

Phil Sakimoto discusses the climate crisis. (William E. O'Dell)



by Catherine M. Odell

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Not so many years ago, Phil Sakimoto, recently named director of the sustainability studies minor at the University of Notre Dame, was a familiar face and voice to people all around the country. They learned from him about telescopes, space exploration and what it's like on Mars.

Sakimoto, an astrophysicist with a doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles, worked at NASA for almost 15 years, as head of the space science education and public outreach program, and before that as university affairs officer for NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. He loved his NASA job, but a serious injury suffered more than a dozen years ago eventually changed the way he saw his work.

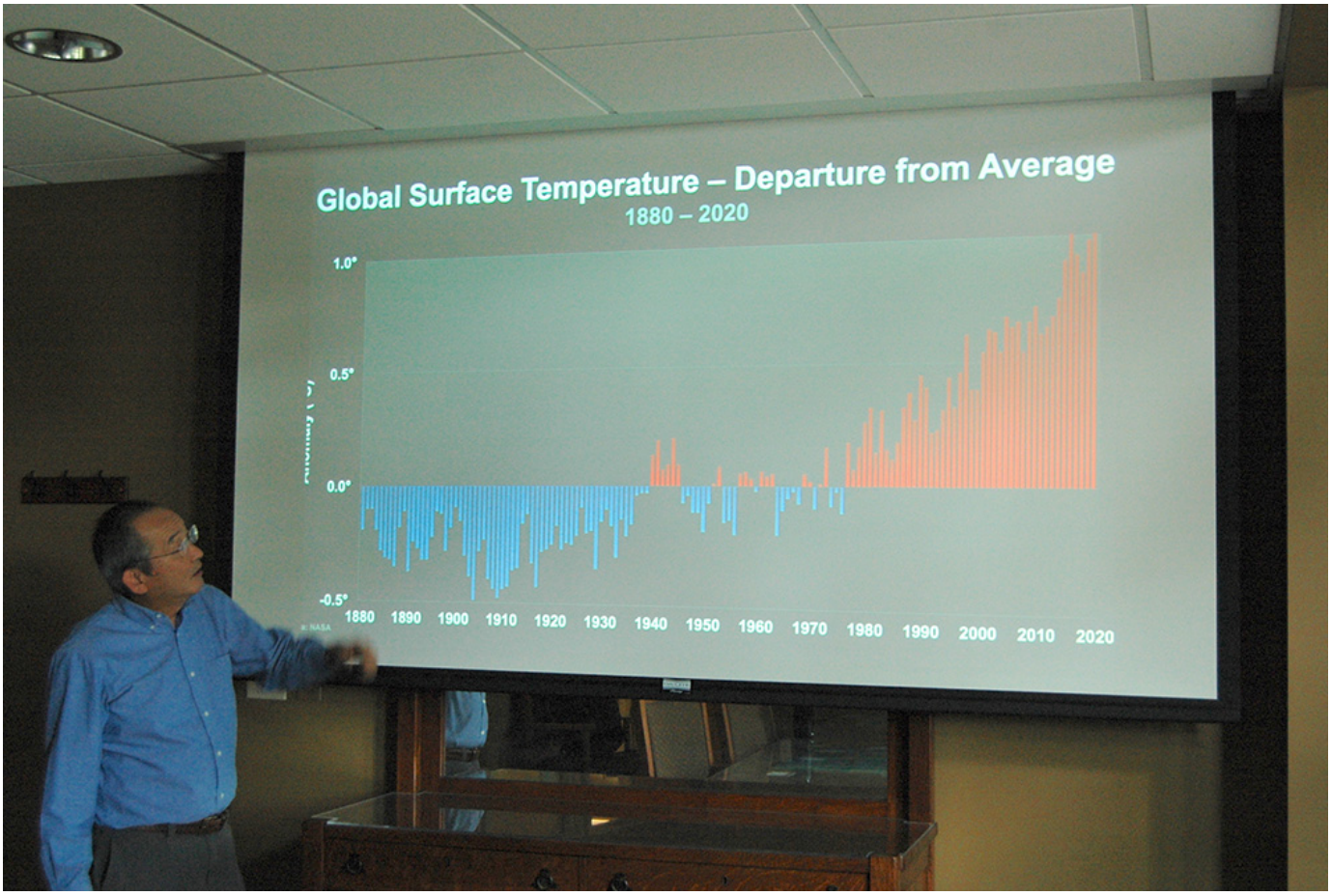
"I tore my Achilles tendon badly when I was playing tennis," Sakimoto explained. "I had to have it operated on and was laid up for a long, long time."

An avid sports fan, he watched a lot of tennis and the Olympics during his recovery. But he also had time to read lots of science journals.

What he read frightened him. He realized that global warming was rapidly becoming a deadly crisis. He'd known about global warming since his student days at Pomona College and UCLA. "But as a physicist, I could just look at this now — at what I was reading — and see that our global climate system was on the verge of collapsing," he said.

