**Earth *Still* Can’t Get a Witness:**

# Continued Clergy Hesitancy in Addressing Environmental Issues

**Leah D. Schade**

**Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship**

**Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, KY;** [**https://www.lextheo.edu/**](https://www.lextheo.edu/)

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**Introduction**

The old adage for preachers, paraphrased from a quotation by Karl Barth, is that we should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a preacher and environmental activist, I have been struck by the increasing number of articles in newspapers, news magazines, and internet news sites that either directly address or at least mention some environmental issue in the last decade. Nationally, papers such as the New York *Times*, and news magazines such as *Time* have regular sections on the environment. Online news organizations such as Huffington Post have “green” pages updated daily. The news is rarely positive. Catastrophic weather events due to climate change, contamination of drinking water, air pollution, loss of species and habitat, ocean acidification and rising sea levels have implications for every human being on this planet.

Yet, how often do clergy address environmental issues in their sermons? As a homiletician, I have argued that preachers have a key role to play in helping congregations understand environmental issues as a matter of faith and moral/ethical obligation. This was one of the main tenets of my book, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (Chalice Press, 2015). But in researching that book, I learned that it is rare for clergy to include issues such as climate change or species extinction in their sermons.

## Surveys document clergy hesitancy to address environmental issues

According to research conducted in 2009 by Lifeways, a Christian nonprofit organization, “The majority of Protestant pastors (52 percent) address environmental issues once a year or less. . . Eleven percent say they never speak to their church members about the environment.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Only 25 percent say they speak on the subject several times a year and a mere 12 percent say they address the issue at least once a month.

Five years later, this reticence in addressing environmental issues in sermons appeared to remain in place. A 2014 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and the Academy of Religion (AAR) indicated that “most Americans who attend religious services at least once or twice a month hear little from their clergy leader about the issue of climate change. Just over one-third of Americans say their clergy leader speaks about climate change often (11%) or sometimes (25%). More than 6-in-10 Americans say their clergy leader rarely (29%) or never (33%) references climate change.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Given this disinclination to address environmental issues from the pulpit, it is not surprising that a 2014 study by sociologist John M. Clements and colleagues finds that between 1993 and 2010 there was “no clear evidence of a greening of Christianity among rank-and-file Christians in the general public.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Even more troubling in their findings is the fact that Christians today actually have *less* regard for ecological issues than those who practice *no religion*. According to Clements, after seven years of repeated assertion by a few religious leaders that Creation care is not only consistent with, but in fact is demanded by Christian values, "[o]verall, mainline (and evangelical) Protestants still reported lower levels of environmental concern than did non-Christians and nonreligious respondents."[[5]](#footnote-5)

Has preachers’ willingness to engage environmental issues changed in light of the 2016 presidential election?

With the contentious 2016 presidential campaign and its divisive politics shaping both secular and faith-based discourse about environmental issues, I was curious to discover if attitudes in preaching had shifted since the PRRI study. In the first two months of 2017, I conducted a survey of mainline Protestant clergy in the United States to assess how preachers approached their sermons during this divisive time in our nation’s history. Using the platform SurveyMonkey, I designed and conducted a 60-question online survey entitled “Preaching about Controversial Issues,” which ran for six weeks, from mid-January to the end of February. I received responses from 1205 participants in 45 states (with an almost equal number of male and female respondents), well over the 1051 responses needed for a statistically accurate sampling.[[6]](#footnote-6) The survey explores a range of topics, including the following:

* The difference the 2016 presidential election has made in preachers’ willingness to address controversial issues in the pulpit;
* Topics clergy intended to address in the 6 months following the presidential inauguration as compared to the topics they engaged prior to the election;
* Reasons clergy list for either engaging controversial topics in their sermons, or avoiding them

#### Environmental issues continue to rank lowest for preachers

One section of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate topics they had mentioned in their sermons in the previous twelve months, choosing from a list of thirty-eight issues. Table 1 shows the top ten areas chosen by those in the survey.

