

# Faith Action on the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Progress and Outlook



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SUPPORT THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# THE FAITH AND SUSTAINABILITY LANDSCAPE

We face major sustainability challenges in the 21st Century. Fortunately, we have a unique opportunity to implement solutions at a global scale. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) grew out of a pioneering idea to mobilize the world around a global framework for sustainability. The SDGs followed from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were in effect from 2000 to 2015 and spurred unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest. In 2015, as the MDGs reached their target date, the UN adopted a new set of goals designed for a new era. The SDGs have a broader scope focused on environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and economic development. The set of 17 goals signals a recognition that our challenges are interlinked.

This report focuses on the progress Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) have made toward the six environmental SDGs - 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, and 15. Activities intersecting with SDG 4 are also assessed. To capture a broad range of activity, we define FBO as *any institution, organization, or congregation affiliated with a religious, faith-based, indigenous, or spiritual tradition.*

FBO progress on sustainability has closely tracked the roll out of the SDGs. Therefore, this five year anniversary of the SDGs presents an opportunity to take stock and plot a course forward. FBOs are uniquely positioned to make progress toward the SDGs. Nearly every religious, indigenous, and spiritual tradition teaches a moral obligation to protect the planet. Aside from these moral considerations, however, are some very compelling statistics. FBOs control 8% of the habitable land surface of Earth, 5% of all commercial forests, 50% of schools worldwide, and 10% of the world's total financial institutions.<sup>1</sup> With a portfolio including these vast resources, the potential aggregate impact of FBOs on sustainable development is immense. UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed recognized this when she

noted that “the continued support and activism of Faith Based Organizations will be essential as we forge ahead in our quest to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for all people.”

This report is just a start. We sourced the information from our own research in addition to survey responses from FBOs around the world. While we endeavored to include as much activity as possible from a diversity of FBOs, there is simply too little space to include everything. Therefore, we call on you to partner with us, and we hope you will help us gather more data. In the months ahead, we will create a web-based platform for sharing and learning about the faith community's progress toward the SDGs.





**SDG 15** is a broad goal covering a number of activities across the land base. FBOs have been actively involved in protecting, conserving, and regenerating land resources for years. Many faith traditions value the cycles of the land and its biodiversity and teach principles of conservation. These values are indispensable for guiding the prioritization of conservation actions and allocation of resources. Thus, conservation work is a natural focus for FBOs and has long been an emphasis. In addition to land-based conservation, several FBOs are engaged in fisheries conservation, which is covered by **SDG 14**. Also worth noting is the intersection of **SDGs 14 and 15**. Land conservation often will have benefits for marine ecosystems. For example, restoring coastal wetlands can benefit fishery habitat. Additionally, most conservation projects have co-benefits of sequestering carbon in soils and plants, which mitigates climate change pursuant to **SDG 13**. Several conservation projects also incorporate partnerships with local farmers promoting sustainable agriculture, which contributes to **SDG 2**.

### SIGNIFICANT LAND HOLDINGS

FBOs own or control 8% of the habitable

land surface of Earth and 5% of all commercial forests.<sup>1</sup> With a portfolio including these substantial resources, the potential aggregate impact on global conservation is immense. According to Good Lands, a Catholic conservation group, if 70% of Catholic parishes planted an average of just three trees, it could sequester as many as 10 million pounds of carbon each year.<sup>2</sup> In Japan, Shinto shrines protect ancient forests, which are believed to be the dwelling places of deities.<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian Orthodox Church owns 300 fragments of the last remaining Afromontane tropical forest containing several endangered species.<sup>4</sup>

### PLACE-BASED KNOWLEDGE

Global migration over the last millennium has brought some faith communities to distant shores. Europe and North America in particular are now host to incredible religious diversity. However, many faith communities are still rooted in their ancient lands. Traditional knowledge of these ancestral homelands is a key to good stewardship. In Israel, the biblical Book of Job, which describes numerous species in detail, has been used in nature

restoration efforts. Japanese Shinto monks have been recording changing ice patterns on lakes since 1443 and now hold a key to understanding climate change. And indigenous peoples around the world have relied on traditional knowledge to manage land, including cultivating and preserving native species, maintaining balance in ecosystems, and sustainably harvesting natural medicines and other resources. This traditional environmental knowledge is valuable for conservation.

