

**“Is Migration a Solution to Climate-Forced Displacement?” a homily
with Jim Caldiero**

Channing Memorial Church, 9/29/2024

Scientists with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently issued a frightening alarm that if the world continues to emit greenhouse gases at the present rate, by 2040 our planet will have sustained irreversible damage.

The Indonesians know this. They are building a new capital city, Nusantara, in an undeveloped jungle, 100 miles inland on the island of Borneo, relocating from the world’s largest rapidly sinking capital city of Jakarta, expected to become uninhabitable by 2030.

But we don’t have to look far--in time or distance--to see the effects of climate change. On May 27, 2018, stalled rainstorms filled with tropical moisture from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, what weather scientists call “training thunderstorms” because they follow one another like train cars, pounded Ellicott City, the **second**

“thousand-year storm” in a little over two years. As you walk along Main Street today, some historic buildings are still boarded up, some torn down as the Howard County Government has implemented plans to destroy a number of these buildings. Many residents and store owners have decided not to return. This is climate-forced displacement brought home.

Not only Ellicott City’s historic buildings face destruction. In the Orkney Islands, more than 3000 archaeological sites--kitchens, forges, Norse houses, standing stone circles, preserved stone age villages that have stood for 5000 years—may soon disappear because of climate change.

At the same time, thousands of Alaskans and Pacific islanders are preparing for similar climate-forced displacement as rising seas threaten to submerge their homes and villages. In Alaska, record-breaking temperatures, thawing permafrost, declining Arctic Sea ice are threatening native communities with flooding, erosion, damage to buildings and even airports. Certain Alaska communities, as those in the

Pacific islands, have made the difficult decision to relocate. For them, it has become the only strategy that will ensure that their access to clean and safe water, to food and to health care will remain secure, that their religious expression, culture, heritage and identity will remain alive as they move to safer ground.

Many years ago, during a sermon-writing course sponsored by the UU Service Committee, we students were reminded to “always leave them with hope.” Well, despite government inaction, despite the hostility to climate change among some in our own national government, people can and will make a difference and mitigate the long-term impacts of climate change.

The people of the Pacific Islands and Alaska know this.

In 2006, the Carteret Island Elders, tired of waiting for the government of Papua New Guinea to turn talk about relocation into action, created their own support system, organizing a program of displacement with

dignity that ensures the cultural identity and rights of the islanders as they relocate.

In Alaska, communities at risk have joined together with NGO's to monitor encroaching erosion from melting glaciers so they will know when it is time to leave their villages and have implemented community-based systems of self-determination to ensure that villagers have a say in their relocation.

In the remote coastal areas of the Solomon Islands where tidal waves have destroyed lives and homes, NGO's, the UU Service Committee among them, are providing water tanks for access to clean, safe water and building materials to help islanders rebuild their villages on drier, higher ground.

What can **we** do?

Nearly a year ago, the United Nations General Assembly required the International Court of Justice to issue an opinion on climate change to

help nations determine critical and sustainable strategies to address the climate crisis.

Although the Biden administration generally supports climate change action, it has not committed to the UN's call for an opinion by the International Court of Justice, preferring instead to work through other diplomatic channels.

We can sign the petition organized by the UU Service Committee to ask the Biden Administration to support the International Court's advisory opinion and demonstrate its commitment to work collectively to address the climate crisis.

We can ask our senators and representatives to support Senate Bill 919, the A. Donald McEachin Environmental Justice for All Act. Sponsored by Sen. Tammy Duckworth of Illinois and co-sponsored by our own Senator Van Hollen, the bill expands the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit federally funded programs, policies, practices, or activities

from causing disparate impacts on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

We can write to our senators and representatives to support the Climate Displaced Persons Act that provides a pathway for admission to the U.S. for 100,000 persons displaced by climate change over and above, and not included in, the current refugee and asylee quotas.

We can ask our senators and representatives to amend the Stafford Act, the statute that authorizes FEMA to allow the president to declare disasters caused by rising seas and melting permafrost.

We can ask our senators, representatives and the president to make FEMA more equitable. Today, FEMA spends on average \$26 per person on disaster relief. But it spends only \$3 per person for native Americans.

In the next session of the Maryland state legislature beginning in January, we can act on alerts from the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland to email, write and call our senators and delegates to vote for

climate justice bills that address emergency needs from extreme weather.

We can join the UUs for Social Justice “Write Here. Write Now” campaign to support climate justice bills that are certain to be introduced in the 119th Congress.

Information about these advocacy efforts and climate change in general will be posted on our Channing Justice website. You’ll get an email announcement soon.

Just as the Anchorage Alaska Unitarian Universalist Fellowship welcomed the First People’s Convening on Climate-Forced Displacement to address its impact, perhaps we at Channing should think about convening community-based discussions about the climate crisis, seeking out local partners, maybe Epiphany Lutheran Church? People and communities working together will make a difference. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It

is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make
some difference....”

Thank you and Blessed be. Jim Caldiero