



Backgrounder - Taking Action on Climate Change

Climate change is already disrupting life on Earth as we know it. Average global temperatures have already increased 1 degree Celsius over pre-industrial levels, bringing about melting glaciers and polar ice caps, rising seas, deadly heatwaves, and more intense storms. Canada is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world, and the Arctic region, three times as fast, with permafrost thawing 70 years ahead of projections¹. Even in southern Canada, climate change impacts such as more intense storms, flooding, greater occurrence and severity of wildfires, and hotter, dryer summers, have become the new normal.² Ocean levels are rising, and oceans are getting warmer and more acidic, resulting in the decimation of fisheries stocks and threatening “100-year floods” on an annual basis.³ Lakes, too, are warming, with Lake Superior one of the fastest-warming lakes in the world.⁴ Seasonal shifts disrupt wildlife breeding and migration, and insect pests that used to be controlled by long, cold winters are increasing their range and activity, leading to impacts on forests, agricultural crops, and the spread of disease.

The human costs of climate change affect low-income people most, as they have fewer resources to protect themselves or recover from a disaster, but the costs are borne by all of us. The July 2013 storm that caused flash flooding across the GTA resulted in \$850 million in property damages, making it the costliest natural disaster in provincial history⁵.

If we were able to maintain global temperatures at this level, it would be challenge enough. But we are on track for much more devastating impacts. In October of 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a report warning that “Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5 C and increase further with 2 C.” Furthermore, the report cautions that “limiting global warming to 1.5 C ... require[s] rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure, and industrial systems... [and] can only be achieved if global CO2 emissions start to decline well before 2030.”⁶ This leaves us only a decade to bring about the transitions we need. The time to act is now.

While the Canadian House of Commons and over 50 municipalities in Canada, including at least 8 within our Diocese (as of October 15, 2019) have joined over a thousand jurisdictions worldwide in declaring a climate emergency, the federal government’s current climate policies would not even achieve its Paris Accord commitment of a 30% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 levels by 2030.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/arctic-permafrost-thawing-early-1.5179760>

² https://changingclimate.ca/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/04/CCCR_FULLREPORT-EN-FINAL.pdf

³ https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/3/2019/09/SROCC_SPM_HeadlineStatements.pdf

⁴ https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/lake-superior-fast-warming-1.5277713?fbclid=IwAR0qml9axTf47Ud5T3_X1VAJI7OIEYRC0z4RgFCPC9Pa8fv5TnhXf1YNVoM

⁵ https://www.thestar.com/business/2013/08/14/july_flood_ontarios_most_costly_natural_disaster.html

⁶ https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Headline-statements.pdf

One of the challenges facing us as Canadians is that our Canadian economy and infrastructure are heavily dependent on the extraction and use of oil, gas, and, to a lesser extent, coal. Transitioning to a lower-carbon economy is not a simple matter. For that very reason, however, it is crucial that all sectors of Canadian society, including governments, business and financial systems, as well as churches and other faith and community organizations, work together to address the challenge. Federal and provincial subsidies of the oil and gas industry add up to billions of dollars annually – money that could be invested in energy efficiency, renewable infrastructure, skills retraining for oil and gas sector workers, and climate change mitigation and adaptation for vulnerable Canadians.⁷

Government and financial experts are starting to recognize transition to a low-carbon economy as an economic imperative. The federally-appointed Expert Panel on Sustainable Finance delivered its final report in June 2019, acknowledging the need to “directly decouple economic growth from emissions.”⁸ More recently, the CEO of one of the worlds’ largest fund managers called climate change a “defining factor” for companies’ long-term prospects.⁹

With the window for transition closing rapidly, it is time for Canadians to send a clear signal to our government to align its financial practices with its climate goals. At the same time, we acknowledge that we, as church bodies and as individuals, also have a key role to play.

This past July, General Synod passed Resolution C003 recognizing a global climate emergency, encouraging dioceses, parishes and all members of the Anglican Church of Canada to make the Baptismal Covenant and fifth Mark of Mission a priority, and urging Anglicans to collaborate with other Canadian faith communities to strengthen our voices on climate change. This past September, millions of people worldwide joined student-led protests calling for climate action. In November, our Diocesan Synod passed a motion calling for the development of comprehensive environmental policies to reduce the Diocese’s carbon footprint and environmental impact more generally.¹⁰

This year’s Vestry Motion invites parishes to consider ways to reduce their own environmental footprint. A range of suggested options for action have been provided. Some parishes in our Diocese have already taken significant steps in this regard, pursuing energy efficient retrofits of heating, lighting, and insulation. Other possible actions include promoting active and public transportation options, limiting or eliminating single-use plastic products, planting trees and/or community gardens, and examining the environmental impact of one’s investments. (The Investing With a Mission resource from the Responsible Investment Task Force of the Anglican Church of Canada may provide helpful guidance in this regard.) Parishes are free to choose from among these actions, or to commit to another goal, which makes sense in their particular context.

As Christians, we understand ourselves as entrusted with the needs of our neighbours (Matthew 25:31-46) and the care of God’s creation (Genesis 2:15). Addressing climate change will take commitment from every sector of our society: governments, businesses, churches, community organizations, and individuals. Let us encourage our governments, and each other, to take up the challenge.

⁷ <https://www.iisd.org/faq/unpacking-canadas-fossil-fuel-subsidies/>

⁸ <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/climate-change/expert-panel-sustainable-finance.html>

⁹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-blackrock-to-adjust-investing-approach-to-address-climate-change-risks/>

¹⁰ <https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/2019/11/10/highlights-from-day-2-of-synod-4/>