

# CHAPTER 22

## Call to Action from Faith Leaders



**Alastair Redfern**

**Summary** This chapter considers the responsibilities of faith leaders in pursuing the agenda of the health of people and the health of the planet—not least because of the particular opportunities and contributions available to faith communities at this significant moment in our global history. Consideration is given to two key areas: first, the context in which faith leaders are challenged to contribute to this crucial agenda, and second, some possible responses, challenges and perspectives that faith leaders might offer.

### The Context of Faith

Other chapters in this book highlight the amazing variety of expert insights into climate change, health, and their interrelationship. Many contributions in this area of concern display the marks of what might be called missionary fervour. It could be that climate change and health professionals are being called to be the evangelists of our times. Further, we can discern two contrasting models of such a mission. One calls for small-scale, local, measurable engagement to offer demonstrable signs to encourage and influence others: a micro-plus approach. In my terms, this is a model often associated with a Protestant understanding of the church, small local groups being the key areas for action.

By contrast, other contributors have emphasized “structural sin” and call for systemic universal action—a more “Catholic” approach to the making of the church, seeking complete fulfilment while acknowledging the reality and inevitability of some interpretations and differences of pace and enthusiasm: a macro-minus approach.

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A. Redfern (✉)

Bishop Alastair Redfern, Church of England, London, UK

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Of course, as with the mission of Christian faith more generally, both approaches are valuable, and an important endeavour is to discern and develop the right balance between local, personal engagement and the broadest vision and ideals. Citizens need a kingdom, and a kingdom needs citizens in their local contextuality.

A second feature of the context that should be carefully considered revolves around indications that the Enlightenment liberal project could be unravelling. Freedom for and within society has become translated into freedom for the individual, thus creating huge issues about the possibility of cohesion and connectivity. We retreat into self-reinforcing “echo chambers” of our own choosing. Pope Francis describes this phenomenon as “the globalization of indifference”, a “liberal” toleration of others subtly moving into a way of living that does not even recognize the “other”, let alone feel any responsibility towards them.

“Freedom” now seems to deliver an expectation of so many different, and often apparently contradictory, possibilities and therefore has tended to become focused upon power being manifested through education and progressiveness. Power becomes knowledge and resides with liberal elites, whose rhetoric about freedom and rights masks increasing poverty and exclusion. This is a challenging political context—an ever-sharpening reality within which responses to health and climate change need to be crafted.

There is a contemporary stream of critique that accuses politicians of not knowing enough, of being too easily swayed by wealthy vested interests. Of course, there is some truth in these accusations, but from my own experience in the English Parliament, I want to be clear that politics is a vocation for some, and there are thus important allies within the structures of policy making who need to be sought out and encouraged.

Another element of the context into which we seek to bring change is an increasing concern for what is sometimes called the power of populism. Nietzsche was clear that popular agitations, beginning in his time in the nineteenth century with the development of mass media, created “moments” of public concern and connectivity, which were in fact “headless”—that is, with no tradition or detailed vision for the future (Hansard, 2017). Such “moments” or emotional expressions were dangerous because of the way they fuelled incoherence. The task in such times is to turn “moments” into movements, with a sense of tradition/continuity and a coherent vision for future well-being. Such wisdom will be very important for the future of our own aspirations. Faith aims to convert moments into movements, which is an urgent and vital contribution needed to counter increasing confusion and division.

Two other factors are important in helping us understand our context in a way that will enable a more effective contribution. In my work on modern slavery it is clear that the ever-expanding trade in children for sexual exploitation is a sign of what one American law enforcement officer described as a world that now has no “moral stops”. Until recently, the liberal agenda of free choice was checked by an instinct to preserve and protect children. There is much evidence that even this “moral stop” is disappearing fast—which creates a challenging environment for the common discourse in this area of global concern for a “moral case” to be made for radical change in relation to climate change and health care.

Finally, in terms of the context into which we are aiming to reach, there are strong signs of what Hannah Arendt termed “the banality of evil”. She used this phrase in relation to Eichman and the Holocaust—pointing to the sense in which, despite the enormously evil outcomes, he and his colleagues could feel that they were simply doing their jobs, cogs in a system for which others were ultimately responsible (Arendt, 1963). This mentality could be part of what the Holy Father has called the globalization of indifference.

## The Contribution of Faith

Given such a complex and challenging context, what might be the contributions of faith and of faith leaders? There are a number of key contributions.

At the most fundamental level, faith calls all people to recognize the common ground upon which we all exist. A strong theme in our concern for the health of people and the health of the planet is the issue of air pollution. In the Bible, life begins by God breathing into a human form. The “breath” of God is the mystery that gives life to every creature. It is universal and inclusive—in faith terms, “Catholic”. And such a reality reminds every human creature that to live is to be dependent—on God, on creation, on others. This is an important reality for measuring our own efforts and confidence.

