

Climate Justice Questions

Responses by Rev. Alison B. Miller, Candidate for UUA President

1. What do you see as the root causes of the climate crisis?

The root causes of the climate crisis from a scientific perspective are our reliance on fossil fuels for energy, our practice of overconsumption, and the consequences of overpopulation. These human behaviors contribute to the increase in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in our air and an encroachment on natural habitats that nourish myriad species of life. All of this has led us to where we are today – in the middle of a climate crisis and an ecological crisis.

The deeper question is what are the root causes of human behaviors which threaten the existence of all life on Earth. While there are some people who are climate change deniers, and I have even met some Unitarian Universalists who fall in this category, there is growing consensus that we must forge a new path and quickly to avert disaster. It is important that we continue to educate the rising generations in schools and try to educate the deniers about how our behavior is connected to advancing a healthier planet or a sicker one.

However, education is far from the only barrier. We can see that people who are educated about the relationship between the choices that people, corporations, and governments make and the wellbeing of our planet, still do not choose to change their behaviors, or do so in a far too gradual manner. People are choosing to ignore what they are no longer ignorant about.

Privilege, greed, fear, and the illusion of our separateness are some of the root causes that we must address to meet the current situation with a sense of urgency and a moral imperative. Climate justice is intertwined with our commitments to equity and anti-oppression. Gender, race, class, poverty, and country all intersect in ways that disadvantage certain populations in grave, harsh and daily ways, while other populations don't personally experience changes in climate as affecting their daily lives (yet).

Climate justice, environmental justice, and ecological justice will not be solved in the ways that we have traditionally tried to solve social problems. We have traditionally looked to fix the situation by increasing the standard of living for more people, which so far has been implemented in ways that lead to more people relying on fossil fuels, practicing overconsumption, and increasing the human population. We must shift towards an ethic of sustainability and an ethic of generational equity. We must live with a present and embodied sense of the promise we owe future generations who will inhabit this planet.

E.O. Wilson writes, "The great challenge of the twenty-first century is to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible." Moving to a "decent" standard of living looks like some people being willing to give up some of the resources they are consuming, while for others it looks like gaining access to precious, life-giving resources. We must work to restore balance in our relationship with the Earth and her inhabitants; the future of life on Earth interdepends on all of us.

2. *What foreseeable impacts of global climate disruption are you most concerned about? Why?*

Water is the source of life. Our bodies are about 60% water, and the surface of our planet is about 70% water. No living organism on Earth can survive without water. Today, many people around the globe struggle to find clean drinking water and many animals are swimming in polluted waters. Scarcity of potable and habitable water leads to famine, death, disease, and war, and disproportionately impacts indigenous people, people of color, and poor people. Water is our most precious human right, and it is being treated like a commodity that should be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Water is also a force of disaster and destruction. Floods, tsunamis, and hurricanes all come to mind. Just as water gives rise to life, in certain forms water can end life too. Once again, we have seen in disasters, like hurricane Katrina, a wake-up call to the ways that these disasters hit vulnerable populations the hardest – although, natural disasters are a great leveler – they do not choose between rich and poor, privileged or oppressed. The effects of global climate change and the ensuing disasters will touch everyone.

Water has so captivated religious peoples the world over that many of our rituals and stories center around the healing, life-giving properties of water and the devastation it can also bring. As Unitarian Universalists, many of us welcome our children in a Service of Dedication where we dip a rose or our fingertips in water and bless them with this sacred element of life.

I feel called to pay attention and to act at the intersection between environmental justice and racial justice. One way that took shape for me in the last year was responding to the call of Chief Arvol Looking Horse and showing up at Standing Rock to resist the Dakota Access Pipeline. This movement is about indigenous rights, about racial justice, and about promoting water as a sacred human right. One of the threats to clean water in our country are the pipelines which crisscross our country to pump fossil fuels from one place to another. Pipelines have leaked wreaking havoc on water and wildlife, and expanding the infrastructure that supports the use of fossil fuels doesn't make sense. If we want to support the potential for healthy life on this planet, we must invest in and shift to renewable, clean energy sources.

3. *How do you relate global climate disruption to the other great moral, spiritual and religious issues of our time?*

Just as mounting nuclear powers have the capacity to eliminate life on Earth as we know it, global climate disruption poses the same threat. Nuclear weapons create a sense of urgency because we know that their impact is swift and immediate. While the impacts of global climate disruption may not be felt immediately, the consequences are just as deadly. The trajectory we have been on of using up the resources of Mother Earth as quickly as we can buy them is already yielding harmful effects – rising temperatures, rising seas, climate change, extinctions of species, and a disproportioned burden on the poor and oppressed. Global climate disruption is one of the greatest moral, spiritual and religious issues that we have ever faced.

