

PART TWO - SESSION SIX

Lives in Danger: Extreme Weather and Disasters

The Rev. Richard Acosta

Translated by Andrew Thompson

At the conclusion of this session, participants will:

- Explain the problem of migration due to climate change.
- Express the relationship between theology and extreme weather disasters.
- Understand the ways in which climate migration affects their lives and communities.
- Discern ways to respond theologically and ethically to the problem of climate migration.

Please review the primary resources, guiding Scripture, and reflection and discussion questions prior to the small group gathering. Optional resources are available for a deeper dive.

PRE-GATHERING PREPARATION

Find these resources online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/love-god-love-gods-world-curriculum/session-six/>.

Primary Resources:

- Film: “Fleeing climate change — the real environmental disaster” from DW Documentary (42 minutes). Also available in Spanish: *Los Refugiados Climáticos*.
- Website: Climate Change and Disaster Displacement from UNHCR

Optional Resource:

- “The Letter: Laudato Si” from YouTube Originals (1hour, 21 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rps9bs85BII&t=1s>

GUIDING SCRIPTURE

Genesis 41:29-31,54-42:2,5 (NRSV)

There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous...and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do.” And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you keep looking at one another? I have heard,” he said, “that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.”... Thus the sons of Israel were among the people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.

SMALL GROUP GATHERING

Facilitator or volunteer can use the prayer below to open your time together.

OPENING PRAYER

By the Rev. Richard Acosta

Lord, God of life, creation, harmony,
At the perfect time, this fragile and beautiful planet sprouted from your infinite love.
In your wisdom you created us, in your image and likeness,
So that we would administer and care for your work.
But ambition and selfishness blinded us.
We brought creation and everything that contains it to the extreme of its resistance.
With this we have also threatened the life and dignity of millions of brothers, sisters, and siblings
Who are forced to leave their homes to go to another land, as foreigners, as strangers,
As before your people were forced to leave the land which you gave them to look for food in Egypt.
Do not allow drought, hunger, and the evil of our hearts to win out.
Give us wisdom in our decisions and the strength to fight for life;
Give us the light to respond to our vocation and show care and concern for others, including other
creatures;
Strengthen charity toward our migrant siblings
Who come to our territories looking for a better life.
Protect those who live far from their country.
May they one day return to their ancestral homelands,
And may we all live in fullness and harmony with creation.
Amen.

CHECK-IN

Facilitator leads the group through brief check-ins from each participant.

REFLECTION

Group can choose to read the reflection out loud together or go directly to discussion questions depending on timing and how many participants were able to do the reading prior to the gathering.

The signs of the times indicate the existence of a real crisis, of life and death, which has been sufficiently confirmed by the natural and social sciences: the environmental crisis caused by human action. For the first time, humanity finds itself compelled to stop, or at least decrease, its consumerist, predatory race that has been unleashed mainly since the Industrial Revolution and that has led the planet, in less than 300 years, to a brink of a new cataclysm.

The only one among all creatures made in the image and likeness of God, and to which God entrusted the administration of creation, has brought the planetary balance to the limits of its endurance, exploitation, and production. It is no longer possible to hide how the planet is bleeding to death in multiple ways (extinction, pollution, exhaustion, and injustice, among others). The paradox is that this species, the human, is completely vulnerable to an eventual global catastrophe because small variations in climate, salinity, temperature and sea level, radiation, marine currents, winds, soil fertility, the seasons, tectonic plates, and more leave it exposed to anguish, illness, precariousness, and death. Creation is a great system;

it is an immense and complex interactive web of life. Therefore, the inadequate relationship with the planet turns into a self-attack, a suicide, which must be avoided and requires everyone's participation.

In addition to the above, the environmental crisis is not only an ecological crisis but also a socio-ecological one. Those who suffer consequences of this damage first and most dramatically are the most impoverished on the planet, those who pollute the least, and those who live on the banks of rivers and beaches, on the outskirts of developing cities, in the countryside and in the jungle—all of whom form a new group that is the victim of the environmental crisis and, therefore, a new population that deserves special attention from governments, industry, organizations, and, of course, the church.

Today we speak of climate refugees, and the causes of this situation are varied. As the waters rise, cities disappear; extreme droughts make the soil infertile and drinking water scarce; farming activities become unviable in arid zones; forest fires displace communities; and hurricanes destroy entire populations. There is a lack of political will of governments and inequality. It all adds up. Climate change is displacing between 20 million and 25 million people around the world each year. These brothers and sisters are forced to leave their homes and even their countries because of global warming. It is expected that by 2050 displacements due to this cause could reach 1,200 million (some speak of more than 2 billion) coming from coastal cities, islands, African countries, South America, and even the United States. The first climate refugees from the United States were a group of Biloxi Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians from the Isle of Jean Charles in Louisiana.

Little empathy is needed to assess this tragedy: losing your living space, livelihood, places of study, the people you interact with on a daily basis, sometimes part or all of your family, your city or—even more serious—your country; going to live as a stranger in a foreign land, trying to communicate in a language you don't know, carrying out a job that is not your own. On occasion the refugee camps themselves bring their own tragedies if they are in poor countries. Although they are in refugee camps, they are nonetheless in strange places and without the possibility of living a full and dignified life.

Faced with this serious reality, the response from the church and theology must be two-fold: the denunciation of the situation of the most dispossessed—victims of the environmental crisis—and the defense of creation as a subject of rights. The environmental crisis is today a humanitarian crisis. It is not a question of mere ecological activism, but of social justice, of attention to the least fortunate.

If theology must respond to the urgent needs of the least fortunate, the lash that strikes the weakest on the planet today is intimately connected to the environmental crisis. The thirst to hoard, to have, to consume has led to an overexploitation of the planet, and this has led to the oppression of millions of brothers and sisters obliged to suffer the consequences so that a few may maintain their standard of living and comfort. The only way to be Christians is in dialogue with these contexts. We must be the voice of those who cannot raise their own. Human and planetary rights today are profoundly related.

Discussion Questions

Facilitator guides the group through the discussion questions.

1. How does climate change affect the poorest on the planet?
2. Why might climate change affect those who have already been displaced for non-environmental reasons?
3. What can/should the church, and Christianity in general, do in this situation? What human and/or environmental rights can we promote and reinforce?

4. How can one implement concrete actions to combat climate change, based on liturgy, catechesis, and pastoral action?
5. Is it possible to engage in ecumenical work from this area?
6. How does this situation affect your life? What would you do if a climate refugee came to your door or your church?

CLOSING CHECK-OUT & PRAYER

What word describes how you feel right now? After you've shared, please invite another person to go.

After all have offered a word, the facilitator or volunteer can pray a simple prayer bringing together the hopes and prayers of the whole group.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The Rev. Richard Acosta Rodríguez is a priest of the Episcopal Diocese of Colombia in Province IX of The Episcopal Church. He holds bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in theology and is a professor at the university and at the Centre for Theological Studies in the Diocese of Colombia. Rodríguez is also in charge of the Mission San Benito de Nurse and has spent the last 10 years researching the relationship between theology, the Bible, and the environment. His book, "Dios, Hombre, Creación," was published in 2014.