## TOWARD GREATER IMPACT

As the trends and projects highlighted in this section demonstrate, FBOs are making significant progress delivering against SDGs 15 and 14. With greater coordination between FBOs and mainstream conservation groups, governments, and civil society, these efforts could be amplified.

## TREND: *Sustainable Agriculture*

The world uses approximately 50% of total habitable land for agriculture. Given the significant land resources under FBO control, and the need to increase food security sustainably for a growing population, FBOs are well positioned for agricultural projects. Initiatives have focused on several areas, including the propagation of native species, growing food for local communities, and training in regenerative agricultural practices.

## Noteworthy Project



**Huarango forests** are well adapted to surviving in the arid climate of Southeastern Peru. Utilized extensively by pre-Columbian cultures, these forests have largely been cut down, but are still important for traditional agriculture on the Peruvian coast. Huarango forests provide farmers and animals with necessary shade, and the leaves feed livestock. A Rocha Peru has planted 26,000 Huarango and other native trees over three years, in conjunction with landowners who manage the new forests. The organization is now extending the project to other regions in Peru.<sup>5</sup>

Photo by [Kriss](#)

## TREND: *Wildlife and Habitat Conservation*

Faith communities have been developing nature-based solutions for millennia. As people historically rooted in place, stewardship of the natural world has been a traditional role. The interconnected crises of biodiversity loss, global pandemic, and a changing climate have shown that nature must be protected to ensure the continuation of life on Earth. We need nature now more than ever - FBOs have undertaken conservation projects to preserve biodiversity, buffer from disease and extreme weather, and sequester carbon.



Photo by [Harshil Gudka](#)

## Noteworthy Project

The Indonesian Council of Ulema issued a fatwa (Muslim religious decree) **declaring the illegal wildlife trade forbidden under Islamic law**. It is the first ever fatwa issued against illegal wildlife trafficking and resulted out of a partnership between the *Alliance of Religions and Conservation* and WWF-Indonesia. The fatwa requires the country's 200 million Muslims to take an active role in protecting threatened species including tigers, rhinos, elephants and orangutans.<sup>6</sup> Although not binding under Indonesian law, the fatwa is an effective deterrent in a country that is 87% Muslim.

## Noteworthy Project

Nearly half of Tibetan monasteries located in the high mountains of the Tibetan Plateau's Sanjiangyuan region are located in **snow leopard habitat**. Tibetan Buddhists consider the snow leopard sacred and believe its habitat should be protected. Monks actively patrol lands surrounding their monasteries to prevent poaching and other activities that could harm the leopards. Buddhist monks are highly regarded in their communities. Thus, their conservation ethos will influence behavior toward wildlife. This is an example of ways conservationists and Buddhist communities could collaborate and create effective solutions for wildlife protection.<sup>7</sup>

## Noteworthy Project

Vardayini Mata Temple in Maharashtra sits next to one of several critical community fish sanctuaries of India that protect the **endangered Mahseer fish**. These sanctuaries have conserved the fish as well as stretches of river that remain undammed to protect Mahseer habitat. The primary reason for the collapse of the Mahseer fishery is dam construction. Though they have received limited support from the conservation community, for Hindu devotees these fish are sacred. They are considered the children of Varadayini Mata.<sup>8</sup>

Photo by [EcoSikh](#)

## TREND: *Ecosystem Restoration*

Just as important as conservation, restoration of natural systems is key to ensuring humans live in harmony with nature, rather than eking out a living at the expense of it. FBOs are actively returning land to its natural cycles by planting trees, restoring fisheries, and developing regenerative agricultural practices that foster native species and soil health.

## Noteworthy Project

Sikh groups around the world have united to fight against climate change by planning to **plant 1 million trees** in 1,820 different locations by November. The project honors the 550<sup>th</sup> birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. EcoSikh, which strives to connect Sikh values with solutions to environmental issues, spearheaded the project. Their goal is to increase reforestation, decrease air pollution, and encourage people to reconnect with nature. Sikhs in Punjab, India have already planted tens of thousands of trees.<sup>9</sup>



7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



Our energy infrastructure is broken. 1 in 7 people still live without access to electricity. Energy consumption accounts for around 60% of global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>10</sup> **SDG 7**, affordable and clean energy, aims not only to achieve a universal energy supply for all, but also to improve energy efficiency and proportion of clean energy worldwide. The cost of solar energy continues to drop and is now cheaper than coal in most markets. As renewables become more efficient and affordable, transitioning to them at scale will become inevitable in the global energy supply market, in both the developing and developed world. FBOs have helped this transition by purchasing renewable energy and advocating for new infrastructure. These efforts also help draw down carbon emissions and establish the renewables industry as the dominant energy provider, furthering **SDGs 13 and 12** respectively.