One of the largest spiritual hurdles around global climate disruption is facing the truth that we have passed the point of no return for certain parts of our biosphere. Our behavior has led to the extinction of certain species – animal and plant – which are gone forever. Our behavior can also lead to restoring wildlife populations and habitats that can still be recovered. We have also passed the number of 350 parts per million carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which is a threshold number for life as we know it to remain intact. We are now about 400 parts per million (ppm). All of us – individuals, families, corporations, and governments – will have to stop acting out of a place of immediate gratification and develop an ethic of generational equity that seeks to put future as-of-yet unborn people first.

We must shift from valuing ease, consumption, and profits to valuing sustainability and a habitable, healthy planet. What does it mean to have money to hand down to our grandchildren, if they don't have access to a healthy, habitable planet? It is meaningless.

Global climate disruption is not just about the future. It is about looking at the here-and-now, and how we still struggle to build a world where the human rights of all are protected. It's not just about imagining the worth of unborn generations, it's about realizing and committing to "the inherent worth and dignity" of everyone who is alive today. Climate justice is not an isolated as moral issue; it is interconnected with our pressing commitment to anti-racism and ending poverty. We are living in a country where children in Flynt, Michigan were knowingly put in harm's way and exposed to dangerous lead levels in their drinking water. If we say we want to be on the side of the oppressed and the vulnerable, then we cannot fulfill these aspirations without a substantive commitment to the wellbeing of planet Earth.

4. What moral imperatives should guide Unitarian Universalist climate action?

Our 1st and 7th principle weave together powerfully as an ethic to guide our actions around climate justice. In our Seventh Principle, we covenant to affirm and promote "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Unitarian Universalism recognizes that human beings are not above nature, rather we are a link in the chain of life that includes former and future generations of human life and all six kingdoms of life (animal, plant, fungi, protists, archaeobacteria and eubacteria). In addition, we must protect the land, the water, and the air, which all sustain life.

In our First Principle, we covenant to affirm and promote "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." In 2017, the way this is practiced in our faith is to be guided by the populations most disproportionately impacted by an ethical issue. When we support a climate justice agenda determined by the movement for black lives, or when we support the rights of indigenous peoples, we are leaning into the work of our first principle. We need to listen, learn from, and center the experiences and wisdom of indigenous peoples, people of color, the poor and the oppressed as we engage in the spiritual resistance to the plunder of our earth and the plight of those who pay the highest price.

5. *How do you respond to global climate disruption in your current life and ministries?*

I serve as the Senior Minister of the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, one of our earliest Green Sanctuary congregations with many people committed to a journey of advocacy and life-changes that support the health and wellbeing of our Earth. I am also married to a middle school science teacher who chose this career to help shape the ethic of the rising generations to use what they learn in science and technology to make wiser choices that impact the future of our Earth home. While I already had a commitment to grow and develop as an advocate for the environment and in my own personal choices, these people and their stories of dedication and the difference it makes inspires me to want to do even more.

As a minister in a congregation, I am deeply aware of the importance of weaving our commitment to work for environmental justice throughout our congregational life. I partner with our Green Earth Ministry to ensure that the wellbeing of our environment and climate justice are a focus over time in our worship services, religious education programs, committee life, justice work, annual budget, and a priority for our capital building projects. As a faith, justice, and advocacy leader in the state of New Jersey, I serve on the UU Legislative Ministry's Board, where we have an environmental focus to promote renewable energy and conservation, to prevent fracking for natural gas in the Delaware Valley, and to reinstate New Jersey in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. As an interfaith leader, I join in movements of global climate justice by responding "Yes!" to show up to witness, to protect, and to resist, which is why I traveled to North Dakota to stand with Standing Rock.

As an individual and as a family, we are committed to deepening our practice of consuming less, reducing waste, reusing, and recycling. Over the last decade, we have significantly altered our habits around the foods we buy and eat. When we shop for groceries, we buy locally grown and raised foods, try to eat more often lower on the food chain, and support organic farms and businesses that are ethical in their treatment of workers and animals.

