



*The earth dries up and withers,  
the world languishes and withers;  
the heavens languish together with the earth.  
The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed laws,  
violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.*

**Isaiah 24:4-5**

ELCA WASHINGTON OFFICE

# Climate change

is one of the most pressing issues facing all of God's creation. The evidence is mounting that earth's climate is changing dramatically—sea levels are rising, rainfall patterns are changing, polar ice and glaciers are melting, weather disasters are increasing. And **the impacts of these changes are already falling most heavily on people and nations struggling in poverty**, those least able to adapt to changing conditions because they have few resources to do so.

We see their stories in the news: drought in Africa; hurricanes in Central America; coastal flooding on small Pacific islands. People are hungry, forced to leave their homes and struggling to rebuild. Perhaps we are moved to act: to give money to a disaster appeal; to write a letter to our member of Congress urging them to provide international aid. But are we called to do more in the face of mounting evidence that this problem is growing worse?

**The great paradox of climate change is that those least responsible for the emission of pollutants harmful to the earth will be most severely affected and least able to adapt to changing conditions.**



**Poverty and  
Hunger in a  
Changing  
Climate**



Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

**Christ taught us to seek justice, to care for our neighbor and to provide special care and consideration for “the least of these”—those living in poverty.** Our response to climate change must heed this call to justice, particularly for those living in poverty around the world, who are least responsible for climate change and most likely to suffer greatly from its impacts if we do not act now.

As Christians, we are called to protect what God has created, and we are obligated to speak and to act in response to this growing crisis. As Lutherans, we are freed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ to serve our neighbor and all of creation; and we are people of hope, who see the crisis facing our planet and are taking action.

### **What is climate change?**

Climate change is real. A report released in 2007 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a group of leading scientists from around the globe who have been studying data on climate for decades, confirmed that global average temperatures are growing warmer due to increasing levels of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases in Earth’s atmosphere, and that human use of fossil fuels is the main source of the increase in these gases. Every time we burn gasoline by driving a car, use electricity from coal- or gas-fired power plants, or heat our homes with oil or natural gas, we release carbon dioxide and other “greenhouse” gases into the air. At normal levels greenhouse gases make Earth’s temperatures moderate enough to support life, but at these increased, and human-caused levels, more and more of the sun’s heat is trapped by our atmosphere and less escapes back into space. The increase in trapped heat changes the climate, causing altered weather patterns that can bring



unusually intense precipitation, droughts and more severe storms.

The United States produces about 25 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions. Although China recently surpassed the United States as the globe’s largest emitter of carbon dioxide, our individual emissions in the U.S. remain the highest of any nation and we are still the largest historic emitter of this greenhouse gas.

### **What are the impacts of climate change?**

In 2007, the IPCC painted a bleak picture of the future for God’s creation and those already struggling with hunger, poverty and disease. They predicted that a changing climate will increase food insecurity in places like Africa, where food is already scarce, while reversing progress made in the fight against hunger in regions like Latin America. Rising temperatures will increase freshwater scarcity in some regions and the spread of diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and West Nile virus in others. More severe storms and long-term drought will lead to increased migration, and rising sea levels will likely lead to the permanent displacement of coastal communities and even entire small island nations. Increasing numbers of environmental migrants, coupled with greater competition for scarce resources among people and nations, are potentially destabilizing forces that cannot be ignored.

Some of these impacts can already be seen and measured. For example, smallholder farmers in western Nicaragua are struggling to adapt to increasingly unpredictable rainfall: where they once were able to plant and harvest two crops during the annual rainy season, they are now facing crop failure and hunger. Often there is too little rain, and crops die, or too much, and

### **Help your neighbor**

People living in poverty around the world are already dealing with drought, flooding, more severe storms and other climate change impacts! **ELCA World Hunger** works with international partners including **Lutheran World Relief** and **The Lutheran World Federation** to address root causes of hunger and poverty, including climate change, through relief, development, education and advocacy. Take part in this important work by supporting **ELCA World Hunger** ([www.elca.org/hunger](http://www.elca.org/hunger)).



floods carry away seedlings. In several small communities, projects supported by ELCA World Hunger and The Lutheran World Federation are helping farmers develop irrigation systems to farm during the dry season. However, groundwater levels are dropping as well due to the unpredictable rainfall, and there is little money to invest in irrigation projects. Families in these communities are struggling to survive, and many of the men have left their communities—or even the country—to seek work as their crops fail season after season. For these farmers climate change is a reality.

As this example illustrates, climate change impacts will fall most heavily on those living in poverty and other vulnerable populations who are dependent on their natural environment for their day-to-day survival. Wealthy countries like the United States will be better able to adapt to these changes, but as Hurricane Katrina proved in 2005, even in our country, low income people are highly vulnerable.

