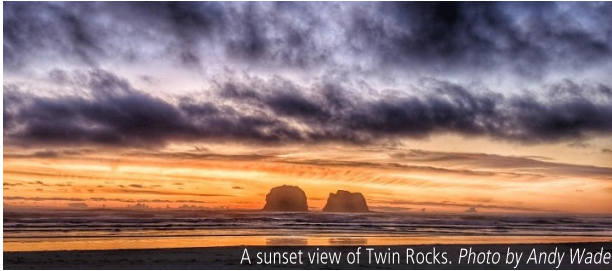


Building Toward Climate Shalom: A Reflection on the PNMC Pastor's Retreat, by Andy Wade



A sunset view of Twin Rocks. Photo by Andy Wade

Overwhelmed, concerned, anxious, doubtful, angry, terrified. What do you feel when talking about climate change? We explored all of these emotions and more when a group of 24 Mennonite pastors and leaders gathered together for two days for the conference, “**Who cares about climate change? Pastoral response to denial and despair**” on the Oregon Coast this past September. I’ll admit, I’m not a fan of most conferences, but, as I read through the materials and completed the pre-conference questionnaire, I sensed this one would be different. I was not disappointed. Rather than just dumping a pile of climate change facts, of which there are an abundance, our facilitators helped us navigate the waters of climate science while not ignoring the gusts of fear and doubt that often catches us off guard.

Pastor Doug Kaufman started off by helping us find our moorings in a sea of conflicting and confusing emotions. How do we personally deal with climate change? Do we pretend not to know in order to find shelter (*psychic numbing*)? Do we push it away, distancing ourselves by imagining it’s way out in the future, or not something we have to worry about where we live? Or, do we outright deny climate change is happening in order to escape the emotions we fear to experience?

As we’re bombarded with waves of facts, figures, and headlines, we may employ all of these tactics. Getting in touch with our own emotions and how we deal with them is the first step in being able to walk with others through these times we must navigate together. Learning to hold the reality of Climate Change together with hope is one key to maintaining both our momentum and our sanity during these tumultuous times.

Worship is also key to maintaining an even spiritual keel. Following our first session, Doug led us outside, into the dark, to listen, wait, and sense God’s Spirit speaking to us in and through the darkness. Yes, even when all seems dark and full of despair, even here, we cannot escape the love and presence of God.

As we gathered the next morning, we turned our boat to head straight into the winds of climate change. Ken Pitts unpacked the science of climate change and its impact in Oregon, reminding us of the devastating fires of 2015 (which cut off my hometown of Hood River from the west for well over a week), decreasing salmon runs due to overheated rivers, and increasing water shortages. These issues, wherever you are on the political spectrum, affect us all. Even more, as those charged with caring for and nurturing God’s “very good creation”, we can experience this as a spiritual crisis of monumental proportions.

Brian Ettling helped us understand the importance of political advocacy, both locally and on a national level. While there are critical changes each of us can make to do our part to combat climate change (which is an act of worship), the biggest polluters are multinational corporations, industrial farms, and the United States military. Brian encouraged us to advocate for serious regulation of these industries, including a rapid transition away from our dependence on fossil fuels, if we hope to tackle this global emergency.

Throughout the conference we heard several times that the good news is that the rapid acceleration of climate change is primarily human caused. That means that we can do something about it; it is in our control! *This is good news, indeed!* Like a smoker who is told to quit smoking or they will die an early death, we have the choice to heed the call, ignore the call, or deny smoking has anything to do with our health issues. But even that analogy is too narrow.

Sarah Augustine, made it clear that we’re facing the collapse of the human species. Creation will continue on, but if we fail to address climate change, *we* most likely will not. We face this crisis, she said, because we live as if we are separate from creation rather than interdependent with it. Living closely with the very creation targeted for financial exploitation by the West, Indigenous people around the globe are most at risk, but what happens to them will happen to all of us, she cautions.

As Sarah expertly guided us up this tributary, what at first appeared a mere stream opened up before us as a river grander than the Amazon and filled with violence and death. As we looked at landscapes in Guiana, Suriname, and French Guiana, our hearts were broken. Forests and rivers and streams are so polluted by mining that none of the food in these three countries is safe to eat. She reminded us that global economic development is the engine of climate change, human rights abuses, and oppression. I wanted to argue, but there was nothing to say.

But pictures from far away can be easy to push to the side. I felt my phone vibrate and was immediately reminded that on the other side of the globe children were mining the metals and minerals needed to keep me connected. Their waters and lands, too, were being stripped for my convenience. And then Sarah brought it even closer to home, to a place that is personal for us Mennonites, Everence invests in mining operations in Suriname. In other words, my retirement fund invests in the destruction of the future for others.

Oh, this is not a river I wanted to travel up. But travel it I must. It is exactly this kind of excursion that can open our eyes to see just how interconnected and interdependent we are. If we are truly people of faith, of justice, of healing and hope, we can no longer close our eyes. We must act, and we must act with faithful courage. And here’s a bit of encouragement: we don’t have to act alone! In fact, as Sarah passionately spoke about climate violence and the growing number of climate refugees, she also invited us to reach out:

First, reach out by exploring the cross-cultural relationships our congregation already has and how we might begin there to act together on climate change.

Next, explore new cross-cultural relationships we might be able to cultivate as we address climate change and serve climate refugees.

“**Finding hope in the midst of climate tragedy**” was our closing session. We didn’t come here to hear facts and figures only to return to our congregations in despair. **We are a people of hope** and God has entrusted to us the gift and responsibility to steward the delicate web and beauty of creation. It is possible to engage the facts of climate change while holding onto a hope that has the power to transform the world.

Our hope is in Jesus who is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-3). Jesus faced head on the injustices of his day and took direct action to address them. Jesus did not shrink back in despair or live in denial of the present reality with his head stuck in the clouds but brought hope and healing through spittle and mud, a tender touch, prophetic truth-telling, and overturned tables. Jesus did not rest in the privilege of his maleness, his Jewishness, or his ability to remain ceremonially clean but stepped out of his bubble to walk alongside those shoved to the margins by politics and policy. Jesus blazed a trail for us to walk in today as we face head on the crisis of climate change.

And even today we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses working together for a better tomorrow. This, above all, gives me hope. We are not in this alone, it is not outside our ability to address, and **together we can both discover and cultivate a new season of climate shalom.**