

An Intergenerational Conversation on Climate Change

Mennonite Creation Care Network is calling the congregations in its network to hold an intergenerational dialog on climate change during the first six months of 2019. The younger people might be a high school youth group or a young adult Christian education class. They might be fringe young adults who attended church as children, whose parents attend the congregation hosting the event or who live in the community and are looking for meaningful conversation. The older people might be anyone from 30 to 95.

Why an intergenerational discussion?

Older people need to hear from younger people because...

- Younger people have longer to live and therefore have more at stake with regard to climate change.
- Younger people have had the benefit of education in environmental science—a discipline that was in its infancy when older people were in school. They are likely to be more knowledgeable about climate change than older folk.
- Many young adults see the Church as out of touch with the issues that concern them. Climate change is one of these issues.
- Younger people can provide inspiration and hope to older people who have become weary and cynical.

Younger people need to hear from older people because...

- Many older people practice their faith in ways that give them powerful sources of hope: regular faith practices, a stable community, a deep knowledge of scripture, an enduring trust in God.
- Many older people have devoted decades to causes they care about. They know what it means to be faithful, to endure and to hope even when things seem hopeless.
- Many older people have more time to devote to current events than those who are in school or beginning careers.

Session 1: Strangers in the Anthropocene*

We may know each other quite well without ever having discussed climate change together. It's easy to avoid problems that make us feel powerless.

Objectives:

- To break the ice around this topic and give people practice discussing it in safe ways.
- To challenge people to make space in their lives for this urgent and important issue.
- To enable us to learn from the unique perspectives that different age groups provide.

1. Set the stage: (5 minutes) Introduce yourself, the objectives above and the particular reasons you find yourself leading this discussion. It will also be helpful to provide a short overview of the physical changes our planet is experiencing in the 21st century. This will give people a picture of the page that you are starting from. For example, you might say something like:

We've all gotten into hot cars in the summertime, so we have some idea how the greenhouse effect works. We also know that carbon and other greenhouse gases in our atmosphere trap heat and keep our planet habitable. In pre-industrial times, the carbon concentration in the atmosphere was under 300 parts per million. Today it is over 400.

We are beginning to experience consequences. Island nations report flooding and sea level rise. Many agricultural areas around the world are noticing erratic weather patterns that result in droughts and flooding rather than reliable rainfall. In our own country forest fires and hurricanes have wreaked havoc. In the fall of 2018, two major climate reports came out, both of which emphasized the severity of the situation. One of them predicted that consequences that were not expected until the hazy future will arrive by 2040. This affects nearly all of us, but the younger we are, the greater our chances of suffering. The poor are especially at risk.

It is difficult to hear this kind of news daily and not retreat from it, but we believe there is more to be gained from talking about it together.

Open with a prayer: *You might say something like...*

Creator God, as people of faith, we believe you hold the world in your saving love. Help us to listen to each other and to find courage in your presence among us.

2. Introductions: (15 min.)

Have group members share their names and the age they will be in 2040. (Passing is allowed...) Follow up with one of these questions:

- How did you decide to join this conversation?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how worried are you about climate change? If space is available, have people stand on a line so you have a visual picture of the group's anxiety level. Invite responses as to why people placed themselves where they did.

* This word has recently been coined to describe the current geological age: an era when human beings have been the dominant influence on the environment.

3. Hearing from younger people: (15 minutes)

Provide a period of time when only younger people can speak. One way to structure this is to put four chairs in the center of a circle and invite young people to rotate in and out of the circle while older people listen from the perimeter.

Questions could include...

- Where does your information about climate change come from? Have you studied it in school?
- How do people your age discuss climate change? Does it come up in your social settings?
- What do you wish the Church would do in response to climate change?
- What advice do you have for the older people who are here right now?

4. Hearing from older people: (15 minutes)

Provide a period of time when only older people can speak using the same structure you used for the younger group.

Questions could include...

- Where does your information about climate change come from?
- How is climate change discussed—if at all—at your workplace or among friends?
- What crises were part of your life when you were a youth or young adult? How did you cope? Looking back, what positive steps were taken to avert the crisis or heal the damage afterwards?
- What hope do you have to offer young people as they face an uncertain future?

5. Wrap-Up: (10 minutes)

When you can all speak again, ask:

- What was most interesting to you while you were listening to the opposite age group? What was surprising?
- Suppose you had one hour per week to devote to responding to climate change. What would you do?

Take-home challenges:

- If this is the only session you've planned, invite people to imagine how they might find time to act on the hour-per-week responses to climate change that were named.
- If you are having a second session, invite people to bring an object to the next meeting that represents a grief they feel in relation to climate change. For example, it could be a leaf from a tree that does not handle drought well, an article of clothing from a baby in the family or a photo of a place that is threatened.