News
EarthBeat



Climate change increases the likelihood of extreme weather, like the rains that caused this flooding in Karachi, Pakistan, in late August 2020. (CNS photo/Akhtar Soomro, Reuters)



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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Sept. 18 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

The bad news about the climate this month feels oppressive. We know that climate change is expected to bring more frequent severe weather, like hurricanes Laura and Sally, causing deaths, devastating flooding and massive power outages. And we've been warned about heat and drought, which make unrelenting wildfires like those ravaging the western United States — and affecting air quality as far away as the East Coast and Europe — more likely.

All of this is happening amid the coronavirus pandemic, which is linked to climate change in three ways. First, the destruction of tropical forests, which is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions in those countries, creates conditions in which viruses and other pathogens can make the jump to humans. Second, although we all feel the impact of both the pandemic and climate change, they disproportionately affect people of color, interconnecting them as environmental justice issues.

Finally, the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic will probably leave less funding available for combating climate change and make tropical countries more likely to invest in job-creating infrastructure construction, like roads and dams, causing more destruction of forests.

A 2013 study found that nearly two-thirds of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel use, methane leaks and cement manufacturing since the Industrial Revolution originated in just 90 corporations or government-connected industries, and that the top eight companies accounted for a full 20% of the emissions. This summary of the study by Douglas Starr for Science includes an animated graphic showing how those companies' emissions have increased over time.

In the face of overwhelming economic interests, what can we, as individuals, do? Many of us have probably made lifestyle choices — reducing fossil fuel use, cutting back on meat and dairy and lobbying our legislators. But experts say there's another crucial step we can all take to tackle the climate crisis: Talk about it.

"Climate change affects our health. It affects our food and our water, it affects our security, it affects the safety of our homes, it affects the economy, but most importantly it disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world," climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, director of Texas Tech University's Climate Science Center, said during a Sept. 14 webinar organized by Interfaith Power & Light and Catholic Climate Covenant.

"For me as a Christian," she added, "I believe not only do we have responsibility for every living thing on this planet, which of course includes our fellow humans, but I particularly believe that we are to care for those less fortunate than us."

For Hayhoe, whose husband is a pastor, the conflict between science and religion that is often brought up in debates has been manufactured by people whose interests lie in maintaining the status quo.

"Climate change shows that we need solutions, and those solutions will alter the balance of power and wealth in this world, because the richest corporations in the world are the ones who are producing all the fossil fuels that we're burning that [are] causing climate change," she said. "So this conflict between science and faith has always been actually between science and power."

But while science clarifies the problems, it's up to us to find the solutions. "That's where our values come in," she said. And that's where we need to find common ground with others.

"If somebody is really obsessed with rejecting climate change and they just can't stop talking about it, we're not going to be able to change their mind, because they're not even going to listen to anything that we say," Hayhoe said. "But we can talk to people who have genuine questions."

They're the ones who are "willing to engage in a two-way dialogue," she added. "So if you feel like somebody is listening to you. and it's a two-way street, so you have to listen to them first. That's when we can have those positive conversations."

Hayhoe dodges one trap often laid in discussions about climate and faith. When someone asks if she "believes" in climate change, her answer is "No."

"Because it's not a religion," she said. "I believe in God. I don't believe in climate change. I know that the climate is changing. I know that humans are responsible, because we've checked every other reason that it could be. And I know that the impacts are serious. And I care about it because of my faith."

That shifts the conversation to different ground.

"I immediately reframe the discussion [so] it's not a competition between the false religion of climate change and the true religion of whatever somebody believes," she said. "Rather, it's a case of whoever we are, we already care about climate change, we just didn't realize it. Climate change is not a religion. It's just a fact that no matter who we are, no matter what we believe, no matter where we live, it matters to every single one of us."

Hayhoe has other tips for finding common ground for talking with people about climate change. Her passion about her faith, her scientific research and the urgency she feels about the looming crisis comes through clearly when she speaks, and listening to her is a pick-me-up in those moments when it all seems overwhelming.

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Here's what's new on EarthBeat this week:

- Voters must look beyond abortion and consider other issues, such as the environment, when casting their ballots in November, Lexington, Kentucky, Bishop John Stowe said during a webinar sponsored by Catholic Climate Covenant (CCC). EarthBeat's Brian Roewe reports that for Stowe, caring for our common home is also a pro-life issue. He also draws on other webinar comments by Hayhoe, who says it is not too late to put the brakes on climate change — but the time to act is now.

