

Overcoming Barriers

What blocks us from taking action on climate justice?

by Diane Marshall and Geoffrey Wilfong-Pritchard

The first step in any action is recognizing that there are emotional and psychological forces at work to keep things the way they are.

By identifying those barriers, we can begin to move past them into sustainable actions in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming challenge.

This workshop is designed to help congregants explore their response to the issue of climate change from a psychological/spiritual perspective. It invites people to identify some of the common emotional and psychological responses to climate change and to place those responses on a spectrum that runs from denying that there is a problem to working for sustainable change. By the end of this workshop participants will be able to identify the next steps they might take on the journey toward a sustainable future and with whom they might take those steps.

PREPARATION

Workshop leaders will require access to the following websites:

- peacefulrivers.homestead.com/maryoliver.html
- ted.com. Search for “Anoté Tong” for the interview “My country will be underwater soon—unless we work together.” The video is about 21 minutes long. If you wish to shorten it, you can just use the discussion of the fishing industry that begins at 12:10 and ends at 18:33.

Materials needed:

- If showing climate change images

in #1, arrange for a computer with Internet and a projector.

- flipchart

1. OPENING (20 minutes)

Welcome everyone. You might begin by saying something like, “In the next two hours we are going to explore some of the images that come to mind when we think of climate change. It’s a big issue, so big in fact, that people seem overwhelmed by it and feel there is nothing that can be done either by individuals or small groups like the one gathered here. But even that is an image! So we’ll do some reflecting on the images we carry with us of change in general, and climate change specifically, to see if they are a burden or a source of energy. We’ll do that by hearing some poetry, sharing a brief video, and reflecting with each other.”

Invite people into the conversation by asking the following questions. Depending how many people you have, you may want to break them up into groups of two to three.

- When did you first become aware of this thing called climate change? What was your first response to it?
- What image comes to mind now when you hear the words “climate change”?

You may want to start by offering an image of your own, for example, “When I think of climate change, I think of the floods in Calgary and Canmore in 2013 or the drought and forest fires in B.C. in 2015.”

If you want to show images of climate change, you can find images at the NASA website, climate.nasa.gov. Search for “Death Valley flood.”

- What feelings do those images evoke in you?
Record the responses if you need to. You’ll be returning to them.

2. STAGES OF CHANGE

(30 minutes)

Read the poem “The Journey” by Mary Oliver found on peacefulrivers.homestead.com/maryoliver.html.

- When you think of climate change, what are the voices that shout their “bad advice”? What “tugs at your ankles”?
Give people time to respond.

Oliver’s poem is a description of the five stages of change described by American psychologist James Prochaska. Prochaska’s model is useful in describing the difficulty and the possibility of making personal and systemic change to impact climate change.

1. **Precontemplative Stage:** People in this stage do not consider the need to change. They do not perceive themselves as needing to take any action. If there is a problem, it is external to them (e.g., the climate has always changed). They may say, “I am just fine the way I am. My behaviour is not a problem. If you think it is, that’s *your* problem.” I am sure that many—not only climate deniers—are in this stage.

2. Contemplative Stage: People in this stage begin to consider the possibility that they might be responsible for some problem behaviour. They may not take any action to change; this stage is more akin to an intellectual acknowledgement of their personal contribution to the problem. They may ask, “I might have a problem with my behaviour, but can I really do anything about it?” Contemplators may intend to take action, but they may not yet have the behaviour-change strategies or emotional commitment that real change requires. Despite their serious intention to take action in the near future, contemplators can sometimes become stuck at this stage for long periods. I think that our whole Northern industrialized hemisphere has been in this stage for a long time, even though the southern nations of the world have been warning us of the dangers they are experiencing. In the Anglican communion, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been sounding the warning bell for many years.

