

**OVERVIEW:** Social science confirms that when it comes to the controversial topic of climate change, pastors are regarded as among the most important trusted leaders. Are they/we preaching on climate change? What difference does it make? What can church folk learn from current research about communicating about climate change? All of this, along with an overview of a work of science-informed fiction by Harvard's Naomi Oreskes, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*.

**PRESENTER:** The Rev. Dr. Jim Antal, Minister and President of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, has been an environmental activist from the first Earth Day in 1970. He regularly engages the spiritual discipline of civil disobedience, most recently at the White House to stop the Keystone XL pipeline. He authored and was the lead proponent of the UCC's vote in 2013 to divest from fossil fuel companies - the first denomination to do so. A national leader in the climate change movement, his forthcoming book *THE TRUTH WILL SET US FREE - A New Church for a Climate Crisis World* will soon be available electronically.

It's an honor to have this opportunity to engage in a conversation with this particular UCC audience – self-selected for your interest in science, technology and sustainability – and at this particular **time** – when the prospects of life as we know it are at a crossroads where faith, science and politics intersect, and the continuity of creation is in the balance.

My working title for this presentation is this: **Trustworthiness and Truth – Communicating on Climate Change in the Church.**

- I'll begin with some comments about the work of my friend Naomi Oreskes, Professor of the History of Science and Affiliated Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Harvard.
- Then I'll share some suggestions about communicating on climate change – particularly preaching in a church context.
- And I'll conclude with some observations about the just-released Papal Encyclical “*Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*.”
- And after that, I expect that we'll have ample time for questions and conversation.

Many of you will have heard of Naomi Oreskes' 2011 book [\*Merchants of Doubt\*](#), which she co-authored with Erik Conway. Brilliantly reported and written with brutal clarity, this now-classic book describes how the fossil fuel companies - like the tobacco companies before them - used a small coterie of scientists (along with a few who were willing to impersonate scientists) to generate a public sense of uncertainty about climate science. Something you may not know about her is that she is the person who first attempted to settle the question of whether there was a scientific consensus on climate change. In 2004, she published her research in *Science Magazine* indicating the vast majority of scientists whose primary work focused on climate concluded that climate change is happening and that it's human caused.

In April (2015) [\*Merchants of Doubt\*](#) was made into a captivating film which I would highly recommend. Earlier this month (June 15, 2015), [Naomi's life and work was featured in the NY Times "Profiles in Science" series](#). I like to think of her as the person who helped the world to understand the almost uniquely American phenomenon of climate denial.

Her newest provocative and grimly fascinating book is called [The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future](#). The narrator is an historian of science (like Naomi) who is speaking in 2393 on the occasion of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Collapse. He is trying to explain what happened in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – how the children of the Enlightenment-- the political and economic elites of the so-called “advanced industrial societies”--failed to act, and thus brought about the collapse of Western civilization.

I want to lift up two substantial ironies about this book each of which has to do with trustworthiness and truth. The first is this: in our current cultural context, Naomi thought that a good way to promote the importance and trustworthiness of science was to write a book of science-informed **fiction**.

And the second irony has to do with the core of her book. To meet the challenge of climate change the governments of most of the world's countries must respond in a coordinated, comprehensive way. As journalist Naomi Klien puts it, “To change everything, we need everyone!” Or as I like to say, **nothing shouts “interdependence” more than climate change**. As we all know, this is exactly what the climate-change-denying lobbyists and congressional leaders oppose. They refuse to allow any curtailment of immediate profits from extractive companies. From “drill baby drill” to burying proposed legislation around a carbon tax, when it comes to preserving the status quo and ignoring science, they are “all in.” And of course the other thing these lobbyists and congressional leaders revile is centralized government – especially when it seeks to regulate the so called free market.

All this forms the basis of the second irony of Naomi Oreskes' book: ultimately, it's the **resistance** of the climate deniers that **ultimately** results in the **triumph** of centralized governments like China. Why? Because once runaway climate change begins, **only centralized government** will be able to respond to the disruption, discontinuity and chaos.

I want to lift up a bigger conversation than we will have time for in this gathering. There was a time – not too long ago – when Americans marveled at science. Perhaps it began with what some regarded as the “triumph” of the super-secret science project known as the Manhattan Project. A few years later, we couldn't get enough of the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space programs. Jacques Cousteau brought the wonder of the oceans into every living room. Fully 10% (20

million) of the American population participated in the first Earth Day in 1970. Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* (1980) – one of the most popular programs ever produced – may have marked the height of that era.