"I decided that I really needed to do something about it," he added. "I had been a specialist in communicating about science to the public for NASA. I told myself that taking care of this planet was so much more important than all the fun I had telling about the exploration of the universe. I knew that I should use those communication skills to tell people about climate change."

So Sakimoto shifted his gaze from the stars to the ground, focusing on Earth and its needs. Soon after the accident, he trained to become a public speaker on climate change through the Climate Reality Leadership Corps founded by former Vice President Al Gore. He uses the organization's frequently updated educational materials and slides in many presentations.



Phil Sakimoto references a slide as he discusses global temperature changes. (William E. O'Dell)

In 2005, he moved to Notre Dame, where he has worked in various roles. In recent years, he's taught an undergraduate course on sustainability, and he now directs that minor program in the university's College of Science.

Simply understood, he says, sustainability is an interdisciplinary study of environmental issues, such as climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss — and how to address them. Notre Dame's sustainability students come from diverse majors, including architecture, business and political science. To further equip his students, Sakimoto teaches them to write grant proposals, challenging them to find ways to professionally address the climate crisis as they make their way in their own fields.

"My poster child right now," he said, "is a business student, an accounting major whom I had in class last year. She was saying, ‘Oh, my gosh! I'm so worried about this climate change thing. What can I do?' Then, partway through the semester, she

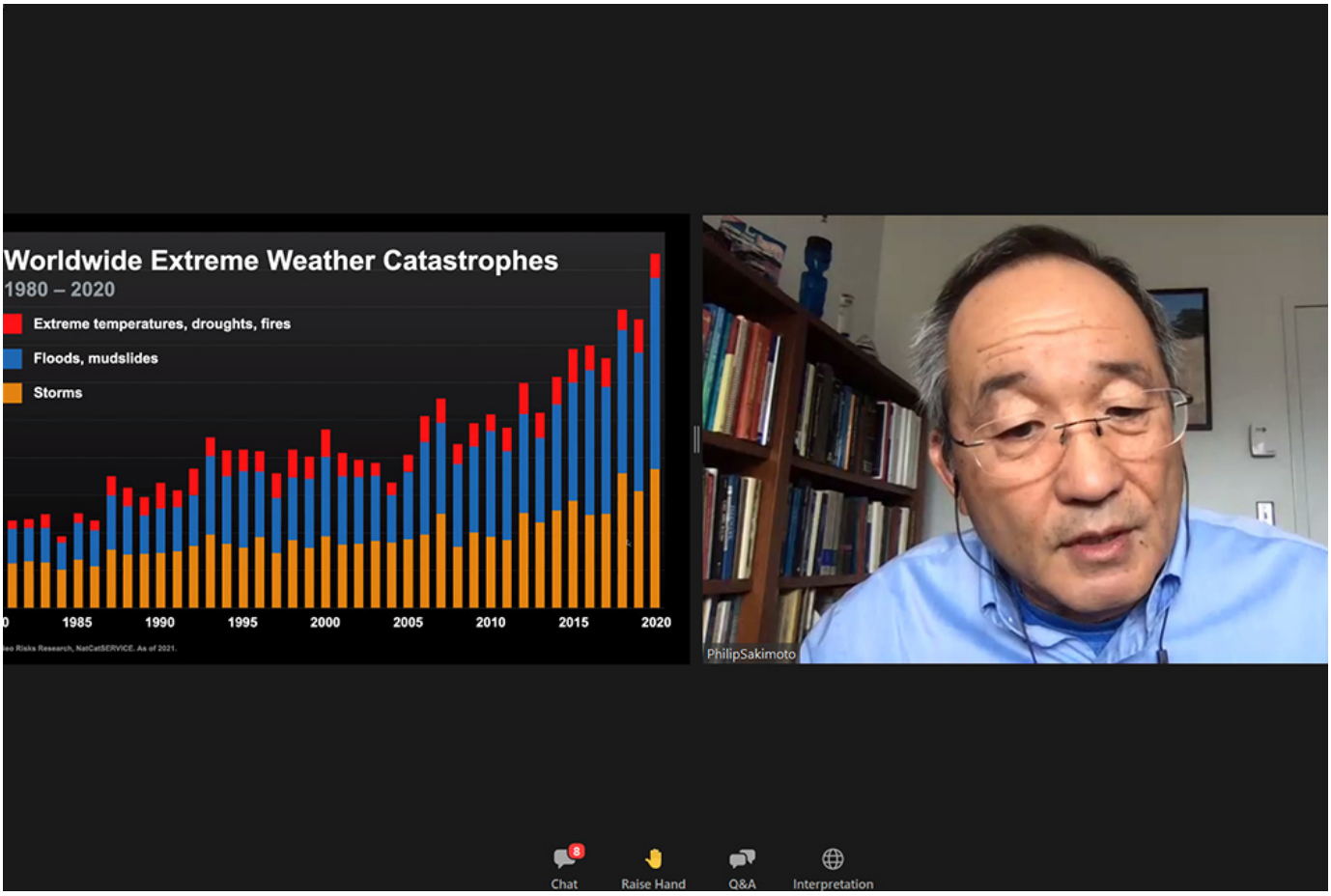
said to me, ‘I could specialize in carbon pricing!' "

Off campus, Sakimoto may be even busier than he is on campus. He is particularly focused on addressing climate issues with Catholics, including parish groups, gatherings of diocesan priests and communities of women religious. In July, he gave a keynote presentation at "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church," a virtual conference sponsored by Creighton University and Catholic Climate Covenant.

