

Responses from Jeanne Pupke, candidate for  
President of the UUA, on the climate crisis

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

What is at the heart of the climate crisis is fossil fuel use. It continues unabated. Most of the energy we use up in this world still comes from the burning of fossil fuels. I can see the coal trucks and coal trains travel everyday through Virginia as coal is being sent out and across the ocean. It is a horrible, horrible injury to the earth that we allow to continue.

We have to look toward alternative sources of energy to change that overdependency, in fact, to eliminate it. We have solar and wind possibilities, geothermal and others, but because they are presently expensive upfront and seem unfamiliar, we don't engage with them.

One of the things I would love to do as President of the UUA is to explore the possibility of creating a B-corporation, that makes simple and easy solarizing of our churches, moving on to other churches, and our UU homes, and doing this affordably. This B-corporation, in addition to addressing the climate crisis, could employ our young Unitarian Universalists in work that is socially redeeming and valuable.

These are things we can do but they require innovative thinking. That's what I would bring to the Presidency – the kind of conversation with folks where we could really think through revolutionary ways of engaging ourselves in healing the earth.

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

The population, as a whole, is going to be affected. It's true that we will lose precipitation in arable land; we'll see the

shifting of our growing zones; we'll experience the loss of habitat. And, we're also going to see seashore mansions be undermined and washed away. Everyone will be affected. So perhaps this is an opportunity for us to understand our mutual human endeavor in healing the injury we've created. Can we come together?

The big concern for me will always be for the poor, who are less able to cope with the changes. A millionaire has insurance on their home. Someone in a desert edge community who's been trying to grow some succulent will not have that insurance.

How do we prevent global disruption in climate from being another injustice visited on the poor? That's a question for our faith.

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

We have a lot of injustices loose in our world. The furies came out of the box and Penelope regretted ever having opened them. But the last one that came out was hope.

I think there's a possibility for us to deepen our consciousness, raise our consciousness, in a way that will allow us to understand our deep relationality, our deep interdependence, and remove the illusion that we're separate. It is the important issue that we fail to notice because we are still too engaged with individual preference and consumerism. We fail to see our connectedness to one another, to all beings, and to the earth.

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

For us, we cannot forget that though we're a well-educated group, though we're a thoughtful group, we are still a part of the communities of this world and we are going to be a part of those affected by the change in climate. I see in my own back yard – plants that used to thrive just ten years ago are showing signs of stress as global temperatures rise. Anyone who's seen the temperature chart knows how radically things are being altered.

I believe that our moral imperatives are not to leave the table, not to forget our common humanity, not to fail to understand the sacrifice and impact people are being expected to bear, and at the same time, to identify with the poor, the most affected, and to confront those who try to suggest that science isn't science, that truth isn't truth.

We can stand with those most impacted and we must. Above all, we must come to see we are called to unite and respond.

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

I struggle sometimes to know how to respond. Unitarian Universalists want to see me in California. Do I fly? What if I tell them that I want to do a video call and they say, "no, you have to be here." People ask how we are working in our church to lighten our footprint and still hold expectations that are first-world privileged. This is not realistic. Young people want to know if this is a church they can trust. So we have to deal with all of the questions of our own consciousness and limitations and the balance of relationality and how we live together.

In my own life, I find it difficult to know if it was worth the extra money that I spent to get a car that shuts off when it idles or if the money was better spent elsewhere. I don't

know the answer to this and I live with the ambiguity. In my life and ministry, there is something comforting about thinking we have moved in a direction of having a smaller footprint on this earth while recognizing there is so very much more to be done. These are tough questions and it's an absolute imperative that we examine them in our communities.

**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?**

The President of the UUA is not going to be one of the great influencers of the debate on the earth, its healing, and the climate disruption we're experiencing. The President cannot assume to turn the debate but can raise the issues and encourage action.

The President can influence the spiritual questions, like how important it is that we connect our social justice movement with our spiritual roots and our heritage to ask ourselves, "what must we now do?" How do we move from having 300 some odd congregations that are Green Sanctuaries to having twice that many? How do we change the requirements for Green Sanctuaries to reflect new understandings and developments in the environment? How do we refresh those commitments when new knowledge becomes available? And how do we create innovative ways to interact in the earth that affirm sustainability in the long run, in our housing, in our transportation, our spiritual relationship to nature? How can we avoid becoming a world in which personal, individual choices dominate everything to the pain of the earth?

We can do better with a common and shared understanding that we uphold as a spiritual teaching. We need to have those discussions; we need to ferment those learnings; and we need to live them in the public square as well. The President can influence how often and how deeply we engage the issues and must do so as one of the focused priorities of the faith.

**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?**

Climate injury happens because we've forgotten the common "we." It's that simple. The extent to which someone can consume fossil fuels at a very, very high rate while others barely do at all, and only for subsistence, shows us the kind of thinking that has led us this way. It says "if I can afford this, I will consume it" and takes no notice of the effect created. The use of fossil fuels without regard to their effect has devastated all of us.

We need to partner with the largest "we" we can imagine, the largest group of climate warriors, the largest group of teachers and scientists. The bigger the "we," the fewer things that can keep us from taking initiative to do what we can to heal the earth. Some say it's already too late. I think it's never too late to take the right action.

**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's always hardest to get people to focus on the things that take the longest to fix. We know that the injury to the earth we have perpetrated as human beings is a long standing

one, and one that's ramped up in recent years. It's interesting that some of the worst damage that's been done has been since the invention of Earth Day, which tells us that it's possible for us to have a split consciousness about both consumption and sustainability.

One of the things we must understand is that the people closest to this issue, the people who have worked the hardest are now people who, perhaps, have the least hope of all. I've heard from other ministers, and I've experienced myself, that some of the people who've been working on earth justice feel defeated. Many feel it is already too late to save the planet. One of the things we can do for them is to bring forward a response that gives them and others hope, one that's not dependent on the permission of government, that does not necessitate the authority of millionaires or the capital investment of billionaires.

Let's cause a revolt.

Let's solarize our churches, our houses, let's step off the grid whenever and wherever we can. Let's make commitments that will be challenging, but, at the same time, liberating, so we can stand in solidarity with all those groups and speak to a world of sustainable energy that will not further injure the earth. Let us gather up our "we" and do what is ours to do, even when things seem dismal, because that is where we can restore hope.

**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?**

Historically, we've reached out to communities that have been marginalized and who have suffered from natural

disasters, many of which were caused by the increased warming of the earth. But I'll just speak to one that I know. A couple of years ago, my congregation partnered with the Unitarian Church of Norfolk, which is a church that exists under a puddle, or a lake, or sometimes a flood, depending upon the tidal tables and the weather. It became routine for me to check the tide tables before I drove to work there. That says something about the way we have habituated ourselves to climate change.

We need to pay greater attention to who is being displaced, because we're not worried about the millionaires -- we're worried about the poor folks, the poor folks whose land is being flooded with salt water, the folks who have houses that wind up under water, the people on the barrier islands who can no longer farm because of rising seas. We need to do what we've done throughout our history, as we did with freed slaves 150 years ago, and stand with them.

We must focus in on areas where we can make a difference. We can't fix the whole globe, but we can make a difference in specific places where we focus our attention, and it makes the most sense to do that in places where we have history.

We need to do that assessment, identify our focus, and begin.