Yet while Sagan was busy making that series, the Love Canal disaster unfolded (1978) – giving rise to the creation of a federal Superfund. (1980) It was courageous individuals like Reporter Michael Brown, and two moms - Karen Schroeder and Lois Gibbs – who used science to expose corporate culpability: an elementary school built atop 21 tons of toxic waste.

During this same time period, some of the most successful corporations in the history of money were beginning to tremble in fear. State after state had passed anti-smoking legislation. And so in 1979, the tobacco industry decided to declare a “war on science”. No... that overstates it. As Naomi Oreskes outlines in exquisite detail, the tobacco industry decided to sow the seeds of doubt in the mind of the public and in our courts of law. Their two front-men again and again and again testified that the EPA's findings represented “junk science.” You can read [\*Merchants of Doubt\*](#) for more detail.

And my point is this: America turned from championing science as a gateway to the American Dream – to questioning science, distrusting scientists, and framing science as an alternative “belief system” – with many Americans preferring to trust their religious faith in matters of evolution and more.

And along with this shift was another: the issue of economic externalities was beginning to emerge. How much should tobacco companies pay for the lives taken by addiction to cancer-causing smoking? How much should chemical and mining companies pay for the lives and land decimated by their negligent practices? And this same question is now being put to the most profitable industry the world has ever known: how much should fossil fuel companies pay in compensation for the life-destroying CO<sub>2</sub> that is the by-product of their profits?<sup>1</sup>

Just last month (May 2015) Naomi testified before Congress. Just as the Committee on Natural Resources heard her testimony, they also responded. And the Republican members of the Committee denounced a wide range of scientific investigations related to the enforcement of existing environmental laws as “**government science.**” What they meant was that, by definition, such science was corrupt, politically driven, and lacking in accountability. The particular science under attack involved work done by, or on behalf of, federal agencies like

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<sup>1</sup> : If the global emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> from fossil fuels reaches 36 billion metric tons in 2015 (a reasonable number based on a [2014 report](#) from the International Energy Agency (IEA)), it means that **the \$5.3T subsidy** - mostly in the form of the harmful environmental and health effects of fossil fuels, will reach nearly \$150 per metric ton of CO<sub>2</sub>! These economic externalities are sometimes called the Social Cost of Carbon (SCC).

the National Parks Service, but climate science came in for its share of insults as well.<sup>2</sup> For a more complete analysis – and for some additional irony – read Naomi’s recent essay, “The Hoax of Climate Denial - Why Climate Deniers Are Their Own Worst Nightmares.”

Trustworthiness and truth...

With this backdrop, I guess I should not be surprised that pastors are reluctant to preach on climate change! In an attempt to counteract that, since becoming Conference Minister in Massachusetts 9 years ago I have regularly told our pastors that they should be mentioning climate change at least every 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> sermon. And of course they look at me light I have two heads, and that I’ve forgotten everything I learned in Seminary. And then I tell them that if we don’t provide that kind of leadership and witness, I don’t know if it will be 10 years... but it won’t be more than 15 years... every sermon will be on grief – grief for the world we let go.

And so I urge them to face the fact that **we are first generation to foresee, and the final generation with an opportunity to forestall, the most devastating effects of climate change.** And then I remind them of how they are regarded: again and again, pole after pole confirms that **pastors are regarded as trustworthy leaders.** While the institution of religion continues (along with other institutions) in a downward spiral, pastors continue to be regarded as trustworthy.

With that in mind, I want to share **two reasons** why preaching on climate change is so important. Both of these reasons emerge from a 2014 Survey on Religion, Values, and Climate Change.<sup>1</sup> **The first reason** is that people who at least occasionally have heard a sermon on climate change are more likely to accept climate change as real. In addition, Americans who say their clergy leader speaks at least occasionally about climate change also score higher on the Climate Change Concern Index. More than 6-in-10 Americans who report hearing about climate change from their clergy leader at least occasionally are either very (38%) or somewhat (24%) concerned about climate change.//

The **second reason** preaching is important is that, of people worshipping in white mainline Protestant churches, **only 10%** of them report that their pastor speaks of climate change “often”, and **only 20%** report that their pastor discusses climate change “sometimes.” In black Protestant and in Hispanic Catholic congregations, people report that their pastor speaks about climate change much more frequently.

