



CREATION JUSTICE MINISTRIES

WEATHERING THE STORM

FAITHFUL CLIMATE RESILIENCE

2022 EARTH DAY RESOURCE

The last five years have shown that the climate crisis is no longer a future worry—it is affecting our communities right now. Record-breaking storms, extreme weather, and the slow violence of sea level rise are tearing at the physical and social fabric of our society. So-called “natural” disasters in the United States have increased in frequency and intensity in the last two decades. In 2021, there were at least 18 weather disaster events in the United States with losses exceeding \$1 billion each, 11 events more than the average since 1990. At the same time, our political leaders and structures have failed to prevent climate change and prepare for its worst effects.

It has become clear that climate change is not merely a problem for the church to prepare for in ten or twenty years; it is time for the church to prepare right now. Around us, God’s people and planet are facing the impacts of the climate crisis. As the world groans in travail, the church ought to partner with God in cultivating a redeemed, restored, and resilient creation.

It is time for Christians to be disciples of “Faithful Climate Resilience.”

www.creationjustice.org/weatheringthestorm

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Photo Credit: Callum Shaw

INTRODUCTION

At the center of Faithful Resilience is the question: ‘How can our churches be hubs of resilience, helping our neighbors weather the physical and spiritual storms of the climate crisis?’ This year, we invite you to reflect on this question and to pursue resilience in your own congregation.

But what is climate resilience? Pathways to Resilience, a community-based collaborative effort to build resilience in U.S. institutions, defines resilience as “bouncing forward to eradicate the inequities and unsustainable resource use at the heart of the climate crisis.” This definition of resilience, which expands the traditional definition of “bouncing back” from a stressor or disaster resonates with the Christian mission of our churches: to build a Beloved Community, the Kingdom of Heaven, here on Earth. Resilience, far from being a singular issue, involves social, physical, and spiritual factors playing together in concert.

Faith communities must take a proactive stance towards resilience to prepare for social, physical, and spiritual storms of the climate crisis.

This year, we invite you to consider how you and your church are anticipating, preparing for, and “bouncing forward” into a just, sustainable, and resilient community.

Photo Credit: Juhi Sewchurran



STORIES OF RESILIENCE

Each of the stories below spotlight a community that has demonstrated commitment to climate resilience. These are inspirational stories of churches that have become hubs of resilience in different ways. Use these stories in your community as places to draw ideas and inspiration or as anecdotes for sermons and small group studies.

These stories of resilience were first printed in *Sojourners* under "How Three Coastal Churches Became Hubs of Climate Resilience", written by Avery Davis Lamb, Co-Executive Director of Creation Justice Ministries.

St. Luke's Eastport Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

Author: Avery Davis Lamb

Co-Executive Director, Creation Justice Ministries

Were it not for the "Shrove Tuesday Pancake Dinner Tonight!" banner and obligatory "Episcopal church in 1 mile" sign, you could drive past St. Luke's Episcopal Church and miss the building entirely. Obscured behind a line of oaks and a hillock of native hydrangea, the sanctuary almost disappears into the landscape. For Rev. Diana Carroll, that's the hope.

When Carroll moved to Annapolis, Md., in 2012 to serve St. Luke's, the four acres behind the church, which abuts Back Creek, a tributary of the Chesapeake, were a tangled mess of brush. The church had planned to clear that land to build a large sanctuary and convert the current structure into an education building, but Carroll and members of the St. Luke's Green Team suggested St. Luke's keep its current sanctuary and use the five acres as "a sanctuary without walls." As Carroll envisioned it, if the church restored the land, it would still be "a sacred space as had always been dreamed about for that location."

For years, St. Luke's has been involved in climate action, integrating climate literacy into its preaching and education while advocating for stronger climate policy at the Maryland State House.

So in 2017, when the 120-person congregation received a total of nearly \$2 million in grants—largely from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Chesapeake Bay Trust, plus small grants and donations through the church—to restore wetlands and a buried stream on their

property that drained into Back Creek, they realized the project was a physical expression of their commitment to earthkeeping. With the help of an ecological restoration company, they coaxed back to the surface the stream that had been diverted through stormwater pipes and built a cascading streambed, with step pools and weirs—low dams to slow water flow—to filter the water as it makes its way toward Back Creek. They named the restored stream Bowen's Branch, after a late congregant who cared deeply about watershed stewardship in Annapolis.