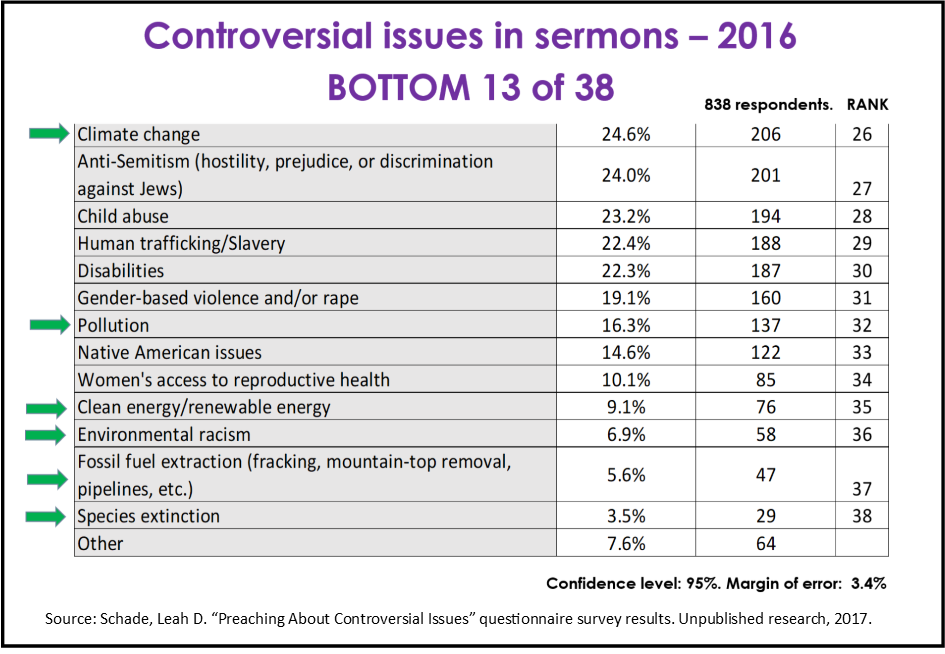
Table 1



Confidence level: 95%. Margin of error: 3.4%

Table 2 shows the bottom third of the list.

Table 2



The results indicate that environmental issues were among the lowest priority for preachers to address. The six environmental topics all ranked in the bottom half of the list, with only 25% of preachers indicating they had preached on climate change in the last twelve months. Further down the list, 16% had mentioned pollution, 9% clean energy, 7% environmental racism, 6% fossil fuel extraction, and only 3% had preached a sermon that addressed species extinction.

Further, when given the option to choose two of the topics that they were most likely to *avoid* in their sermons, 319 out of 761 respondents chose at least one of those environmental issues. In other words, 42% of respondents on that question listed at least one environmental issue as a topic they would *actively avoid* in preaching.

When listing them out individually, we can see how certain environmental issues compare to other “hot topics” that pastors deem off-limits in Table 3:

Table 3.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Women’s reproductive health | 205 | 27% |
| **Fossil fuel extraction (fracking, MTR, coal, etc.)** | **141** | **19%** |
| Critique of capitalism | 134 | 18% |
| White privilege | 100 | 13% |
| Rights for LGBTQ | 98 | 13% |
| Gun violence | 96 | 13% |
| War/militarization | 79 | 10% |
| **Species extinction** | **72** | **9%** |
| **Environmental racism** | **60** | **8%** |
| **Climate change** | **29** | **4%** |

Of the top ten “hot topics” preachers avoid, environmental issues were listed in four of the slots. Avoiding a sermon addressing fossil fuel extraction was second only to that of women’s reproductive health.

Environmental issues saw a bump in early 2017

When asked what topics they intended to preach about over the next six months of 2017, respondents were given a shorter list of more general categories, 19 in all. See Table 4.

Table 4

The topic “environmental issues” came in at 17%, placing it at the middle of the list of choices. This indicates that the importance of preaching about environmental issues increased after the 2016 presidential election. This may be due, in part, to the realization that the current administration was undermining all aspects of environmental protection, from gutting the EPA, to reversing key environmental regulations, to plans for pulling the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accords, to dismissing the reality and dangers of climate change. Environmental issues may also have been on the immediate horizon for preachers knowing that Earth Day, the March for Science, and the Climate March would be occurring over the next few months. In addition, the Standing Rock protest was making headlines at the time this survey was being conducted. In other words, this is a snapshot of a moment in time, and may not indicate the importance of addressing environmental issues for preachers going forward. Further research would be needed to track these ongoing questions.

