

ADVOCATING WITH COMPASSION

To care for creation and to serve the most vulnerable among us are mandates shared by all major religions. It has become increasingly clear that faith-based messages and messengers provide new angles on issues and are able to lead with bold, grounded, and non-partisan voices of hope-filled faith. The history of social change in this country has shown, over and over, that the participation and influence of the religious community is profound. Our advocacy efforts strategically insert the faith community's voice and influence into climate campaigns. Lifting the faith voice to the front of the climate conversation proclaims that caring for the environment and our communities is not just political, it is spiritual doctrine shared by all faith traditions.

Our "Faith in Action" movement is supporting lay and ordained faith leaders to develop their individual faith voices and apply them to appropriate local and state-level energy and climate issues. Our goal is to develop relationships with elected officials, and participate in constructive and collaborative strategies that influence energy policy and foster local and state-wide resilience.

What does it mean to "Advocate with Compassion"? Let us take a moment to ponder the concept...

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Compassion as: "the emotion that one feels in response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help." In the book *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, Sherlyn Jimenez, writes:

Compassion is often regarded as having an emotional aspect to it, though when based on cerebral notions such as fairness, justice and interdependence, it may be considered rational in nature and its application understood as an activity based on sound judgment. There is also an aspect of compassion which regards a quantitative dimension, such that an individual's compassion is often given a property of "depth," "vigour," or "passion." The etymology of "compassion" is Latin, meaning "co-suffering." More involved than simple empathy, compassion commonly gives rise to an active desire to alleviate another's suffering."

This understanding of what is required from those of us that are called to advocate on behalf of our deepest values, calls into a "new way of being", a new way of communicating, and a new way caring about how we are

connected to the public policy process.

Lawmakers are accustomed to hearing how a bill will affect business. But starting with the business model lifts up the economy as the primary reason for our existence. Instead, we encourage beginning legislative conversations with what lawmakers love. The response, from faith leaders and legislators alike, is almost always that "they love this place—North Carolina. They love vacations with their grandchildren, fishing in our state's rivers, having picnics on the parkway—their love expands "from the mountains to the sea."

When people of faith begin a conversation based in love, the discussion moves from business to humanity. *"What is it we're trying to experience here? What is life about?"* Beginning our conversation with love also grounds the discussion in justice. Love can invoke images of beautiful summer or fall days spent outside, but love also calls us to the care of our neighbors and communities. Love calls us to name injustice and acknowledge the pain of environmental degradation and environmental racism. We know that black, brown, indigenous, and impoverished communities are hurt first and worst by the climate crisis. Beginning a conversation in love provides an opportunity to name that truth, and call for legislative actions that are just and equitable.

It is important for each of us to remember that the changes required to repair humanity's relationship with the natural world threaten the dominant paradigm of the industrial, extractive, growth-focused society. *This is why the faith voice is so vital.* People of faith have an opportunity to critique the dominant narrative *and* imagine a new one. Faith leaders are storytellers, visionaries, and weavers of community. We need their vision and imagination in order to build the sustainable and compassionate world we all desire. By offering this vision to our legislators, we help them do their jobs with a new sense of courage.

It is through the lens of faith, that hope overcomes despair. By returning to the core values of our faith traditions we can find the creativity, strength, and vision to move beyond this powerful status quo. By putting our "Faith into Action" through compassionate advocacy and values-based messaging, our prayers that our leaders will respond are lifted in a new and powerful way. We hope you will join us in "Advocating with Compassion" this legislative season and throughout the year. Schedule a meeting with your representative now.