



For GreenFaith leader, the Faithful are Needed in This Work

*By Mary Jane Cherry
TAF Coordinating Committee*

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Speaking at Third Act Faith's General Meeting last month, the Rev. Fletcher Harper, executive director of GreenFaith, drew upon 20+ years of experience as an environmentalist and climate activist to share with us his insights on what it means to do this work as a religious person and why it is so important that faithful people are involved in this growing and evolving movement.

His observations about climate work, now and in the past, were made during an interview with TAF Co-Facilitator Pat Almonrode and the Question and Answer session that followed. The Rev. Harper spent some 25 minutes with the TAF members on a zoom call from Germany (where it was 1:30 a.m.).

The Rev. Harper first became involved in this work in the 1990s as an Episcopal parish priest in New Jersey, volunteering for an organization that eventually became GreenFaith. The focus in the early days was on cleaning up the environment when, he said, "it was incredibly hard to get traction on these issues... it was truly incomprehensible to people about what the relationship was between

religion, faith and the environment... There was next to nobody thinking about these issues 20, even 15 years ago.”

Eventually, the organization’s community-led work shifted to addressing new areas of concern, including the impact of environmental issues and climate change on poorer communities. Under his leadership since 2002, the scope of GreenFaith’s outreach has grown from national to international, and new initiatives were begun, such as Shine, which supports renewable energy access for communities in India and Africa. GreenFaith has teams working in Brazil, England, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

Of particular interest to us now, as we prepare for the 3.21.23 Day of Action, is that the Rev. Harper is a “pioneer” who “recognized early on the urgent necessity for a faith-based fossil fuel divestment movement,” as Third Act Faith’s Ace Leveen noted in last month’s newsletter.

The movement today is generating a lot of energy – and courageous action – because of its increasing focus on “sharp-edged climate justice campaigning,” according to the Rev. Harper. He noted that French and East Africa teams are focused on the East Africa Pipeline. U.S. efforts are focused on asset managers, getting President Biden to declare a climate emergency, and trying to stop an extractive project on the Gulf Coast. Indonesian and Japanese teams are working on stopping coal financing and coal plant development in those countries.

Following, with light editing, are excerpts from the interview and two final questions. Check out the [video](#) on our [Facebook page](#) to watch the full interview and the Question and Answer session. The interview began with Pat mentioning that he had worked with the Rev. Harper during the 2013 People’s Climate March in New York City.

Pat: Working with you was one of the high points of my life.

Fletcher: We had a lot of good organizing work... a lot of people from a lot of denominations There was a huge amount of pent-up energy... The climate movement had gone into sort of a two-year depressed state after the climate talks in Copenhagen cratered. It [the Climate March] kick-started us... It was the first time for really large-scale religious communities coming together ...

Pat: I learned so much working with you on that and working with everybody that was involved. But I have to say – and I think I’m probably not alone in this – it seems, quite frankly, not to have had a whole lot of an effect. It did raise the issue in the public consciousness ... [and] it seemed to raise the issue in the faith community. But it’s hard to point to a particular result... I think that we’re looking for concrete and targeted projects now. I think that is true of GreenFaith... [It has] been involved in working on the financing of climate chaos and fighting that for quite some time. How did you decide that that was going to be one of [your] targets? What’s been your experience with that?

Fletcher: First ... I think that the People’s Climate March gets a fair amount of credit, along with others, for the Paris Climate Agreement because it demonstrated and signaled to political leaders that they had cover to move on this...There was some strong grassroots pressure.

The problem is that there is just an unbelievable amount of money, political corruption and influence, and there is just the inertia of a massive status quo that makes change really, really hard. Then, there was a literal, viral insanity around the world between Trump and [Brazilian president] Bosanaro and ... all that we had to struggle with for much of the past six to eight years.

So we [GreenFaith] got into the finance stuff first. I think of the fossil fuel divestment work as the first wave of the climate finance work, where there was a recognition that money and politics were the two pillars of the system that needed to get changed. Divestment was a financial tool or lever to start sending a signal symbolically and in real ways... [We were] signaling to policymakers that if enough people are willing to move their money, that is a pretty reliable indicator of political support for action as well.

