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**Faith and Environmental Justice**

**Speaker:**

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**Presider:**

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**Description**

Sally G. Bingham, president and founder of Interfaith Power and Light, discusses the role of faith communities in promoting environmental justice, as part of CFR's Religion and Foreign Policy Conference Call series.

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**Audio**

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**Transcript**

CASA: Good afternoon from New York. And welcome to the Council on Foreign Relations Religion and Foreign Policy Conference Call Series. I’m Maria Casa, director of the National Program and Outreach here at CFR. Thank you for joining us. As a reminder, today’s call is on the record and the audio will be available on our website, www.CFR.org.

We are delighted to have Sally Bingham with us today to discuss the role of faith-based organizations in global efforts to address environmental issues. The Reverend Bingham is president and founder of Interfaith Power and Light, and the Regeneration Project, organizations dedicated to mobilizing a religious response to global warming. She also serves as canon for the environment in the Episcopal Diocese of California. As one of the first faith leaders to fully recognize global warming as a core moral issue, she has mobilized thousands of religious people to put their faith into action through energy stewardship.

The Reverend Bingham serves on the board of directors of the Environmental Defense Fund, the Environmental Working Group, and the U.S. Climate Action Network, and was formerly a member of President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. She is the lead author of *Love God, Heal Earth*, a collection of 21 essays on environmental stewardship. And in 2012, she received the Audubon Society’s Rachel Carson Award for environmental leadership.

Welcome, Sally. Thank you for joining us today.

BINGHAM: Thank you, Maria, and anybody else who’s listening in. It’s a pleasure to be able to talk about this work because it is what I do and what I care the most about, other than the grandchild that I’m expecting—(laughs)—in about two weeks. Environmental justice is what we do. A religious response to global warming environmental justice, largely defined by the fact that the people who contribute the least to the global warming problem are the people who are suffering the most. And that, in anybody’s mind, is not fair or just. So what we are doing is working under the mandate that most major religions if not all have, to protect and serve poor people.

And we figure that the global warming problem, the climate crisis that we’re in today is what is harming poor people both here in America and also around the world—harming them the most, and that we have a responsibility as religious people and people of faith to address this problem. It’s almost more than a responsibility. We have a—we have a—really it’s an obligation, if we’re going to be true to our faiths, to help solve this problem. And in our network, we have Buddhists and Baha’is, and Christians, and Jews, and Muslims, and Hindus. And all of those religions have expressed statements to protect the climate. And we don’t see that there’s any better way to protect the climate and protect poor people than to cut our greenhouse gas emissions and advocate for others to do the same.

We are promoting and pushing for the Green Climate Fund to be fully funded. The Green Climate Fund is what was pulled together at the different Conference of the Parties meetings. And each country has pledged a certain amount of money. The United States has committed a tremendous amount of money, it’s $100 million a year, to mitigate and help countries around the world adapt to this problem that they’re suffering from but didn’t cause. So the Green Climate Fund itself is an environmental justice solution, in a way. And I’m happy to say that when the Obama budget was recently passed, the Green Climate Fund funds stayed intact.

And specifically what we do, and it will involve the Faith Climate Action Week, which is around Earth Day, but our concentration has been on congregational facilities around the country, to have them serve as examples to their communities. And we would like the faith community to be doing and representing what we’d like to see our government do. And on that note, we have something called the Paris Pledge that we took to Paris, where people—over 5,000 people and congregations have committed to cutting their greenhouse gases 50 percent by 2030, and being carbon neutral by 2050. That’s a bigger pledge than what the U.S. government did, but we feel that it’s important to do. And we’re going to try to show the way. We want to be an example of what we want the government to do.

So our congregations, of which we have 18,000 in our network, are promoting the Green Climate Fund to their parishioners, and the Paris Pledge. We are continuing to take Paris Pledgers, and we will all the way until eternity, and try to check in with congregations to see how they’re doing, just as the Paris agreement is doing with countries. They’re checking in every five years to see how the countries are doing on their pledges. And we will check in with our congregations as well.

We asked the congregations, and we supply resources and directions on how to do it, with energy efficient appliances, if they can possibly put solar on the roof. We can come up with various plans that will make it possible for a congregation to put solar on the roof and not have any up-front cost. We have sample sermons. We have discussion points for congregants to use if they have an adult education class or discussions around climate. Our preach-in, which we used to do over Valentine’s Days weekend, was a focus on loving God and loving creation.

