

The Reverend Classis of Schenectady overtures the General Synod:

To urge RCA institutions, congregations and members to take immediate steps to begin to reduce fossil fuel consumption and transition to renewable energy; and further,

To direct the General Synod Council, in conjunction with the Advocacy Initiative, to develop a means for gathering information and sharing stories to help encourage and equip RCA institutions, congregations and members to take steps to reduce fossil fuel consumption; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Christian Action, in consultation with the Global Mission Team and the General Synod Council, to prepare a preliminary assessment of the effects of projected climate change (sea level rise, increasing frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods, food shortages, the growing number of environmental refugees, etc.) on RCA congregations, mission facilities and programs and to suggest measures for addressing these challenges; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Christian Action to review the previous 1993 Christian Action report, “Global Warming,” and the 1999 report, “Climate Change Update,” and to report to the General Synod in 2020 with additional recommendations for resources and actions to help the church more faithfully care for God’s creation and be a bold and compassionate witness in a time of environmental and social crisis.

Reasons:

1) The 1993 Christian Action report, “Global Warming” (MGS 1993, pp 98 - 103), stated that “the greatest priority must be to reduce the use of fossil fuels, particularly coal and oil” and called on churches “to play a positive role with wise purchases and an active educational efforts to inform members about the cause and consequences of global warming and the steps that are necessary to reduce this danger” (p.100). In response to that report the General Synod voted:

1. to instruct the general secretary to write letters to governmental leaders in the United States and Canada “urging support for national and international policies to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases, to curb deforestation and to promote reforestation” (p. 102).
2. called on pastors “to prepare special liturgies and sermons so that members may be equipped to understand environmental issues from the biblical perspective of creation and stewardship.”
3. called on churches “to improve the energy efficiency of church buildings and appliances...”
4. encouraged “RCA camps and conference centers to stress environmental issues in their programs and to model environmental stewardship in their operations” (103).

2) The 1999 report of the Christian Action Commission, "Climate Change Update," (MGS 1999, pp. 98 - 104) noted that addressing climate change is:

1. a matter of faithfulness to the Biblical mandate "to till and to keep" the garden of creation.
2. an issue of justice. The poor, the marginalized and future generations will suffer the most from the effects of climate change, while the wealthier and those in the more developed nations have been responsible for most of the greenhouse gas emissions.
3. a means of fulfilling the Biblical command to love our neighbors as ourselves. We cannot ignore the plight of our neighbors who are already suffering as a result of global climate change.

3) Since those reports were presented to the synod the threat of climate change has become even more severe. Twenty-five years ago when the first Christian Action paper on global warming was presented the CO<sub>2</sub> level in the atmosphere was approximately 350 parts per million. Today it is more than 400 parts per million. U.S. carbon emissions jumped by 3.4% in 2018, the biggest rise in eight years. The 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years, and 2018 was the 4th warmest year on record. The most recent report (October 2018) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a U.N.-sponsored collection of the world's top scientists, stated that the world may have as little as 12 years to act to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. If we don't act to reduce fossil fuel emissions the consequences will be catastrophic, according to the report.

Drought and poverty would intensify. There would be food shortages, more devastating wildfires, coastal flooding, an increasing number of environmental refugees, and coral reefs would die-off at an alarming rate. "Several hundred million" lives are at stake, according to the IPCC.

1. The U.S. National Climate Assessment released in November 2018 reported that climate change could cause hundreds of billions of dollars in annual damage in the U.S. as deadly heat waves, wildfires, crop failures, coastal flooding, and an increase in extreme weather events take their toll. The report estimates that the cost to the United States economy of projected climate impacts would be \$141 billion from heat-related deaths, \$118 billion from sea level rise and \$32 billion from infrastructure damage by the end of the century, among others. The nation's farm belt is likely to be among the hardest-hit regions. By 2050, if action is not taken, the scientists forecast that changes in rainfall and hotter temperatures will reduce the agricultural productivity of the Midwest to levels last seen in the 1980s. "This report draws a direct connection between the warming atmosphere and the resulting changes that affect Americans' lives, communities, and livelihoods, now and in the future," the document reads, concluding that "the evidence of human-caused climate change is overwhelming and continues to strengthen, that the impacts of climate change are intensifying across the country, and that climate-related threats to Americans' physical, social, and economic well-being are rising."

2. The 2018 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change noted that above-average and record-setting temperatures in the U.S., and heat waves have been getting more frequent and lasting longer and puts people at risk for heat exhaustion and heat stroke while worsening chronic conditions such as lung, heart, and kidney disease. One estimate predicts that by 2050, approximately 3,400 more Americans will die prematurely each year as a result of increased heat. According to the report, climate change is also elevating the risk of mosquito-, tick-, and water-borne diseases. Climate-sensitive vector-borne illnesses transmitted by mosquitoes, ticks, and fleas, including Lyme disease and West Nile virus, tripled between 2004-2016. Longer warm water seasons and increased water temperatures support pathogens and bacteria, like Vibrio, which can cause gastrointestinal illnesses, food poisoning, skin infections, and even death.
  
3. Similar data can be cited for the nation of Canada. Average temperatures in Canada have increased by 1.7 degrees Celsius since 1948. The nation has experienced a higher rate of warming than most other regions of the world, particularly in its far-north and west. Cases of Lyme disease have been reported across Canada, in areas where it was never thought to exist. In early July 2018, a heat wave in the southern part of the Canadian province of Québec took the lives of up to 54 people. The Canadian Arctic is especially vulnerable and it is warming at a much faster rate than much of the rest of the world. Scientists are already seeing dramatic reductions in Arctic sea ice cover, particularly in the summertime. This shrinking sea ice disrupts normal ocean circulation and causes changes in climate and weather around the globe. <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/causes-effects.html> <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/how-climate-change-affecting-canada> <https://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/blog/how-climate-change-is-already-affecting-canada>

4) Nevertheless, there is cause for hope. Increasing awareness, advances in technology, and renewed commitment to the ministry of creation care are making change possible. As examples, Christian camps within our denomination have significantly reduced its fossil fuel consumption by installing solar panels and implementing other energy conservation measures. Multiple churches have made care of creation a central priority in their congregation, including a decision to eliminate investments in the fossil fuel industry from a portion of their endowment funds and to re-invest in renewable energy. The RCA Care of Creation Initiative coordinated by Earl James and in partnership with Creation Justice Ministries has held several workshops and training events to equip congregations to address climate change and other threats to the well-being of God's creation.

There are small signs of hope, signs that the Spirit is at work among us. "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Ro. 8:19), wrote Paul, suggesting that creation itself is yearning for the children of God to fulfill their biblical mandate "to till and keep" the earth. But the need for action is urgent. We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation able to do something about it. By working together we

can more faithfully care for God's good earth, protect the lives of the poor and vulnerable, show love for our neighbors, and in word and deed witness to God's promise "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).