When I visited St. Luke's in 2019, Carroll and I followed the curve of the stream to its mouth, which is now a living shoreline, a small coastal edge made of native plants and natural materials rather than a concrete seawall. In an age of climate crisis, marshes like this one are critical: As sea levels rise, marshes engage in a kind of dance with the rising tides through a process called accretion.

This is especially important in a place like Annapolis, where waters breaching sea walls and submerging parking lots, roads, and sidewalks has become a frequent problem (only four such events were recorded in the early 1960s, compared to 63 in 2017). When the dock in downtown Annapolis floods, explained Carroll, the church's marsh helps absorb the extra water. The marsh is also a carbon sink, more effective at sequestering carbon than the equivalent area of dry land.

By restoring their land to serve its intended purpose, the church created a climate sanctuary: absorbing higher tides, filtering polluted stormwater from extreme rain events, hosting displaced creatures, and drawing carbon out of the air.

STORIES OF RESILIENCE

St. Luke's Eastport Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD - continued.

And while St. Luke's sanctuary is high enough above sea level to be outside the floodplain, the same is not true for all Annapolis residents. The church is in solidarity with those neighbors, absorbing the water their houses cannot, holding a space for lament when devastation comes, and advocating for equitable climate solutions—an ecotone where the meditative ebb of human action meets the flow of steadily rising tides.

Before I leave St. Luke's, Rev. Carroll tells me that the climate crisis and St. Luke's response has strengthened her conviction that God uses the most unexpected people to do God's work. "No one would have expected that such a small, financially struggling congregation as ours would have engaged in a \$2 million project to do something that on the surface doesn't actually benefit us. And yet it's so clearly part of God's mission in the world and God's desire for the healing of the world."



**Photo Credit: St. Luke's Eastport Episcopal Church
- Annapolis, MD**

St. Paul AME Zion Church - Aurora, NC

St. Paul's is nestled feet from the Pamlico River in Aurora, N.C., a 500-person town known for its museum featuring locally found fossils. While these preserved traces of prehistoric organisms bring tourists to the town, their ancient, decayed, carboniferous cousins, converted to coal, oil, and gas, are forcing out Aurora's residents.

In 2011, Hurricane Irene slammed into North Carolina's Pamlico Sound, raising the tidal river to 10 feet above sea level, well beyond its banks, to swallow St. Paul's. It happened again in 2018, when Hurricane Florence dumped waist-deep water in Aurora and broke 28 flood records across the Carolinas. It is almost guaranteed the church will flood again soon.

After Florence, the church was able to rebuild with insurance money, but that's not the case for many Aurora residents who are struggling with the decision of whether to stay and face the floods or leave. Many have chosen the latter, and St. Paul's, once a flourishing church with full pews, has diminished to six members.

In the very pews that were floating a year earlier, Glenoria Jennette, a second-generation member of St. Paul's, and James Parker, a 91-year-old lifelong resident of Aurora, share stories of how the sea's rising has affected their lives. Jennette lost her home, and nearly her husband, in Hurricane Irene and was forced to move inland to higher ground. Parker formerly worked in construction and has been part of efforts to raise houses and other structures onto stilts, an expensive adaptation technique that is inaccessible to low-income communities.

As we talked, Gerald Godette, who serves as a steward at the church, gently wove in the science behind climate change. Godette, a former marine biologist, went into ministry in 2015; faith, justice, and science, in that order, inform and guide Godette's work in the community.

STORIES OF RESILIENCE

St. Paul AME Zion Church - Aurora, NC - continued.

He's also a skilled facilitator, able to guide a conversation that weaves together Jennette and Parker's stories with the science of climate change and scripture.

What's remarkable about St. Paul's isn't the scale of their work; what's remarkable is that despite the sea shrinking their congregation and driving away their neighbors, the six-person community has not become discouraged and inwardly focused.