The Laudato Si' conference drew more than 2,700 participants and focused on the Laudato Si' Action Platform released by the Vatican in May. The action platform is intended to help Catholics all over the world respond to the challenge of Pope Francis' groundbreaking 2015 encyclical on the environment, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

"The role of the Catholic Church is profound," Sakimoto told his audience during a conference workshop on creation care teams. "It is arguably the largest international organization in the world. If we could move Catholics in every part of the globe to become active and vocal about climate change, we could literally change the future of our planet."

When asked about the impact of *Laudato Si*' itself, Sakimoto spares no superlatives. "It's the most important thing written or said about the subject," he said without hesitation.



Philip Sakimoto, a past NASA official, explains the basics of climate science and the rise in extreme weather events in recent decades during the creation care team breakout session of the Laudato Si' conference July 15. (NCR screenshot)

In it, Pope Francis shared the theology of creation but also reported what scientists said about climate change. Francis also made it clear that the biggest challenge to addressing climate change is the need to address modern materialism and greed.

Sakimoto hopes that the newly launched Laudato Si' Action Platform will help Catholic parishes, schools, religious communities and other institutions get to work on addressing climate change. It is a very practical guide, he said, for putting the encyclical's message to work in real-life ways.

Specific goals suggested for parishes, schools, colleges and religious orders for a seven-year plan include adopting renewable energy, achieving carbon neutrality, fostering ecological education, defending all life, adopting simpler lifestyles and other steps.

In Sakimoto's own parish, St. Pius X in Granger, Indiana, a creation care team has been active for several years. Solar panels on a maintenance barn and a four-part lecture series on *Laudato Si*' are among the team's achievements, but he added that another "little victory" also came when a team member asked the parish business manager about abandoning the use of nonbiodegradable Styrofoam cups.

He recounted that the business manager replied, "Oh, I've wanted to get rid of them for years. If somebody wants me to order something else, they're gone."

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Small moves to address climate change are genuinely important, Sakimoto assures everyone. Those steps help people pay more attention to what they do and what they buy. And people are influenced by what they see others doing.

What are several things anybody can do right away to reduce carbon footprint and address the climate crisis?

"Eat less red meat," he suggested. "That doesn't mean becoming a vegetarian, but it means making it a smaller part of what you eat, for instance, in a casserole, stir-fry or stew. The second thing you can do right away is to source all of your electricity from wind energy through a wind broker."

A broker will contact a customer's local provider, take over the customer's bill, then sell the provider electricity from a renewable energy source.

"You will still have electricity coming into your house and might have a small surcharge," he said, "but overnight, that cuts your carbon footprint by as much as a third."



Phil Sakimoto stands in front of the "Word of Life" mural on the Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame (William E. O'Dell)

People can also put solar panels on their houses and buy electric vehicles, which are becoming more available, Sakimoto added, but those climate-conscious projects take more time, money and planning.

Teaching about the climate crisis every day could be a heavy burden, but an experience several years ago reminded Sakimoto that it's God the Creator who's in charge and can be trusted.

"It happened at Notre Dame," he recalled, "and involved hearing the same Gospel story three times in an hour, which could only happen if you work at a place like Notre Dame. It was the Gospel for the day from John's Gospel and was about the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes."

He heard it first on the local Catholic radio station as he drove to campus late one morning. Then, when he went to confession at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, his confessor talked about the meaning of the loaves and fishes story. And when he went to Mass right after confession, the celebrant — predictably — preached about the Gospel and how Jesus asked others to trust him when there wasn't enough to eat.

"I think God was really trying to get my attention that day," Sakimoto said with a laugh. "Particularly since the fall guy in the Gospel was the apostle Philip. He was the practical one who keeps pointing out that there isn't enough food. Things won't work out. That's like me when I'm worried that we need more solar panels and so forth."

"So, Jesus finally tells Philip and the others to be quiet and start serving the people. There's plenty of food for everyone, and there's even leftovers," he added. "I realized that the hero of this Gospel is the boy who offers his few loaves of bread and a few fish. He didn't have much, but he gave everything he had and trusted in the Lord for the rest. And that's what we have to do as we work to address the climate crisis."

[**Editor's note:** Philip Sakimoto is a member of the EarthBeat advisory panel.]