And that happened over a weekend in February. It was so successful that we came to the conclusion that we probably could do more. If we could do a very little bit in—or, as much as we were doing in a three-day weekend, we could probably do a great deal more over a full week. So this year, the preach-in has become Faith Climate Action Week. And it’s the whole week surrounding the secular Earth Day. We have kits available on our website that can be downloaded for free, or if you—a congregation or person were to buy the kit, it comes with the film, which is an award-winning film, called “Racing Extinction.”

And in this kit, along with racing extinction, you would get sample sermons, talking points for climate conversations, and many other resources, including some postcards that have advocacy asks on them that can be sent to your senators and House representatives. Depending upon the number of congregants in the congregation is how many postcards one gets. And the person of faith that has listened to the sermon and is feeling inspired to do so would pick up one of these postcards and send it into their senator or House representative.

And the postcards this year are focusing on the Clean Power Plan. This is another environmental justice issue, because the way that we’re going to cut air pollution is to lower the emissions out of coal plants, which is what the Clean Power Plan will do. And as I’m sure most of the people on the call know, the folks that live around those power plants here in America are the ones that suffer the most from air pollution, respiratory problems, lung diseases, and lung cancer. So the Clean Power Plan is one of the initiatives that we’re working on this year as well.

We do a lot of policy work, and we’d like to get our congregations involved in the advocacy around good policy. AB 32, which is the California Global Warming Act, we were instrumental in helping to get that passed. We work on any legislation that will provide energy efficiency, retrofits, and help for low-income communities. We work with any legislation that will continue to give tax credits for solar. We’re working on reducing the amount of methane that comes from both fracking and in just the leakage of natural gas traveling from place to place. Those rules have come out from the EPA. And we’re supporting those.

We sent a declaration that was given to the DC court when they were having a discussion around the merits and the legality of the Clean Power Plan. We sent a declaration in. And of course, the DC court turned down this lawsuit from the 27 states asking for a stay, which of course was then undone when the Supreme Court went ahead and said they would—they would hold the stay, or allow for the stay to happen. And they’re going to have the judgement on the merits and legality of the Clean Power Plan on June 2nd. So that’s one of the things that we’re writing letters about, opinion pieces about. There’s an amicus brief that went in last Friday from the faith community.

So those are the sort of advocacy things that we’re doing. And then we have a program called Cool Congregations coming underneath—if you were to go to—if you’re all sitting in front of a computer and you were to go to our Interfaith Power and Light website, we have a Cool Congregation challenge going on right now, where congregations can write to use and tell us what they’re doing, and they get financial awards when they win.

We have something called Carbon Covenant, which is a program for developing nations. We have one in Tanzania, one in Cambodia, one in Ghana, and one in Cameroon, where we’re helping religious communities in those countries to reforest. And we feel that that’s a really powerful way of connecting faith communities here in America with faith communities there, and also accomplishing something that needs to happen, which is planning—replanting trees, which of course alleviate the greenhouse gas situation.

So that in a nutshell is what we’re doing with environmental justice. It’s just about—everything we’re doing out of this office in San Francisco is about environmental justice, and serving and helping the people who are suffering the most from the climate problem. And Faith Climate Action Week, also on our website, will provide congregations and people with tools that they might not otherwise have, along with the reasons why this is a spiritual and faith issue, that however we respond to the climate crisis is an indication of our relationship with God and, frankly, with each other. If we love God, and love creation, and love our neighbors, we don’t pollute their air.

So I’m going to stop now and open this up for questions.

CASA: Thank you. Thank you, Sally. Thank you for providing context for this conversation, and for the many examples and suggestions for taking action. Let’s open up the call to questions now.

OPERATOR: OK.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

And our first question will come from Steve Gutow with the National Religious Partnership.

GUTOW: Sally, hi. It’s Steve. It’s good to hear you.

I was actually shocked that you—you know, not shocked—but, you know, the idea that you could love anything more than the climate change work you do shocked me. So your granddaughter must be really loved, or going to be really loved. Mazel tov on that.

Two quick questions: What do you think—and I know we work very hard on Pope Francis’ encyclical. What impact do you think that’s had? Do you think it’s been as positive as we’ve hoped, or not? And second, as far as the Green Climate Fund around the world, what are we doing in terms of both pledges and commitments and, you know, actual money in terms of how that’s going? If you know—I mean, if you’re aware of those answers.

