



# carmelngo

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## Faith For Nature

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The global Faith for Nature conference was held 5-8 October 2020. It was based in Iceland, but due to the pandemic it was held virtually, with participants and observers joining from around the world. Taking part in this conference were leaders from all of the world's major religions, teachers and scholars, environmental scientists and activists, political and policy leaders, representatives of NGOs and faith-based organizations, and concerned citizens. Taken as a whole, it was a clarion call for unity of faith and science in the service of humanity and our planet.

The Faith for Nature conference had as its objectives to 1. Identify the relevance and way forward in mobilizing values, ethics, spirituality and faith-based action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations in 2015 and 2. Empower faith-based organizations to take action in support of the SDGs and to cooperate for sustainable and regenerative development, with a view to endorsing the establishment of a global Faith for Earth Coalition.

So, this conference was seen as a beginning—a foundation—upon which a strong interfaith coalition,

informed by both religious belief and science, can move aggressively forward to build a more sustainable future.

Most immediately, the objectives of the conference were seen as being supportive of UNEP's fifth United Nations Environment Assembly being held in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 2021, the next scheduled international gathering on the global environment and sustainable development.

One of the chief organizers of the Faith for Nature conference, UNEP's Faith for Earth Initiative, was designed to integrate faith, spiritual and religious values into the regular work of UNEP.

*The initiative aims at strengthening faith communities' actions on environmental issues, green faith-based investments and assets to contribute to financing sustainability and to bring the science-based evidence and religious teaching closer in providing a compelling mutually supportive argument for an ethical approach to protecting the planet. The initiative has been supporting and partnering with global and regional faith institutions and engaging faith actors in policy dialogue and capacity building.*

Below is the key rationale for this effort to bring faith-based organizations (FBOs) and their members more deeply into the struggle for a cleaner environment and sustainable development. These words are from the Faith for Nature website, but were also echoed by a number of conference presenters:

*The potential benefits of structurally and systematically involving FBOs [faith-based organizations] and religious actors in working for the SDGs is considerable. Spiritual values drive more than 80% of the people living on earth, giving faith leadership perhaps unparalleled capacity to influence individual behaviors. FBOs are close to their communities which see them as being trustworthy with a high level of credibility. This combined with the local networks and dynamism of FBOs enables them to generate action and achieve results in the communities where they operate. Globally, FBOs manage 50% of schools, run more media channels than the whole of the European Union and are considered the fourth largest group of investors worldwide. Some individual faith-based aid agencies have country programs with larger budgets than the government ministries to which they relate.*

*Perhaps most importantly, faith connects directly with and forms the basis of people's values. The organizers hold the view that the root causes of climate change and other sustainable development challenges emerge from human fallacies and cannot be addressed by technology alone. People need to be reached close to their hearts and inspired to take collective action to protect our shared planet. Faiths define human relationships with the environment and advance values calling for sustainable living. This includes seeing humans and nature as an integral whole; the intrinsic value in nature; serving as stewards of Earth's resources; the importance of balance; ecological justice based on consciousness of the oneness of humanity; compassion towards all sentient beings including plants and animals; and leading a virtuous life through respect for the planet. The diversity of such values allows faith actors to connect with people regardless of culture and context.*

There were many great talks and discussions during the four days of the conference. Among the points that were emphasized and that stand out to me was the fact that all of the great religions have teachings that emphasize the importance of creation care. Environmental concerns are not tangential to any of the great faiths, but are, in fact, essential. God has created the earth and we are required to care for it. It is that simple.

Another point that was important and clear from the conference was the multiple ways in which we can affect change: planting trees, converting to clean and renewable energy, taking public transit instead of a private automobile, or educating and lobbying others to move hearts and minds to act in ways that show respect

and love for God's creation. And there is prayer. In fact, maybe we can think of planting a tree or any action that demonstrates our care for creation as a form of prayer. Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Al-Modarresi told us that planting a tree is a religious act and that protecting the environment was a religious duty.

Cardinal Turkson, echoing Pope Francis, spoke of an integral ecology. Everything is connected. We must hear both "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." The suffering of one brings the suffering of the other. The earth and the most vulnerable who live on it are inextricably linked.