6. *As UUA President, what specific actions and policies would you implement to address the climate crisis? How would you increase institutional support from the UUA for its congregations and their members to work towards climate justice, environmental justice, and a sustainable way of life?*

As UUA President, I would implement a plan to further reduce the carbon footprint of our Association's operations. We have a LEED Platinum headquarters, now let us continue to be green in our activities in that building and in all the spaces where our work happens. Our budget should reflect costs for green choices around renewable energy, green products (cleaning, paper, etc.), meeting/conference planning that aligns with principles of food justice and reducing the use of fossil fuels, and more.

As UUA President, I would deploy staff resources to promoting our goals of climate justice, ecological justice, and environmental justice in the world. I plan to continue to promote our practice of shareholder advocacy to encourage corporate responsibility around climate justice. I plan to support our climate justice campaign, Commit2Respond, which my congregation has

participated in since the beginning. I see opportunities for us to develop the campaign further towards the intention of including leaders in other faith traditions. Where I serve in Morristown, interfaith congregations are interconnected through Green Faith in NJ, and we inspire one another to continue along a path of responsible consumption, reducing fossil fuels, and promoting the health and wellbeing of our Earth. We can create an interfaith advisory council to empower leaders from other faiths to help us to shape the campaign in ways that speak across faith traditions.

The UUA plays an important role in denomination-wide communications and setting the ethical standards that congregations follow. The UUA can incentivize congregations to initiate new climate justice conscious operations through small grants awarded to support green building design features, reducing fossil fuel usage, responsible consumption, and collaborate community projects in the town/city in which they live. This will also assist the UUA in collecting and sharing the stories of how congregations/communities/affiliates are becoming increasingly climate conscious. These models alongside of updating Green Sanctuary Standards offer the inspiration and the challenge for others to become greener in their choices.

Currently, we have statewide advocacy networks in 22 states in varying states of maturity. Many of these organizations are involved in community organizing, public witness, and advocacy for climate justice. The challenge is that climate justice is a global issue, and we are only covering a portion of the United States. It is a priority in my planning for the future of the UUA to partner with UUs and congregations in all five regions to expand our advocacy efforts and reach. We also need to strengthen our voice in Washington, DC. Our voice and faith values are critically important part of the resistance to policies of the new US administration, which is openly hostile to environmental protections.

7. As UUA President, how would you expand and support the UUA's work with other faiths and non-governmental organizations to take collective actions towards shifting to a low carbon future, advancing the human rights of impacted populations, and growing the climate justice movement?

Our Commit2Respond initiative launched a couple of years ago with the intention of involving people of other faiths. However, looking at the list of endorsing groups, it is currently mostly Unitarian Universalists who are involved. As I wrote above, Commit2Respond could be an organizing umbrella for climate justice leaders that reaches beyond UUs, but we would need to recruit leaders from other faiths at the leadership level and at the grassroots level of the campaign to help us attract new participants and shape the campaign in ways that speak across religious traditions. I would suggest we move strongly in that direction, or decide to brand it more strongly UU and actively seek to partner with climate justice organizations of other faiths.

The UU-United Nations Office has five program areas, including Climate Justice. The UU-UNO is now part of the International Office of the UUA rather than a separate entity. It is important to evaluate this newer part of our UUA system, how effective our voice is at the United Nations, and what we could do to strengthen partnerships with other non-governmental organizations and faith based groups working to further climate justice and the sustainable development goals. It

will require steady advocacy to ensure governments and businesses in our country and around the world implement the recommendations to support healthy water, air, land, and life. We have a seat at the UN table, and we should use that positioning to do our part to achieve these goals.

The UUSC is one of the strongest human rights organizations in our UU universe. I plan to continue the development of the UUA-UUSC partnership in initiatives that hold governments, corporations, and socioeconomic elites accountable. The UUSC, through projects of the College of Social Justice, also provide UUs with opportunities to serve and make a difference in areas with populations who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate disruption. To put our values into action, we must engage with meaningful projects in global advocacy, service projects, and targeted fundraising to support grassroots efforts to support populations who find themselves on the margins, such as LGBTQ identified people who might otherwise be on the outside of humanitarian aid in certain countries.

8. How should the UUA and its congregations offer ministerial support for people struggling with despair, confusion, or denial related to the global climate crisis?

