

THE RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT: LOOKING AHEAD.

June 6, 2023 – Episcopal Church Center, New York

REPORT ON THE PROGRAM

On June 6, 2023, a half-day program was held on “The Right to a Healthy Environment: Looking Ahead” at the Episcopal Church Center at 815 Second Avenue in New York. The Co-sponsors were the Center for Earth Ethics, the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, The Episcopal Church, the NGO Committee on Human Rights, and the Parliament of the World’s Religions. The program was an observance of World Environment Day and a Pre-Parliament Event of the Convening of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago August 14-18. The program was a hybrid event, with in person attendance of 35 and 29 on-line by Zoom.

The program was a non-formal consultation with the purpose of sharing information, reflections, analysis and recommendations on implementing the Right to a Healthy Environment. Following is a brief report including abstracts of the speakers’ talks and a summary of salient points made by presenters in the Visioning Roundtable as well as the speakers. The Zoom recording provides a complete unedited transcript.

Concept of the Program: The Right to a Healthy Environment was approved overwhelmingly as a basic human right by the UN General Assembly in July 2023, the first recognition of a new basic human right since The Right to Water and Sanitation in 2010. This was a historic step forward for human rights and protection of the environment, and faith-based organizations played a significant role in the campaign for this recognition. The Right to a Healthy Environment is included in the constitutions of over 100 countries but is far from realization. What role can the world’s religious communities play going forward to fully manifest the right to a healthy environment – in the urgent “triple crisis” of the climate emergency, pollution and loss of biodiversity? The recognition of a new basic human right is especially notable as this year we will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A welcome to the Episcopal Church Center was given by the Rev. Margaret Rose, Ecumenical and Interreligious Deputy to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and Concluding Reflections were offered by the Ven. Doyeon Park, Co-Chair, Committee of Religious NGOs and UN Representative of Won Buddhism. The first part of the program was moderated by Imam Saffet Catovic, Director of UN Operations for Justice for All, and the Visioning Roundtable was moderated by Beth Blissman, UN Representative of the Loretto Community.

SPEAKERS

Detailed biodata of the speakers is included at the end of this report.

Professor Daniel Magraw, Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), President Emeritus the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) – In his opening keynote address, Professor Magraw noted that not only has the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly recognized the Human Right to

a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, but also the International Labor Organization (ILO) in summer of 2022 elevated occupational health and safety to be a Fundamental Principle and Right at Work. Stating that, “Nature is the true infrastructure of our society” he said that we have the knowledge to deal with the environmental crisis but “lack political will and adequate policy and legal tools.” He provided a detailed history of the Right to a Healthy Environment beginning with pathbreaking scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, the Inuit Petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2005 followed by the 2007 Malé Declaration by small island developing States, and the creation by the UN of a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, the first being John Knox, succeeded by David Boyd (the current Special Rapporteur). The Right to a Healthy Environment (R2HE) was recognized by the UN Council on Human Rights in October 2021 after extensive advocacy, including mobilization of almost 1400 civil society organizations. This was followed by the campaign for recognition by the UN General Assembly, which took place on July 28, 2023. Professor Magraw explained the meaning of R2HE and discussed the close relation of R2HE to environmental justice and the rights of future generations, noting that protecting R2HE for current generations presents a seamless means of also protecting the rights of future generations. He further said that R2HE provides a pathway to rebalancing the relation between humans and nature, stating that “It is humans that have the right to a healthy environment, but that right cannot be fulfilled unless nature itself is healthy.” In closing Magraw stated that religious organizations have an important role to play in realizing R2HE and called for recognition of R2HE in case law and in international legal instruments, as well as its inclusion in international monitoring systems, such as the Universal Periodic Reviews by the UN Human Rights Council and environmental reviews by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the work programs of all intergovernmental organizations including UN agencies.