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<sup>2</sup> See Oreskes “The Hoax of Climate Denial - Why Climate Deniers Are Their Own Worst Nightmares” June 16, 2015. [http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176011/tomgram%3A\\_naomi\\_oreskes%2C\\_why\\_climate\\_deniers\\_are\\_their\\_own\\_worst\\_nightmares/#more](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176011/tomgram%3A_naomi_oreskes%2C_why_climate_deniers_are_their_own_worst_nightmares/#more)

**So to sum up: preaching actually matters!** Because congregations respect and trust their pastor, if the pastor addresses climate change, the congregation is likely to be receptive to his or her message.

And it's worth noting the impact religious leaders and their congregations have had in nearly every social transformation:

- For millennia it was normative to own slaves – until Samuel Sewell from Old South Church in Boston published the first anti-slavery pamphlet in 1701 and thus launched the Abolitionist movement.
- For centuries it was normative to allow only white men to interpret scripture from a pulpit – until our congregational forebears ordained Lemuel Hayes and Antoinette Brown.
- History will forever admire Dietrich Bonhoeffer for gathering a group of seminarians at Finkenwald to prepare Christian leaders to oppose Hitler.
- Martin Luther King Jr. **bent the arc of justice** by changing the aspirations of a nation.
- And Archbishop Desmond Tutu inspired scores of clergy to work with him until the dignity and equality of **all** South Africans was written into the law.

The preaching of these religious leaders **repurposed the church** for their time and place. Their clarity – and the actions they took – were not popular. The majority of congregations kept doing what they had always done. Instead of offering a moral critique that would land them on the third rail, most pastors chose instead to attend to the immediate needs of their flock. They continued to offer leadership that looked pretty much the same as it had for decades and perhaps centuries before.

But I ask you - as we look back, whom do we admire? Who do we believe was following Jesus? And what does this have to do with Jesus' call to "follow me" in the context of climate change?

The Pope is now providing a considerable amount of "cover" for priests and pastors who may still be reticent. I'll say more about the Encyclical in a moment.

But first, I want to share with you **ten guidelines for preaching on climate change**. I'll direct these to the pastors in attendance, and hope that others of you will bring these suggestions back to your home pastors.

Many of these considerations draw upon insights offered by George Marshall in his superb book entitled: *Don't Even Think About It – Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change*.<sup>ii</sup> These considerations are also informed by the 8 page guide to [Communicating on Climate](#) from EcoAmerica.<sup>iii</sup>

First consideration: **Don't start with science, or with fear, or with headlines.** Instead, begin by asking yourself: What is the collective story of your congregation? What is their social identity? What are their common, deeply held values? What do they care about most? And then: how do these values connect with creation? Research tells us that a compelling emotional story that speaks to peoples' core values has more impact than rational scientific data.

The second consideration may be counter-intuitive: **It's good to acknowledge ambivalence.** Don't assume that everyone knows what you know, and even if they do know, that they would care. People have diverse priorities. A simple comment such as, "Some people are very concerned about climate change, and others are less so" will invite everyone in your congregation to go with you, wherever you may take them in the remainder of your sermon.

A third consideration: **Cite one fact, not a bunch of science.**<sup>iv</sup> Be aware that too much emphasis on science can seriously backfire. It may not be helpful to explain what scientists mean when they report 2014 as hottest year in history. That's not to say that mentioning and citing facts should be avoided. In fact, it's better to cite facts than it is to quote science. With over 80% of Americans acknowledging that climate and weather are changing, noting, for example, that extreme weather events in New England have increased over 70% in recent years connects with people's experience. Try to share one powerful fact from a trusted messenger. And don't get all caught up in the details. Stay on the mountaintop as a messenger while you give people a clear take-away. And finally, be sure to remember that talking about values and moral narratives and imagery is what will affect people most.<sup>v</sup>

As a fourth consideration – **keep it simple!** For decades – perhaps centuries – preaching classes in seminaries have taught: tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you told them! Don't get drawn in to the complexity of the climate science or ideological debates. As David Fenton of Fenton Communications says, "only simplicity works."<sup>vi</sup>

Fifth consideration: **Do what the Golden Rule does!** (There's a reason why the Golden Rule is found at the core of every world religion!) In other words, **provide a narrative that invites people to recognize our common humanity.** Tell a story that illustrates our mutual interests – for example, people and creatures all over the planet breathe the same air! And when you discuss responses or solutions, be sure to emphasize cooperation. In regards to the challenge of climate change, no one has an alibi – we are literally all in this together.