It is natural to feel a degree of despair in the face of all we have already lost in this climate, environmental, and ecological crisis, especially as we recognize that some parts of the web of life cannot be repaired. It is normal to experience confusion as we try to understand all the complexities and intricacies involved in the web of life, as well as the intended and unintended consequences of our choices on the interdependent web. In extreme cases, there are some people who are so fearful of the narrative of global climate disruption, that they refuse to listen to or believe what is happening and prefer to place control out of their hands.

To those who are experiencing despair and confusion, our congregations/covenanted communities offer practices that buoy the spirit, center our hearts on what matters, challenge our assumptions, and cultivate hope. We contribute something essential to the work of justice. We co-create possibilities to be more resilient in the face of a crisis because we nourish our spirits along the journey, and we don't face challenges alone. We lean into opportunities for change together participating in concentric circles of hope and renewal – circles of Unitarian Universalists, circles of environmental justice activists, and circles of interfaith partners committed to caring for all of creation. These collective connections allow us to see the difference that each one of us can make as our actions add up to noticeable change. This is also the source of our collective power to pressure corporations and governments to make changes.

The UUA can support this work by allocating staff resources to equip congregations for holistic engagement on the issues of climate justice and by modeling what it looks like to be an institution on a path of deepening commitment to climate justice. For example, UUA can make wise choices about the energy providers, conferences, priorities for justice campaigns, and more. UUA's Beacon Press can be used to publish works that articulately frame the ethical dilemmas that we are up against in climate justice and why it is so critical to engage on a path to repair, restore, and resist. Skinner House books can be used to inspire Unitarian Universalists by sharing stories of how different congregations are successfully engaging in this work in their advocacy, public witness, community organizing, and intersectional movements for justice.

For those that remain in the camp of denial, education is the best tool once they are open enough to listen to another side. I don't see a Tapestry of Faith series on climate justice for adults. There is room for development here – possibly a series is set up for UUs to partner with other houses of worship in their community/town/city – to learn about the global, national, and local effects of the current climate crisis and the theologies/philosophies which undergird moving together on a path towards change. The series could include giving people language and tools to reach out to climate change deniers and ways to bring people on all sides of this issue together to foster productive dialogue and learning.

9. How should the UUA and its congregations offer ministerial support for members of front-line impacted communities of the global climate crisis? What steps should the UUA take to be in greater solidarity with the front-line impacted communities of the global climate crisis?

In this past year, we saw several congregations and donors generously support their minister's travel to North Dakota to stand with Standing Rock. As UUA President, I will encourage congregations to create a fund to be able to send their minister to front-line impacted communities, so that when faith leaders are called to show up, we can say "Yes!" more often. Indigenous people around the globe have been dislocated and disproportionately impacted by the human tendency to dominate nature rather than to live harmoniously with it. Native people have much to teach us about the spiritual work of resistance and resilience. Leaders across the UUA should look to the agenda of indigenous associations near their community to see where we can be allies and co-conspirators in the work of social change movements and climate justice.

The UU Trauma Response ministry is also a valuable human asset that we can develop to be able to send trained chaplains as companions through the most challenging crises. On a national level, we can look to develop a fund to defray the cost of experienced indigenous climate justice leaders traveling around the country/globe to a place where their wisdom would be of benefit to other indigenous leaders. We know that oppressions are linked and intersectional. When I was at Standing Rock, I heard many stories of the economic challenges of Native Americans. Right here in Morristown, I also hear the same from many of our Latin American immigrants who are indigenous people from the Americas. Empowering people of color to lead is an important part of our work towards reconciliation.

The UUA needs to reflect on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which have an eye towards the benefit of all of humanity, and to figure out what are the strategies we can best employ to make them a reality by the goal date of 2030. Even as we are campaigning for these goals, we need to do so in ways that amplify the voices and experiences of people of color and indigenous people within our congregations/covenanted communities and in the world beyond. As with any non-profit institution, we need to set priorities for when we commit to respond. The UUA, can set an agenda for between now and 2030 that our focus and activities around environmental justice, ecological justice, and climate justice will be determined by the agenda set by front-line impacted communities and our commitment to anti-oppression.

Final Notes: I would love to hear your ideas about how we can better work together to promote climate justice. This is one reason I held an online Listening Circle in the Fall on Environmental Justice. Please go to our website www.alisonforuuapresident.org and share your hopes, concerns, and ideas with our campaign.

If you would like to see my responses to the UU Food Justice Ministry questions, you can read them here: <http://www.foodjusticeministry.org/blog/candidates-for-uuu-president-answer-questions-from-food-justice-ministry-part-3-rev-alison-miller>