In any case, when compared to issues such as poverty and economics, racism, equal rights and immigration – which all came in between 40 - 55% – environmental issues still fared poorly. Which leads to the question of *why*. What are reasons clergy list for not wanting to address environmental issues in their sermons?

**Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching**

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate which two topics they were the most hesitant to preach about, and then were asked to indicate their reasons for avoiding preaching about each of those two topics. They were given nine possible choices and asked to check all that apply. In addition, they were given an “other” category which allowed for open-ended responses. While I have not yet aggregated the data for the nine options, I did pull the narrative responses which yield some interesting statements.

For some preachers, the idea of connecting any environmental issues to the biblical witness is completely foreign, or even anathema to them:

“What do any of these [environmental] issues have to do with the gospel?”

“[Fossil fuel extraction] isn’t the gospel.”

“[Clean/renewable energy] has no relation to the gospel message.”

“[Species extinction] is not applicable to the gospel text.”

One respondent specifically dismissed the idea of addressing climate change because “It’s in God’s hands.” (This person also checked “This issue isn’t a concern for my congregation.”)

Other respondents just didn’t see environmental issues as a priority:

“I can't envision [clean/renewable energy] as a topic for preaching, as there are other issues that are much more important, urgent, and relevant to preach on.”

“There's little direct action anyone can take. There are more important/pressing issues.”

“I don't want to lose my job. I don't want to distract congregation from doing healing work.”

“[Species extinction is] not my most pressing issue. But, I recognize that the increase of our population has changed the national and international landscape and division of resources.”

[Species extinction]: “Other bigger fish to fry (ironically enough!)”

*Environmental racism* was a topic that stymied a few respondents. Some checked that they did not feel adequately informed about the issue. And others either denied the existence of it, had never heard of it, or stated that it was too complex to address in a sermon:

“This item [environmental racism] does not exist.”

“I have no idea what [environmental racism] is.”

“It’s too complicated.”

“I feel getting them to admit racism is a problem first is a step we've yet to achieve (on the whole).”

Regarding the topic of *fossil fuel extraction*, a number of respondents indicated that their reticence had to do with the industry being a major source of employment for their parishioners:

“So many livelihoods in the congregation are tied to fossil fuels. Also, misinformation is too strong to untangle in one sermon.”

“Too many parishioners have livelihood in this industry; hard to separate personal from systemic.”

“It's difficult to preach against an industry where most of your members make a living or are directly associated with it.”

“The economy of my city is heavily dependent on fracking and although it is a deeply eco-aware congregation, it is also a congregation that realized that the slowing or elimination of fracking in our community has incredibly far-reaching negative impacts on families in our community.” (Colorado)

“Critique of the false dreams regarding capitalism we have been promised, e.g. the factories and coal jobs are not coming back. I am struggling to find the Gospel witness. Where does the unemployed coal miner find and hear the good news in the end of his family’s primary vocation? At this point the issues seems to be one of pastoral care until Scripture helps me find a voice.” (Kentucky)

##### Finding the intersections

I have previously contended that homilies and sermons can enhance the effectiveness of the message to embrace green Christianity. Research from the 2014 PRRI/AAR survey on religion, values and climate change appears to confirm this assertion, in that “Americans who say their clergy leader speaks at least occasionally about climate change are more likely to be climate change Believers than Americans who tend not to hear about climate change in church (49% and 36%, respectively).”[[7]](#footnote-7) Further:

Americans who say their clergy leader speaks at least occasionally about climate change also score higher on the Climate Change Concern Index. More than 6-in-10 Americans who report hearing about climate change from their clergy leader at least occasionally are very (38%) or somewhat (24%) concerned about climate change, compared to approximately 4-in-10 (39%) Americans who attend congregations where the issue is rarely or never raised.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

One way to craft sermons that address environmental issues is to realize that many of the topics listed in the survey intersect and overlap with each other. For example, climate change contributed to and exacerbated the refugee crisis in Syria, which is also complexified by Islamophobia and xenophobia.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is that intersectionality which is both a challenge for the task of preaching, and a potential opportunity.

