



“A Religious Response to Global Warming”

Rev. Sally Bingham
President, The Regeneration Project

Remarks at the *Religious Perspectives on Climate Change* conference
The University of Michigan
October 19, 2007

Thank you, Jim. That’s quite an introduction. In fact, it’s the fanciest introduction I have ever heard and (this is not original), but it’s very true. It’s the kind of introduction that my father would totally enjoy and my mother would not believe. And thank you, Andy, for making it possible for me to be here. I am very humbled by this company today. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Dr. Dewitt and Larry Rasmussen and Charles Morris, who you all heard from this morning, are people whose work I have studied and read and, in many cases, plagiarized. And what I’m going to do is summarize some of what you heard this morning, not because it was intended that way but because that’s what I do. I mean, I have been going around listening to the real theologians and thinkers and trying to put some of what they’re saying into everyday language so that we can, as a people, and as people of faith, move forward and put our faith into action.

We chose global warming as the most important issue for the Regeneration Project Interfaith Power and Light to work on, because how we respond to global warming is going to define the future. And we agreed, as a group when we moved into the global warming area, that it was insulting to God to continue to destroy creation. The changing climate is affecting every aspect of life: water, crops, disease and, of course, human health. These are things that we are called to be the stewards of. So until very, very recently the religious community has abdicated its moral responsibility. We have not been wearing the green lenses on our glasses when we read scripture. Nor have we paid enough attention to what human beings are doing to the planet. But there is good news, and I will talk more about the good news later.

People of faith are transforming their basic ideas and attitudes toward nature. And we’re beginning to see the moral connection between our treatment of nature and our treatment of people. We are now looking for solutions for the entire community of life. It’s not one species, it’s not one disease, and it’s not one problem. This is about the entire community of life. It’s about the well being of everything that lives. And it’s religious institutions and teachings throughout the world that frame our ethical values. So clergy, preaching environmental stewardship from the pulpit, will perhaps have far more of an impact than a politician or even a scientist alone. This is what is beginning to happen. Religious people are being invited to stand with politicians and show solidarity on the climate issue. Scientists have invited religious leaders to get involved, recognizing that they cannot solve this problem themselves. And a case in point is one that you heard about this morning from Cal DeWitt. Richard Cizik, an evangelical, the Vice President of Global Affairs for the Evangelicals, was invited to go to London and listen to Sir John Houghton, and it was a life-changing experience. It’s changed his life and his ministry. He is now one of the foremost evangelicals speaking out on climate change.



Another person that that happened to in the religious community is an African-American Baptist minister in Atlanta, Georgia, the Reverend Gerald Durley. He watched what happened to the poor people after Katrina. No one told him that global warming was a cause of the Katrina Hurricane, but he was convinced that it had a great deal to do with the severity of it. And he said, up until he saw *Inconvenient Truth* and another film called *The Great Warming*, and witnessed the folks who were hurt the most after Katrina, up until that time Dr. Durley thought that anything that had to do with the word “environment” was about white, rich people. After witnessing Katrina and the two films, he had an epiphany. He is now preaching and teaching about global warming in Atlanta, and he is president of the Black Minister’s Association. He asked them to preach, about climate and subsequently there were 40 sermons in Georgia coming out of the black faith community on Earth Day about climate change. These religious voices are being heard.

You would expect that once we know about a problem we would look for ways to solve it. But the climate issue has been a difficult one to get folks to engage in. But once we know, and most of us do know, you have to wonder what kind of a society continues to do things that are destructive. Doesn’t it call into question our morals and our ethical values? If we continue to harm something, knowing that we’re doing it, you have to ask the question, “What does it say about us as human beings?” And in light of the climate crisis, “Who are we as human beings?” And particularly if we know these things and we do nothing.

Let me ask you all a personal question. Who among us doesn’t love someone, whether it’s a husband, a wife, a child, a parent, maybe you just generally love people. Maybe you love the natural world. Perhaps it’s a pet. But each of us has a tender spot for someone or something.

