

A new climate for discipleship

How can Mennonites respond to climate change?

For years, our congregation, First Mennonite Church in San Francisco, has held baptisms in Pescadero Creek, a redwood-lined stream that runs near the retreat center we meet at every fall. Last year, we needed to find another venue for our baptisms; the creek was dry, due to a record-setting drought in California. Our own dry creek bed opened our eyes to the farmers whose fields were fallow because there was no water to irrigate them, the farm workers who couldn't pay bills because there was no work, the firefighters battling an unprecedented wildfire season—six were burning at one time in mid-August 2014.

Each of us can probably recite a similar litany of weird weather events from our region: hurricanes, floods, warmer and shorter winters, the “polar vortex,” heat waves. In fact, some people believe the phrase “global weirding” is a better descriptor of the impacts of climate change than “global warming.” As global temperatures rise, the weather gets weird—the hots hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier.

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And the poor get poorer. Climate change's effects are most devastating for poor and other vulnerable communities. Droughts, cyclones, hurricanes and floods push people over the economic edge on which they were already living. Five years ago, changes in weather patterns were already making it impossible for small-scale farmers in Kenya to continue growing primary food crops. Rising sea levels and flooding have severely impacted small rice farmers in Bangladesh, who provide most of that country's food. In our country, Hurricane Katrina disproportionately displaced that city's poor and working class, overwhelmingly African American. Climate change is a social justice issue, magnifying and multiplying existing inequalities and injustices.

Climate change is also a peace issue. The genocidal conflict in Darfur, driven by environmental degradation and resource depletion linked to climate change, has been dubbed the “first climate war.” Drought and crop failure in Syria played a significant role in sparking that country's civil war. Experts predict that climate change—and the water and food security it threatens—will increasingly serve as a “threat multiplier,” pushing already volatile regions into wars that could quickly become international crises.

Unfortunately, it is only going to get worse before, or if, it

gets better. We are already locked into at least 2 degrees C of warming, and many climate scientists believe 3 or 4 C is more likely unless we severely limit carbon emissions now. These same scientists say that a world with 3-4 C warming is one in which millions of people may die or be displaced, many of them in poorer countries. This degree of warming also threatens to trigger what climate scientists refer to as “nonlinear tipping points,” events that could result in rapid, rather than gradual, change. For instance, the melting of the West Antarctic ice sheet would lead to rapid sea-level rise. The thawing of permafrost in the Northern Hemisphere would release massive amounts of carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere, possibly producing a feedback loop called “runaway global warming” that would render this planet uninhabitable to human life.

These apocalyptic scenarios are truly frightening. In the face of such a threat, it is natural to become overwhelmed and numb. In our congregation, we have found that unless we tend to the big emotions—the fear, anger and grief—that come up around these realities, we can get stuck in inaction and despair. We encourage congregations or small groups to set aside time in worship to pray and sing our emotions, to bring our fears to the One who holds heaven and earth.

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The threat of catastrophic climate change has called followers of Jesus to see this as a “kairos” moment. Never has the divine call to “choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19) been so clear. We literally can choose life for our descendants or bequeath them a world that is uninhabitable. In this new climate for discipleship, the necessity of Jesus' gospel and the demands of following him are brought into sharper focus—we have “new eyes to see” what is required of us as disciples. This is the opportunity of this moment.

Mennonites have many gifts to offer in this moment of opportunity. Our values of simplicity and our history of farming are often held up as examples of sustainable ways of living. Our community also possesses the sorts of skills that our world will increasingly need as we head into the uncertainty and challenge of global climate change: cleaning up after disasters, mobilizing quickly to meet material needs, building economic opportunities in low-income communities and resolving conflict nonviolently. Perhaps we have been honing these kingdom-building skills and values “for just such a time” (Esther 4:14).

We want to highlight two additional gifts we have to offer in this kairos time that may not have received as much attention: namely, the power to act that emerges from our commitment to the discipleship of Jesus and what may be

called an Anabaptist political theology. These two gifts are crucial antidotes to the despair engendered by climate change.