The Rev. Melanie Mullen, Director of Reconciliation, Justice and Creation Care, The Episcopal Church – Reverend Mullen opened by saying that in the Episcopal Church and for Christians in the U. S., the path towards reconciliation, justice and creation care goes back to the civil rights movement, and recalled that in the 1968 labor march in Memphis, the last march in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. participated, those involved well understood that labor, social rights, racial rights and environmental rights are all interrelated. She reflected, “We have to use words that help us align solidarity with creation and with each other,” adding, “The right to a healthy environment is core to how we understand who we are and how God made us.” Reverend Mullen commented that in the past there has been a gap between theology of creation care and the “secular” public square or “political” concern for human rights, but that this perception of a gap has been closing with the growth of the environmental justice movement and the realization that the right to a healthy environment is not new. Caring for the common good within God’s creation is meant for all. Respect for the human dignity of all, made in God’s image, calls for clean air, clean water, food security and health; the Covid pandemic increased learning about the conditions faced by front-line communities. She closed by saying, “God created us to do the work of justice. God created us also to leave no one behind, to understand that a healthy environment is the right of all, and that we go forth, loving, liberating and going into the world, proclaiming that there is this human right for all of us in the life in the world.”

Geoffrey Roth (Lakota), Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2023-2025) – Geoffrey Roth began by noting that he is referring to a study which he authored collaborating with 20 international Indigenous health experts and presented this April at the UN

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and that he would reflect on the intersections of health, environmental and biodiversity protections. This work is grounded in twenty years of the UN PFII as well as the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was ratified by 144 countries in 2007. This year the Permanent Forum's theme was "Indigenous Peoples, human health, planetary and territorial health and climate change: a rights-based approach." The study is concerned with Indigenous determinants of health for the UN system and Member States and focuses on three main themes: (1) intergenerational and holistic healing, (2) culture as a determinant of health, and the re-indigenizing and decolonization of culture (3) the health of Mother Earth. With regard to the right to a healthy environment, "planetary health science shows that human health cannot continue to flourish while the natural life support systems we depend on continue to decline." Yet Indigenous people, who are 6 percent of the world's population, care for and manage over 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. The study is intended to create outcomes at the local level and also educate non-Indigenous decision-makers and policy advocates. It can serve as a tool for dialogue with authorities and help prevent further "minoritization" of Indigenous people's lifeways, which disregards their uniqueness by approaching them with the same methodology as other minorities and is at cross purposes with the 2007 Declaration. Mr. Roth concluded with a discussion of efforts to integrate the study and its content on Indigenous determinants of health into the work of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other UN agencies, and the obstacles that impede these efforts.

David Hales, Chair of Climate Action and Trustee, Parliament of the World's Religions and President Emeritus, College of the Atlantic – David Hales began by stating that the actions of humans living today will impact the lives of countless humans in the life span of our species, and even considering the next three generations, will immensely affect great numbers of people living in the 22nd and 23rd centuries. The unprecedented power of the Anthropocene requires unprecedented caution and responsibility. We can choose our actions and it is "common sense" that we have a moral responsibility to future generations, which is also a teaching embedded in our faith traditions. Our obligation to those in the future is not in conflict with duties to those living today; avoiding the existential risks of carbon, pandemics, nuclear war and artificial intelligence (as examples) are each part of the common good of both present and future generations. We need to enhance our capacity to anticipate, to learn from the future scientifically and in other ways, but the siloed and fragmented nature of decision-making at the UN with "disparate actors" and in governments prevents this from taking place effectively. What is needed is a Trustee for Future Generations "at the table," as future generations now are voiceless and disenfranchised. The Parliament of the World's Religions and others therefore call for repurposing of the UN Trusteeship Council "to serve as a deliberative forum to act on behalf of succeeding generations" as proposed by Secretary-General António Guterres in his report "Our Common Agenda," as well as to give guidance on management of the global commons. This would be a transformative "game-changer" for decision-making by the UN and would catalyze research and problem-solving thought, helping create a "forum for systematic collaboration" across sectors and disciplines including policy-making, science, philosophy and religion.

VISIONING ROUNDTABLE

Presenters in the Visioning Roundtable were invited to offer two-minute interventions responding to the following questions: What is your vision of how the Right to a Healthy

Environment can be most effectively implemented going forward? What are your practical proposals for action to implement the Right to a Healthy Environment? And are there other points you would like to briefly add to your statement?