Then, more recently, we've been targeting BlackRock, Vanguard, State Street and Fidelity as the biggest asset managers who are funding climate projects all around the world – new fossil fuel, new coal, oil and gas expansion... I think that now the significance of the finance stuff is that there is – at an enormous level – a combination of indifference in the finance sector and large-scale greenwashing with massive amounts of money still getting plowed into these projects. And they've just got to stop.

There is a need for a series of actions... We've been putting a particular focus on BlackRock for the last year and a half or so because they are one of the worst offenders. We were really proud because we had about 30 people of faith and clergy arrested at a BlackRock action last October. The April prior we had about a dozen arrested, and the October prior to that we worked with the Jewish Youth Climate Network on an action with three rabbis and six young Jewish activists. We are trying to get a drumbeat of direct action going on there... The finance sector traditionally has not been easy to move on these kinds of issues, so it is going to take a concerted, consistent effort and a real slap to their brand identity, a real reputational threat. And it's going to take a lot of uncomfortable social interactions with people in the industry to really try to get this changed. It's not going to be easy.

Pat: You know I was one of the 30 people arrested last October at BlackRock... the organizer was really good at organizing religious actions.

Fletcher: One of the things that are really important is that when we go into action publicly as religious people, we do so as religious people and not go in as some kind of pale imitation of secular activists. It's really, really vital that we make our identity clear in that way, in part because the issue in the U.S., unfortunately, is so politically polarized... it is our religious identity that gives us a shot at getting people to engage this issue in a pre-political mindset, which is part of what is needed to shift ... the calculus of a lot of people's hearts and minds on this.

Pat: As you know, Third Act is organizing this Day of Action ... what is called 3.21.23... It is a big step in the Banking on Our Future campaign that Third Act is running. I know you've probably been talking with Bill [McKibben] about this. What can you tell us about how Third Act and GreenFaith will be working together on this?

Fletcher: I know that we have been in conversation with Third Act... I know that we are planning to be supportive... There is more and more religiously based action on climate finance happening in a lot of places around the world. I'm hoping and thinking that one of the things that will be important

in the future – for reasons of capacity and for reasons of maximizing impact – is that we can find a way to do some good and effective coordination around this... [*He highlighted the work being done by activists in North Carolina, the Gulf Coast, the Jewish Community in the U.S., and in London and Germany.*]

I also think that it is going to be extremely important for those of us in the faith sector to find ways to collaborate to find a way to target and pressure our institutions... We were really proud 16 years ago to get the Episcopal Church in the U.S. to make a divestment commitment, which was passed by an overwhelming number in General Convention, but we have not been able to get a response from the Episcopal Church about whether it actually implemented that resolution. So I think we need to be putting pressure on the banks and the asset managers [but] we also need to be putting pressure on our own institutions not only to make these commitments in name but to follow through on them. It really needs to happen... Maybe you and I can put our heads together and start to try to do that because I think there is some really good, important work to do.

Pat: You can always count on me. In fact, I think you can count on all of us here. We would love to continue to work with you and to continue to learn from you and get tips on how to navigate all this.

Two final questions during the Q&A evoked two especially passionate responses:

Q: What areas bring you hope in doing this work?

Fletcher: It is always the community... [*After naming Third Act members Betsy Bennett, Jerry Cappel and Dan Terpstra, he continued.*] A lot of us know each other. We've been in this fight for a while. We'll be in it the rest of our lives... So it's the community that gives me hope, and seeing more and more people willing to do things that require more and more courage.

In terms of the real-world impact, I think if one is serious about this, it is devastatingly not hopeful... [*He recalled a conversation with a GreenFaith team member working on communications in northern Kenya where there is a "horrible, climate-intensified" drought.*] She showed me photographs and short videos taken of people and livestock literally lying on the ground dying because of the drought... What's so infuriating is the level of complacency and smugness that still afflicts so many major Global North governments and institutions. It's just absolutely unacceptable. That's more anger than hope, but it's what keeps me going.

Q: What exactly is meant when we are told we have a religious obligation to do this work?

Fletcher: Each religious and spiritual community has its own compelling, in-depth, deeply theological, moral language and framework to use around these issues... Too often this issue is turned into a matter of political polarization when in reality this issue is about preventing trauma and loss and people losing their livelihoods, their homes, their health, and any stability they have in the world... It is a very fundamental issue about love, and you cannot pretend to be committed to a God of love or a faith tradition that is about love and not be active on this.