- Pope Francis is also urging action, and in an audience with members of Laudato Si' communities, he said that compassion is "the best vaccine against the epidemic of indifference." He also drew a link between the coronavirus pandemic and the health of the environment, saying that climate change "not

only upsets the balance of nature, but also causes poverty and hunger" and forces people to migrate, reports Junno Arocho Esteves for Catholic News Service.

- A year ago, 16 children from around the world took their demand for action on the climate crisis to the United Nations. Now their home countries are pushing back, and the pandemic is forcing the youth climate movement to regroup, Emily Schwing reports for KCET as part of the Covering Clmate Now collaborative.

- And when you're having a rough day, consider sea turtle hatchlings on the Florida coast. What with hungry crabs, birds and fish watching for them, and hazards like plastics and industrial fishing nets to dodge, they stand between one chance in 1,000 and one in 10,000 of making it to maturity. But there's still hope, Gail DeGeorge reports in a story and video for EarthBeat.

"*Nobody's pro-life if they separate children from their parents at the border, if they put people in cages, if they allow for the destruction of the environment*"

— Bishop John Stowe

Here's some of what's new in other climate news this week:

- A study of more than 3,000 U.S. counties found a "close correlation between levels of hazardous pollutants and the per-capita death rate from Covid-19," report Lylla Younes and Sara Sneath in ProPublica. Among the people most affected are those living in Louisiana's industrial corridor.

- But although environmental and health crises like climate change and Covid-19 disproportionately affect people of color, the Environmental Protection Agency suspended a series of internal presentations on problems affecting those communities after the White House ordered government agencies to stop "anti-American" race-related training, writes Alex Guillén in Politico.

- Worldwide, environmental activists also pay a high price for questioning projects that affect their lands. Monte Reel of Bloomberg Green takes an in-depth look at the 2016 murder of Honduran indigenous activist Berta Cáceres and the corruption and violence surrounding the Agua Zarca dam project that

she opposed.

- We may see more projects like that one as the coronavirus pandemic pushes fossil fuel companies into economic decline. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which once wielded significant political power, has been weakened by infighting, the U.S. shale oil boom, concern over climate change and the recent price crash — but it's too soon to write the bloc's obituary, Ashutosh Pandey writes in DW.

Upcoming events:

- As part of a series of online events for NCR Forward members, EarthBeat will sponsor a conversation with Franciscan Fr. Dan Horan on Sept. 24. Horan will explore Laudato Si' as a "liminal text," standing between the useful but still inadequate "stewardship model" of creation and the call to embrace a "kinship model" that recognizes humanity's true place as part of God's broader community of creation. Not a member of NCR Forward yet? You can sign up for just $5 a month to take part in our fall series of events. That will also give you access to the Sept. 17 presentation by Charity Sr. Caroljean Willie about ecospirituality and how we can explore our relationship with all of creation daily, even in a large city during the pandemic lockdown.

- "A just transition: European nations' responsibility to their people and to the world," a Season of Creation webinar on Sept. 24, will explore how the coronavirus crisis and the environmental crisis are related in Europe, and how regional approaches to a just transition to integral ecology could be developed. You can find more information here.

- "Beyond 'Stewardship': Redefining Our Godly Place on the Planet," a Sept. 24 webinar sponsored by the Center for Religion and Environment at the University of the South, will explore the terms, metaphors and thought patterns we use to envision and describe our relation, as human beings, to other creatures and the larger world we inhabit, as well as the contribution of Christianity and other faith traditions to that endeavor. You can register here.

- Young people take center stage Sept. 25 with a Day of Global Climate Action around the globe. Speakers at the digital event will include young people from various parts of the world.

- Retiro Laudato Si', a two-day Spanish-language retreat for the Season of Creation, is will be held Sept. 26 and 27, sponsored by the Franciscans and the Global Catholic Climate Movement.

Closing beat:

The November election will be critical for the climate, with impacts that will ripple around the globe. Join us on NCR's Facebook page at 1:30 p.m., central time, on Sept. 30 for a conversation with Thomas Lovejoy, the biologist who coined the term "biological diversity." Lovejoy, who has advised multiple U.S. administrations on environmental and climate policy, warns that we are close to tipping the climate into a perilous cascade of consequences — but we can still take steps to avert the worst.

Families, faith communities and religious congregations worldwide are renewing the face of the Earth during this Season of Creation by planting trees, lobbying legislators and educating or sharing ideas through webinars. What is your group doing? Tell us in 150 words or less in a Small Earth Story.

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