BINGHAM: Well, thanks, Steve. And the granddaughter is not a granddaughter. She’s a grandson. And she’s not born yet.

GUTOW: Sorry! (Laughs.)

BINGHAM: She’s due the first week—I mean, he’s due the first week in June. And I’ll tell you, besides this work, which is my life, that is this incredible, bright beacon of light that is now popping up as something that may take a little attention over the next few years.

These are both really great questions. From my perspective, the pope’s encyclical has been extremely influential, not just by the faith community, and certainly not just by Roman Catholics, but all of the different religions around the world that we have been in touch with were applauding the encyclical when it came out, and applauding this pope for making the declaration that this is a moral issue, it affects everybody, and we all need to act together to solve the problem.

Secular organizations were almost as excited as the—secular environmental organizations were almost as excited as the faith community. I can’t tell you the number of calls, and I’m sure you got them too, saying: How can we use the encyclical to further our work, you know, from Environmental Defense Fund and RGC, World Wildlife, the Union of Concerned Scientists even did a discussion on the encyclical. In fact, I hardly know people—anyone who’s been working on climate that didn’t embrace this encyclical.

Now, as to its effect going forward, I know that most of the folks in our organization, which is, of course, in 40 states all around the country, we had discussions around the encyclical that are still ongoing. Several conferences, papers. We have on our website actually a discussion group, it’s kind of a small class on the encyclical, and we have it in Spanish as well as in English. And it is being downloaded and used now. So the pope’s encyclical is certainly not a one-time, one-thing piece of—document. I think it’s going to be with us for a long time and I think it’s had tremendous influence. And more Catholics have heard about climate now than prior to the encyclical.

And on the Green Climate Fund, I don’t know the numbers, but I do know that what Obama put in the U.S. budget is still there. When it got passed in January or early February, the Green Climate Fund from the United States money stayed intact. There was a worry that it might get yanked, but it didn’t. It’s still there. And there’s a lot of pressure on him from people like NRPE and us to keep it going forever. But I don’t know the exact numbers.

GUTOW: Thank you very much. I just—thanks, I just wanted to get those responses. Thanks a million.

CASA: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Yes, our next question will come from Crystal Hall with the Union Theological Seminary.

HALL: Thanks so much for your presentation. I work with an organization in Baltimore called United Workers, which is a grassroots human rights organization. And a student group of theirs, which is called Freer Voice, has been organizing for the past four years against a trash-burning incinerator, so very concerned with the question of air pollution that was already mentioned on the call. And they recently won a victory against the Maryland Department of the Environment that actually ruled the permit for the company that was going to build the incinerator as invalid, which has been very exciting.

So my question for this discussion is, what is the role of organizations like Interfaith Power and Light in supporting grassroots efforts that are happening on the ground for environmental justice? In our work in Baltimore the local faith community has certainly played a role, as well as the local affiliate of Interfaith Power and Light. But I also wonder, like, what’s the role on a national level for calling for involvement at the local level in local environmental justice fights?

BINGHAM: Well, we in our national office really try not to micromanage our state programs. But having said that, nearly all of our state programs are involved with local issues. And we encourage them, particularly when they have to do with things like air pollution. And I’ll give you an example of that. Out here in California, the port of Oakland is being—there’s a proposal to build a coal-export facility. The coal would come from Utah, and it would go right through the poor neighborhoods of Oakland, and then be shipped off to China. Now, our Interfaith Power and Light folks in Washington were able to defeat this proposal to go out of Seattle. Our Interfaith Power and Light people in Oregon were able to get involved and prevent this from happening in Oregon. Now, California IPL is deeply involved in trying to stop this from happening.

They’re open to having a port there if they’re exporting agriculture, and the things that the original—the original design from the developer was had nothing to do with coal. But as it began to look like they were going to be able to build this port in this export center, we found that they were intending to bring coal from Utah. So this is a local issue. California IPL is very involved. They’ve been to hearings. They’re getting other religious, you know, people to come around and go to the hearings with them. We’ve written opinion pieces. We’ve had articles in the newspaper.

And those are the kinds of things that could happen with your—with the example you gave of trash burning in a local neighborhood. We would encourage our local IPLs to get involved and work with any issues like that, although we wouldn’t say you have to—(laughs)—because we don’t, as I say, have that jurisdiction over the local IPL. But we would encourage it.

