go against self-centeredness, greed and materialism, and that can change policy. We have to tap into the power of our traditions and ask more of ourselves in the service of an ecologically conscious and ethical future. Millions are facing droughts and flood: the poor are getting poorer and the rich getting richer. "We are here because the will to act is not there. As we come from faith traditions representing millions and all our faith teach reverence for the earth, it is now our role to act."

- Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, President - Union Theological Seminary

"Today we address you as the keepers and bring you a most urgent message by Wano. The ice is melting in the north. 1000 feet of ice has gone. This requires your absolute attention. There must be reconciliation between the people and the natural resources. We believe in the order of the universe and the laws of creations, the Spirit of life. The energy to create, the law of the seed, the spiritual laws transcend generations and continue to sustain us through time of crisis. Peace is

dynamic. Peace also requires constant effort. There can be no peace as long as we wage war on mother earth, our giver of life.

- Chief Oren Lyons, Faith keeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation

“My first temple was the temple of nature. The first creation of God is Nature. Adam comes from the word earth “adama” and it is the first creation. Part of the Jewish religious original teachings says: “Serve the land as we would serve God”. We are connected to the earth and our behavior impacts: rain stops and disasters come. Sins are magnified on land. Inflictions against the earth are afflictions against God “

- Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, Founder, Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth; Spiritual life advisor, Hampshire College shared



Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksha (above, 80 years old), Founder, International Network of Engaged Buddhists. Ajarn, representing the Buddhist faith, established that it is the habit of greed that has brought us to this stage. We need to recognise this inner craving for ‘more’. Let us show the political leaders that our communities are willing to change.

### **Workshop**

“What Moves Us: Values, Narratives & the Climate Crisis”

During the workshop all the faiths gathered together. In some of our traditions, newly established eco-narratives have taken root in the past two decades. In others - notably Indigenous traditions - ancient beliefs speak clearly to the current ecological crisis. We now need to ask ourselves: Have these teachings proven able to mobilize our communities for action? Do our teachings move people deeply to change? If not, what are our alternatives?

### **Saturday 20th September**

“In Harm's Way: How Climate Change Hurts People & Planet”

Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-Director, Forum on Religion and Ecology, Yale University. Moderator.

As the recently released IPCC report makes clear, the world has a short window of time before damage to the planet's atmosphere and ecosystems is irreversible. Extreme weather is already impacting people's lives around the world, and religious communities are on the front lines of the relief efforts. Other harms include famine, displacement, and the sharp inequity endemic to societies that disregard human and environmental costs. Scientists and humanitarian heroes will expand our knowledge about the dangers posed by climate change and the moral cost of inaction to the global community.

### *Speakers*

Dr. Thomas Lovejoy, senior Advisor to the President, United Nations Foundation, Dr. Vandana Shiva, founder, Navdanya and Father Edwin Gariguez, Secretary General - Caritas Philippines

“We are part of the incredible energy of this universe: Shakti. But we’ve reduced our understanding of energy to consumer energy. Shakti is regenerative energy and renewing energy. We need to change our thinking of fundamental concepts like energy and work. We have reduced human work through the coal economy to labor. Whereas truly, human work is the ultimate creative expression of us as are creative and responsible human beings. And whether it is Climate Change, unemployment or violence against women, it is a crime to define human beings in terms of usable labour and utility as workers, rather than unlimited creative potential.

- Vandana Shiva

**Panel: Climate Change, Gender & Human Rights**

Ms. Lydia Mogano, The Southern African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute, Facilitator

This panel explored the complex relationship between climate justice and issues of gender and human rights. In particular, the ways in which the economies that lead to climate change are gendered, and have extra negative consequences for women and girls. We discussed about the impacts of climate change violating human rights. The panel looked into human rights being a helpful framework for this issue.

“Climate change is a human right disaster affecting the right to life of human beings. Climate change does not affect us all equally. It falls more heavily on the poor and causes more harm to women. Though not responsible for the disaster, they can’t escape the danger and have to recourse in terms of food, health and survival.”

- Larry Cox

**Gender perspective on CC and HR experience on the ground**

Climate Change is a global phenomena affecting all but women are hit more by it than men. Patriarchy, money and the inappropriate use of power exclude what women have to contribute. Therefore what we know becomes fragmented. Women are the one most hit by CC because they take care of family. Women are responsible and take care of children, home, family, community and the great work involved in that. Yet when disasters come it is these women who can offer knowledge, but who listens? For example, women kept seed banks at the time of Orissa cyclone, allowing them to have their own seed for the future. Women also know about the value of diverse crops. They know which seeds will survive droughts and which will survive floods. This thing called ‘the new agriculture’ uses 10 times more water than the traditional way, and at time of droughts this is a dangerous luxury.

Building solidarity and compassion for those who suffer from the consequences of Climate change is understanding nature is not a commodity. Damage to the environment causes cyclone and floods which kill people. The challenge of the faith community is to put the poor at the heart. We have no concern for elitism”

- Vandana Shiva

There was consensus with the statement below:

*“The problem is that countries insist on pursuing the aim of Gross National Product. A healthy and well population, and the simple economy of living from the earth do not show up in countries Gross National Product, but allow people to have quality of life and for nature to restore. On the other hand, so many atrocities and so much environmental damage continues to cause the Gross National Products to increase. Where are our priorities? What are we measuring?”*

**Making the Connections: Transformation towards a New Global Community.**

Engaging in faith-based action on climate change, is a powerful opportunity to become agents of environmental transformation. We can help to frame the global discussion and to influence political and governmental organizations towards effective international action and decision-making. Our response to the climate crisis offers an opportunity to foster alignment across religious institutions and belief structures. This can leverage our values, our vision and our voices to force progress on social justice issues that have long plagued the world. Spirituality and emerging worldviews can engage ecological issues with transformative depth among a massive population.

#### Closing Session

"Einstein was right, we cannot solve a problem from the same mind set that created it. So Faiths have to speak up. May I urge all of you to raise your voices to include in your words and language this major threat. All disciplines of knowledge must be brought together to solve this challenge. We all need to work together."

- Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, Chairman, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Director-General of The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI).

Dr Harper Flecher from Green Faith invited the participants to take a minute of silence, compose a short prayer and share it with someone in the church.

Participants then voiced their views of what was realized in the conference and made commitments to the work ahead. Terry Tempest Williams, author and teacher, facilitate this session, and composed a poem based on everyone's contribution.

The two things that touched me the most were: how people were remembering the days of Martin Luther King and how many of them expressed their desire to make a stand regardless of the consequences on their personal comfort.

And also many people expressed the views that the role of religions was to maintain hope and share hope, I got curious about their understanding of what should people hope for but this never seemed to be communicated.