## RENEWABLE ENERGY IN HOUSES OF WORSHIP

FBOs, as a vital player in civil society, have made many of their own facilities examples for switching to renewable energy. For example, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York has installed

an extensive geothermal system, and thousands of mosques across the Islamic world are becoming more sustainable via solar installations. In the past five years, global renewable energy capacity has increased by 37%, and now makes up some 20% of total energy generation.<sup>11</sup> We still have a long way to go, but this is undeniable progress, and FBOs are important partners in bringing renewable energy to scale.

## ADVOCATES FOR AN ENERGY TRANSITION

Significant investments and donations from FBOs are propelling the development of on-grid and distributed renewables, including geothermal, biomass, wind, and solar energy. Some of this funding is reinvestment that has been facilitated by FBOs divesting from fossil fuels. Additionally, FBOs have been actively lobbying legislatures and utilities to make renewable energy more widely available.

## TOWARD GREATER IMPACT

More congregations than ever before have implemented energy efficiency solutions and begun purchasing



renewable energy. According to a survey conducted by Interfaith Power & Light, nearly 800 houses of worship now utilize solar energy. With over 370,000 houses of worship in the US alone, there is great potential to scale these efforts.

## Noteworthy Project



Photo by [Science in HD](#)

In 2017, Shiloh Temple in Minneapolis installed a **community solar garden** on its rooftop. The 630-panel array provides energy to the Temple, a neighboring Masjid, and 29 residences.<sup>12</sup> Community solar allows members to access solar energy who otherwise could not due to an unsuitable rooftop or funding issues. In many cases the costs are less than the members' utility rates. Community solar is starting to become popular with FBOs as a way to bring renewable energy to low income communities in a cost-effective manner.<sup>12</sup>

### **TREND:** *Renewables on Houses of Worship*

Greening houses of worship is becoming mainstream in many religions with a move to renewable energy being a priority activity. In some circumstances, the clean power generated by FBOs can be used not only for their own purposes but also shared with nearby communities or fed directly back to the electric grid. Rooftop solar is the most popular choice, but community solar is gaining traction as well.

## TREND: *Government Subsidized Renewables on Mosques*

Several Islamic countries, including Jordan, Kuwait, and Indonesia, are undergoing a renewable energy transformation to green their mosques. A project administered by the Jordan Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Fund and the Jordanian government funded solar installations on over 500 mosques from 2015 to 2020.

## Noteworthy Project



Photo by [John Weinhardt](#)

The Moroccan Government created a **Green Mosque program** aimed at promoting the dissemination of technologies for energy efficiency and renewable energies and to create jobs. Thus far, 100 mosques have been upgraded for energy efficiency and more than 40% of energy costs are being saved. Almost 1,000 mosques have also undergone energy inventories in preparation for upgrades. 262 additional jobs have been created with project support.<sup>13</sup>

## Noteworthy Project

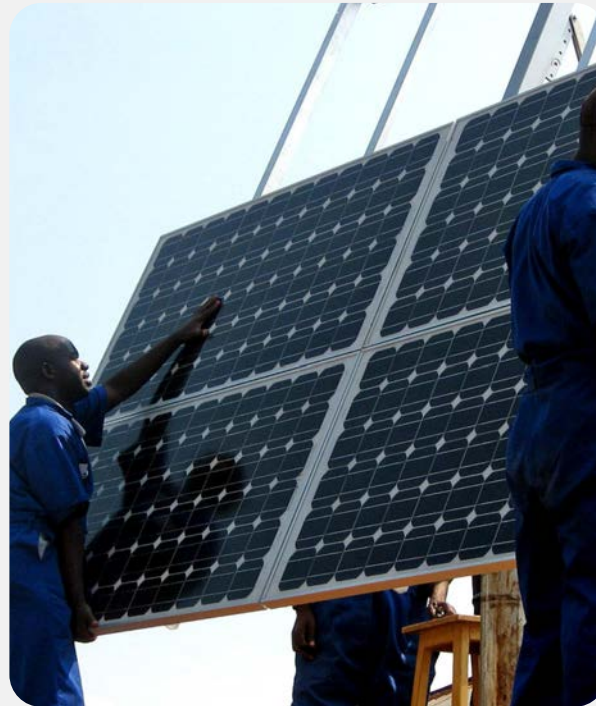


Photo by [Walt Ratterman, USAID](#)