CASA: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Yes, ma’am.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

And our next question will come from John de Vries with Multifaith Council.

DE VRIES: Yes. Thank you for this opportunity. Just finished reading a little while ago “This Changes Everything,” by Naomi Klein. It’s about climate change. And she makes one strong recommendation, that we have allies in the First Nations communities, the aboriginal communities. I think especially in light of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, this gives the faith communities a natural ally. And I’m wondering if this is happening across USA and other countries, or Canada? And secondly, in Ontario, the politicians have gotten very aggressive and the coal mines have been shut down in light of the carbon issue. And thirdly, in Canada the carbon tax—the conservatives, and they would be the last ones onboard, but they are now onboard as being pro-carbon tax. Any comments on those three questions or comments?

BINGHAM: They’re all really important. And I think that Naomi Klein’s book was excellent. And I think she’s right. We do have allies with indigenous peoples. I was in Houston over last weekend, and there were some indigenous people who came to the Rothko Chapel to be—to listen in at this conversation we were having, and at great lengths gave us a reason to get involved and keep them involved in some of these issues. Just as you just said, that they are obvious partners.

And the New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light folks are working with the Navajos to—because there are places in Navajo land down in the four corners where they have no electricity and they have no running water, right—you know, right here in the U.S. So our New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light program is now looking for funding to help these folks get solar on their roofs and get water to them. So we do recognize that there are some very difficult issues that the indigenous peoples in this country are facing. But that they also can be, and are, allies of ours. So that’s a point well-taken that you made.

Coal plants being shut down are happening. I think the last two years 250 coal plants have retired early. And that is a really good step in the right direction. I want to make one point about that, though. I think as people of faith, and it’s a justice issue too, there are people that have relied on working in coal plants, or their families have, for years, and years, and years. And as these coal plants close, those folks are losing their jobs. And we have to have sympathy and perhaps work on solutions for those folks to readjust their lives. We know that it’s better for them. I think they know it’s better for them as well. But there’s going to be some suffering as those folks lose their jobs.

And Gina McCarthy, who runs our U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, I asked her about that. And there is a fund that’s being created for people to have the money to retrain themselves to do other things. And also, if they’re 55 or 60 and they can’t necessarily start a new career, that they will have compensation. So it is being thought about. And it’s something that the faith community really needs to pay attention to.

What was the third thing that you asked me about? Do you mind, John, saying it again?

OPERATOR: His line has actually been cleared. If he presses star-one again, I can go ahead and get him open to repeat the third part. OK, Mr. de Vries, your line’s back open.

DE VRIES: Yes, I was asking about carbon tax efficacy. And here the most least-likely party is now having some of its leaders support carbon tax.

BINGHAM: OK, well, the carbon tax—of course, just the word “tax” is going to have difficulty getting through U.S. legislation. I happen to be a strong believer that the cap-and-trade works. There were some difficulty in the beginning with the Waxman-Markey bill being so very, very long. That was a cap-and-trade bill at the federal level. But they got a cap-and-trade bill signed by Governor Schwarzenegger here in California in 2006. And it went into effect in 2012, I believe. It has been so successful that China is now doing a cap-and-trade. There are parts of Canada that are working with the West Coast states, working with cap-and-trade.

And I know some of the numbers, that the auction that are part of the cap-and-trade business here in California, has created enough money to bring down our deficit. Twenty-five percent of the money goes back to low-income communities, which is, I think, one of the benefits of cap-and-trade. They’re investing in more renewable energy. And it has just been—it’s just been an enormous success. And anything—anytime you look up the success of this global warming act in California, you will see that in all areas it’s been a success. So I’m a proponent of pushing cap-and-trade.

I think we have to have a price on carbon. Maybe that’s even a better way of saying versus tax. But the cap-and-trade puts a price on carbon as well. I do—and you didn’t really express your opinion about this, but I’m assuming because you asked the question that you think a carbon tax is a good thing. I do too. I think it would be difficult to pass just being called tax.

Q: Yeah. I would say, let’s call it something else, but I think it expresses the onus is on us to reduce the carbon. And if other incentives can be helpful, and tax is an ugly word, but if we can with mutual cooperation and dialogue with the people that make the laws, or that have some of the community initiatives call it—or the cap-and-trade. I think that’s a good way to go.