So think of that something for just a moment and then pretend that you’re in front of a doctor, or you find out that that person or that thing that you love is seriously ill. This is what happened to me when I was diagnosed with cancer 10 years ago. You get the news, and then the doctor says to you, “Well, we have the technology to cure you. We have the medication. But I am going to wait three years before we start treatment.” Why? Why would you wait? Will I be alive after you’ve waited three years? But that’s what’s happening around our country in terms of the political bills that are being discussed. And I have to wonder why are we waiting? We have the technology, we know how to solve the problem, we’re acutely aware of it but we don’t seem to have the political will or, if you will, the moral integrity to make the changes that we need to make. And the result is that people and species, Mary Evelyn talked a lot about species, people and species are dying. More every day.

The United States and Australia, the primary leaders there (and I just returned from Australia) fall into this category of the political leaders who are doing nothing. Voluntary cuts in carbon emissions are nice, but it isn’t good enough. We’ve made great strides with renewable energy in this country and we need to implement that technology. We can and we must change the way our leaders think about the human role in what Mary Oliver also referred to earlier this morning. Mary Oliver’s a wonderful poet. How do we fit into the family of things? How do we fit into this community of creation? And what’s our relationship to the common good and the survival



of the human species? I have maintained for 10 years that the issue of global warming is the most important moral issue of our time. It's the slavery issue of the 19th century, it's the civil rights issue of the 1960's, it's the biggest challenge facing this generation. And you all probably remember when the tobacco industry told us that smoking was not harmful to your health. You probably remember when the auto industry said seatbelts wouldn't make a difference. Now those are moral issues that we addressed and we dealt with. We did something about them.

Today, global warming is the equivalent issue. War, terrorism, poverty are all major moral issues too. But they will pale in the light of what can potentially happen to the planet if we don't stand in solidarity, put aside our differences and address solutions. And by we, I mean the entire industrialized world. There are international treaties like Kyoto. They're only a beginning, but signing it would have shown cooperation with the rest of the world, and it would be a step in the right direction. Australia may do it. Jim mentioned when he was introducing me that I've just come back from Australia. The Australians are getting ready to vote sometime in the next two to three weeks on a new Prime Minister. The Labor Party, which is the out-looking-to-get-in-party, has agreed to ratify Kyoto. Now they called me there to talk about that and I said to them, "You know, we're really beyond Kyoto in this country. We've kind of stopped talking about it."

But here's the reason the Australians want to get this Labor Party leader in. He's agreed to ratify Kyoto, and it will leave the United States as the only industrialized country that has not ratified Kyoto. And again, that doesn't mean a lot at this point in time, but it means a tremendous amount when all these international leaders get to Bali in December. And if the United States is the only one that has never signed an international treaty on climate, we think that it will push the United States into being part of the solution discussions when they get to Bali. So, I had a man in Australia come up to me and shake my hand and he said, "I never thought that my Australian vote would make such a difference in America." But one of the reasons that I've heard, it's probably the primary reason that neither Australia or the United States have entered into these treaties--they're saying it's because the developing world is not part of the treaty. And I cannot back them on this decision.

One does not have a right to continue to put engine oil in the drain behind your house just because your neighbor does it. And no one has a right to murder because someone else did it and got away with it. That's just an excuse for bad behavior. When I asked earlier, "What does it mean to be human today in light of the climate crisis?"

We have a responsibility to do the right thing and our role is to lead the developing world. If we don't cut Green House gas emissions, how can we expect them to? We don't ask other people to do things that we haven't done ourselves. India and China will soon surpass the U.S. in carbon emissions, and if we don't slow our own down, there's just no valid reason how we can ask them to do it. And it's up to us, and it means every single one of us. If we don't respond soon with the urgency, we're never again going to have a chance to maintain the quality of life that most of us now have.

Why are we waiting and isn't it immoral to do so? Our children are hearing about the climate problem. High schools and college campuses across America have campaigns going on. Step It



Up, Focus the Nation, Powershift, some of you that are students may know about Powershift and Focus the Nation. These are college campuses that are coming together across America and focusing the nation on climate change. Now what lessons are we as adults providing for them and what values are we modeling? What are we teaching them by doing nothing and waiting? That's why I ask, "Why are we waiting?" The problem is not going to go away on its own. If you have a fever, you drink liquids right away; you don't wait until you've passed out.