The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, based in Jerusalem, has spearheaded the Faith Inspired Renewable Energy Project in Africa. In coordination with FBOs and other international organizations, they are piloting a group of initiatives supporting investment in, and deployment of, **solar and wind projects of 7.5 megawatts or larger in Africa**. Commercial solar or wind plants are planned or under construction in Burundi, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Rwanda.<sup>14</sup>

## TREND: *Renewable Energy Development in Africa*

Over 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa have no access to electricity. They constitute 13% of the global population and contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions. Yet they are on the front lines of climate change impacts. Renewable energy production improves livelihoods, reduces reliance on diesel and gathered wood, the most polluting fuels, and boosts local economies. A five megawatt solar array avoids 125,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over 20 years and provides energy to thousands.



12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



**S**DG 12 is important for catalyzing sustainable practices. According to the UN, SDG 12 relates to decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation, increasing resource efficiency, and promoting sustainable lifestyles. One important avenue for achieving SDG 12 involves ending the financing of fossil fuel extraction. Access to capital is the lifeblood of the fossil fuel industry. FBOs have led the way in divesting from fossil fuels, reinvesting in sustainable sectors, and pursuing direct action to raise awareness about the sources of financing for dirty energy infrastructure. These efforts also help the world transition to renewable energy and stave off the worst effects of climate change, furthering **SDGs 7 and 13** respectively.

## DIVESTMENT

Since 2012, the fossil fuel divestment movement has mobilized more than \$14 trillion in commitments from nearly 1,200 organizations, governments, businesses, colleges and nonprofits. Faith communities make up 30% of divestment pledges, the largest share of any category.<sup>15</sup>

Divestment takes a variety of forms:

- Full Divestment Commitment - organization has committed to fully divest from fossil fuels by a target date (e.g. 5 years)
- Partial Divestment Commitment - organization has committed to partially divest in a certain type of fossil fuels (e.g. coal, tar sands, or fracked natural gas)
- Fossil Free - organization has completed the transition and no longer holds investments in any type of fossil fuel.

Several hundred FBOs have made full or partial divestment commitments and more than 25 have made the transition to fossil free.<sup>16</sup>

## REINVESTMENT

In addition to divestment, there is also a need to reinvest in a number of markets and initiatives that will hasten the transition to a low carbon world. Many FBOs have deployed their finances to bolster projects in the developing world that are increasing access to renewable energy. Others have invested in innovative products and materials. One important resource is FaithInvest, an international organization working

with faith communities to ensure their investments achieve the environmental and sustainable development impacts they seek to implement in the world.

## DIRECT ACTION

Another important strategy involves targeting dirty energy infrastructure and the financial institutions that fund it through organizing, protesting, and other forms of direct action.

Clergy of many faiths have been on the front lines protesting. About 14 protesting religious leaders were arrested in 2016 when they blocked work on the construction of a gas pipeline in West Roxbury.<sup>17</sup> Clergy from the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Unitarian Universalist faiths entered the construction site for the West Roxbury Lateral pipeline, sat on the ledge of a hole sited for the 16-inch steel pipe, and engaged in prayer. Also in 2016, 500 Clergy joined indigenous leaders at Standing Rock to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>18</sup> In 2018 the Philadelphia utility PECO called the police in response to a prayer circle of Quakers and allies in the Power Local Green Jobs Campaign.<sup>19</sup>

According to environmental journalist and activist Bill McKibben, Chase Bank, Wells

Fargo, Citibank and Bank of America are the “worst offenders.”<sup>20</sup> McKibben discovered that Chase lent \$196 billion to the fossil-fuel industry *in the past three years alone*.<sup>21</sup> In March 2017, Seattle Quakers and allied clergy held a prayer meeting inside a Chase Bank to expose its over \$300 million in funds to the Bakken pipeline, which is strenuously opposed by the Sioux.<sup>22</sup>

## TOWARD GREATER IMPACT

The numbers of FBOs making a divestment commitment continue to grow, but much more is needed. Members of faith communities should keep pressure on their clergy, congregations, assemblies, and governance bodies to make the inevitable and necessary decision to stop financing dirty energy.