BINGHAM: Yeah. Well, I agree with you. And I think we’re on the same page.

Q: Yeah.

CASA: Thank you. Thank you both.

Q: Thank you very much.

CASA: Next question.

OPERATOR: OK. Our next question will come from Ved Nanda with the University of Denver.

NANDA: Thank you very much. I appreciate your presentation. And I work with the Hindu-American Foundation and the Hindus here. The question I wanted to ask you is that you very appropriately talked about all the initiatives that you have taken, and working with the states. Just wanted to ask if there was any effort in order to see that we do advocate even cities, because cities at the present time, municipalities, states, they have taken initiatives. And while the federal government is not going to be acting with Congress, or not willing to take the initiative, I think we ought to be working with cities and municipalities. And I hope that there is an effort to have that advocacy be enhanced and strengthened.

BINGHAM: Yes, thank you. I agree with you. I think that cities do have to become models. And there are a few around the U.S. that are considered very green cities. But we at Interfaith Power and Light are focused on congregations, with the hope that it might start with a congregation if you have a very large cathedral or synagogue or temple in your city that becomes green, to the extent that it can be a model for the rest of the community. Because that’s what we hope our congregations will do, serve as examples to the community. I think that we have to—I mean, we can’t do everything. And our focus is on these congregational facilities. But I agree with you, that cities need to step up and do their job as well. And maybe the congregations can get the cities started.

NANDA: That’s exactly what I was saying, that the congregations and members in the congregation can at least do that advocacy with the cities, because they are the ones who play an active role in the communities, they are the ones who persist in doing so many other things in the communities, and they can obviously play a very active role in energizing the city to take action, which at the present time seemingly is probably even more important than putting focus simply on the federal government.

BINGHAM: Yes. Thank you.

NANDA: Thank you.

CASA: Next question, please?

OPERATOR: Yes, ma’am. Our next question will come from Syed Sayeed with Columbia University.

SAYEED: Hello? Can you hear me?

BINGHAM: I can hear you. Is that Syed, my friend?

SAYEED: I’m not from, you know, Washington, DC, that Syed.

BINGHAM: Oh.

SAYEED: OK. (Laughs.) He’s different—he’s another person. We are friends.

But I have been affiliated with Columbia in, you know, the role of a religious life advisor on call. And I just wanted to first, you know, once again, thank the Council on Foreign Relations for bringing this subject to the attention of all of the participants, and to them—you know, to a broader range. And you, for devoting your time, energy and resources, for bringing this climate issue to the attention of, you know, people at large.

The connection between faith and climate, as you have pointed out, is traced back to all the sacred texts. In fact, you know, in the Quran there are very clear references. Anyhow, I don’t want to get into that. I just wanted to share your idea of bringing this, you know, message to the congregants and, in fact, through the congregants to the neighborhoods. Then wherever people live, they can start talking about our responsibility as people who believe in any faith to do what is critically important for us to do, to not litter our neighborhoods, for example, not use too much plastic. I mean, all those kinds of things, we can do it individually. And that can make a big difference both in terms of models and, you know, in actions.

So I wanted to ask if you have sort of attempted to bring this to the level of every citizen, not just people of faith in congregations or through organizations. Thank you very much, again.

BINGHAM: OK. And thank you very much. Maybe I wasn’t clear, and I think I was not entirely clear. But as we focus on these congregational facilities, and we want them to serve as an example to the community and to the neighborhood, we also make the point that if a congregation has energy-efficient appliances, if they have sensors in their bathrooms where the lights go out after no one’s been there for five minutes, if they have solar on the roof, if they have put in the energy efficient windows so that the heat stays in when it’s supposed to stay in, and the cold air stays out when it’s supposed to out—all of these things do three things that are good.

They are saving money. They’re creating jobs. And they’re saving creation at the same time. Now, when a religious leader in one of these facilities can announce to the congregation, and all the people that come in and out of that facility, we are saving money, saving creation, and creating jobs, why don’t you all go home and make all of these changes in your homes, because once you start doing it in your home, you’ll be saving money, creating jobs, and saving creation at the same time. So if I wasn’t 100 percent clear about that, I mean that we are hoping through example of the congregational facility to train the people that are in that facility or attend that facility to go home and do the same thing in their homes.