Discipleship and moral agency

Mennonite understandings and practices of discipleship can give people the power to act for good, what theologians call moral agency. Why is it that even with all the information we have about climate change, many people don't do anything about it? Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes: "Far too readily we do know what we ought to do in response to economic and ecological violence but fail to find the moral agency to act on that knowledge." Aside from climate denial, we see two main reasons that prevent a wider response to climate change. First, people are overwhelmed by the scope of the problem; second, they don't think their individual actions can make a difference.

I (Katerina) attended a discussion group for the general public last year on three reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The participants, mostly 20- and 30-year-olds, shared a sense of what Christians might call being "mired in sin" when it comes to climate change. One woman exclaimed with sadness and frustration, "Everything I do is bad." From driving to using electricity to buying clothes to even the basic act of eating, nearly everything we do has some direct or indirect connection to exploitation of the environment and, more often than not, marginalized peoples. Put bluntly, as citizens of the Global North, we are complicit in systems of structural violence by the mere fact of being alive.

If that isn't depressing enough, people feel increasingly burdened by the perceived futility of individual actions to effect significant change. Even if I install more energy-efficient light bulbs, recycle, take the bus or change my diet, I can't really do anything to reverse climate change. I can't be "good" on my own, so why not just throw in the towel now? Or, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

Mennonite understandings of discipleship present a way forward for those who feel stuck between the overwhelming nature of our contribution to ecological destruction and the failure of individual action to bring about the "salvation"—the protection and healing—needed for God's creation.

In response to despair, the idea of discipleship assumes that change is possible. Mennonites historically have seen faith not as a matter of assent to theological precepts for the salvation of our souls but as a way of following the gospel in everyday life. For example, rather than reading the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible standard meant to reveal human guilt, Mennonites interpret Jesus' challenge to love our enemies as a realizable vision possible through the power and accompaniment of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, moral agency is embedded in the idea and practice of discipleship itself. We are animated by the biblical hope that we can become more and more Christlike through

concrete daily practices like clothing the naked, feeding the hungry and sheltering the destitute. At its best, discipleship as a way of practice acknowledges inevitable failures, our brokenness and addictions, and systemic oppressions that hurt us all while beckoning us toward continued transformation through the power of the Spirit within and among us.

Living more justly and peaceably according to the values of the God's kingdom is actually possible now; indeed, it is precisely what Jesus calls us to. And this understanding of discipleship matters more than ever before. The fate of our world may hinge on our actively undoing structural injustices and exploitative practices that have been put in place in history and can, therefore, be undone in history. However, undoing structural injustice is not an individual endeavor, though it requires individual action. Change is only possible through community, an understanding implicit in practices of discipleship.

Through communities of discipleship, the body of Christ works together across the world in ways we can't individually imagine, amplifying 1,000-fold what one person could accomplish alone. Many Mennonite communities have demonstrated this through political witness and practice. A few examples include the conscientious objector movement, the sanctuary movement when many Mennonites joined other faith communities across the country in sheltering refugees fleeing violence in Central America, and Christian Peacemaker Teams' creative alternatives to violence as they stand with communities impacted by war.

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An Anabaptist political theology

This brings us to the second gift Mennonites have been nurturing for years, often without intentionally doing so, what may be called an Anabaptist political theology. At this point, the likelihood of a unified international political response to climate change with any clout is slim to none. International climate conventions over the last three decades—in Rio de Janeiro, Kyoto, Cancún and Copenhagen—all failed to produce significant political will to limit fossil fuel emissions from industrialized countries and keep global warming under 2 degrees C. You know the issue is serious when a renowned NASA climate scientist commits civil disobedience at mass protests to draw attention to the issue from the White House. If we were to hope for our governments to save us, our hope would be vain.