Godette recently partnered with North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment to host public roundtables with coastal churches to talk about sea level rise adaptation. But as Godette told me before I visited, he also believes casual conversation is an important form of climate education. Often, if you "try to get your congregants to come to a formal setting to discuss climate change, they will not come," he explains; the community is rightly suspicious of political and economic agendas disguised as church. So Godette has become a master of creating informal climate conversations.

While the shrinking size of the congregation presents challenges for St. Paul's sustainability, the core of the church's courage is a willingness to engage in conversations about climate change. Recent data shows that nearly 70 percent of people in the U.S. agree the climate is changing, but about two-thirds never talk about it. The same problem persists in our churches, where climate change often seems less important than other social issues or too political for the pews—at least until water floods those same pews.

There are physical needs that remain in Aurora, including a desperate need for funding to implement adaptation measures such as elevating the church and nearby houses on stilts. While federal programs exist to support adaptation, the scale of those programs is nowhere near the level of need.

And the congregants at St. Paul's see the same story of their history played out again: While wealthier, whiter communities receive funding to relocate or adapt, Aurora is left behind.

Yet, courage persists. Starting with their conversations in the pews of St. Paul's, Jennette, Parker, and Godette continue to engage in local advocacy efforts to change those stories. And inside that riverside sanctuary, one informal conversation at a time, a community is strengthened.



Photo Credit: St. Paul AME Zion Church - Aurora, NC

Crosstowne Church, Charleston, SC

In Charleston, S.C., Paul Rienzo, pastor of Crosstowne Church, sat behind a desk constructed out of a reclaimed door. This door, removed after the first flood at his church, is a daily reminder of the Christian call to reclamation and restoration, Rienzo told me. It is from this desk that Rienzo has worked to reshape the mission of this church in the wake of the extreme flooding the Charleston community has seen in recent years.

Rienzo describes Crosstowne as a "newfangled evangelical" church, a 600-person congregation that is "good for somebody that's on their third marriage ... good for the doubter, and we're really good for atheists." It's also a church that has flooded three years in a row.

STORIES OF RESILIENCE

Three hurricanes, in 2015, 2016, and 2017, pummeled Crosstowne, each dumping enough water to require a massive rebuild of the sanctuary. After the third flood, the church interior was rebuilt in two weeks, but the church recognized that rebuilding wasn't enough. The leadership team at Crosstowne decided to do something unusual for a church: gather scientific data. They hired a hydrology team and an environmental lawyer to analyze the onshore causes of the flooding so that the church could serve as a trustworthy hub of communication with their neighbors and the city.

The study found that as climate change exacerbates rainfall intensity, unsustainable development results in water flowing over concrete rather than percolating into the soil. When rain falls, streets and storm drains are inundated with more water than they can handle, and the excess water ends up 3 feet deep in the sanctuary of Crosstowne. According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment, by the end of the century heavy rainfall events in the Southeast U.S. are expected to double, and the amount of water falling on extreme rain days will increase by 21 percent. As more rain falls on hard surfaces around Charleston, Crosstowne has realized it will be underwater more frequently.

With their data-driven study, Crosstowne became experts on flooding in the area around Charleston's Church Creek Basin. Rienzo worked with the city to develop new stormwater retention guidelines, reshaping how development is done in Charleston. The benefits of Crosstowne's work extended beyond its walls, to local homeowners who "were looking at buyouts, flooding, delays," Rienzo told the local Live 5 News. "So we began to see we were not just doing this study for ourselves. It was a study to do for the community around us."

While most in the city supported Crosstowne's efforts, others worried that small-scale, privately funded reports like the church's study would distract from the need for a comprehensive citywide study. But even in the midst of pressure from many sides to, as Rienzo described, "let the scientists and the politicians do their job and, you religious folks, you go in the other room and talk about values,"

Crosstowne held firm to its conviction that getting involved in policy—even when inconvenient—was an act of faith. "It just seemed like the gospel thing to do," said Rienzo.

Rienzo continued to tend the spiritual needs of Crosstowne, which included congregants who had been displaced from their own homes in the floods. He led a sermon series on the book of Nehemiah so that the church would see itself "as being a part of a biblical story."