The following persons presented in the Visioning Roundtable. As this was not an official deliberation, organizations are named for identification purposes only.

Br. Benedict Ayodi OFMCap – Laudato Si’ Movement
 Rev. Dr. Liberado Bautista – United Methodist Board of Church and Society
 Debra Boudreaux – Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation
 Sister Veronica Brand, RSHM – Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary
 Imam Saffet Catovic – Justice for All
 Marya Farah – Franciscans International
 Alison Kelly – ACT Alliance
 Bruce Knotts – International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women
 Carl Murrell – Bahá-ís of the United States
 Alyssa Ng – Center for Earth Ethics
 Sue Rheem – Presbyterian Church of the USA
 Hiro Sakurai – Soka Gakkai International
 Hannah Williams – Greek Orthodox Archdiocese
 Jimmy Walters – Sisters of Charity Federation
 Deepika Singh – Religions for Peace
 Lauren Van Ham (by video) – United Religions Initiative (URI)
 Rev. Scott Stearman (by video) – World Baptist Alliance
 Shefali Ajmera – Jain Center of America

There was a convergence of vision and ethics in the presentations, as well as much agreement on practical recommendations for action. Following is a summary of the main points; in most cases points were made by more than one presenter.

Vision, from diverse faith perspectives:

- We are all interconnected and interdependent, both in Nature and in human society
- God knows and sees all that we think, say and do and foresees the results of our actions
- Every action has a result, a result in accord with the nature of the action
- Love of God and faith in God include love for the natural world; humans have a special duty to care intentionally for other species and the environment
- The sources of our faith traditions describe the natural world flourishing in beauty, majesty and countless forms of life, manifesting and celebrating its Creator
- Love and compassion mean justice and equality – caring for one’s neighbor equally as one cares for one’s self

- Love, justice and responsibility extend to future generations: our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and the further future

Values and Ethical Principles

- Opportunity entails responsibility: We can choose our actions and all of our choices are moral
- There are no rights without responsibilities and duties – Who is responsible to fulfil and implement the Right to a Healthy Environment?
- We all have a shared and collective responsibility • and are responsible for both present and future generations
- The Right to a Healthy Environment cannot be considered apart from other human rights – human rights are indivisible.
- Justice is inclusive and includes the Right to a Healthy Environment, social, racial, economic justice and the rights of Indigenous peoples
- We aspire to a world of non-violence – killing by humans is vastly excessive and is not part of “the natural order”
- Restraint and ascetic orientation fosters simplicity, peace and ability to see beauty in Nature

Implementation of The Right to a Healthy Environment

Following are recommendations for action in descending order from international to local and personal, bearing in mind the great importance of faith-based organizations (FBOs) and religious leaders to work together in partnership with each other as well as other sectors of society.

Note that some of these proposals call for concerted action by a number of organizations in a coalition, some can be implemented by single institutions or denominations, others by local communities – still others pertain to individual action and practice, and some can be carried out by an appropriate combination of these.

- *Incorporate* the Right to a Healthy Environment in:
 - work programs of UN agencies and intergovernmental organizations
 - Periodic reviews of the UN Human Rights Council
 - Periodic reviews of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
- *Repurpose* the United Nations Trusteeship Council to be a forum on the rights of future generations and management of the global commons, as proposed by the UN Secretary-General in “Our Common Agenda”

- *Endorse* and promote the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty
- *Regulate* business – with legal accountability – regarding its impact on the environment and human rights – *Support* the legally binding instrument in development by UN Human Rights Council (currently in its 3rd draft) to regulate transnational corporations and other business entities
- *Give input* through advocacy to the international Plastics Treaty now being negotiated
- *Develop strategy* to implement the Right to a Healthy Environment as part of a comprehensive agenda including racial justice, food security, poverty and public health – including partnerships with local Indigenous communities
- *Promote* agroecology and regenerative agriculture
- *Stop fossil fuel pipelines* planned or under construction in one’s own region
- *Divest from fossil fuels* and/or engage in shareholder advocacy
- *Retrofit* old buildings and infrastructure
- *Promote* the circular economy and end “throwaway culture”
- *Convert* the houses of worship to 100% renewable energy by 2030
- *Educate* youth and adults in local congregations so they can advocate on public policy and also speak on issues of the Right to a Healthy Environment at their places of work
- *Live* more simply and reduce consumption in personal practice, recalling our faith traditions’ teachings on asceticism and simplicity