## Noteworthy Project

The Unitarian Church of Montreal (UCM) is officially **fossil free after fully transitioning its assets**, amounting to \$2.25 million, in 2017 out of fossil fuels. The achievement was also symbolic as UCM is the oldest Unitarian Universalist church in Canada. UCM joins a growing list of 27 Unitarian Universalist congregations in the US and 8 in Canada that have committed to divest. Church leaders are currently considering where to reinvest the divested assets.<sup>23</sup>

### TREND: *United for Divestment*

Religious governing bodies are taking bold steps by directly divesting or adopting resolutions on divestment, motivating their member congregations to follow suit.

In 2013 The United Church of Christ (UCC) passed a resolution strongly endorsing divestment, which mobilized over 130 UCC congregations to divest. And in 2016 the Islamic Society of North America became the world's first Muslim institution to divest.

## Noteworthy Project

Congregation Kolot Chayeinu in Brooklyn removed its savings from JPMorgan Chase in 2018. This made the congregation the **first U.S. synagogue to publicly divest** in opposition to the funding of fossil fuels. The move is significant because Chase has lent \$196 billion to the fossil-fuel industry in the last three years, including the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>24</sup> Congregants of Kolot Chayeinu were involved with the Standing Rock protests and felt compelled to bank in line with their values. If the broader Jewish community followed their lead, divestment amounting in the billions of dollars could be achieved.

### TREND: *Sustainable Reinvestment*

Reinvestment is an important parallel effort to the divestment trend. FBOs are increasingly reinvesting their finances into sustainable funds or even starting their own funds in order to support businesses innovating for sustainability. FBOs often use their reinvesting power to lift up livelihoods in the developing world, particularly by providing access to electricity through renewable energy generation.

## Noteworthy Project

16 congregations of Dominican Sisters across the United States have provided **\$46 million in seed funding for a climate solutions fund** that has secured \$130 Million in capital investment. They are “bringing these resources to the marketplace to help address our deep concern about the integrity of God’s creation and the people most impacted by climate change.” The fund will focus on providing access to clean energy for communities in sub-Saharan Africa and small businesses in India, as well as constructing shipping pallets from lighter, recyclable plastics and upgrades for utilities to increase energy efficiency.<sup>25</sup>



The SDGs do not exist in siloes, but rather in overlapping circles, where multilateral thinking is required. The SDGs are inherently intersectional. This part of the report was inspired by **SDG 4** (Quality Education), and very specifically, a secondary target listed as 4.7, “by 2030 all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. Education is thus a core principle intersecting with the other SDGs.

Creating learning opportunities that promote greater knowledge of the SDGs, while also providing applicable skills-training to reach the goals, is an

important space for FBOs. In truth, over the next 3-5 years, this could be the most valuable education humans can give one another.

FBOs are making notable contributions in several SDG intersections, each of which assumes education and training as integral to ongoing success. Examples such as Training Small-Scale Farmers, Returning Land to Indigenous Peoples, Clean Water Access, and Energy Education are summarized below and demonstrate the integrated nature of the SDGs.

## TRAINING SMALL-SCALE FARMERS

There are roughly 500 million family-owned farms throughout the developing world. Approximately one-third of humanity lives and works on farms.<sup>26</sup> Industrial agriculture, subsidies, and imported food are but a few of the obstacles preventing small-scale farmers from better livelihoods.<sup>27</sup> With climate education and regenerative agriculture practices, small-scale farmers can become more effective stewards of food, soil, trees, and water. Additionally, when farm plots are productive, there is less dependence on forest lands for crops: less deforestation means less greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>28</sup>

## RETURNING LAND TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Doctrine of Discovery, first expressed in papal

edicts from the 15th-century, sought to justify the domination of lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples. It is now being repudiated by many Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church.<sup>29</sup> Indigenous communities worldwide are among those impacted most dramatically by climate change even while they contribute the least to its causes.<sup>30</sup> Indigenous peoples are on the front lines resisting deforestation, all forms of extraction (mining for oil, minerals, and gas), and the most harmful industrial agricultural practices. The traditional knowledge and land tenure practices of Indigenous peoples provides invaluable wisdom in the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity. Through land return, we can courageously model a release of possession, a process for making amends and seeking forgiveness, and an instructive act of humility.