Photo Credit: Paul Rienzo

The eponymous book describes how Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem, a task fraught with conflict from Judah's enemies. Nevertheless, the people of Jerusalem "committed themselves to the common good" (Nehemiah 2:18), standing shoulder to shoulder, each person building a segment of wall "opposite his house" (3:6-12). For Rienzo, this was an important lesson. "[Nehemiah] got a buy-in from everybody. And so that was one of the important pieces of it: that everybody was going to be a part of this solution together."

Crossing over the threshold of Crosstowne, I noticed a watermark, 3 feet high on the door. While the rest of the church was renovated, they kept the doors as a reminder of where they have been. As congregants enter the church, they symbolically proclaim a remembrance of the flood, a celebration of Crosstowne's reclamation, and a recommitment to the work of justice in Charleston.

BIBLE STUDIES & SERMON STARTERS

The reflections below can be used as “sermon starters,” sparks meant to ignite the fire of a sermon or bible study. Use the text, the reflections, and your own meditation to craft a sermon or bible study around climate resilience.

Nehemiah 2

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace. Then They said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good.

Nehemiah 2:17, 18

Our natural response to disaster is to rebuild. In fact, that’s precisely what the book of Nehemiah is all about: rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem after its destruction. Rebuilding gives us a sense of safety. It gives us a sense of normalcy. After any major disaster it is political suicide for leaders to say anything but “we will rebuild!”

And yet, in the midst of rebuilding, we often fail to ask the questions: what caused the disaster in the first place? How might rebuilding be a process of undoing systems that are failing our community? If we do rebuild, how can we make changes that ensure we are creating a just and equitable community?

The climate crisis forces us to confront questions of rebuilding both our physical buildings and our social systems. While physical infrastructure gets a large slice of attention from resilience experts, social capital is shown to have a larger impact on a community’s ability to bounce forward from a disaster.[1]

Our churches are often hubs of social capital and centers of a community. As such, they play a crucial role in preparing for the disasters that are likely to come our way.

How are we building social and physical structures that will deepen community connectedness and aid in response to the climate crisis? The climate crisis will continue to bring slow and fast disasters to our community. Rather than reacting to crisis and rebuilding, our churches should be proactive in building resilience that can support both the physical and spiritual needs of our communities.

Genesis

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.”

Genesis 18:1-5

Our churches care deeply about hospitality. When we welcome the stranger or the migrant it is as if we are welcoming the Lord. The passage from Genesis 18:15 and Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 25 that just as we treat the least of these, we treat the Lord. God calls our churches and our homes not only to be places of hospitality for those we know and love, but also for our new neighbors, those who are forced to move or migrate due to reasons of persecution or disaster.

BIBLE STUDIES & SERMON STARTERS

The climate crisis is driving migration around the world. As weather patterns become more erratic, bringing drought to some areas and flooding to others, people are forced from their land and community, and forced to find refuge elsewhere. These migrants, who are expected to number in the hundreds of millions in the next century, do not have the same protected status of refugees because their situation does not meet the definition of persecution. This makes it easier for countries to reject environmental migrants from the border. Historically, though, the Church has played a huge role in ensuring just policies and welcoming spaces for migrants. Now is the time to extend that same hospitality to climate migrants.

This is not merely an international problem. In the United States, the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw band of Indians of the Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana is the first group of climate-displaced people in the United States.[2] More internally-displaced people are expected to be forced out of their homes along the coasts or in wildfire-risk areas.

More internally-displaced people are expected to be forced out of their homes along the coasts or in wildfire-risk areas. They will largely settle across the midwest, far from their community and home. Our faith communities can be hubs of hospitality for these neighbors, welcoming them with love and generosity. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."



Photo Credit: Caleb Cook

Genesis

Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for [the animals].

Genesis 6:14-16, 21

It seems a bit odd that, in a story with as epic proportions as Noah and the Ark, the writer of Genesis chooses to include God's carpentry measurements. What does it matter to us that the Ark had to be constructed of cypress to very precise specifications? Perhaps what God is revealing here is that the way we build our structures and the materials we use to build them matter -- especially when a flood is coming.