3. Preparation Stage: People in this stage know they have to change. They feel they have to change. They have already taken some proactive steps toward modifying their problem behaviour. They show a combination of rational understanding, emotional commitment, and the beginning of a journey toward change. In this stage, where there are addiction issues, for example, individuals, couples, and families may have a sense of urgency that actions need to be taken in days or weeks or someone’s life or relationship may be in danger. In relation to climate change, many concerned Christians and churches are at this stage, and so they are making incremental changes to their lifestyle: recycling, turning down the thermostat to save on heating costs, or buying hybrid cars, for example. This has often been referred to as “green lite,” but it doesn’t affect structural change.

4. Action Stage: People in this stage have launched full-scale actions both within themselves and within their environment to overcome their problem. This is also the stage where lay persons and professionals alike may erroneously equate action with permanent change. People in this stage believe that “I am actually doing something about climate change right now.” Churches adapt to exorbitant heating bills, communities put in more bike lanes, individuals may change the way they take holidays. In fact, this is a *beginning* toward effective, long-term change.

5. Maintenance Stage: In this stage, people are fully engaged in preventing recurrence of the problem behaviour. Prochaska emphasizes the importance of recognizing that maintenance is a continuation of change, not its absence. An example of this stage at a personal level is implementing an anger management contract within a family. In terms of climate justice, this would entail engaging as individuals and families with how we invest our money, how we function as church communities (e.g., creating a community garden for food security), and how we behave as citizens (e.g., how we vote for and lobby for our governments to develop public action plans).

Discuss:

- What stage are you at personally? Where is your congregation?
 - When you listen to those in your circle of influence speak of climate change, what do you hear?
 - Is there a gap between where you are personally and your circle? If so, what does it look like?
- Record responses.
This might be a good time to break.

3. DEEPENING THE APPRECIATION OF CHANGE (25 minutes)

The 2015 UN Climate Conference in Paris was critical to the future of our planet. For North Americans, we must

face the fact that our lifestyles are environmentally unsustainable. The peoples of the Southern hemisphere are already victims of huge climatic changes that are creating food and water refugees.

Introduce the video interview of Anote Tong. (There is some good background material you can use for introduction on the website.) As people watch the video, ask them to keep in mind the psychological issues that Anote Tong has faced as he has dealt with the issue of climate change. What are they? How has he dealt with the barriers to action?

Give time for discussion.

- What feelings does watching Anote Tong leave you with?

4. WHERE TO FROM HERE? (25–30 minutes)

Return people to the descriptions of the feelings they had about climate change at the beginning of the session.

Discuss:

- When you reflect on what we’ve considered—where you started from with your understanding of climate change, looking at the stages of change, and listening to Anote Tong—has anything shifted for you? Has anything changed for you?
- When you consider where you are on the change spectrum, is there one thing that you could do to move closer to the maintenance stage?
- When you think of where your congregation might be, is there one thing that you could do to influence a behaviour change? Whose help might need to be enlisted? What might that behaviour change be?

This might be the opportunity to see if there is any interest in the group in continuing the conversation at a later date around further study of the issue of climate change. What might people be prepared to gather for? A book study? A move to action? Record responses and be prepared to pass them to the appropriate person/committee within the congregation.

One last question for the group:

- What’s one thing that will stay with

you after this session? What's one thing you would pass on to someone who wasn't here?

Conclude with this final thought from Steven Scharper's reflection, "Falling in Love with Earth":

Creation care helps move us from an anthropocentric vantage to an "anthropo-harmonic" perspective. This perspective suggests that the human strives not for domination of, but for harmony with, the rest of the created world, and that we as humans are participants

rather than "master and commanders" within the fabric of creation. This perspective also suggests that we can only be fully human, and fully true to our Christian calling, when the individual and communal elements of our social concerns are integrated to sustain all of creation....

We are being invited into a relationship with all of creation that involves affection, compassion, celebration, and joy.

We are invited to fall in love with the Earth.

—quoted with permission from Living Ecological Justice, published by Citizens for Public Justice

CLOSING

Offer a final blessing.

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