Now I'm neither a scientist nor a politician, nor am I a theologian, but I do listen to what they say and I have read most of the reports. I can find no viable reason why the scientific community would lie about the condition of the planet's health, which is also about our health. You don't feed a young, pregnant woman with drugs and chemicals and then expect a healthy baby. And the same is true of air, water, and land on which we all depend. If we expect to be healthy, the air we breathe, the land in which our food grows, and the water we drink need to be clean. So right many in our society are behaving as if we care more about ourselves than we do our children or the folks that come after us. In the Judeo-Christian religion, you heard earlier that God put Adam in the garden to till it and to keep it, and we have the first and great commandment. The first is to love God and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. Some religious traditions say it differently, but we all have more or less the same message. Muslims talk about balance, Buddhists talk about everything being interconnected and interdependent. - if you hurt one small part, you're affecting the whole. There is a universal belief throughout religion, that we are all part of something greater than ourselves. We belong to it and we have a responsibility to it.

We have a responsibility to serve one another and serve our neighbors. It is in direct disobedience to the commandment to love one another when we destroy the very basic, physical stability on which poor nations and poor communities depend. It's the people who contribute the least to the problem who will suffer the most. This is a justice issue and it's precisely why the religious community has such an important role. We must restore a shared sense of purpose and a sense of gratitude for our very existence. And additionally, the call to serve one another. It's a religious value that's gone awry. This value of service is very important when we face the reality of the changing climate. If we are part of the problem, as it seems we are, then we have an obligation to change the way we behave and become part of the solutions.

So you ask, "Does your behavior really matter?" Well, indeed. Science and medicine have proven that it does. Every behavior matters. The clothes you wear, the cars you drive, the energy you use, all of your choices, the coffee you drink, everything we do affects another person somewhere on the planet. Bill McKibben is a writer that you all may know. He has a wonderful analogy here where he said, "There is no more away." When we think of throwing something away, away doesn't exist anymore. When we toss something, it ends up in somebody else's backyard. Neighbors near and far. Neighbors on the other side of the world. And most importantly the neighbors that come after us are being affected by the choices that we make today. Our children. Their children. We have a responsibility to the next generation.

Speaking of that, if you are in the process of or even thought about writing a will, you probably leave things to your children. If you have land, you leave that. If you have jewels or precious



possessions, you leave that. If you have a big portfolio full of stocks and bonds, you'd leave that. But we haven't thought about leaving clean air, clean water, and clean land to our children. Something we need to be thinking about, and how are our children going to survive if we don't think about those things? Is it their problem? Now some people think that they'll figure it out. They'll come up with the technology. There's an idea that we'll be able to suck CO₂ out of the air, but for now I think it's our decisions that we make today that will define what kind of a future our children will have. And if the scientists are correct in their predictions, we have a scant 10 years to solve this problem. And that's why I say, how we respond to global warming will define what it means to be human today.

And in light of the problem that exists concerning health of humans and frankly, the health of all species that may perish because of the potential catastrophic events, don't we have a moral obligation to look at the impact of our behavior on those who come after us? And I refuse to believe that we are so lacking in moral integrity that we don't care. I refuse to believe that we don't care. If I thought that we couldn't do something about the climate problem, I would not have dedicated my ministry and my life to this effort. I work almost entirely on a religious response to global warming. It's who I am, it's what I do. Now without hope and optimism, I wouldn't be here. So I can't finish or not mention my reasons for hope and why I am here and why I do what I do.

