

A Kairos Call to Action:

10-Years of Church Mobilization on Climate and Inequality

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity... Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: “Too late.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., [“Beyond Vietnam.”](#) Riverside Church, April 4, 1967

Overview

Climate scientists have impressed upon us the urgent need to act. Action is needed today, and action is also needed on a society-wide scale over the period of the next ten years in order to meet the minimum goals needed to put human civilization on a more sustainable and equitable path. For some, the climate crisis has engendered a faith crisis as people seek a foundation for hope. This faith crisis will only widen and deepen if churches fail to mobilize themselves in accord with what the situation demands. At the same time, there is a rich theological tradition that underscores the ways moments of crisis can simultaneously be God-charged moments of possibility. This resource aims to provide the scientific, theological, and practical resources for churches seeking to develop 10-year mobilization plans to address the twin, intertwined crises of climate and inequality.

Background

In 2018, the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released [a climate report](#) that highlighted how limiting global warming to 1.5 °C would potentially enable the world to avoid notable adverse consequences projected to occur with 2°C warming or more. Headlines at the time read [“We Have 12 Years to Limit Climate Change Catastrophe, Warns UN.”](#) Even a half of a degree of warming over 1.5°C would place hundreds of millions of people at notably higher levels of risk for droughts, floods, forest fires, sea level rise, food scarcity, poverty, and more. The report concluded that CO₂ emissions would need to be cut roughly 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030 before reaching ‘net zero’ by 2050.

The ramifications of this report go well beyond predictions of severe weather. The physical realities of a warmer world become intertwined with the socioeconomic realities of injustice. What does a drought mean in a world where women make up 70 percent of those under the poverty line and in a world in which women in poverty often perform multiple roles as workers and caretakers as well as the collectors of food, water, and fuel? A drought is no longer a red-shaded region of a weather map. It is a daily

reality of hardship often defined by factors related to race, gender, disability, class, and inequality among nations. One crisis compounds another, and all of them must be addressed together.

In the situation today, youth have become our climate prophets in the pursuit of human and environmental redemption. They have awakened the world to the urgency of the moment. More than ten years ago, Ikal Angelei began a grassroots effort that eventually forced the World Bank to withdraw funding for a dam that would have wrecked immense harm to locals and the environment. In 2016, Jasilyn Charger and other indigenous youth began a movement in Standing Rock to protect sacred lands and waters from an oil pipeline. Now, today, we hear the voice of the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg who declares, “We are now standing at a crossroads in history. We are failing but we have not yet failed. We can still fix this. It’s up to us.”

The Kairos Moment

In Christian theological terms, we find ourselves in what is called a *kairos* moment. As various theologians have defined this ancient Greek word for “time” found in the Bible, *kairos* moments are simultaneously periods of crisis and opportunity. They are God-charged moments. Martin Luther King, Jr., described them as periods when “history is pregnant, ready to give birth to a great idea and a great movement.”

Amid the brutal violence of apartheid South Africa, a group of clergy, laity, and theologians issued a famous declaration known as the Kairos Document which highlighted how *kairos* moments are also moments of truth for churches. God issues a call for decisive action, and churches have no option but to respond. In their response, their true nature is revealed. So it is that the climate crisis of today will also reveal the true identity of churches.

Discerning Our Call

Churches now have the opportunity to assert that we are fully committed to our first calling as caretakers of God’s creation. In contrast to destructive theologies of dominion/domination over the Earth, we have the opportunity to now manifest a theology of kinship with creation and a spiritual connection to Mother Nature. As [Rev. Dele has written](#), “When God coupled the earth with the breath of eternity, our souls and the soil were fused and our destinies perpetually intertwined.” It is the church’s vocation to model what a right relationship with Mother Nature looks like.

The present *kairos* moment impresses upon us the need to discern the actions to which God is calling us now. In fact, the word “action” by itself no longer suffices. We are talking about a situation that demands a massive, sustained series of organized actions—a mobilization of a magnitude that evokes entire countries and citizenries

rallying for a collective effort in a manner similar to World War II or the Great Depression. In a context such as this, churches need not be mere spokes in the larger machinery of society. In fact, churches have unique, vitally needed roles to play and opportunities to seize.

At our best, we are equipped to address the spiritual crises that accompany the crises of climate and inequality. At our best, we create and sustain communities of love that break down the isolation that can feed and worsen despair. At our best, we provide stories and languages of hope. Ultimately, at our best, we can offer through our actions a tangible hope that a vibrant and livable society can be restored. Our collective gifts can help give birth to a new world.

The discernment of such a calling promises transformative results not only for society but for churches themselves. Indeed, this *kairos* moment necessitates a rethinking of the fundamental purpose and vocation of churches.

Why Mobilize?