## **CLEAN WATER ACCESS**

People around the world are becoming more acquainted with the dangers of drought and the importance of water sanitation. FBOs are creating a powerful intersection in which to learn and act from a place of mutual benefit, cooperation, and greater water security for all. Water ceremonies, prayer meetings, demonstrations, and petitions, as well hands-on efforts to clean rivers and build sanitation systems are all part of the important work taking place. For example, Ecopeace is working in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan to restore the Jordan River as

a shared water resource for all, and equipping teachers to build environmental leadership skills in young people.<sup>31</sup>

## **ENERGY EDUCATION**

Many FBOs have modeled responsible energy practices by installing solar panels on their rooftops or property. This is merely the beginning as these houses of worship might also provide support for others who wish to “go solar.” In these ways, FBOs are engaging with clean energy and consumption reduction, while encouraging others to do the same. Interfaith FBOs offer a range of education and community organizing opportunities for renewable energy, all of which invite engagement from people of many faiths.

## **TOWARD GREATER IMPACT**

In remote villages and large cities, across the disparities of poverty and wealth, opportunities for sustainability education abound. FBOs have many opportunities to contribute on their own, or more broadly through interfaith cooperation. Our success in meeting the SDGs by 2030 demands that we think creatively, developing innovative solutions that incorporate multiple SDG targets. With only nine years remaining, the time is now; and there are ways for all of us to participate in the effort.

## Noteworthy Project

Farming God's Way provides **free training for small-scale farmers across the African continent** using "the laws that God has put in place in creation for the most productive ecosystems in the world." This includes little or no soil disturbance, no destruction or incorporation of surface organic residues, and significant biodiversity of species. Agricultural practices include no ploughing, 100% mulch cover, and practicing rotations.<sup>33</sup>

### TREND: *Farmer Training*

FBOs are providing training for farmers in the developing world, focusing on sustainable agricultural practices. There are long standing gender disparities in agriculture. According to the World Economic Forum, women grow 70% of the food in Africa. Yet, less than 20% of land in the world is owned by women.<sup>32</sup> The efforts of FBOs in this area help bring economic independence to women, increase food security, and ensure agricultural practices are in harmony with ecosystems.

## Noteworthy Project

In 2019 the Bahá'í community opened the Ngungu Center for Community Agriculture in Zambia. This community-based center will facilitate **knowledge transfer relating to sustainable food production** to community members. The center will be staffed by local residents closely connected to the area's food production systems. Programs will focus on sustainable food production on small experimental plots of land. Local farmers will benefit from these insights.<sup>34</sup>

## Noteworthy Project

Lifewater is committed to **ending the global water and sanitation crisis**, one village at a time. The organization achieves its results with a collaboration, rather than a top-down approach, utilizing training and education. Their model for sustainable change includes sourcing local technology so that replacement materials are close at hand, training local influencers in water access, sanitation, and hygiene practices, forming a committee of local leaders, and leveraging a community contribution of 10-15% of project cost through labor, materials, or funds.<sup>35</sup>



Photo by [Liz Martin](#)

### TREND: *Clean Water Access*

More than a dozen FBOs are working to provide access to clean water in developing countries across world, particularly in Africa, Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean. Their projects leverage innovative technologies, renewable energy for pumping, and local input. This approach fosters sustainable and locally managed projects and ensures lasting access to clean water with minimal environmental impact.



## TREND: *Energy Education*

The Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR program estimates that if America's 370,000 congregations cut energy use just 20% it would save nearly \$630 million per year. That would prevent carbon emissions that are the equivalent of eliminating 480,000 cars from the road or planting 60,000 trees.<sup>36</sup>

FBOs are helping congregations conserve energy, save money, install renewables, and create an ethos that congregants take back into their own residences.