Sixth consideration: **Embrace Jesus' most frequent admonition: "fear not!"** At the moment – at least before the release of Pope Francis' Encyclical – the master narrative in our society in regards to climate change is fear, denial and

struggle to accept our own responsibility. What insights can you call upon from how Jesus addresses the fear that dominated his audiences? What encouragement can you take from the fact that living as he did in such a fearful time, Jesus nevertheless addressed those fears, and inspired endless courage, again and again and again?

A seventh consideration: **lead your congregation to recognize that the time to act is NOW!** Of course, it's challenging to prompt action on an issue that does not seem to pose any immediate threat. As in most situations, when there is no deadline, people will create their own timeline. As is often the case with concerns we preach about that are a world away from our congregation, our people appreciate being informed, and they feel vaguely guilty for being unable to do much about it. In contrast to this, congregations were encouraged to respond immediately and concretely to both the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the 2004 Christmas Tsunami in Sumatra. It made a difference that people were able to take action. When it comes to climate change, what more or less immediate action is appropriate for you to advocate to your congregation?

An eighth consideration has to do with how our brains are wired. In the narratives we develop for our preaching, we must speak of climate change in ways that **make it local, personal, immediate and abrupt**. This is because peoples' brains are UNSuited to deal with threats that are distant or abstract.

A ninth consideration has to do with our role as clergy. For the most part, clergy are respected and trusted by their congregations, and research confirms that audiences are more receptive to messages from someone they respect and trust. And since we are clergy, it's also essential to speak to our generation's **moral obligation** to take immediate action by embracing solutions already universally available.

And finally, a tenth consideration: help your congregation to see how, in facing the reality of climate change, they can **lead more faithful and hopeful lives...** and doing so does not mean that their lives will be diminished. We tend to think of faithfulness in terms of personal conduct and decisions. While that is true, Jesus makes clear that we are called not only to make our **own** lives more righteous, but we must also make **society** more just, loving, fair and life-sustaining. Just as entrepreneurs are offering new responses and solutions to climate change every day, as leaders of faith communities, it's up to us to offer new ways to live **faithfully and hopefully** in a world increasingly discontinuous with the world into which we were born. ///

Ok. Those are my ten considerations for preaching on climate change. Before I conclude with a few comments on Pope Francis' Encyclical, I want to add two things.

First: that the church, the synagogue and the temple are a sleeping giant – and future generations are shaking us as they try to wake us up. We need to accept – to put it in Christian terms (but it applies to every faith perspective) – that **we are not called to be a church for ourselves. We are called to be a church for others – Koinonia.** And the most important “others” we must give our lives to are **future generations.** That’s the first thing.

And the second thing is this: **we actually have the power to bend the arc of justice.** If people of faith realize how profound this moment is –if we realize that we can determine not only the direction but the pace which change needs to follow, then we will realize that we can revoke the social license that the fossil fuel industry requires to continue to conduct “business as usual”. And once we do, the world will move at breakneck speed to engage opportunities for a life-sustaining way of life.

Having made these two points time and time again over the past ten years, I was of course delighted to read Pope Francis’ Encyclical: “Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home.” Addressed to “every person living on this planet” Francis calls for a “broad cultural revolution” to confront “the ecological crisis.” One of the most admired and trusted leaders in recent times (if not in all times), Pope Francis is using his bully pulpit to promulgate the scientific consensus, shine a bright light on the injustice, confront the causes, and give hope to a world that must immediately undertake unprecedented change.

I want to begin by sharing with you a paragraph from Bill McKibben’s commentary on the Encyclical in the New York Review of Books.<sup>3</sup>

*[The Pope has] brought the full weight of the spiritual order to bear on the global threat posed by climate change, and in so doing joined its power with the scientific order. Stephen Jay Gould had the idea that these two spheres were “non-overlapping magisteria,” but in this case he appears to have been wrong. Pope Francis draws heavily on science—sections of the encyclical are very nearly wonky, with accurate and sensible discussions of everything from genetic modification to aquifer depletion—but he goes beyond science as well. **Science by itself has proven empirically impotent to force action on this greatest of crises; now, at last, someone with authority is explaining precisely why it matters that we’re overheating the planet.***

