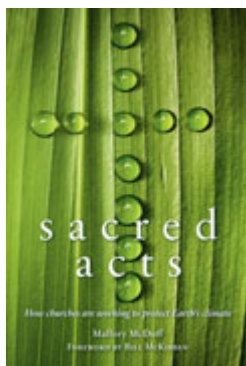


On climate, local efforts are not enough

Reviewed by Charlene Spretnak | Nov. 7, 2012



SACRED ACTS: HOW CHURCHES ARE WORKING TO PROTECT EARTH'S

CLIMATE

Edited by Mallory McDuff

Published by New Society Publishers, \$17.95

Shortly before I received this book, I happened to read that worldwide levels of emissions of carbon dioxide rose by 5.9 percent in 2010, according to the Global Carbon Project. This was the largest jump in any year since the Industrial Revolution.

It occurred in spite of many years of efforts in numerous countries to cut carbon emissions. In short, the leading organizations of scientists on the planet have identified the escalating situation and the causal dynamics, yet still we rush headlong into catastrophe. (Carbon emission levels dropped in the United States in 2011 by 1.7 percent, but only because of the partial shift from coal to natural gas, which has poisoned our groundwater with the chemicals used in fracking.)

Great sheets of ice in Greenland and West Antarctica are melting; vast deposits of frozen methane are thawing in the tundra; the circulation patterns of the North Atlantic are changing; the oceans are becoming more carbonized and acidified; and weather patterns are becoming more extreme. As Bill McKibben, the prominent climate-change activist and author, notes in the Foreword to *Sacred Acts*, global climate disruption is already here.

It is too late to avoid it: Our only choice is whether or not we will manage to take immediate and sufficient action to limit the extent of the damage that has begun to manifest itself dramatically.

So I turned eagerly to this book, hoping that it would present various ways in which the churches -- those uniquely placed institutions that have a presence at every level of society from neighborhoods to international forums -- are lobbying and otherwise pressuring government policymaking bodies to initiate laws, taxes and incentives that would get the job done.

However, I didn't find that sort of information here because *Sacred Acts* focuses mostly on local efforts. One article, though, does describe the major role played by a coalition of faith communities in Washington state

called Earth Ministry (working as part of a larger organization, the Environmental Priorities Coalition) in getting the Coal-Free Future for Washington bill passed last year, which will result in the multiphased decommissioning of a large coal-burning utility plant.

Beyond statements of concern by their leadership, faith communities have participated, to greater or lesser extents, in ecological protection and restoration projects since the first Earth Day in 1970. These activities have been framed theologically as responsible acts of stewardship of creation. *Sacred Acts* specifically presents articles written by Protestant and Catholic activists who have led efforts in their local faith communities to respond to global climate disruption.

Most of the projects described link care for creation and the social Gospel. An energy audit and the retrofitting of church buildings might be done, for instance, with the savings on utility bills then used to help the poor, or a project might focus on environmental justice (correcting inner-city environmental conditions that degrade the health of the poor).

To identify such projects, Mallory McDuff, an Episcopal activist in Asheville, N.C., traveled around the country, commissioning a rich harvest of inspiring stories about what she found. She arranges the articles in four sections: stewardship, spirituality, advocacy and justice.

The most important article in the book may be "At the Intersection of Belief and Knowledge: Climate Science and Our Christian Faith" by Katharine Hayhoe, an evangelical Protestant, climate scientist and director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University. For climate-change activists trying to convince Christians who need lots of scriptural citations along with lots of sound scientific data, this article is invaluable.

Also inspiring is the article by the Episcopal Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, who founded Interfaith Power & Light, a network of programs that now spans 38 states. Unlike the other authors, she mentions explicitly that corporate forces are blocking efforts to reduce our level of carbon emissions, although she refers merely to "a powerful misinformation campaign." In fact, the utilities industry also spends massive amounts of money on campaign contributions and lobbying in order to win influence with congressmen and state legislators.

This is a political situation, which demands that climate-change realists put political pressure on politicians of all persuasions as a very large, organized bloc of voters. Perhaps that day is coming.

I'm grateful for the efforts of the people in this book and thousands more like them. Yet human societies seem unable to grasp something that is historically unprecedented (that human action is causing planetary disruption). Nor can we seem to grasp that the damage we are causing is irreversible.

As my husband has observed, only half-facetiously, the ecology movement would probably have achieved more traction had it called itself the Human Environment Movement.

Tragically, it may be that the well-being of creation is no match for the boundless self-absorption of our species.

[Charlene Spretnak is author, most recently, of *Relational Reality: New Discoveries of Interrelatedness That Are Transforming the Modern World.*]

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