



What deeper reflection are we called to in our time? Why?

How to Lead on Climate Change

By Mary Minette, ELCA director for environmental education and advocacy

*"We have such a hope, we act with great boldness."
-- 2 Corinthians 3:12*

Given the state of global and national [discussions around climate change](#) it is abundantly clear that there is a real need for leadership if we are to protect God's creation and vulnerable communities now and in the future.

This month, in his State of the Union address to Congress, President Obama showed some signs of the leadership we need, saying:

"But for the sake of our children and our future, we must do more to combat climate change.

Now, it's true that no single event makes a trend. But the fact is, the 12 hottest years on record have all come in the last 15. Heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods, all are now more frequent and more intense. We can choose to believe that Superstorm Sandy, and the most severe drought in decades, and the worst wildfires some states have ever seen were all just a freak coincidence. Or we can choose to believe in the overwhelming judgment of science and act before it's too late.

Now, the good news is, we can make meaningful progress on this issue while driving strong economic growth. I urge this Congress to get together, pursue a bipartisan, market-based solution to climate change, like the one John McCain and Joe Lieberman worked on together a few years ago.

But if Congress won't act soon to protect future generations, I will."

The president went on to state that if Congress fails to act, he plans to direct federal agencies to “come up with executive actions we can take, now and in the future, to reduce pollution, prepare our communities for the consequences of climate change, and speed the transition to more sustainable sources of energy.”

This sounds like real leadership, but as with all things, the details he has yet to announce will be key to whether or not we will see real change. Current politics make it unlikely, but Congress could decide to act, and a comprehensive approach to reducing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases is the best way to address this pressing issue. However, there are a number of things that federal agencies can do to reduce overall energy use, encourage investment in cleaner sources of energy that emit less pollution into our air and water, and save money while creating new economic opportunities and new jobs.

Last year the Environmental Protection Agency proposed new rules under the Clean Air Act that would require new power plants to reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide, one of the primary causes of climate change. The Environmental Protection Agency is currently going over the more than 2 million public comments it received on the rule (many comments were from ELCA members who acted on ELCA e-Advocacy Network emails) before deciding whether to implement it or modify it. If the rule goes into effect, it will have a substantial impact on new sources of pollution.

However, if the U.S. is to honor a commitment that we made to the global community four years ago in Copenhagen to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels by the year 2020, we will need to do much more.

Increased energy efficiency has great potential to reduce carbon emissions, and it has the added benefit of saving businesses, government and consumers money. According to a [new report](#) from the bipartisan Alliance Commission on National Energy Efficiency Policy, there are multiple options for increasing energy efficiency across the board, including raising efficiency standards for appliances and equipment — something that the Department of Energy can do without congressional action. Some of the most promising efficiency steps would require congressional action; however, energy efficiency may be an area where Congress and the president could find common ground due not only to the potential for cost savings but also the prospect of new economic growth and the creation of jobs.

Another key piece of needed action is to address pollution from existing coal-fired power plants, which are currently our largest

single source of carbon dioxide emissions. According to a [recent report](#) by the Natural Resources Defense Council, if the Environmental Protection Agency were to use the Clean Air Act to regulate carbon emissions from existing power plants beginning in 2014, it would put us on track to reduce emissions by 26 percent from 2005 levels by 2020 and 34 percent by 2025. Such a regulation would cost about \$4 billion to implement in 2020. But the report outlines significant benefits to public health, in adaptation and disaster response costs not spent due to climate change avoided, of between 26 and 60 billion dollars — six to fifteen greater than the costs.

What else can the Administration do if Congress fails to act? A report from the [World Resources Institute](#) gives a few more ideas: cut emissions of methane, an extremely potent greenhouse gas, via Clean Air Act regulation; set new standards for hydrofluorocarbons, also extremely potent greenhouse gases, under the Montreal Protocol and the Clean Air Act; and make appliances and equipment more energy efficient through stronger Department of Energy standards.

Climate change is already affecting our world. The longer we wait to act, the more likely it is that some of those changes will be permanent, and will affect God's creation for generations to come. Consider reaching out to your members of Congress — calling and writing their Washington offices or interacting with their local staff — to tell them that, as their constituent, you look to their leadership and expect them to prioritize climate change in this new session.

As we've noted in recent reflections, some of the changes we need to make are difficult, but they are not impossible — we need the will to embrace them and leaders to help guide us. As people of hope and people of faith, God gives us the courage to act boldly. Let us pray that our president and our Congress will also have the courage to do what must be done.



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