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Screenshot from Feb. 23 online event presented by Catholic Climate Covenant, with Anna Robertson, the group's new director of youth and young adult mobilization



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The Catholic Climate Covenant launched a new initiative this week that looks to mobilize young Catholics to spur greater action on climate change in the church and around the country.

More than 70 people, predominantly young adults, joined an online event Feb. 23 to learn more about the youth-oriented program.

Anna Robertson, the group's new director of youth and young adult mobilization, said its goal is "to inspire and empower meaningful action" among young people in the church, within their parishes and dioceses, as well as in the wider national public square.

"This is a new initiative, and we at the Covenant really desire that it is shaped by the people who are in this room right now and other young folks in the Catholic sphere throughout the country," she said.

The mobilization effort will focus on four main areas: advocacy, community resilience, education and ecological spirituality.

The 29-year-old Robertson, a former campus minister at Seattle University, said the goal is to create a community where young people can share ideas and work together on ways to take steps on climate change in their own regions, as well as to join larger collaborative efforts. It also seeks to encourage young Catholics to move toward the personal ecological conversion that Pope Francis has championed, by learning about church teachings on care for creation and growing in their understanding of ecospirituality.

The four focus areas will guide the program, but the hope is that young Catholics will mold it to support what they want to do to further environmental stewardship.

Participants in the online webinar shared their concerns about climate change — its health impacts, threats to food security, how it's become a polarized issue and the enormity of the challenge — as well as frustrations with the seemingly slow pace of action, in their parishes and in society at large.

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One participant said the church has to move past a dichotomy that seems to say Catholics can focus on spirituality or justice, but not both. Another wanted to be a part of a wider, holistic pro-life movement that incorporates protecting the environment and ending racism. One young woman said she has fears about having children with a climate crisis hanging over the planet.

Throughout the evening session, the young Catholics expressed particular interest in advocacy, asking for ways to bring their concerns to elected representatives, suggestions for making environmental issues nonpartisan, and guidance on moving their parishes' work on justice beyond supplying and volunteering at local food banks.

Jose Aguto, associate director of Catholic Climate Covenant, said the organization is working on "some very ambitious advocacy" for legislation from Congress and actions from the Biden administration. Young people will be important in those efforts, he added. Just as important will be speaking with their pastors and bishops to call for greater involvement of the U.S. church to act on Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

"We believe that your voices in particular are instrumental," Aguto said.

The new youth and mobilization initiative follows another youth-focused endeavor launched by Catholic Climate Covenant last year. The U.S. Catholic Climate Project was meant as a yearlong, intergenerational effort, led by young people, to galvanize actions and events ahead of milestone anniversaries for *Laudato Si*' and Earth Day. With that project over, some of its work will continue through other Catholic Climate Covenant programs, including the youth mobilization.

The introductory event, titled Emergence, offered a glimpse into the new initiative.

The online evening included prayers and reflection as much as presentation and education. Robertson led an Ignatian-inspired ecological examen and broke down elements of ecological spirituality that Francis identified in *Laudato Si*'. Early on, participants took part in a land acknowledgement, sharing the names of Native tribes that previously lived in their regions of the country.

The theme of emergence, Robertson explained, came in part from a definition of the term offered by Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio, who said it points to the idea that the complex web of nature can't be reduced to the sum of its parts, and that even the smallest pieces, or fractals, can contribute to the larger whole in ways that aren't readily apparent.

That metaphor also applies to steps for addressing climate change, Robertson said, adding that a growing number of "fractals" of actions happening in the U.S. and around the world will animate greater action at the larger level.

"When we think about the individual work of defending our climate and defending creation, it can feel really tiring," she said, adding that it is important to remember "that each of these little pieces that we're doing actually is a piece of this whole."