CONCLUSION

This report is intended to serve as a record for those who attended the program or would like to learn about it. As mentioned, it is not an official statement or the outcome of formal deliberation, but rather a series of notes developing content on which we can build future work undertaken in partnerships, as single organizations and as individuals.

The Organizing Committee

Beth Blissman
 Co-Chair and Climate Working Group,
 Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN
 UN Representative, Loretto Community

Imam Saffet Catovic

NGO Committee on Human Rights
 Bureau Member, Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN
 Trustee and Climate Action Task Force,
 Parliament of the World's Religions
 Director of UN Operations, Justice for All

Bruce Knotts

Co-Chair, NGO Committee on Human Rights
 Trustee and Climate Action Task Force,
 Parliament of the World's Religions
 A UN Representative of the International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women
 Chair, NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security

Lynnaia Main

Episcopal Church Representative to the United Nations
 Co-Chair, Climate Working Group, Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN

Kusumita P. Pedersen

Trustee and Climate Action Task Force
 Parliament of the World's Religions
 Co-Chair, Climate Working Group, Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN
 Chair, Interfaith Center of New York
 Advisory Board, Center for Earth Ethics

Biodata of Speakers

DANIEL MAGRAW is a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced international Studies (SAIS). He was President and Chief Executive Officer of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) from January 2002 to September 2010. From 1992 to 2001, he was Director of the International Environmental Law Office at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). From 1983 to 1992, he was Professor of Law at the University of Colorado, where he was the faculty initiator of the *Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law & Policy*. He was a Visiting Scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in 1989. Professor Magraw has a J.D. degree from the University of California, Berkeley and a B.A. with high honors in Economics from Harvard University and is the author of numerous books and articles.

THE REV. MELANIE MULLEN is Director of Reconciliation, Justice and Creation Care, The Episcopal Church, charged with bringing the Jesus Movement to the concerns of this world. Prior to joining the Presiding Bishop's staff she was the Downtown Missioner at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, leading a historic southern congregation's missional, civic and reconciliation ministries. She was the interim missioner for youth ministries for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington; assistant director of community for Camp Richmond Hill; and the director of communications and development for Lutheran Volunteer Corps. She has also worked in campaign fundraising and development and was a development associate for the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, with a focus on poverty advocacy. Melanie

has an M.Div. from Virginia Theological Seminary and a B. A. from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

GEOFFREY ROTH (Lakota) is a Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2023-2025). He has devoted his entire career to the advocacy of Indigenous rights in diverse sectors. He is currently providing advice on policy and legislative strategies for Urban Indian Organizations. Mr. Roth recently co- founded *Inaji*, an Indigenous-led technology company, providing culturally competent solutions to improve American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) healthcare. President Barack Obama appointed Mr. Roth in 2010 to serve in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Indian Health Service (IHS). Prior to that, Mr. Roth served as the Executive Director of the National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH), representing community-based Indigenous health centers in cities across the United States. Mr. Roth also served as the President of the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center and represented the US in the International Indigenous Working Group on HIV and AIDS.

DAVID HALES IS Chair of Climate Action and a Trustee on the Board of the Parliament of the World's Religions and President Emeritus, College of the Atlantic. He served as President of Second Nature, the managing organization of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, and as Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. He led environmental policy and sustainability programs for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). As a diplomat, he has represented the USA in numerous negotiations on climate change, urban affairs and policy, and biodiversity. He served in the Carter Administration as Deputy Secretary of the Interior and was the first American to serve as Chair of the World Heritage Convention.

References and Resources

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