

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 35 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 may have knowledge to share that is new to others.
- 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 may have become weary.

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.
- Older people care about the environment too! People of different generations often use different language to talk about what matters to them and have different strengths to offer. What can we learn from each other?

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: (10 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 place 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 than from ignoring it.

Alternately, you could use one of these videos:

National Geographic: [Causes and Effects of Climate Change](#) A 3-minute overview

[What's the Worst that Could Happen?](#) An 8-minute case for action based on logic rather than arguments for or against the science.

Greta Thunberg

Emphasize listening: In many places, climate change is a politically charged topic. Are there any guidelines your group would like to agree on that could help the conversation go well? Examples might be:

- Strive to listen without judgment.
- Approach the conversation with curiosity.

* 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.

- Monitor how much you are speaking versus listening.

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

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

2. Introductions: (10 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.

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.

Session 2: Learning to Lament

People who have experienced personal losses report that they first needed to face their pain and express it before they could heal and take action to make life better. Likewise, moving from spiritual numbness to lamenting the losses that are upon us due to climate change is a step toward healing our planet.

Objectives:

- To identify ways we feel threatened by climate change.
- To name the feelings we have in response to this.
- To experiment with spiritual practices which allow us to express environmental loss.

Beforehand:

Discern whether you want this session to be intergenerational or by age group. If your younger people are high schoolers, it might be good to separate. High school students may be eager to get back to their own context where they feel free to be themselves. Older people may be reluctant to express their own fears and sense of powerlessness in front of youth. On the other hand, if genuine communication took place last week, you might want to continue as a mixed age group. *This lesson plan is for adults. See notes on adapting it if youth are involved.*

Arrange chairs in a circle. Plan out a walking path for #5 below, even if it is simply walking around the outside of the circle of chairs. If you want something more elaborate, you could mark out a labyrinth-like path with blue tape.

You need: note cards or slips of paper; writing utensils; seeds or bulbs; about five minutes of reflective music and a way to play it; space to walk. Arrange an altar in the center of the circle with a variety of seeds and bulbs on it—or a bowl with a single variety of large seeds on it if that is easier.

1. Set the stage:

Provide a brief review of last week's session and the objectives for this week. Remind people that they were invited to bring an object that represents a grief that they feel related to climate change.

Provide slips of paper for people who did not bring an object and give them a few minutes to jot down something they would bring if they had the chance.

2. Discussing ways of grieving

Most of us have experienced grief. Losing a parent or a pet, failing at work or breaking up with a significant other are common experiences. Use these questions to help people think about how they deal with more familiar kinds of pain.

- What spiritual practices do you use when you need to grieve and/or deal with pain?
- What rituals does your congregation—or culture—use to help people grieve or deal with pain?

- How might we adapt this body of experience to help us face ecological losses such as the disappearance of a local species or the degradation of an ecosystem?

3. Sharing climate griefs

Invite each person to tell about the object s/he brought (or would have brought) and to name the emotion that comes to mind in relation to it.

4. Holding each other's fears:

Ask people to pass the objects they brought or the card they wrote to their left. Invite them to pray for the concern they are now holding and the person who brought it. Let them know that background music will play for 5 to 7 minutes. You could cue people to pass to the right several times during this period or simply sit with one thing.

J. Philip Newell's [*Chanting for Peace: Praying with the Earth*](#) would work well and is available on Amazon in MP3 format. The chants are each about six minutes and can be purchased individually for a dollar. "Wait for God," "Do Not Be Afraid" or "Whichever Way You Turn" would work well.

5. Praying for the future:

As always, the future is uncertain. We are walking into a mist, clutching the promises God has given us: that creation is good, that we are loved, that there is resurrection. While we normally respond to the present in our prayers, there is no reason we can't pray for the future.

- First, have people figure out what year they will reach age 85. (We'll give everyone a generous life span.)
- Explain where you'd like people to walk during a walking prayer. Invite each person to take a bulb, packet of seeds, avocado pit or handful of large seeds as a symbol of hope for the journey.
- Imagine yourselves walking together through time as well as through space, praying for whatever people, places or species come to mind.
- Ask people to pray while walking until you call the decade in which they will turn 85. At that point, they should return to their seats and continue praying while seated.
- Begin with the 2020s. Every minute or two, call another decade until everyone is seated. Or go to 2100 if you have time.

To shorten this exercise, invite people to hold bulbs or seeds but remain seated. Ask them to choose a decade in the future. Close by leading a short prayer that names places, people, parts of creation that could apply to any decade.

6. Wrap-Up:

If you are having a third session, pass out copies of the session 3 resource list and

encourage them to learn a little about positive steps people are taking in response to climate change. Ask for volunteers who are willing to choose an article or clip from the resource list and report on it.

Adapting the above plan for youth:

- The younger the group, the fewer opportunities they will have had to experience grief. Youth are more likely to grieve in short bursts rather than long periods of solemnity. The idea of lamenting as a spiritual practice may be new to them. They may deal with grief by avoiding it, acting out or turning to humor. Don't be dismayed if this happens.
- The material above is too much for one session. Use just one exercise before moving on to a lighter topic. Or spread the exercises over several weeks. For example, you could do #2 one week #3 and #4 the next and #5 the third.