## Noteworthy Project

Cool Congregations is a unique stewardship program of Interfaith Power & Light that **helps congregations reduce the carbon footprint** of their facilities and engages their members in reducing their carbon footprint at home. The program educates, inspires, and saves money. Cool Congregations provides start up kits, calculators, and a certification process. It can guide a congregation from creating an energy baseline to implementing energy efficiency or renewable energy projects.<sup>37</sup>



Photo by [Seth Doyle](#)

## Noteworthy Project



Photo by [Alex Azabache](#)

A partnership between non-profit Planting Justice and the Sogorea Tè Land Trust is coordinating the **return of Ohlone land back to Native stewardship**. A quarter acre of land in Oakland, California will become an indigenous cultural site with a traditional arbor, a place for ceremony, and a place to remain true to the original teachings and pass them onto the next generations.<sup>38</sup> The Ohlone's traditional lands are the California coast between San Francisco and Monterey Bay. The arrival of Spanish missionaries brought disease and destruction, reducing the population to only 1,000. Though never federally recognized, today the Ohlone people have retained their culture and way of life.

## TREND: *Returning Land to Indigenous Peoples*

Although each locality has its own laws associated with land ownership, more and more FBOs are looking for the best ways to share, redistribute, and return land to the indigenous communities that are the original caretakers. Pope Francis and several Protestant leaders are determining next steps for land transition. In some cases, the return of land is facilitated by community land trusts in local areas.



## Recommendations

# GOAL 15

## Life on Land

### FROM FAITH LANDS TO FARMS

6,000 to 10,000 churches close every year in the United States.<sup>39</sup> And although some traditions have seen net growth in houses of worship - the number of US mosques increased by 74% between 2000 and 2010<sup>40</sup> - others have experienced declines. These 'stranded assets' could be transitioned to sustainable agriculture and serve as a much needed resource, particularly in food deserts. Western North Carolina alone is predicted to have 40% of its churches close by 2030 due to lack of parishioners, according to Greenhorns, a nonprofit that supports young farmers.<sup>41</sup> With the right coordination these lands could be cultivated to provide local, sustainable, nutritious food for communities.

### INTEGRATED APPROACH

Faith communities are making good on their stewardship commitments by conserving natural resources. From monasteries in Tibet monitoring snow leopards to dry forest restoration in Peru, FBOs are protecting biodiversity and creating resilience to climate change. FBOs could adopt two strategies to integrate their activities with other stakeholders. First, they could lobby governments, nature reserves, and natural resource agencies to allow them to take on a greater role as natural resource managers. FBOs possess traditional environmental knowledge that is valuable for conservation. Second, they could integrate conservation into existing activities on lands under their control. Potential projects include native plant cultivation at schools or watershed restoration.

## COLLABORATIONS FOR SCALE

In many cases, FBO projects run parallel to the work of mainstream conservation groups and government agencies. By fostering collaborations with these partners, FBOs could magnify their role and create a conduit for information sharing. For example, temple sanctuaries in India protecting endangered Mahseer fish should be substantially supported by the conservation community as a whole. Achieving SDG 15 requires that we identify missed opportunities for collaboration and scaling of conservation projects and actualize them.

## SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIES = SUSTAINABLE LANDS

Communities that are economically stable tend to have better conservation outcomes. A major driver of environmental degradation is unsustainable development. With few options for sustaining their families, farmers in the Brazilian Amazon set fires to clear and fertilize land. After a few cycles of this activity, the soil becomes degraded and can sustain neither agriculture nor biodiversity. This story plays out in rainforests around the world. FBOs can create positive cycles by assisting local farming communities with aid, equipment, and training in regenerative agriculture. It's a win-win for people and nature.

## Recommendations

# GOAL 15

## Life on Land



## Recommendations

# GOAL 7

## Affordable & Clean Energy

### COMMUNITY SOLAR

Many congregations are unable to install solar panels because their rooftops are unsuitable or they lack funding. Community solar would allow congregations to share the costs and benefits of a solar installation when it is infeasible to have their own. In many cases the electricity generated by the community solar farm costs less than their utility's rates. The solar farm can also be shared by others in the community, including congregants' residences.

### ACCESS TO ENERGY

Millions around the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and India, lack access to electricity. In these regions people often burn kerosene, wood, or waste, resulting in air pollution and GHG emissions. Respiratory disease rates are high. As renewable energy costs continue to decline, FBOs with technical expertise and available funding have an opportunity to bring utility-scale renewable energy projects where it is needed most, changing lives, reducing pollution, and mitigating climate change.



## Recommendations

# GOAL 12

## Responsible Consumption & Production

### POOLING REINVESTMENTS

FBOs have divested billions of dollars from fossil fuels and divestments continue to grow. Reinvesting in sustainable industries and projects is the next logical step so those divested dollars can do good in the world. FBOs could follow in the footsteps of the Dominican Sisters, referenced in this report, who created a \$130 Million reinvestment fund. Pooling creates more influence in markets, and allows FBOs to fully fund multiple projects and bring sustainable solutions to scale.