In the face of an oncoming flood, Noah and his ark played the role of a shepherd, guiding God's people and God's Creation through a transformation into a new kind of community. In that transformation, the build of the Ark was not an afterthought; it was integral to the success of the mission. Without a structurally-sound ship with enough space and facilities for all the creatures, the kind of transformation that occurred through the Ark would have been impossible.

LITURGY

The structure of our communal life lies in the heart of Christian worship. The ways we structure our worship life resonates beyond the walls of the sanctuary. You are invited to use this prayer and liturgy as a way to begin integrating climate resilience into your worship service.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Like Job in the whirlwind, or Jonah in the storm at sea, we come before you in awe of your power, God.

We recognize that today's storms and whirlwinds are not your judgment on your people, but the distortion of natural systems through our own sin and hubris.

As the storms and whirlwinds of the climate crisis accelerate around us, may our sanctuary be a place of refuge and resilience, where all of God's creation might be protected and sustained, and from which we, People of God, might be sent forth to bring healing and justice.

Prayers of the People

Leader: For all those around the world who have lost their homes, livelihoods, or communities to the climate crisis.

Congregation: Lord, hear our prayer.

For our nonhuman siblings whose habitats are destroyed by the effects of greed and accumulation.

Lord, hear our prayer.

For decision-makers, that their choices might create a more beautiful, whole, resilient world.

Lord, hear our prayer.

For our own church, that we might be bearers of hope and resilience in our community, a place of refuge in the midst of crisis and disaster.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Prayer of Absolution

Creator, forgive us for our sins against you and your Creation.

In your name, may we turn from our sins and work towards a new creation, one in which all creatures are freed from the bondage of greed and accumulation and are able to flourish into their creatureliness.

May this church be a site of redemption, resilience, and hospitality; an extension of your love to all who are affected by the climate crisis.

*In this land, this structure, this community, this worship, may we love you more fully by seeking justice for our neighbors.
Amen.*

RESPONSIVE READING

Adapted from Psalm 18

I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer.

My God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

The earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled. In my distress I called upon the Lord.

From his temple he heard my focus and my cry to him reached his ears

He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters

He delivered me, because he delighted in me.

This God's way is perfect;

God is a shield for all who take refuge.

ACTION STEPS

How can we integrate climate education with personal, communal, and public action? Use the action steps below as a starting point for integrating climate resilience and climate justice into your life.

Personal

- Partner with a local organization to install natural climate adaptation solutions. In coastal areas, these might be oyster beds, sea grasses, or mangroves. In inland areas, it might be native plants and trees.
- Learn about the original peoples of your community: Find federal and state recognized tribes through the National Conference of State Legislatures. Check out online resources like <https://native-land.ca> to learn about the indigenous caretakers of the land you inhabit, and, if applicable, where their descendants may reside today.
- Develop a personal climate disaster resilience plan. Check out <https://www.weekofcompassion.org/how-to-prepare-for-a-disaster.html> for more information.

Community

- Encourage collective action and a sense of community by praying together, adopting a spirit of reference to creation and to one another, creating awareness about environmental migrants, sharing knowledge, fostering dialogue and making space to hear community concerns.
- Develop a resilience and disaster preparedness plan for your church. Then, invite your congregants to develop one for their household.
- Make room for people who might be displaced by disasters. Consider options like: Stocking cots, sheets, toiletries (including menstrual products), and non-perishable food, installing showers in some of your bathrooms, and working with local emergency management so that people know they can come to you.

Advocacy

Visit creationjustice.org/action to learn more about advocating for God's Creation locally and federally. Using what you've learned about the climate risks and needs for resilience in your community, contact your legislators, write a letter to the editor, and organize your community in support of local resilience initiatives.



Photo Credit: Gabriella Clare Marino



Photo Credit: Markus Spiske



Photo Credit: Ray Harrington



Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips, and mobilizes its 38 member communions and denominations, congregations, and individuals to do justice for God's planet and God's people.

Learn more at www.creationjustice.org and @CreationJustice on social media.