I think that we are at a point in time where enough people are aware of the issue that we face. I'll bring up the tobacco issue again. For 20 years, doctors and scientists said that smoking was would hurt us. And it took 20 years for people to really understand and enough folks to get this message and be touched by it. And then all of a sudden, I mean it was very quick, people stopped smoking. Stopped smoking in restaurants, and it was almost overnight--now I think that's where we are on this climate issue. I think that we have reached that point where enough people understand the problem. It might be that we're becoming conscious in a new way. I think that we may be evolving as a species and that this is an exciting time to be alive. We are maturing as a society and beginning to open up ourselves to that world outside of ourselves. And this growth may be due to the Internet, it may be due to intellectual exposure that is beyond what we would've conceived of 20 years ago, but it's bringing us to new levels of consciousness. The human race is evolving and our collective consciousness is evolving with it. We are maturing as a species and that is something that Jane Goodall writes a lot about, it's her *Reason for Hope*, that as a species we are developing. We have evolved physically and now the potential of the human soul and our consciousness is evolving to a new level.

I was reminded recently about something, that we didn't leave the Stone Age because we ran out of stones. We don't have to keep using coal because we have so much of it.

Now, when we talk about global warming in America, it's not just the climate that's changing, but also the attitude towards dealing with it. It can be expressed in one sentence: The ice is melting. On the one hand, the ice is melting even faster than the scientists predicted just a few years ago. But on the good news, the ice is melting in Washington, D.C. After years of politicians refusing to take action on cutting greenhouse gas emission, there is a positive shift in attitude. The release of the inter-governmental panel on climate change report in February has



convinced some of the most skeptical of the skeptics. And I think that things will continue to change. There are several bills under consideration now in our congress calling for as much as 80% reduction in greenhouse gasses by 2050, and one that calls for a 10% reduction in the next three years. And just yesterday, in Washington, the Lieberman-Warner bill for cutting greenhouse gas emissions was introduced. And interestingly, Richard Cizik, back to the “Where does religion play a role in this?” He and a Rabbi and two or three other well-known religious leaders have been in conversation with the Lieberman staff and the Warner staff to implement something that will provide for justice for the poor if a cap and trade bill goes into effect. And that voice is powerful now.

The politicians in Washington are having the religious leaders come in and are asking for their opinions and hopefully their support--they want the religious community to stand behind their bills. We are a crucial part of the conversation.

I am really truly standing before you with more hope than I have had, ever. It's the most important moral issue of our time, and I believe that we are on the way to solving it. The political will is being heard and state-by-state, across the US, states are putting in their own greenhouse gas reduction bills. There're over 300 mayors of cities who have formed a coalition to cut their greenhouse gases. There are governors who have to come together in different regions around the country, the Northwest Governors Global Warming Initiative. The governors in the northeast have done a similar thing. They're not waiting for federal legislation and the thing that's happening is we have all these different regulations going on around the country which is putting a great deal of pressure on the federal government because they're not going to be able to deal with one law in California and a different one in New York and a different one in Arizona.

So the federal government is going to have to have some federal regulation. And these regions are doing it. Some of the utilities, Pacific Gas and Electric, has a climate-smart program going on, so utilities are getting involved. Big corporations are calling on the government to regulate greenhouse gasses, and some of the largest corporations are going green, like Wal-Mart. And then we have, which is very good news, Al Gore and the IPCC winning the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel Peace Prize committee has made it clear that combating climate change will be a central piece of security and peace for the 21st century.

But with all that good news, the most exciting thing for me is that the faith community is now a voice in this dialogue. Mary Evelyn Tucker told you about the Pope, numerous other important religious leaders, like the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Now that the religious voice is at the table talking about solutions, things are really going to change. This moral authority that comes with religion is going to make an enormous difference. And as I said in the beginning, if clergy will talk about this from the pulpit we can influence an enormous number of people. Our churches are putting solar on their roofs, we have energy efficient appliances, we have creative liturgy that changes hearts and minds of people. Churches and synagogues are serving as examples to the community and clergy are beginning to walk the halls of our legislative buildings. It happens here in Michigan, it happens in California, it's happening in Georgia. We put on our vestments and we walk in and talk to legislators. The beauty of the religious voice is



that we are not partisan. These are not democratic or republican voices or independents in terms of the political party, these are voices that are deeply rooted in theology, that are claiming our right to be the stewards of creation and do a good job at it, so we can talk to both sides of the aisle. I have been with both republicans and democrats. They like to have religious leaders stand with them when they're signing their greenhouse gas reduction. Bills. I was in the New York Times, it was a photo-op for Arnold Schwarzenegger but it was a photo-op for me too. The point is, we're seeing a lot of connection now between religious leaders and politicians. 4,000 congregations in our 24 state programs showed the film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and after that a lot of these congregations formed their own committees that would work in their facility to make it green.