### RAISING AMBITION FOR DIVESTMENT

While unique circumstances will dictate each FBO's timing of a fossil free transition, we must also recognize the urgency of this moment. This is a time for bold action. FBO leadership should take a hard look at their fossil fuel investments and seize every opportunity to become fossil free in the near term. Some FBOs have already moved their investments away from certain fossil fuels, such as fracked gas or coal, while others have made a commitment to divest in the future. As discussed in this report, fossil free means a full transition. Becoming fossil free is the only way to ensure movement away from fossil fuels and toward scaled renewable energy.



## Recommendations

# INTERSECTIONALITY

Clean Water & Sanitation

Affordable & Clean Energy

Responsible Consumption & Production

Education

Climate Action

Life Below Water

Life on Land

## TRAINING FOR WOMEN FARMERS

Small scale farmers in the developing world need training and support in regenerative agricultural practices that will help them earn a livelihood while respecting ecological balance. Regenerative agriculture takes into account soil health, biodiversity, fertilizer and pesticide applications, and water use. Women make up 60-80% of farmers in non-industrialized countries but do not receive a proportionate level of assistance.<sup>42</sup> Women are the future of food security. FBOs should target their training and support programs to maximize positive outcomes for women farmers.

## Recommendations

# INTERSECTIONALITY

Clean Water & Sanitation

Affordable & Clean Energy

Responsible Consumption & Production

Education

Climate Action

Life Below Water

Life on Land

## RETURN OF INDIGENOUS LANDS

The doctrine of discovery has been invoked by colonial powers around the world since Pope Alexander VI established it in 1493. It resulted in the appropriation and theft of indigenous lands throughout history. Apart from the injustice of removing original caretakers from their historic and often spiritual lands, this has also resulted in negative impacts to landscapes. Indigenous peoples have respected natural cycles and accumulated knowledge of their environment over generations. Returning lands to indigenous control will rectify this injustice and help restore balance by applying traditional knowledge to advance place-based solutions.



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## THE PATH FORWARD

FBOs are answering the call to unite behind the SDGs and usher in a new era of sustainability. Across the six environmental SDGs, and in several intersectional areas, we see remarkable strides. This translates to environmental, economic, and social benefits. People of faith number in the billions. Their aggregate impact could literally change the outlook for our future.

There is much work to do before the SDGs sunset in 2030. Our capacity for action far exceeds our accomplishments so far. The urgency has never been greater. This must be a decade of rapid progress if the SDGs are to be achieved. FBOs will need to deploy their finances to enable a low carbon transition. They will need to use their lands to conserve and protect natural resources. And they will need to educate the poor and lift up livelihoods *sustainably*, and without contributing to new sources of waste and pollution. These are

not small challenges. They require a cultural transformation and broad mobilization in communities across the globe. Fortunately, we have every resource we need to meet the SDGs. What we must now demonstrate is true adherence to our values. We must imagine a better world and commit to its stewardship.



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## Bhumi Global

Bhumi Global works to educate Hindus worldwide to protect and care for Mother Earth.

Learn more at [BhumiGlobal.org](http://BhumiGlobal.org)

## The Parliament of the World's Religions

The Climate Commitments Project, an initiative of the Parliament of the World's Religions, is an online resource that connects communities around the world and facilitates resource and tool sharing in the fight against climate change.

Learn more at [ClimateCommitments.org](http://ClimateCommitments.org) and [ParliamentOfReligions.org](http://ParliamentOfReligions.org)

## UNEP Faith for Earth

Following a series of initiatives and conventions organized in partnership with Faith-Based Organizations, UN Environment launched the Faith for Earth Initiative in November 2017. The goal of Faith for Earth is to strategically engage with Faith-Based Organizations and partner with them to collectively achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and fulfill the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

Learn more at [UNEnvironment.org](http://UNEnvironment.org)

## United Religions Initiative

A URI Cooperation Circle is a self-organizing group of at least seven members from at least three religions, spiritual expressions, or indigenous traditions—including atheists and agnostics. Cooperation Circles work on two levels: by giving people of different backgrounds a chance to work together, and by tackling important community issues their members care about.

Learn more at [URI.org](http://URI.org)