It is our duty, as people of God, to recognize this link and to do everything in our power to not just protect our vulnerable people and planet, but to build new systems and social relationships that truly transform our world where ecological and social justice can flourish. As Pope Francis reminds us, "An authentic faith always implies a deep desire to change the world."



Icelandic Church

### **The concluding declaration from the Faith for Nature conference: Our sacred commitment.**

High-level faith leaders, faith communities, and academics – recognising the triple threats of poverty and inequity, climate change and biodiversity loss – engaged in a global dialogue anchored at the historic cathedral of Skálholt in Iceland to discuss a coalition of hope, commitment and action.

From all corners of the globe we came together to hear the cry of Mother Earth. Religious institutions and faith communities have a long history in fostering sustainable development. Faiths cultivate values of compassion, community, and care for the vulnerable. We shared our love, compassion, and belief that the Earth is sacred, and we are called to be keeper of this sacred trust given into our care.

We came together in this global dialogue from diverse backgrounds and experience and were moved by a deep sense of global consciousness, concern for our planet and a commitment to demonstrate leadership.

We emerged with a shared resolve to mobilize around the protection of nature and our common home, and to working through the proposed Faith for Earth Coalition to turn our commitment into action.

We do so recognizing that religious communities and faith-based organizations have a unique and vital contribution to make to global efforts on environmental protection and ecosystem restoration building on a growing track-record of multi-faith action for nature. Faith and spiritual values drive individual behavior and personal choices and shape cultural values, social inclusion, and political engagement. Faith communities with their vast networks, adherents, education structures and spiritual endeavors, are a valuable partner in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Recognizing that there have been times when science and religion have been at odds, we commit ourselves to communicate spiritual insights informed by best available science. Harmony and balance between scientific and religious inquiry is essential for the advancement of humankind at this critical juncture. Local, traditional, and indigenous knowledge, wisdom and spirituality will continue to be an indispensable source of guidance. Efforts need to be made to cultivate synergies and mutual understanding between indigenous, religious, and scientific inquiry.

We recognise with profound concern scientific evidence on environmental degradation, climate change and biodiversity loss and the limited time available to achieve the deep transformation needed. The world's faith-based organizations are uniquely placed to relay this science and rallying religious communities to act in defence of nature and environmental justice.

We have one common home. Global challenges faced by humankind are deeply interlinked and have a significant spiritual dimension. Appreciation for the spiritual nature of our being leads to a deeper sense of connectedness both with the natural world, of which humans are an organic part, and within the one human family. Humans have the responsibility to protect Earth's life-supporting systems to ensure a sustainable human civilization on which both social and economic capital rest.

Current extremes of wealth and poverty need to give way to greater equity and justice. Justice in all its dimensions is a fundamental prerequisite for lasting unity. Investment needs to be redirected away from extractive economic activity towards green, inclusive, just, and regenerative economic development.

We need a movement with roots and wings. Insights and experiences from elders can reinforce the vision, passion, and creativity of the young. Faith communities draw their power from the interplay of generations, firm grounding in local realities and sense of belonging to a global community. Recognizing the challenge of patriarchy and the vital role of women as leaders in the environmental movement, we commit ourselves to ensuring that women are given access and opportunity to exercise full leadership roles.

The core environmental crisis is an ethical and moral issue. Responsible dietary choices moving towards plant-based diets and attention to the footprint of our

consumption of energy and materials are an integral part of ethical stewardship of nature. Nature-based solutions, which are a win for livelihoods, climate, and biodiversity through protecting and restoring forests and other ecosystems need to be developed and scaled up. They offer an essential, reliable, and cost-effective way to address climate change and halt biodiversity loss.

This is a time of lament and a time of hope. We recognize what has been irreversibly lost and confess that we are living off the inheritance of generations to come. At the same time, we recognize the key role of faith communities as bearers of hope at a time when the environmental movement suffers from despair, which may lead to apathy. We will demonstrate bold leadership and catalyze transformation at all levels. Through hope, faith, empathy, and reason we can build a better future.

