

Primate of Southern Africa: "Climate Change issue is Moral Imperative for All"

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The Most Revd Dr Thabo C Makgoba at the World Economic Forum in Africa

The Archbishop, who is a participant at the World Economic Forum in Africa, has written to his faithful that the issue of climatic change must be regarded as a moral imperative for all and hopes that others at WEF will take heed of his call. His full statement follows:

In one sense, I imagine I might be 'preaching to the choir' about climate change, as we sometimes say in the church. But even if we agree on its reality and the dangers which it poses for our planet and our people, we need to make our witness bolder and take more courageous steps to bring others to our state of awareness and to work for real change.

We in the faith communities know that climate change will be hugely damaging to both people and our planet. We know too that it is not only an environmental, economic and social issue but essentially a moral issue. It must therefore be solved through moral principles.

We therefore ask this World Economic Forum to recognize the need to put justice first, in caring for people and planet, and to recognize that real prosperity can only come from making the well being of people and planet our primary concern. In our world today it seems clear that we put prosperity – and profitability – before justice, so that at a time when there is more wealth in the world than ever before, we also have greater poverty and inequality and alarming environmental destruction.

We are aware of what is happening - globally and nationally and locally. We are witnessing unprecedented and severe climatic changes and the effects are devastating. As the environment is harmed so are the local communities who live there. The impact is felt in terms of food production, of the availability of safe water, and of energy, in particular. The livelihoods of people may be changed forever.

When I attended the Lambeth Conference 2008 - a meeting of Anglican bishops around the world which is held every 10 years – and again at the meeting of Anglican Primates in Dublin earlier this year (2011) - we were told by some bishops that when we met again, parts of their dioceses would no longer be habitable. This is due mainly in their situations to rising water levels. Indeed we may be looking very soon at a new category of refugees in our global family – environmental refugees!

We can't ignore these changes just because we don't all agree scientifically. There is a need to look at ourselves. What patterns have changed in our attitudes to the creation which has been entrusted to us? How do we view our 'rights' to energy, water and land, to name but three of our natural resources?

In the Maplecroft Climate Change Risk Report 2009/2010 there was a devastating finding: that of the 28 areas in the world that would be most affected by climate change, 22 are in Africa! That is a frightening and sobering statistic for those of us living in our amazing continent. It may also speak to another aspect of the effects of climate change – it affects impoverished areas more. And this may be so, in part, because these areas have so few alternatives when environmental changes occur. By simple deduction, we can assume that the more developed and richer nations have more alternatives when facing the effects of climate change, most particularly because of their development and resources.

We in Africa also have a moral responsibility to speak out to those nations which have the greatest impact on climate change, through their high levels of carbon emissions. We are a global family – it is very hard to argue against that fact. Our actions impact on one another and our tragedies do as well. As we witness the insatiable desire for more and more energy, and increasing levels of deforestation around the world, we see these nations behaving as if these resources are limitless. They know and we know that they are not!

I want to say to this World Economic Forum that I believe your task is not to be led by financial interests nor to multiply your wealth. Your task - as is mine and that of all who recognise that we have responsibility for ourselves, for this world and all in it - is to be custodians of this planet, to care for it and look after it for the future – the future of your children and grandchildren and mine.

The UNFCCC COP 17 (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change - Conference of the Parties) to be held here in Durban in November-December this year offers the world an opportunity to change direction. As host we pray our South African Government will “do the right thing” and set an example by seeking climate justice and radically reducing carbon emissions.

However, we are deeply concerned that South Africa’s current energy policy as agreed by Cabinet and presented at Copenhagen falls seriously short of what science requires if we are to have any chance of preventing runaway global warming.

We also read in Scripture “From those to whom much is given, much is expected” (Luke 12:48).

We look to the United States to give a lead and to do the right thing as a custodian of this planet and to make a clear commitment to reduce carbon emissions in accordance with the needs of the planet, and to work with the world community in overcoming this greatest threat humanity has ever faced.

We also look to China. We know the commitment of China to bring development to its people, as in our own country. But, we say, do it the right way and set an example by developing your energy production only by renewable means.

Might these challenges and needed changes alter how we live our lives – especially the more affluent? They may very well. But we are a global family and we must learn to live as a caring and compassionate family – caring for all, and especially those who are struggling to find their place.

We must develop energy production through ways that are not destructive to the planet and the people, and that of course includes not destroying our climate and our water resources. We must live in harmony with the environment. We therefore call on this World Economic Forum to recognise that we are totally dependent on this planet and that we must therefore care for it and live within its natural constraints.

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