Another strategy is for a preacher to address environmental issues by way of the points of connection with other “safer” topics. To illustrate: since hunger issues seem to be a more palatable topic among justice issues (see Table 1 above), preachers could connect that issue to climate change. For instance, the preacher could explain how climate change affects crop production, blight, and the devastation of agriculture due to catastrophic weather events (witness Puerto Rico’s decimated farming industry after Hurricane Maria).[[10]](#footnote-10) A preacher wanting to address climate change in a sermon with Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 as its foundation, might explain how our efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions ultimately help preserve the fruits of the earth which God has called “good.”

Another critical component of environmental preaching is simply making the case that Creation-care is part of our responsibility as Christians. Biblical authorization for addressing contemporary ecological threats is a key step for laying the groundwork for “green” preaching. Utilizing an ecohermeneutic for allow Scripture to frame our understanding of environmental issues is vital. The preacher who can interweave the intersectionality of environmental issues with other justice topics – and within a biblical and theological framework – may find their sermons to be effective, contextual, and scripturally sound.

For example, consider the opportunity to preach about the intersection between systemic racism and pollution when preaching the text of Isaiah 24, which describes the desolation of the earth. Preachers wanting to address racism and confront white privilege might craft a sermon pointing out the locations of toxic waste sites and their proximity to communities of color. The reading from Isaiah is particularly poignant when considering how the covenant between air, land, and communities has been broken by the pattern of polluting industries targeting communities of color:[[11]](#footnote-11)

*The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes  
    and broken the everlasting covenant.* (Isaiah 24:5)

Or the preacher might share a simple statistic about the number of black children who suffer from asthma as compared to white children.[[12]](#footnote-12) Communities of color are often places ringed by incinerators, metal producers, power plants, chemical manufacturers and other industries that contribute to poor air quality. Reading Matthew 12:31 – 32 (the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit), then, takes on a different perspective when considering the ways in which the very *ruah*, breath, or air of God is blasphemed by air pollution that chokes the breath out of children.

Also, when it comes to preaching about a topic such as fossil fuel extraction in a congregation whose members derive their livelihood from the industry, pastoral sensitivity is of the utmost importance. For the parish pastor, the relationships which we seek to nurture between ourselves and our congregations, and between them and God, are what remain essential when preaching about environmental issues. Without those relationships, there can be no hope of healing anything, much less our relationship with Earth. When it comes to preaching about environmental issues, I have found that deep listening and finding common ground (or water or air), while building strong pastoral relationships of trust and good will, can go a long way toward engendering the process of repentance and healing necessary for our human and Earth community. At the same time, it is important to lift up a vision for Christians to participate in the healing of God’s Creation through their activism. The global grassroots climate movement is growing. People of faith with incredible stamina and unrelenting courage are mobilizing across Earth to preserve what is left of our planet.

**How to preach through “the dark night of the green soul”?**

Still, the hour is late, the stakes are high, the obstacles are great, and the time left for effective action is terrifyingly short. In a 2017, New York magazine published an article by David Wallace-Wells called “The Uninhabitable Earth,” in which he noted that the thawing of the arctic permafrost is creating a feedback loop of global warming. He warned that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has overlooked key factors in its evaluations of the present and future of global warming. In frightening terms, he laid out the worst-case scenarios which human civilization could face on massive scale over the next ten to fifty years.  These include crop failures, increases in heat deaths, wars over resources, a surge of climate refugees, exotic diseases, unbreathable air, oceans unable to sustain life, and economic collapse.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In light of this worst-case scenario, it’s easy to understand why preachers avoid talking about environmental issues. For those who are truly aware of what is happening, the grief is poignant, and can result in what I have called “the dark night of the green soul.” Such as when I read about “Sudan,” the last male northern white rhino on the planet, who died in Kenya on March 20, 2018.[[14]](#footnote-14) It might as well have been Good Friday. Because the extinction of this rhino species is part of what is known as the Sixth Great Extinction.[[15]](#footnote-15) In theological terms, I call it the “eco-crucifixion.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Thus, we must honor the sorrow and despair with the honesty of biblical lament. Walter Brueggemann tells us lament achieves three things:

1. recognizes the reality of injustice, loss, and grief

2. names that injustice as intolerable

3. ultimately, moves us to action to follow God’s call to make it right again.[[17]](#footnote-17)

But of course, lamentation is not where we can permanently reside. Lament must be used to break through apathy and numbness, creating a space for hope and action. This is particularly true since we worship a God who, in the Christian tradition, promises resurrection, even after all hope has been crucified.

