

INTERFAITH GROUP, CAAV HOST CLIMATE CHANGE EVENT

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By **CANDACE SIPOS**

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How can climate change be viewed as more of a moral issue?

During a meeting of local religious leaders to discuss climate change, the group breezed through the question of whether the phenomenon is happening, opting instead to address debates such as the one above.

Many Americans, though, are stuck years behind science on the topic.

After presenting conclusions on climate change from several scientific boards, speaker Les Grady, a retired professor of environmental engineering at Purdue and Clemson universities, showed the crowd of about 50 one grave statistic.

“As a scientist and engineer, I feel comfortable with what scientists tell me,” Grady said. “I believe what they ... say, but the public doesn’t.”

Though 97 percent of scientists now agree that climate change is occurring and is caused by humans, only 41 percent of the public believes it, he explained.

A poll conducted at the meeting likely would not have produced such a low number, however.

Originally, the idea behind the event, sponsored by the Climate Action Alliance of the Valley and the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Interfaith Association and held at First Presbyterian Church on Court Square, was to bring together people of faith who fall on all sides of the climate change debate.

When the attendees seemed to fall on one side — that of climate change believers, though Grady made clear that even that camp ranges from the activist to the disengaged — the conversation quickly turned toward questions of whether — and how — to bring the issue into the sanctuary, with the larger question being how to change the hearts of congregants to whom the issue may not seem as pressing.

“I pastor a congregation ... that has a variety of viewpoints about [climate change],” said the Rev. David Miller, outgoing president of the interfaith group and pastor of Montezuma Church of the Brethren. He leads a group running the gamut from environmental activists to people “who have very little tolerance and feel it is a violation, basically, of the pulpit to talk about these kinds of political issues.”

“I know that when I promote a speaker who’s going to talk on this issue that I can count on a much smaller attendance than Sunday,” he added.

The Rev. Shelby DePriest of Faith Lutheran Church in Fort Valley said that while she doesn’t believe it’s appropriate to preach about climate change from the pulpit, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t address the issue in some way to her congregants.

“What I do preach about ... probably once or twice a month is a way to think about it,” she explained. “A way to think about science and faith. As Lutherans, we believe we exist in a world of science, and we believe we exist in a world of faith at the same time.”

Gary Race, director of James Madison University’s Gandhi Center and moderator of the event, was the first to offer this point: “It seems to me that if this conversation is going to happen in churches that one of the things that we need to work at is to make it a moral issue and not a political issue. ... As long as it’s political, it’s going to be divisive.”

He returned to a statistic that Grady presented earlier — that is, wealthier countries, such as the United States, are responsible for 62 percent of the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today, yet these nations only account for 16 percent of the planet’s population. Developing countries that comprise 76 percent of the world’s population are only responsible for an estimated 24 percent of the extra greenhouse gas said to be causing climate change.

“It’s an issue of loving your neighbor, that’s how you make it spiritual,” DePriest offered. “You love your neighbor when you care for the Earth.”

Ian Sawyer, who’s affiliated with New Community Project and said he comes from a Buddhist tradition, suggested that people can do a simple activity every day to help fight climate change. For example, Mohandas K. Gandhi used a spinning wheel daily to make cloth as “an act of faith,” Sawyer said.

Something such as bicycling, a large part of NCP’s daily operations, helps to fight the sense of

powerlessness about climate change, he said.

NCP is a Church of the Brethren project, located off North Main Street in Harrisonburg, attempting to live out a nonviolent lifestyle inspired by faith. The small community that employs people who have struggled with homelessness attempts to live and work carbon-free, using power tools to grow produce sold to nearby restaurants with the help of bicycles for transport.

“I feel like for me and New Community Project, the main issue is how do we bring it into every day, into the personal, versus keeping it up beyond in the theological or the political,” Sawyer said.

The Rev. Jon Heeringa, pastor of First Presbyterian, said that though he believes climate change is a moral issue, “when you go to ‘moral issue’ you’ve just implied judgment, and as soon as you imply judgment, everybody shuts down.”

“You have to find ways to make it a self-interested and pragmatic issue,” he said.

Diane Bayer, minister of Christian formation at Muhlenberg Lutheran Church in downtown Harrisonburg, added that the issue is a moral one that has political implications.

“As much as I’d love to separate the two, it’s really almost, in our country, impossible,” she added.

Her church partners with a school in Rwanda, and when the children come to visit Muhlenberg, the church members learn about the seriousness of climate change.

“We can learn so much from our brothers and sisters out in third-world countries who really feel the effects of global warming because of what we’re doing,” she said.

Contact Candace Sipos at 574-6275 or csipos@dnronline.com