

Delivered at MCC Annual Meeting @ ANTS

“Our Faith Witness In this Historic Moment”

I want to thank Jack Johnson for the opportunity to be part of this distinguished panel this morning, and I want to thank to Board of the Mass. Council of Churches for recognizing the importance of this moment in history – and the possibility that people of faith working together could make a decisive difference in the future we offer those who will follow us.

Today’s theme, “Our Faith Witness In this Historic Moment” is open to a variety of interpretations. Here’s mine. Having lived in civilizations for about 500 generations, humanity stands at a crossroads. We are the first generation to foresee, and the final generation with an opportunity to forestall, the most catastrophic effects of global warming.

With this is mind, I ask myself, “What is God’s hope for this generation?”

My faith tells me that God would want our great, great grand children to be able to look back at these troubled times, and tell a story about how the world was saved from environmental collapse. Chapter One of that story has already been written by Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Loren Eiseley, Rachel Carson, and those who celebrated the first Earth Day.

Chapter two of that story is still being written by Bill McKibben, James Hanson, Michael Gorbachev, Al Gore and all the scientists who have suffered derision for holding on to hypotheses long enough to identify the incontrovertible evidence to support them.

And if the earth is to be saved, my friends, chapter three must be written by us – by Christian faith-communities along with people of every faith perspective. Why? Because for better or for worse, since civilization began, people of faith have been involved in – and in many cases have been the impetus for – virtually every major change of direction.

What do religious communities bring to this reality? Let me make several brief points:

1. First, the God we follow sends us forth to serve others, not ourselves. The myopia, selfishness and greed that underlie our current culture is antithetical to religious values.
2. Second, a message that is central to the New Testament and important to virtually all religious traditions is that God’s love is inclusive. 100 years ago, Albert Schweitzer led us to see that God was calling us to expand the moral unit so that we would recognize that not only humans but ALL OF LIFE is sacred. Now, we are being called to expand the circle of life to include future generations as well.
3. Third, our God is a God of justice. In a world which seems to be saying that if you can afford it, it’s ok to use it; if you can profit from it, it’s ok to make it; or if there’s no law against it, it’s ok to do it – in a world like that, our God insists on standards that elevate the equal worth of every soul who is alive today, along with those who may be alive tomorrow.
4. Fourth, as people of faith, we know something about repentance; and God knows, now is a time when repentance is sorely needed.

5. And finally, we are a people of HOPE – and hope is rapidly emerging as our most precious gift as we face the perilous path ahead – hope that is rooted not in the realities we have seen, but in the promises God has made to us that we have yet to see. (Romans 8: 24-25)

It's worth remembering that there have been a few moments in the past 300 years when diverse people of faith have risen to such a challenge by drawing on these qualities. Their convictions re-wrote history as they re-focused the vocation of the church for their time.

Beginning at Copley Square with Old South Church member Samuel Sewall in 1700, congregationalists aligned with Quakers and others to abolish slavery. If you've seen the movie or know the story of the Amistad, you know how important and powerful this witness was.

A second example is that people of faith played a significant role in eliminating child labor practices in the early 20th century. Just as the church compelled society to reject profit that resulted from the work of slaves, a few decades later it compelled society to expand the circle of "who counts" to include children, and thus reject profits that resulted from their labor.

And more recently we have the Civil Rights Movement. Using various means of moral persuasion, Christians and Jews worked together to compel congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. Their sacrifice and vision made possible the election of Barack Obama.

Here's how I tie the civil rights movement to the environmental movement. Whenever I'm asked to speak to a group of clergy about the environment, I point out that within 2 or 3 years, clergy will need to be preaching on the environment and related issues every 3rd or 4th sermon. Often, the clergy look at me like I've lost my mind.... And then I ask them: In Mississippi between 1955 and 1964, how frequently do you think the pastors' sermons touched on the topic of civil rights? Somewhere around 100%? And then they begin to see what I mean when I say that we have entered a time which calls for a new understanding of the vocation of the church, the synagogue and the mosque.

In each of these historic examples, thousands of congregations and millions of disciples allowed their passions and resources to be re-purposed in response to a call articulated by their clergy from the pulpits of their houses of worship. Is the opportunity and challenge we now face any less compelling?

- Just as congregations in the 50s and 60s made the passage of the Civil Rights Bill inevitable, we can make the preservation of life on earth possible.
- Just as ministers and rabbis once preached Sunday after Sunday about the fact that a black person should count the same as a white person, we can inspire our congregations to behave and advocate as if future generations counted the same as those alive today.
- Just as churches across the south provided their members with the support they needed to

take risks and make sacrifices as they witnessed for a vision of racial equality, we can become supportive communities which invite people to invest meaning not in material acquisition but in spiritual growth and take comfort in downward mobility.

- Just as every black Christian knew that laws had to be passed if anything were to change, and that their role was to advocate for the passage of those laws, we can testify and witness:
 - to lawmakers in government,
 - story makers in media,
 - and money makers in corporations.

Each of those sectors must change, and their change will come directly in response to the force of our witness and testimony.

For those who may still be skeptical, I'll leave you with this: British environmental leader Nick Reeves has convincingly written that of all the actions humanity could take to save the planet, an ecological coalition of faith leaders would have a greater impact than a new Kyoto protocol-style agreement to regulate emissions. In fact, Britain's Environmental Agency rates the impact of the commitment of religious leaders as #2 on its list of 50 things that would save the planet¹.

The world has begun to undergo a great turning – greater than even the industrial revolution – and far more compressed in time and dispersed in its impact. This great turning hasn't a prayer of succeeding unless faith communities the world over respond in profound ways to the call God is issuing. To this challenge:

- we bring the spiritual disciplines that people will need to change, and survive and flourish;
- we bring community engagement that can organize every village, town and city in the world;

- and we bring hope – hope that is great enough to connect us with an endless string of future generations whose lives depend on our vision and choices.

Thank you.

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1. Nick Reeves, The Guardian, August 6, 2008; "It's creation, stupid! A coalition of the faiths could save the planet."