But our hope is not in vain. Politics, broadly understood, is about the power of people to order society. Understood in this way, politics is not the sole property of government or

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the state. Neither does it belong exclusively to our economic systems—including the global “ordering” brought about by large multinational corporations. What social theorists call “civil society” also has political power, the power to order society. Civil society consists of the countless voluntary associations who come together to form communities of faith, or nonprofits that feed the hungry and combat police violence, or cultural organizations such as theaters, museums and arts collectives. The early Anabaptists actually helped create civil society by insisting that churches should be allowed to exist independently of the state, thus giving rise to a third sector distinct from government and business.

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A truly Anabaptist political theology reimagines a way of ordering society based not on the coercion of the state or the profit-driven dictates of business but on the values and vision of the kingdom of God. Governmental regulations on fossil-fuel extraction and emissions would certainly contribute toward climate change mitigation, but we cannot depend on policy measures alone to solve these problems. Our trust is in God’s kingdom, which compels us to political action that does not depend on centralized forms of control.

The early Anabaptists were forcibly weaned off dependence on Empire. Maligned as revolutionaries and rabble-rousers, many early Anabaptist communities refused to swear oaths that allied them with the state, to participate in the magistracy or bear arms. Their allegiance was to God’s kingdom, and that allegiance brought them into conflict with the state. When 16th-century Swiss Anabaptists were evicted from their land by the church-sanctioned state authorities, they responded with words from Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s” (and therefore not the government’s).

An Anabaptist political theology today might view the emerging centralized responses to climate change with a critical eye, calling out their latent violence. Large-scale technologies currently on the table include nuclear power and geoengineering. Voices championing nuclear power are growing louder as climate change worsens, ignoring the deadly risks to Earth’s life support systems that Chernobyl and Fukushima demonstrated so disastrously.

Geoengineering, defined by Britain’s Royal Society as “deliberate large-scale manipulation of the planetary environment to counteract anthropogenic climate change,” proposes massive projects such as injecting carbon dioxide underground, “fertilizing” oceans with iron to increase plankton growth, and using an enormous space mirror to de-

flect sunlight from Earth. This kind of engineering is already receiving billions in investment from philanthropists like Bill Gates.

Yet human tinkering with complex ecologies carries many unknown consequences that threaten to plunge us deeper into the mess we find ourselves in. Furthermore, these centralized “imperial” strategies allow a limitless-growth industrial economy to continue, require a heaping dose of idolatrous hubris and do not demand any significant change from corporations and people whose collective lifestyles have most contributed to ecological destruction.

“Watershed discipleship” is one alternative political framework gaining traction in Mennonite circles. Indigenous peoples have long known that water is life and have based their economies around the source of life in their watersheds. Defined by the drainage area of a particular place, watersheds defy modern political boundaries. One might imagine a watershed as a bathtub holding the cities, land, people, animals and the rest of creation where a particular body of water drains. Look up your watershed on a map. Chances are, it does not line up with the arbitrary dividing lines of cities, states, nations or walls like the one along the U.S.-Mexico border. Like the global body of Christ, watersheds are interconnected.

Watershed discipleship opens up a way of living out allegiance to God’s kingdom “on earth as in heaven.” It is a way of replacement in response to ecological destruction and colonialism that see no place as home. As North Americans, many of us descendants of European settlers, the framework calls us to work for the repair of the land as well as the repair of our relationships with indigenous peoples and other communities harmed by distortions of Christian discipleship.

Watershed discipleship calls disciples of Jesus to also become disciples of our particular places, inviting us to be salt and yeast for the kingdom of God in thousands of diverse watersheds and ways. In Elkhart, Ind., for example, Mennonites joined other community residents in opposing the “Mega Shredder,” an enormous waste recycling machine that polluted a mostly African-American working class neighborhood with noise, fumes and occasional explosions. With little funds and a lot of public outcry for environmental justice, the group made their voices heard, and the facility closed during the recession in 2008.

In this new climate for discipleship, God is offering us a kairos moment to reimagine and extend our community’s gifts for the work of broader shalom. Our unique understandings of what it means to follow Jesus are needed in this perilous time. Now is the time to remember and more fully live the faith into which we were baptized, so that “streams of living water” flow from us (John 7:38).—*Katerina Friesen, a student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind., and Sheri Hostetler, pastor of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco*