

Climate Change Education for Faith Based Groups

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Introduction

Faith based audiences are one of the key audiences that climate change educators seek to reach. Faith communities wield significant influence in American culture, and as the nation's most popular voluntary organizations (Wolkomir et al., 1997), religious congregations can be important sites for adult education and lifelong learning about social and environmental issues like climate change. Faith-based environmental educators have capitalized on this potential, and this paper will summarize expert opinion and explore different programs and practices that are being implemented in working with faith-based audiences to help foster an understanding of climate change.

A leading source of climate change outreach in faith communities is Interfaith Power and Light (IPL), the largest faith-based climate change organization in the United States, currently engaging more than 10,000 congregations in a growing network of more than 30 state IPL chapters. Because IPL's work is focused on empowering a religious response to climate change through education, advocacy, and other programming, the directors of IPL state chapters possess valuable insight about what messages and approaches currently are most successful in climate change outreach in U.S. faith communities. Many of these insights were collected in a July 2010 study¹ of 25 Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) state directors, who were asked to describe the successes, challenges, audiences and strategies of their climate change education efforts. IPL

¹ The study consisted of semi-structured phone interviews; twenty-three directors were interviewed by phone, two by email, during July 2010. Interviews ranged from 25 to 75 minutes; directors had worked for IPL an average of 4 years (range: 1-10yrs), with an average of 12.4 years in the field (range: 4-30); they deliver an average of 27 climate change education outreach presentations per year (range: 6-70), mostly (75-95%) to faith audiences; presentations are complemented by newsletters, blogs, websites, action alerts, climate legislation advocacy, media events, energy audit programs, carbon footprint reduction initiatives, renewable energy programs, energy efficiency retrofitting, and other programs.

chapters generally abide by relatively consistent mission and goal statements, described below, which aids in the interpretation of their collective experience. This study also draws from a 2008 needs-assessment of participants in Ohio Interfaith Power and Light (OhIPL) programs, from further interviews with evangelical Christian (National Association of Evangelicals; Blessed Earth) and Catholic (National Catholic Rural Life Conference) climate change educators beyond the IPL network, and the author's experience from over 100 climate change outreach presentations to Ohio faith communities from 2008 to 2010.

Faith Community Audience Characteristics

Many characteristics of the audience affect the approach, framing, and content of climate change outreach in various faith communities. One consideration is where the audience falls in the spectrum of Leiserowitz and colleagues' Six Americas (Leiserowitz, Maibach & Roser-Renouf, 2010), as faith communities tend to span all six of these public opinion categories (alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful, dismissive). IPL directors were asked to characterize their most common audiences on a scale from "climate alarmists" to "climate skeptics." A few Northeastern state directors said most all of their audiences are *concerned*, with very few skeptics. Most state directors (including in the Midwest, Southwest, West, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic) said most of their audiences are *concerned*, but with some skeptics. A few state directors in the Midwest, West, and South described their audiences as more scattered across the range from some *alarmed*, many *concerned*, and many *cautious*, and perceived that the rest of their state is much more skeptical compared to their typical IPL audiences. Two state directors (in the South and far West) indicated that 50% or more of their audiences are skeptical. Some implications of these differences are discussed below.

Another consideration is simply the denominational or broad religious affiliation of the audience. Presentations within specific faith communities allow educators to frame messages in terms of corresponding denominational climate change policies²; for example, outreach in a Methodist congregation can refer to official Methodist climate change policies and resolutions. A more general framing can be applied depending on broader religious community identity. For instance, the four main partners of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) represent key affiliations that encompass the majority of American religious membership. These partner groups serve constituencies of mainline Protestants (National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs), evangelical Christians (Evangelical Environmental Network), Jews (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life) and Catholics (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Eco-Justice Project and the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change). Differences in approach across these broad religious categories tend to differ more significantly than within them; for instance, Catholic climate change resources will generally serve Catholics better than mainline Protestant curricula, even though faith audiences in America display a healthy interest in religious views different from their own. As a result, different resource materials are commonly generated for each of these four general groups.³

Other key considerations are the political affiliation of specific audience members—since climate change views often reflect a partisan divide, and because political views tend to overshadow theological perspectives on environmental issues (Shaiko, 1987)—and the general theological/religious environmental orientation or preference of the audience within the three main traditions of faith-based environmental response identified by Kearns (1996): stewardship,

² For examples, see: <http://www.nrpe.org/statements/index.html>; <http://nccecojustice.org/anthology/>; <http://www.ohipl.org/OhioPolicies>

³ The author's perception is that mainline Protestant materials are diverse and often resonant with secular environmental materials; evangelical Christian materials are usually more explicitly scripturally focused; Jewish materials are often grassroots in character; Catholic materials are frequently tied to sources such as Catholic social teaching and papal statements. Devotional materials related to environmental concern can also be grouped within general categories such as these.

eco-justice, and creation spirituality. A wide range of faith based environmental curricula and writings draw variously upon these three approaches and provide ready resources to help educators inspire their audiences within these traditions of engagement.⁴

Challenges and Constraints

Not surprisingly, climate change educators face particular challenges and constraints in reaching different faith communities. IPL directors identified several key barriers to the acceptance of climate change information in faith-based audiences (see Figure 1). Political bias or partisanship was named by 38% of the directors; the influence of climate deniers and peddlers of pseudo-science (in some cases assumed to be funded by fossil fuel interests) was mentioned by 23%; vocal deniers in the media and scientific ignorance among Americans were each identified by 12%. Some directors also perceived that “too much technical information” was a barrier (instead, “you must win people with their hearts, not their minds”), as well as a sense of hopelessness generated by what is perceived as Americans’ political/cultural inability to respond in action. Notably, none of the IPL directors cited religious beliefs as a barrier to acceptance of climate change information.

⁴ In a 2008 survey of Ohio Interfaith Power and Light program participants, 65% resonated most with stewardship; 22% with eco-justice; 13% with creation spirituality (Jablonski & Hitzhusen, 2008). Notably, the mainline Protestant (NCC) and Catholic (USCCB) partners of the NRPE employ “Eco-Justice” within their program titles, while evangelical Christian programs tend to focus more on stewardship; even so, overlap occurs between these categories, and many people may feel strong affinity with more than one.

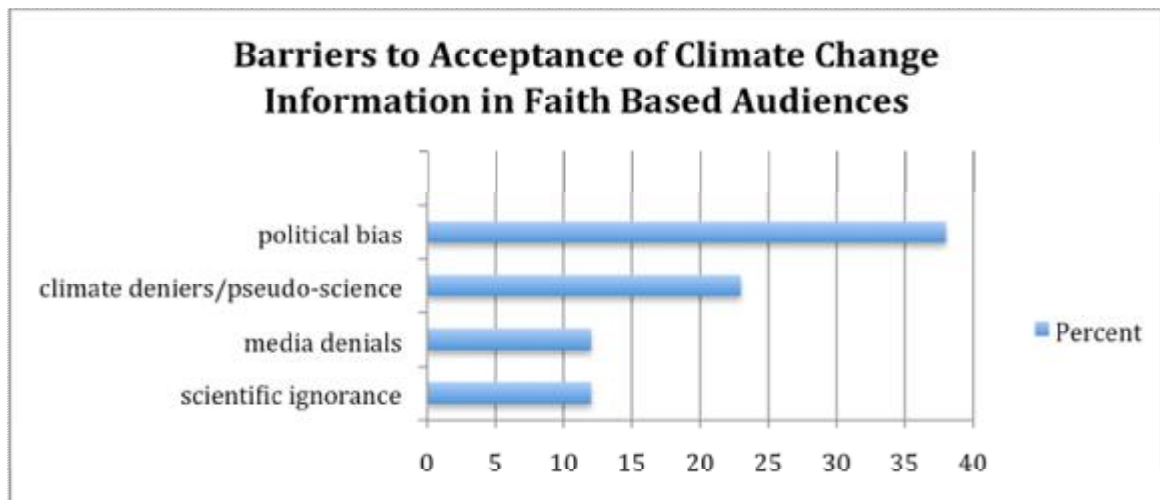


Figure 1. Barriers to acceptance of climate change information perceived by IPL directors.

Different Education Goals for Different Faith Audiences

Differences in climate change education *goals* across faith communities also tend to have less to do with differences related to faith and more to do with social, regional/local, and political factors. Due to their similarity, IPL programs make a useful sample to compare audience-influenced differences in climate change education goals. The mission and goals of IPL state chapters tend to closely follow the mission of the national IPL campaign: to link ecology and faith and empower a religious/moral response to climate change by promoting energy conservation, energy efficiency, renewable energy and advocacy in faith communities as an expression of faith in action. IPL directors indicate that where climate change seems more controversial, or where oil and gas industries hold significant local influence, goals shift toward engaging audiences in energy and environmental decisions *because of their importance*, rather than promoting particular policy and lifestyle responses encouraged by denominational climate change statements. Such foundational goals may also serve in faith communities where a majority of members are politically conservative or skeptical of climate change; educators often

aim to first establish basic moral and theological bases for environmental concern in communities that have not previously engaged environmental issues such as climate change.

Successful Messages

Two key messages that echo Kearns' categories (stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality, as cited above) topped the list that IPL directors named as most successful and resonant for their audiences: a basic stewardship message (53%) and a basic eco-justice message (46%) (see Figure 2). Directors also emphasize a message of saving money with energy efficiency (27%). Some particularly emphasize the science of climate change (23%), practical steps to help respond to climate change (19%), the impact of climate change on future generations (19%), current observations of the impact of climate change on the natural world (including especially locally) (19%), and green jobs/green economy opportunities (19%). Others emphasize personalized messages about the impact on specific people(s) (15%) or the benefits and hope that come from making change (15%).

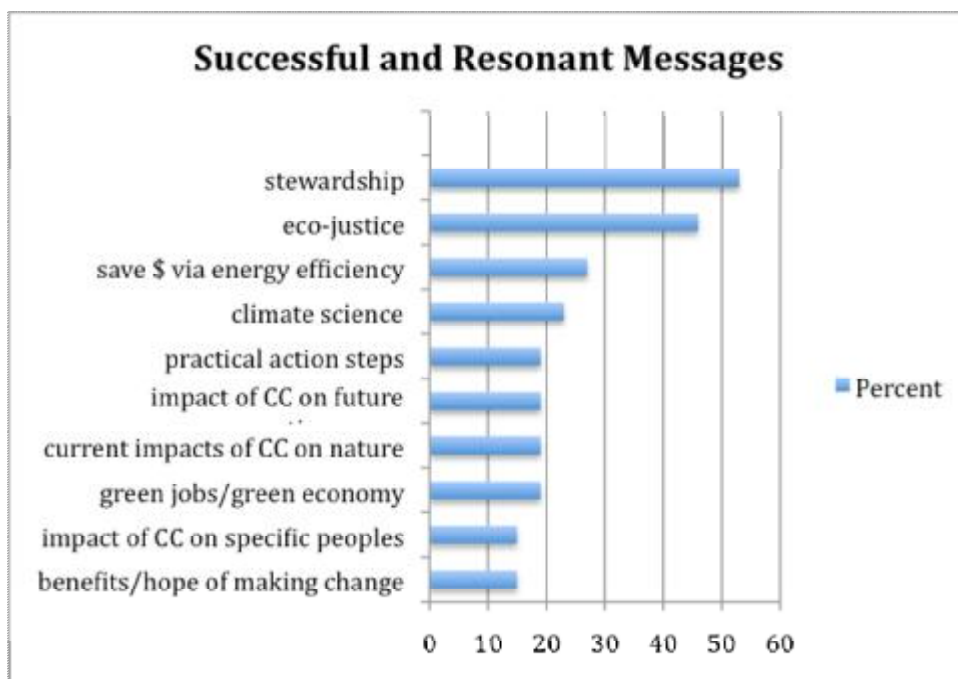


Figure 2. Most successful and resonant climate change (CC) messages perceived by IPL state directors as delivered to faith based audiences.

At the same time, IPL directors mentioned that there are specific messages that do not work well with their audiences (see Figure 3). Many said that “doom and gloom,” “scare tactic,” and “guilt trip” messages do not work (46%). Others said that too much technical language will not work (27%); nor will talking about climate change in a political way, or with partisan overtones (19%); nor will giving environmental justice examples from far away places like Africa or Bangladesh (19%)⁵; nor will details about legislation or talk of cap and trade (19%).

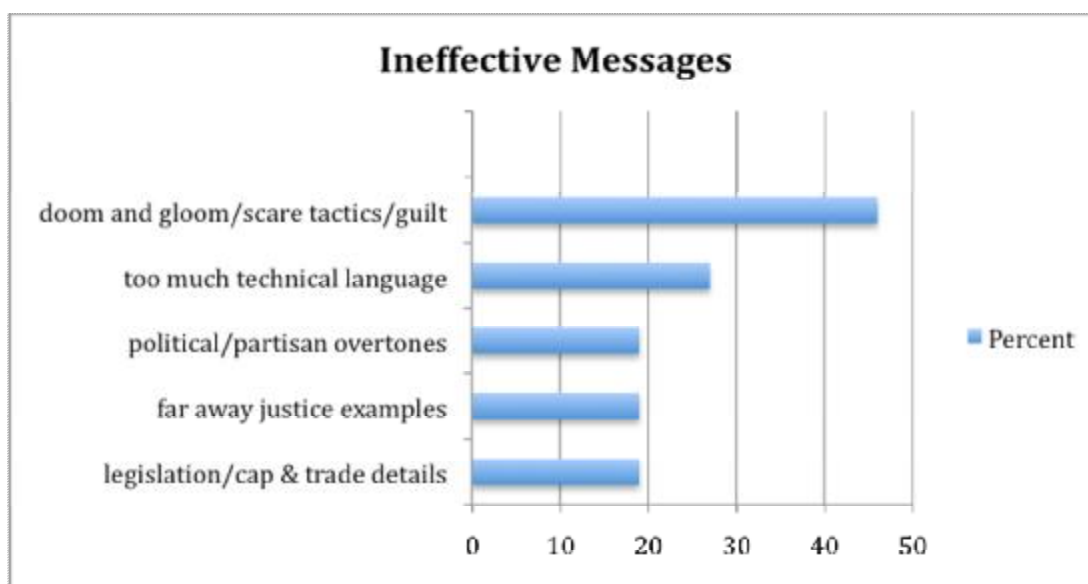


Figure 3. Messages that IPL directors claim “do not work” in faith based audiences.

IPL directors were also asked to describe how their messages had shifted and evolved over the last two years in response to particular influences. Many indicated that they had shifted

⁵ Directors were also asked to specifically describe the eco-justice messages they commonly use, and in contrast to the responses about what “doesn’t work” described above, many (27%) specifically mentioned relying on messages about the impact of climate change on far away peoples. Other popular categories of eco-justice messaging included: description of specific impacts on specific communities near and far (69%); a general message about how climate change disproportionately impacts the poor and vulnerable (53%); impacts on human health (27%); empowerment/training-opportunity themes (27%); green jobs/economy (19%); and “tricky” issues of considering the justice impact of environmental protections to be sure that our solutions to climate change are themselves just (15%).

their messaging in some way in response to heightened debate about climate change in the media (including “climategate”) (73%). Directors also described a range of responses related to the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit of December 2009 (including pastoral efforts to address disappointment) and the Gulf Oil Spill of April 2010 (including more attention to the risks of fossil fuel use) (42%). Other shifts were toward messages about saving money and energy efficiency (23%), messages focused more on local rather than federal issues or legislation (19%), and toward green jobs/green economy messages (12%). Some also described a shift to a moral message of “prudence,” and that the faith message itself (especially stewardship and justice themes mentioned above), despite other shifts, has remained quite consistent.

Many of the messages and approaches used by faith community educators are the same as those used in other audiences, though some differences occur. A key difference between these approaches and those more central to reaching other groups appears to be the focus on the moral dimensions of the problem, particularly stewardship and justice, tied specifically to particular religious statements and views, and in some cases the link between these foundations and a general approach of reaching people especially through their hearts.

Communication Strengths and Weaknesses

One strategic weakness of faith-based climate educators, though not unique to them, is that most are not equipped to counter the influence of the media and of partisan/culture-war messaging that has shifted and framed public perception about climate change. Another weakness is that many faith-based presenters do not have a science background, or do not feel entirely confident presenting climate science. To the extent that moral messages may be more successful in faith communities, this may not be a weakness; however, these educators may also

perceive climate science information to be less resonant with their audiences because of their own limitations in delivering it.

On the other hand, less confidence with climate science (at least for the humble) may lead to a strength, namely a willingness and interest to collaborate, and to request help from scientists and other partners. When asked what resources from climate scientists would be most helpful to their outreach work, 65% said that the best role that scientists could play would be to provide clear summaries of climate science, in easily understandable layman's language; 31% requested understandable facts and guides and summaries particularly of the *effects* of climate change; 27% expressed keen interest in a speaker's bureau of scientists; 12% longed for good visuals that they might use in their outreach (see Figure 4).

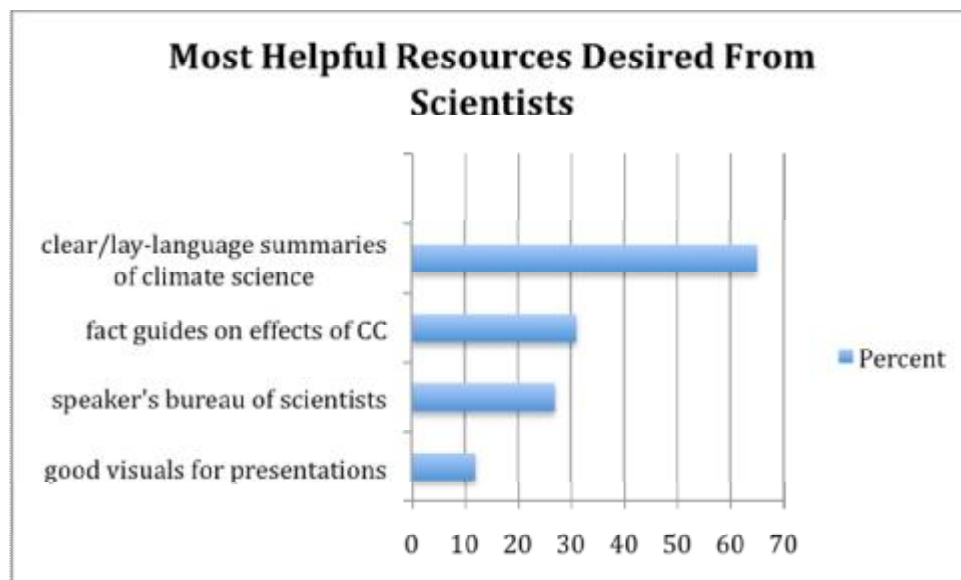


Figure 4. Most helpful resources or collaboration that IPL directors would like from scientists to assist their climate change education and outreach efforts.

Future Directions

Future research can look more closely at differences in interest, response, political affiliation, and religious perspectives between engaged faith community members and those members not as receptive to climate change education; these populations can be likewise

compared with receptive and non-receptive individuals in other audiences to discern which, if any (and to what extent), faith-based factors can particularly enhance climate change education success. Several IPL directors noted that they are kept plenty busy just serving and responding to those faith communities that are interested in climate change, and therefore on the whole may have less experience and insight to offer regarding audiences skeptical about climate change. IPL outreach is probably therefore more concentrated in some of the six Americas than others, and even though faith community membership spans the six Americas, participants in climate change programs likely self select from among the ranks of the less skeptical.

But one benefit of examining the views and interests of these generally more engaged faith community audiences is that their particular path to concern and response may provide insight into how to better reach other members of their community. Future research can examine more closely the basis of respondents' receptivity to climate change education. If the moral-religious and cultural foundation that comes from their faith community is a key element, a better understanding of that basis could provide educators better tools for reaching these audiences.

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