We have something on our website that I'm sure Charles Morris can tell you more about because this Interfaith Power and Light program here in Michigan was really the inspiration behind it. Churches that belong to the Interfaith Power and Light program, or any house of worship, can shop IPL--shop Interfaith Power and Light. You can buy energy efficient appliances at 1/3 off and it will be delivered to your door. We have set up this shopping cart arrangement in partnership with the EPA and Energystar.

The moral choices and values over the problem of climate change are beginning to replace the one of abortion and same-sex relations that captured values four years ago. And I also think that asking the questions, some of the questions that were raised here this morning are wonderful signs of hope. You all may remember Paul Tillich. He said, "The answers are in the questions." We are starting to ask questions now that we have not asked before.

Doing the right thing is seldom the easiest choice, but when it is apparent that it's the only choice for people of conscience, we begin to heal. And we will heal the environment, we will heal ourselves and we will bring healing to this planet. We're all in this together. We all have a shared responsibility and the moral obligation to work together. Who are we as human beings if not the caretakers of the planet? Therefore, stewardship of the planet and taking care of each other is our greatest moral duty.

There are a lot of things that you all can do when you wonder, "Well, what do I do?" Put in some compact florescent light bulbs, get energy efficient appliances, drive a fuel-efficient car, ride a bike, walk, wherever possible buy renewable energy--green energy. Efficiency is really important. Conservation is crucial. And every one of us can turn off what we're not using. But I think the single most important thing that we can do right now, at this point in time, is vote for leaders who will implement policies that will provide us with a sustainable future. Policies that will reverse rising pollution. Policies that will invest in clean energy, and that we, as Americans can become a leader in the global response to climate change. I know that things are changing for the better, and you all are going to be a part of that. Make a commitment today to become aware of how your behavior affects your neighbor. And if you're a person of faith, accept the responsibility to be a steward of creation. Walk with God, and you can make the adjustments in your life that we must make in order to save this fragile earth, our island home. We're all in this together. One family, one shared purpose, one body, one spirit, and one hope in God's call to us. Thank you.



Rev. Sally Grover Bingham is a Priest in the Diocese of California and is currently working as the Environmental Minister at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. She has been the chair of the Episcopal Diocesan Commission for the Environment for the last ten years. Sally has been active in the environmental community for twenty-five years and serves on the national board of both Environmental Defense and the Environmental Working Group. She also serves on the national advisory board for the Union of Concerned Scientist and Environmental Commons. She is the founder and executive director of The Regeneration Project, a nonprofit ministry dedicated to deepening the connection between faith and the environment. Currently, the primary focus of TRP is Interfaith Power and Light, a campaign whose mission is to mobilize a religious response

to global warming. The Interfaith Power and Light Program is in twenty-three states around the US including Alaska and HI and Washington DC. The World Wildlife Fund recognized the Regeneration Project as a Sacred Gift to the Planet in November 2000 at a ceremony in Kathmandu, Nepal. The Regeneration Project received the international Global Energy Award 2002. This “Energy Oscar” was presented to Rev. Bingham in Austria by President Gorbachev. In July 2003, Sally was honored by the Bay Area Air Quality Board as a “Clean Air Champion”. In 2006 Senator Barbara Boxer awarded her Conservation Champion Award to Rev. Bingham. In May 2007, Sally will receive the US EPA Climate Protection Award. She has been a speaker at a diverse selection of events ranging from the Mid-Atlantic Energy Efficiency annual event to Samford College Campus with E. O. Wilson.