The sudden emergence of COVID-19 changed the global outlook. The very health and future of humanity depends on our ability to act together not only with respect to pandemics but also in protecting the global ecosystems. We must seize this moment to change course, protect and restore nature, reduce our vulnerability to deadly viruses and to the impacts of climate disruption.

People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership – these are woven together through the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals thus providing a framework for urgent action and a roadmap for faith communities to work together. We recognize that there is still much work remaining to translate that vision into language accessible to people of faith in the local context.

Faith-based organizations around the world are committed to working across spiritual traditions and across sectors to take actions that protect and restore nature. We see it as a shared moral responsibility to contribute. The time has come for people of faith to work together for the planet given into our care.

The proposed Faith for Earth Coalition has a vision – in partnership with UNEP – to enable faith groups to promote action and influence policy choices at the local, national, regional, and international levels. We encourage governments to come to an agreement at the fifth United Nations Environment Assembly in 2021 to turn that vision into reality. We stand ready to join hands with UNEP to turn this ground-breaking vision into a model for others to emulate.

We express our appreciation to the Government of Iceland, our Icelandic partners, Religions for Peace and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (USA) for enabling this global exchange and resolve to disseminate our findings and channel our energy into focused and sustained action.

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### **The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):**

**Goal 1.** End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

- Goal 2.** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Goal 3.** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Goal 4.** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- Goal 5.** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6.** Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- Goal 7.** Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
- Goal 8.** Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
- Goal 9.** Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
- Goal 10.** Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- Goal 11.** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
- Goal 12.** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Goal 13.** Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- Goal 14.** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
- Goal 15.** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
- Goal 16.** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- Goal 17.** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

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### For Our Part

The *Carmelite* NGO considers Care for Creation to be a top tier issue for us. Over the years – even before Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, and certainly since – individual NGO members, as well as the organization as a whole have engaged in a number of efforts related to the fight to protect the environment and especially to combat climate change:

- We have presented numerous articles in our quarterly publication *Carme*NGO and in our e-bulletin One Page that educate on the issue.
- Fr. Eduardo Agosta Scarel, O.Carm, is a member of our Steering Committee and a climate scientist. He has been an adviser to Pope Francis on climate change. Fr. Eduardo has also published academic papers, attended conferences, and given speeches to general audiences on his research, the problem of

climate change, and on Church teaching regarding creation care.

- Other members of the NGO have attended conferences, written articles and given talks on the subject of climate change. Dr. Dennis Kalob, the Chief Administrative Officer of the *Carmelite* NGO, participated in a national Catholic conference in the U.S. on climate change in 2019. He has also written for us on the subject and is our representative on the steering committee of Catholic Climate Covenant, a national organization in the United States.

- The NGO has created videos addressing the subject of climate change, including one on the impact of rising sea levels on communities in Louisiana. Another video is being completed in Indonesia, also about sea level rise and its impacts.

- We have created and are promoting a secondary school curriculum that teaches *Laudato Si’* across disciplines. It is available in English and in Spanish and is being used in various schools in the U.S. and worldwide. We also created a *Laudato Si’* study guide suitable for college or parish study groups. For information about our *Laudato Si’* curriculum project, go to [laudato-si-for-all.com](http://laudato-si-for-all.com).

For further details about the work summarized above and for other information about our NGO, we invite you to examine our website: [www.CarmeliteNGO.org](http://www.CarmeliteNGO.org). The website is available in English and Spanish.

The *Carmelite* NGO invites all of our friends and supporters and indeed, all people of good will, to join in the vital work ahead to promote sustainable development, social justice, and creation care. Faith and science working together can transform our world. That is the hope that led to the creation of the Faith for Nature global gathering and it is the hope that we need to sustain us as we march forward to build a better world for all of us and for future generations.

The Faith for Nature conference was also used as a launching platform for a new book, *Faith for Earth: A Call for Action*. This book, which was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Parliament of the World’s Religions, is a new and revised version of a book published twenty years earlier and titled *Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action*. It represents a new and urgent call for people of faith to take part in the vital work ahead to save and nurture creation.

**For additional information about the conference, go to [faithfornature.org](http://faithfornature.org).**

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