Further, faith leaders have a great ability to convene people to work together around significant issues. In the work I do with Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo in fighting the evil crime of modern slavery, through the Global Sustainability Network, we can gather people from different faiths or none, and from significant sectors such as government, business, media, academia and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). At these gatherings, Bishop Sánchez Sorondo sometimes reminds participants that there is something in every human heart that can recognize and respond to the values of the Beatitudes—the importance of being pure, meek, humble and thirsty to offer justice, and the need to reach out to any who are poor, suffering or in mourning. These values are the basis of the golden rule to do to others as you would have them do to you.

Faith leaders can convene people around such values because we are generally credited with being on the side of goodness but lacking a particular expertise or agenda in terms of detailed responses to the challenges facing society. Thus, faith leaders can invite others to make their various and necessary contributions in a space of mutual commitment to goodness and mutual flourishing. This is a unique kind of convening power.

This potential is recognized in the chapter by Professor Dasgupta, calling our attention to recognize the importance of what is “within us”. This is the deep desire for goodness that embraces others as well as ourselves and yet needs the wisdom and expertise of numerous disciplines in order to proceed effectively.

Another important contribution of faith is the primary focus on “salvation”. This word comes from *salvus*, which means health. Salvation and health are the same

thing—for creation, for creatures, for our endeavours in this crucial and urgent project of preserving the planet. There is an interplay between health being properly understood and pursued and our care for the planet and its inhabitants, which are two sides of the same coin.

Sin, which is both structural and personal, is recognition that human efforts often miss the mark and fall short because of our selfishness and short-sightedness. Sin requires judgment and a robust response, not least in terms of tackling corporate corruption and individual greed. But the Christian understanding of sin also involves an invitation to recognize the miracle of forgiveness and the gift of new life. This mystery needs to inform our relationship with others, especially those who might seem to be perpetrators of the trends we so urgently need to challenge regarding global warming and approaches to health care. In a sinful world, all parties need to know our need for God's grace through forgiveness and new life. Profound humility and self-criticalness must inform a faith approach. In his chapter, Governor Brown eloquently captures this deep truth in his powerful call for "transformation".

## The Journey of Faith

A key New Testament word used to describe the ministry and mission of Jesus is *hodos* (the way). Faith calls us in a direction—a journey during which we will continue to learn new things, and within which none of us is immune from making mistakes. This should provide the comfort that no one set of tools or answers will suffice. Often, new insight or energy can come from unexpected sources. Thus, faith can provide a context that is both creative and critical, a common ground inhabited with humility, openness to others and graciousness towards fellow sinners who may hold different visions and values. In this way, faith groups are often more open to diversity and debate than "purist" organizations offering "perfect" solutions. The latter approach is important in offering a prophetic element but always needs embedding in the complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory agendas so prevalent amongst God's diverse children.

Moreover, the Gospels make clear that the prism through which faith pursues its calling is not one of perfection (as can be the dangers of an Enlightenment project that has become reduced to the power of knowledge). Rather, Christian faith is a call to see and act through and with the poorest: those suffering, threatened and excluded. Faith is a power that unfolds through the unpowerful. Worship is an enactment of this reality about human dependency and imperfection called into greater wholeness or health. Jesus is clear that wisdom resides with the unlearned, not the worldly wise.

In this way, very much reinforcing the emphasis of climate change concern upon the link between air pollution and health, faith invites us into the narrative of the breath. Life begins with breathing: the life of God breathed into the creature to give life within creation. Breath gives life and needs to be pure and holy/healthy. But, for Christians, when on the cross, Jesus, who represents every creature, gives up His breath—a process that will happen to each of us and to every human being. Life,

inspired or breathed into by God, will end in this mortal setting. The miracle and mystery is that God breathes new life into the mortality of human life: resurrection. And on the day of Pentecost the breath of the Holy (healthy or whole) Spirit is breathed into the disciples to enliven the seeds of eternity in souls touched by this faith in the resurrection of the body.

This miracle is not an excuse to give up on our challenges and leave everything to God; rather, faith recognizes this mystery of the breath of resurrection as a power to sustain and nourish human life through adversity, failure and challenge. Thus, faith invites engagement with all the complexities of the penultimacy of our endeavours—an arena needing hope and love to sustain and encourage, even when the direction seems less than perfectly clear and plans struggle to be adequately comprehensive.

