News
EarthBeat



View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew traveling toward the moon on Dec. 7, 1972 (NASA photo)



by Bill Mitchell

View Author Profile

bmitchell@ncronline.org

Follow on Twitter at @bmitch

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Boston — January 18, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew traveling toward the moon on Dec. 7, 1972 (NASA photo)

With global temperatures rising to decidedly unhealthy levels, a panel of leading physicians addressed the well-being of the planet here Jan. 15 as if it were presented to them in an exam room.

"As a doctor, nothing's harder for me than having a patient in front of me that I don't have a treatment for," said Dr. Renee Salas, clinical instructor of emergency

medicine at Harvard Medical School and an emergency medicine physician at Massachusetts General Hospital. "But thankfully we have the treatment for (climate change). We know how to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. We just need the political will to implement it ...

"As an emergency doctor I am frequently in situations where a patient is crashing in front of me and we give that patient every treatment that might save their life. It's the same thing (with climate change). We need to work on multiple fronts, not only learning how to protect the vulnerable to help them be able to adapt but also to get to the root cause."

Salas spoke at an event that drew more than 150 people for a discussion of the impact of climate change on especially vulnerable populations. The sponsoring group, an organization called A Faith That Does Justice, made a point of including action along with the talk by inviting representatives of the Boston Catholic Climate Movement and Sunrise Boston.

Organization founder Fr. Peter Gyves, a physician who became a Jesuit after working with people under siege in Central America, urged people to venture "beyond the temple, the mosque or the church to live our faith in society."

Dr. Aaron Bernstein, a pediatrician who is co-director of the Center for Climate, Health and Global Environment at the Harvard School of Public Health, underlined differing responses to medical vs. climate diagnoses.

Informed that their child might have a 10 percent chance of serious infection, a parent does not bank on the 90 percent chance that the infection is no big deal, Bernstein noted. Regardless of what's considered "probable," parents typically insist that doctors investigate the problem and pursue whatever treatment looks most promising.

Anything less, he indicated, would get parents pretty quickly considering a malpractice claim.

But when it comes to assessing the risks of climate change, many people simply don't pay attention to assertions by scientists that climate change is the "probable" cause of such disasters as extreme weather, even when they place the likelihood far above the low probabilities prompting action in medical situations.

It’s time, Bernstein said, for physicians to look "at the planet like it’s a patient."

He said that will require extraordinary attention to the language used to assess the risks of climate change.

"Probabilistic events are essentially lost on human brains,” he said. "Human beings have a terrible time understanding risk."

As a result, he said, "We need to use language that people grab onto ... that says, yes, we’re not certain but that doesn’t mean we should stop doing stuff. You would never want your doctor to do that."

Click here for a video of the entire discussion, which also included remarks by Dr. William Kaelin Jr., a professor at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard Medical School who last year won a Nobel Prize.

Turns out, according to Kaelin, that not even a Nobel Prize is enough to discourage friends and family from challenging the science he cites in dinner discussions about climate change. But he listed several encouraging signs, including the Environmental Voter Project, an initiative focused on finding and registering to vote people for whom action on climate change is their number one priority.

Here’s some of what’s new on EarthBeat this week:

- A federal appeals court ordered the dismissal of the youth climate suit you read about on EarthBeat back in October.
- The president of the Catholic University of Costa Rica tells Global Sister Report’s Soli Salgado that Laudato Si’ has helped reenergize Catholics in the Central American country.
- From Nigeria, NCR correspondent Patrick Egwu reports on a young Catholic who is using his radio show to press for climate action.
- Addressing our latest Burning Question from readers, NCR’s Jesse Remedios offers a resource guide for parishes considering solar panels or other energy-saving initiatives.
- EarthBeat’s Interfaith ClimateTracker provides updates from 34 individuals and organizations reflecting a linkage of climate to various faiths. We're happy to share. If you'd like to make use of the Tracker to provide dynamic content to your site, just copy the code from the box on this page and paste it into your

page.

Here's some additional climate-related coverage:

- Speaking of the Environmental Voter Project mentioned above, here's an article by The Guardian tracking the group's recent survey showing significant growth of voters focused on climate issues as their top priority in the voting booth.
- Bill McKibben describes in the New Yorker what he calls a seismic shift: Asset manager Blackrock will begin ridding its $1.8 million managed portfolio of coal stocks. Even more striking, as McKibben points out, is the tone of Blackrock CEO Larry Fink's assertion that the climate crisis has pushed us "to the edge of a fundamental reshaping of finance."
- After the fires in Australia have killed 28 people, destroyed more than 5,900 buildings and scorched forests and farmland the size of Bulgaria, Independent Catholic News reports that the Australian bishops have expressed support for legislation aimed at more aggressive climate action.
- The Tablet reports from Brooklyn about a street nun running a recycling program aimed at providing work as well as reducing the landfill.
- On Patheos, Fr. Carl Chudy searches for common ground on climate change among believers and secularists.

Upcoming Event:

You can register via this page for an organizational webinar for the U.S. Catholic Climate Project, an "Intergenerational Catholic Initiative for the 5th Anniversary of Laudato Si' and 50th Anniversary of Earth Day" at 2 p.m. EST Thursday Jan. 23. Watch for a story about this initiative coming on Tuesday on EarthBeat. You'll find more events like this -- virtual as well as in person -- on EarthBeat's Event Calendar.

Closing Beat:

NCR lost an important shaper of its history this week, former board member John Caron, who led the group from 1977 to 1990. As NCR CEO/President Tom Fox notes in this appreciation, the 95 year-old Caron played an important role in some key moments in NCR's 56-year history.

Thanks for reading! If you know of someone who might like to receive EarthBeat Weekly, here's the sign-up page.

Bill Mitchell

NCR Climate Editor

bmitchell@ncronline.org

Advertisement

This story appears in the **EarthBeat Weekly** feature series. View the full series.