The climate crisis and inequality cannot be adequately addressed by changes in individual outlooks and behaviors. We are talking about the rapid re-organization of our society and its economy on a scale that brings to mind wartime efforts and massive government undertakings like the New Deal. To be clear, however, with both of these examples the government does not act as an isolated entity. An organized movement brought the New Deal into existence. Moreover, activity does not stop with the signing of legislation. By that point, the entire society has caught the spirit and is moving to contribute to the larger effort in whatever way it can. The word “mobilize” effectively captures the encompassing sense of a people organized for collective action.

10 Ways Churches Can Mobilize

Before us is a ten-year window of opportunity to demonstrate how we will respond to God’s call. To make the most of this moment, the UCC’s Council for Climate Justice has issued a call for all of the churches and institutions that comprise the UCC to adopt 10-year mobilization plans in the year 2020. The development of such a plan provides a focused framework for discernment and the setting of goals. Each church and institution will discern how it can best address climate and inequality with the means and opportunities before them. To generate thought and conversation in the discernment process, here are ten ways churches and institutions can mobilize:

1) Enter a period of study and immersion.

- Through visits and immersion experiences, form lasting relationships with local and global organizations that work in frontline communities where

residents experience the harmful consequences of pollution or climate change. Learn about grassroots solutions to the climate crisis and inequality. Let these relationships and learning experiences form the foundation of your work moving forward.

- Form groups to read and discuss writings about the climate crisis and inequality. Suggested writings:

-Melody Zhang's article in *Sojourners* entitled "True Climate Justice Is Impossible without Racial and Economic Justice." -Rev. Dele's

-Jim Antal's [*Climate Church, Climate World*](#)

-Rev. Dele's [*Breath of Life: Growing Closer to God and Growing a Secure Community by loving Creation*](#).

-The [UCC discussion guide](#) for Greta Thunberg's *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*.

- The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative's resource on [indigenous peoples and forest protection](#).

- Through educational forums, engage scientists, community leaders, and online resources to not only learn about the causes and consequences of the climate crisis and inequality, but also solutions. Suggested resources:

-[Project Drawdown](#) is a research organization dedicated to providing the public with information on equitable climate solutions.

-[Biodiversity for a Livable Climate](#) focuses on education and advocacy for the restoration of ecosystems to help reverse our climate crisis.

- Reflect upon what it means for the first calling of people of faith to be caretakers of creation. Deepen the process of discernment in making this calling central to the DNA of one's church by becoming a [Creation Justice Church](#). This program guides churches in giving particular attention to socioeconomic factors such as race, class, and global inequality as they become informed about environmental justice issues. It stresses finding opportunities to connect locally and denominationally in building a movement for change.

2) Plan inspired worship that continually focuses attention on this *kairos* moment.

- Have a special *kairos*-themed worship service near Earth Day. Make use of Earth Sunday worship materials in this resource by Creation Justice Ministries entitled “The Fierce Urgency of Now.”
- Through dialogue sermons, poetry, and art, invite into worship members of the broader community who are addressing climate and inequality as leaders, thinkers, or artists.
- Devote at least one minute each Sunday to being a Kairos Moment of Reflection or Call to Action. Learn from Weybridge Congregational Church in Vermont which has a [Creation Care Moment](#) each Sunday.

3) Know Your Environmental Justice History and Become a Zero Waste Church

- Learn about the connection between toxic waste and racism. In addition to publishing the first report to document environmental racism throughout the country, the UCC Commission for Racial Justice was central to [the birth of the environmental justice movement](#) which developed in response to toxic dumping practices.
- Watch and discuss Van Jones’s Ted Talk entitled “[The Economic Injustice of Plastic](#).”
- In Raleigh, North Carolina, Church of the Nativity has created an online resource to help church prevent waste through composting, reducing use, recycling, reusing, and more. Check out their [20 ways to become a Zero Waste Church](#). Additionally, look at how they invite members to take the zero waste message home by embarking on [a year of intentional reflection and practice](#).

4) Cultivate gardens, landscapes, and appetites in the struggle for justice.

- Through church-based community gardens, provide food or opportunities to grow food for the homeless, low-income households, and refugees.
- Through adult education sessions learn about the work conditions and environmental practices surrounding the food you eat as it makes its way from farm to table. Consider who has control, power, and access throughout the food production and distribution process. Learn about the injustices that occur such as the [sometimes fatal consequences of rising temperatures](#) for undocumented migrant farm workers. At the same time, learn about just and sustainable agricultural practices. One can do this by promoting [Community](#)

[Supported Agriculture](#), visiting farms and ranches engaged in restorative agriculture, or bringing local practitioners to your church.

- Pull carbon out through how you make use of your church's landscape. With the possible help of local gardening or conservation organizations, possibilities include:

- Training local leaders in [composting](#) and [permaculture gardening](#), an agricultural practice and philosophy that adheres to "the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems."