In this way, faith can help to create an atmosphere that enables ideals and the frustrating realities of limitation to exist creatively together in hope as much as in demonstrable “answers”, bound together in the greater purposes of a love that can flow through us and between us, connecting more closely with the fuller purposes of creation in its proper healthiness (or holiness/wholeness).

Of most obvious significance regarding the role of faith is the fact that all believers are citizens and consumers. The potential “power” of mobilizing believers and faith communities to practise and support appropriate action for climate change and proper approaches to health is enormous. The congruence between the teaching of faith about salvation/health in this world as stewardship and preparation for a greater wholeness (health), with the values and visions so powerfully expressed in this book, should provide a proper challenge to faith leaders to pursue these possibilities. The fact of a common ground (breath) for all creatures and the convening power of faith to call different people together in the service of goodness, reliant on the expertise of others, need to be replicated in local contexts too. Faith leaders can initiate raising awareness of key issues related to climate change and health, and encourage appropriate action as witnesses to the Gospel of salvation.

This strategy does not need to wait until appropriate “answers” have been fully formed and agreed on; it can proceed while the “movement” we are trying to form continues “on the way”.

The Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations provide important and internationally agreed frameworks. Faith can give energy, perspective, commitment and essential humility for the journey—a hope that will set out in the right direction ahead of “conclusive” evidence, modelling appropriate lifestyles and embracing the wisdom or perspective of the “unlearned” by human standards. Perhaps most significantly, faith empowers its adherents to give themselves for the good of others, sacrificially, at cost to the self—for the health (salvation) of all.

This is the Catholic doctrine for a deeply connected creation, inviting recognition of and participation in the purposes of the Creator and the fulfilment of creation. Moreover, to act in faith is to trust that just a small contribution can play a key part; the fraction at the Eucharist reminds us that broken bits can be joined to give health to creation.

Given the urgency of the issues highlighted in this book and a deep recognition of the interconnectivity of so many factors that together can make or break our health on this planet, faith leaders have a huge responsibility to practise what has been preached for 2000 years by Christian churches.

## **The Role of Faith Leaders**

In response to this context, and the contribution and journey that faith might offer, there are a number of key roles that faith leaders need to consider in terms of our contribution to the health of people and the health of the planet.

First is the importance of authoritative guidance. Many people do not believe that climate change is an urgent matter, and evidence shows that it has a very low priority for voters. Those in positions of leadership need to provide appropriate guidance and challenge—always substantiated with credible evidence and clearly connected to the teaching and values of the faith.

Second, places of worship and congregations can play a key role in the formation of community life, providing sophisticated networks for mobilizing views and values, and possessing the ability to organize potential action at both the policy and grass-roots levels. Careful consideration needs to be given to how this resource can be utilized in a way that does not seem merely idealistic, while inviting people to make appropriate and manageable responses. Important areas include the transition to a low-carbon economy and recognition of the inalienable link between climate change and human health.

Current research shows that there are key groups who are relatively less engaged with the matter of climate change. These include older citizens, parents, right-wing voters and the less scientifically educated. Any response of faith leaders and groups needs to be particularly targeted in terms of work with these sectors.

Finally, in terms of targets, any strategy must highlight the reality of perceived social norms, the need for creating higher political priorities in this area and the skill to present opportunities rather than burdens to those who might respond. Faith leaders and communities can also have considerable influence in the world of industry/business, particularly in convening spaces for conversation and a commitment to progress that is realistic about pace and possible outcomes. There is also huge potential for faith values to be translated into citizen action through voting and participating in political debate. Faith leaders could be more proactive in convening spaces for discussion and debate.

Faith creates “households of commitment”, domestically and institutionally. The ultimate human household is Planet Earth. Our values, commitments and care need to be fully expressed for the best ordering and stewardship of this place of residence. It is a particularly human responsibility and one that faith leaders need to help present as a divine mandate too. We are stewards of the environment into which life is born, not owners or proprietors. Humility, wonder and thankfulness should energize our efforts, not simply calculation and self-interest.

The health of all God’s people is directly and deeply related to the health of the planet we are privileged to inhabit. Faith in the future owns this privilege and pledges a responsible stewardship in return.

This challenge and call need leadership to best identify and articulate a response appropriate for each “faith” so that cooperation and companionship can be developed and human flourishing can be joined to a common concern for the well-being of our shared household. Such witness will offer encouragement and an invitation to all people of goodwill and good sense to play their part too—a common human cause for a common human flourishing in a common human household.

This is not an option but a divinely given duty. We each need to take a deep breath.

We have to recognize the responsibility of stewardship of the household we inhabit, join our teaching and our actions in a common work of praising our Creator and cherishing creation, and invite others to discover this call and to join in our endeavour.

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