Consider the women who went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body. Their faith compelled them show up because it was the right thing to do, the compassionate thing, the most loving thing they could do in the face of death and despair. We do the same. We preach lament and a prophetic call to address the Creation-crisis not to be successful, but to be faithful, drawing on the words of Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We pick up the anointing oil and walk to the tomb to attend to those crucified places and people of this Earth. Who knows – perhaps in this journey of despair, we may be surprised by who we meet there: the Divine One, meeting us in those places of pain to transform the wounds into the scars of healing.

1. “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”

   Karl Barth, quoted in *Time* Magazine, May 31, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark Kelly, "Lifeway Research Studies Global Warming Beliefs among Protestant Pastors," April 16, 2009, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-studies-global-warming-beliefs-among-Protestant-pastors>; accessed July 13, 2014. According to the website, “the phone survey sampled randomly selected Protestant churches. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church called and responses were weighted to reflect the geographic distribution of Protestant churches. The completed sample of 1,002 phone interviews provides a 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed ±3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, *Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted About Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science: Findings from the PRRI/AAR Religion, Values, and Climate Change Survey,* Public Religion Research Institute and American Academy of Religion; Washington, D.C., 2014; 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John M. Clements, Aaron M. McCright, Chenyang Xiao, "An Examination of the 'Greening of Christianity' Thesis among Americans, 1993-2010," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 2 (2014): 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I calculated my optimal sample size (1051) based on information collected from the statistics and research departments of eight mainline Protestant denominations to arrive at an estimate of the total number of pastors currently serving congregations. While I received responses that represented over 16 different denominations, I calculated my sample pool (67,701) based on the number of active, non-retired clergy currently serving congregations in eight denominations in the United States – United Methodist, Presbyterian Church – USA, Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), and Reformed Church in America. The number of responses (1205) exceeded the optimal sample size needed for a statistically accurate sampling at a confidence level of 95% with a 3% margin of error. It is important to note that not all questions were completed by all participants, so the confidence level and margin of error is adjusted accordingly for each question. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jones, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Abraham, “Study finds that global warming exacerbates refugee crises,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2018/jan/15/study-finds-that-global-warming-exacerbates-refugee-crises>, accessed Sept. 7, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Frances Robles and Luis Ferré-Sadurní,“Puerto Rico’s Agriculture and Farmers Decimated by Maria,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-agriculture-.html>, accessed Sept. 7, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, class and environmental quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990) <http://www.ciesin.columbia.edu/docs/010-278/010-278chpt2.html#fn27>, accessed January 23, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, black children are twice as likely to have asthma as white children. And black children are 10 times more likely than white kids to die of complications from asthma,” “Scientists Seek Genetic Clues To Asthma's Toll On Black Children,” Lesley Mclurg, June 7, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/06/07/481092103/scientsts-seek-genetic-clues-to-why-asthma-is-deadlier-in-blacks>. Accessed October 13, 2017. See also “Asthma and African Americans” report by the Department of Health and Human Services: <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=15>. And Crystal Gammon, “Pollution, Poverty and People of Color: Asthma and the Inner City,”, *Scientific American*, June 20, 2012, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pollution-poverty-people-color-asthma-inner-city/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. David Wallace-Wells, "When Will the Planet Be Too Hot for Humans? Much, Much Sooner Than You Imagine," *New York* Magazine, July 10, 2017, accessed May 28, 2018, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Leah D. Schade, “The Last Rhino, Good Friday, and the Preachers’ Silence,” *Patheos*, March 27, 2018, accessed June 16, 2018. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2018/03/last-rhino-good-friday-preachers-silence/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kolbert, Elizabeth, *The Sixth Great Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company, LLC, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Leah D. Schade, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2015), 4 -5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Walter Brueggeman, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress: 1984), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)