- Joining others around the country by planting a [Climate Victory Garden](#) and adding it to a national map.

- Planting native trees [and restoring the church property back to its native landscape](#), what some refer to as God's original design.

- Cultivate healthy communal practices during potluck and coffee hours. Celebrate the local gifts of creation and practice what you preach through your eating. Eat food that is grown locally and sustainably. Moreover, eat plant-rich foods that model healthy eating which is [good for both the body and the planet](#).

5) Become a carbon neutral or a carbon negative/climate positive church.

- For a church, to be carbon neutral typically refers to having no net climate pollution from building operations. To be climate positive or carbon negative, entails activity that goes beyond achieving net zero carbon emissions to creating an environmental benefit by removing additional carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. A church, for example, can generate more clean energy than it uses. Suggested resources:

- In 2017, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) passed a resolution that called on its churches to be carbon neutral by 2030 and carbon positive by 2035. Find ideas and inspiration in [the resources produced by the Christian Church \(Disciples of Christ\) and their ecumenical partner Blessed Tomorrow](#).

- In 2013, the UCC passed a resolution to call upon churches to become carbon neutral by 2030. Check out the list of resources generated on [ucc.org](#).

- Explore and assess possibilities like solar panels, the purchase of renewable energy off the grid, and carbon offsets.

- When addressing a church's energy use, always make a point of [learning about the source of your current energy](#) and whether or not anyone is harmed in the generation of it. Toxic pollutants from coal plants, for example, are connected to a [wide range of serious health matters](#) ranging from cardiovascular disease to the damage of developing brains in utero and after birth. These coal plants are [disproportionately located near low income neighborhoods and communities of color](#).

6) Divest from fossil fuels and move church money out of “dirty” banks

- In 2013, the United Church of Christ became the first denomination to pass a resolution endorsing both divestment from fossil fuel companies and other strategies such as shareholder activism. [Learn more about divesting](#).
- In addition to where churches invest their money, there is also the matter of the banks in which churches keep money that is not invested. As part of the rise in awareness generated by the Standing Rock Movement, members of Northshore United Church of Christ in Washington built upon their own experiences in moving their money and created [The Find a Better Bank Toolkit](#) to assist other churches in doing the same.
- Consider moving beyond divestment from fossil fuels to investment in renewables. Desmond Tutu addresses this and more in a piece entitled [“Climate Change Is the Apartheid of Our Times.”](#)

7) Make every election a time to call for values-based voting that expresses care for creation and justice for all.

- Invite members to take the [Creation Care Voter Pledge](#) which is a non-partisan effort that supports people of faith in consistently voting their values so that they put “love into action for every living creature and for every economically or racially marginalized community that suffers from environmental harm.”
- Collect and [dedicate the pledges of members in worship](#) as Church of the Covenant did in Boston.
- Similar to how church members might volunteer at a food bank, encourage members to phone bank. Organizations like the Environmental Voter Project regularly host [training webinars](#) for volunteers to text and call people in encouraging them to vote their values.

8) Through townhalls, delegations, candidate forums, emails, and petitions, call upon elected officials and candidates for office to support the Green New Deal.

- Prepare for this effort by reading the UCC's 2019 General Synod [resolution in support of the Green New Deal](#).
- Make use of faith-based resources like Interfaith Power and Light's "[Faith Principles for a Green New Deal](#)" and [GreenFaith's webpage devoted to the Green New Deal](#).
- Dig even deeper by reading and discussing Naomi Klein's book [On Fire: The Burning Case for the Green New Deal](#).

9) Become a *kairos* mobilization hub.

- Create ways to inspire church members to connect what they do at home to the collective efforts of your community. For example, instead of encouraging members to change lightbulbs and plant trees at home as solitary endeavors, make it a group goal. Keep a running count of each act performed by everyone in the congregation. Calculate the total carbon reduction of those acts combined. Set ambitious goals and celebrate the achievements of the community.
- Through the use of your church building and the actions of your members, provide hospitality and solidarity for organizations working to address climate and inequality.
- Invite, encourage, and challenge other local institutions to develop 10-year mobilization plans.

10) Throughout the process of mobilizing, tell your story!

- Make what you do visible at your church whether it is a bulletin board, a newsletter, or a website. Bold action inspires and attracts. Let visitors and the broader community know that your church is acting upon its values in meaningful ways.
- Share your plans and successes with local media. Use press releases to share news of your Kairos Plan and the accomplishments achieved in implementing it.

- Share what you are doing with the broader UCC. Conference and association newsletters can be one outlet. On a regular basis, the UCC's [Pollinator](#) newsletter shares [the best practices of local congregations](#). Moreover, UCC staff writers regularly cover everything from [church participation in climate strikes](#) to [solar installations](#).