It matters because we are turning the earth into “an immense pile of filth” [¶21] --- whereas “a true ecological approach,” the Pope writes, “*always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, *so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*” [¶49]

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2015/jun/18/pope-francis-encyclical-cry-of-earth/>

And why has humanity become deaf to these cries? Again, I want to quote from Bill McKibben's commentary:

*[At] the heart of the encyclical is ... a remarkable attack on the way our world runs: ... on the way that economic growth and technology trump all other concerns.... But now... Our way of life literally doesn't work. It's breaking the planet. Given the severity of the situation, Francis writes, "we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing, and limiting our power." [¶78] ... Francis calls for nothing less than the demotion of individualism and a renewed concern for what we hold in common as humans .... [He writes:] "The rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption [is] essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment." [¶208]*

This is what we have to offer as religious leaders. We must join Francis and not hesitate to label our American lifestyle as "extreme consumerism" [¶203] – and also join him in recognizing that Christian spirituality offers a growth marked by "moderation and the capacity to be happy with little." [¶222] Yes – it's the role of religion to offer a redefinition of our notion of progress – and motivate disciples to live into that new understanding of spiritual growth.

There's so much more to say, but I want to have time for questions.

Let me conclude by linking the Encyclical to the divestment movement.

Pope Francis does not mention the word divestment. But when we, in the divestment movement, point out that fossil fuel companies must leave 80% of their known assets in the ground if our grandchildren are to even have a chance of knowing the Eden into which we were born... when we say this, we are dismissed as fanciful dreamers. Well, in paragraph 190 the Pope shows he has our back.

*Here too, it should always be kept in mind that "environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces" Once more, we need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals. Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention. Moreover, biodiversity is considered at most a deposit of economic resources available for*

*exploitation, with no serious thought for the real value of things, their significance for persons and cultures, or the concerns and needs of the poor.*

Friends – we need to move

- from hunkering down to stepping up;
- from too much emphasis on **per**sonal salvation to much more emphasis on **communal** salvation;
- from being a church for ourselves only, to being a church for others – especially future generations.

And I'll close by sharing with you one initiative we might consider. A year ago I was keynoting the Annual Meeting of the South Central Conference in Houston.... .....Imagine if tens of thousands of churches the world over initiated Truth and Reconciliation Commissions....

Thank you.... And now questions....

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<sup>i</sup> From the PRRI/AAR Religion, Values, and Climate Change Survey

<http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/11/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/>

<sup>ii</sup> Jim Pierobon's synopsis of George Marshall's book *Don't Even Think About It – Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change* is excellent: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-pierobon/why-communicating-about-c\\_b\\_6626692.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-pierobon/why-communicating-about-c_b_6626692.html)

<sup>iii</sup> *Communicating on Climate, 13 Steps and Guiding Principles*. [http://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Communicating-on-Climate-13-steps\\_ecoAmerica.pdf](http://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Communicating-on-Climate-13-steps_ecoAmerica.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> January 30, 2015 From Climate Nexus **American Public Doesn't Get Science**: There are major discrepancies between public opinion and scientific consensus on issues like climate change, evolution, GMOs, and vaccines, a new [study](#) by Pew Research Center finds. Despite having a high level of respect and appreciation for science, the public disagreed with scientists by 20% or more on eight of 13 surveyed issues. including a 50-87% split between the public and scientists on the validity of human-caused climate change. A large majority of the scientists criticized the education system, and 84% said that public ignorance of science was a major problem. (AP, [Guardian](#), [National Geographic](#), [Live Science](#), [Pacific Standard](#), [NBC News](#), [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#), [PBS Newshour](#), [Washington Post](#) \$, [The New Republic](#), [The Atlantic](#), [Mother Jones](#), [Reuters](#), [Xinhua](#), [io9](#), [The Week](#), [Co.Exist](#). Commentary: [Scientific American](#), [Lee Rainie column](#), [Forbes](#), [Eric Mack column](#), [Washington Post](#), [Chris Mooney column](#) \$, [The Conversation](#), [John Besley op-ed](#), [Huffington Post](#), [Jon Entine column](#))

<sup>v</sup> Interview with David Fenton of Fenton Communications: <http://grist.org/climate-energy/want-everyone-else-to-buy-into-environmentalism-never-say-earth/>

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