As Lutherans around the world accompany our neighbors in their journeys out of poverty, the reality of climate change presents new challenges and requires new strategies for our work. For example, Lutheran World Relief's (LWR) projects around the world aim to improve peoples' lives and



## Reduce Your Footprint

Find out the contribution that you, your household, or your congregation are making to climate change by calculating your **carbon footprint**:

[www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind\\_calculator.html](http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind_calculator.html)

Get suggestions for ways to **reduce your energy use** and links to other resources on the ELCA advocacy Web pages:

[www.elca.org/caringforcreation](http://www.elca.org/caringforcreation) and [www.elca.org/environment](http://www.elca.org/environment)

Find ways for your congregation to **"go green"**:

[www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has an **Energy Star** guide for congregations that can also help:

[www.energystar.gov/congregations](http://www.energystar.gov/congregations)

You can also connect with an **Interfaith Power & Light (IPL)** organization in your state. IPL works with congregations to offer energy assessments and consultation on energy efficiency steps: [www.theregenerationproject.org](http://www.theregenerationproject.org)

resiliency to climate change by increasing sustainable access to water, food security, reducing risks to disaster, and preventing and treating malaria.

In the semi-arid Makueni district of Kenya, for example, partner organizations work with LWR to secure accessible potable and irrigation water. The project provides food and economic stability to those in need by improving crop production through environmentally-friendly water harvesting and soil preservation techniques. The development of efficient water catchment systems also helps secure community water supplies against fluctuations in rainfall that can result from changes in climate.

## How are we called to respond?

As a nation, we bear moral responsibility for this crisis. Scientists tell us that it is consumption of energy and resources in industrialized countries that is the primary cause of climate change. Although the United States has only about five percent of global population, we consume 30 percent of the world's resources and create 30 percent of the world's



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## Make the Connection

The **Companion Synod Program** connects the 65 ELCA synods in over 120 international companion relationships with Lutheran churches around the world. Through these relationships, members of ELCA synods live out the accompaniment model of global mission and experience the rich gifts and witness of Lutheran churches in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe, or the Middle East. Through these relationships we have the opportunity to learn how climate change is impacting the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. For more information about your synod's companion relationships, contact your synod office or ELCA Global Mission: [www.elca.org/globalmission](http://www.elca.org/globalmission).

waste. The U.S. is the largest historic emitter of carbon dioxide and we emit more carbon dioxide per person than any other nation. The planet is in danger unless we are willing to face this reality and to take responsibility for it by reducing our use of energy and our emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. If we don't, all of creation will suffer.

As a leading industrialized nation that has disproportionately contributed to greenhouse gas emissions, it is incumbent upon us to rectify this injustice through national legislation that meets the following goals:

**Follow the recommendations of the scientific community to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.** Currently this means legislation must ensure that we do not increase the Earth's temperature by more than two degrees Celsius. Scientists say we can achieve this goal by reducing emissions by between 20 and 40 percent by 2020 and by 80 percent by 2050.

**Protect those living in poverty in the U.S. from the impacts of climate change and climate legislation.** Legislation must ensure that low income Americans do not bear the disproportionate burden of increases in energy costs, must ensure that any increased costs do not push more people into poverty and must provide for those whose jobs are impacted by climate legislation.

**Provide adaptation assistance for those living in poverty abroad.** Those living in the most vulnerable developing nations around the world bear little responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions and are already feeling the burden of climate change, with little ability to adapt. Through adaptation assistance, the U.S. can prevent the destruction of vulnerable communities around the world and help with climate relief.

As a nation we should work for a strong international agreement that requires all nations to reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Any agreement should provide aid to developing nations to reduce their emissions even as they lift their people out of poverty, and help them adapt to the inevitable impacts of a changing climate on food, water and other basic human needs.

And finally, as individuals we must examine our own role and responsibility for climate change. How can we act, in our homes, congregations and communities, to consume and waste less?

*This resource is produced by Church in Society, a unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, dedicated to promoting peace, justice, and the care of creation in Christ's name in the global community.*



## Learn More

The **ELCA social statement** "Caring for Creation" states our concerns about climate change and its potential impacts on God's creation and calls us to act ([www.elca.org/environment](http://www.elca.org/environment)). Stay informed and join the ELCA's e-Advocacy network ([www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy)).

**ELCA World Hunger** offers a toolkit for congregations to explore the relationship between hunger and climate change ([www.elca.org/hunger/toolkits](http://www.elca.org/hunger/toolkits)).

The **National Council of Churches** Eco-Justice Programs offer resources for individual and group study, and for worship ([www.ncccojustice.org](http://www.ncccojustice.org)).

**Church World Service's** "Enough" series explores the relationship between climate change and global poverty ([www.churchworldservice.org](http://www.churchworldservice.org)).