Now, if you live in a neighborhood and six houses on your block have put solar on, or they’re driving an energy-efficient car, or they are walking to the store instead of driving their car—they serve as examples to their neighbors as well. And it can almost be a—almost like peer pressure. If you’re the only house with the trash out front, and you’re the only house that leaves their lights burning all night, you may, just through you’re your neighborhood is doing, change your ways. And I think that’s what you’re saying, that if we—the more of us that participate in less waste and become more efficient, the more people will do it. And I think that you’re right on about that, because I think that’s true and has proven to be true.

SAYEED: Thank you.

CASA: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: OK. Our next question will come from Nancy Lorence with Call to Action.

LORENCE: Yes. I also participate with the Global Catholic Climate Movement.

And I just wanted to bring up another aspect of working with Native American allies, and that is that a lot of the Native Americans who have been in the front of environmental struggles in their communities, the Keystone XL pipeline being one where Native American communities took the leadership on that, but also the recent threats that come against people who do that, and the example being—the most recent example being Berta Caceres in Honduras, this environmentalist who was a Lenca indigenous person from Honduras, who led the struggle of her community to stop this huge dam going in that was actually going to provide electricity for other mega-mining projects that were very harmful to indigenous lands.

And you know, I know when the summit happened in Peru after the meeting here in New York, and prior to the Paris summit, that that was another issue that was brought out, about how many native Peruvians—indigenous Peruvian environmentalists had been killed up to that time. So it’s just another aspect, I think, of our relationship with Native American communities that we should take into account, is the protection of the environmental leaders.

BINGHAM: Nancy, that’s a really important point. Do you know the Goldman Environmental Prize? If you don’t, look them up on the web. But they often are giving prizes to just extraordinary people who have really put their lives on the line. And in several cases, sadly, those people have lost their lives. I mean, they have sacrificed for their causes. And the Goldman Environmental Prize recognizes these folks. But I do think that all of us have to pay attention and, yes, support those folks that are out front. Thank you for saying that.

LORENCE: Berta had won—had been awarded that prize prior to being killed.

BINGHAM: That’s right. So you do know about it.

LORENCE: Yeah.

CASA: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: All right. Our next question will come from Martin Bresler with Americans for Peace Now.

BRESLER: Yes. Thank you for taking this question, although it may overlap a little bit with one of the questions that was asked earlier. But you mentioned in your earlier presentation the availability of postcards to mail to our congresspeople. And I’m wondering how effective you may find that campaign, given the fact that the majority of our Congress unfortunately does not believe that there’s a problem.

BINGHAM: Well, you’re right. What we have done—the postcards are not so general that they say: Let’s take action on climate. The postcards are usually—we’ve done this now for seven years. The postcards have been directed towards a particular piece of legislation that’s trying to work its way through Congress and those legislations. And this year it’s going to be on the Clean Power Plan, showing—you know, with a note showing that we will save many, many trips to the hospitals if we can keep the air pollution down. And I think our postcards have had an effect, 70(,000) or 80,000 of them went in last year.

And we’ve been told that better than writing an email, better even than writing a letter are these postcards. And that when they go in individually to legislative offices, if a senator gets 4,000 individual postcards into his or her office from their own constituents—I mean, I don’t send one to Senator Inhofe in Oklahoma. I send mine to the senators that are from California. But the ones that go to Senator Inhofe come from Oklahoma. And it’s our understanding that politicians care tremendously what their own constituents have to say about these issues. And there are a lot of senators who will say—because we have a lobby day every year where we take—we spend a whole day and our IPL leaders from around the country go in and visit their particular legislators.

And we’ve heard from them. They will say, I haven’t heard—if you want me to do this, make me do it. And we need to hear from our constituents. And that’s why the postcards, because apparently people care more now than ever—65 percent of the American people now care about climate change and understand that it’s a human-induced problem. But they’re not getting that message to their elected officials. And that’s what we need to do. And that’s why we think the postcards are effective, because the message is coming from the people that elected that person into office.

BRESLER: Thank you.

CASA: Thank you. Thank you, Sally. On a related subject, do you have advice on what the best ways of engaging in meaningful dialogue with climate change skeptics, apart from politicians, might be?

BINGHAM: Well, I just want to point out the difference between skeptics and deniers. Deniers are often the folks who are—well, let me start with the skeptics. (Laughs.) We like skeptics. Skeptics are people who say, look, I have questions about this, but if you can answer those questions, or you can prove to me that this is true, I could move my opinion. The deniers are folks who for almost the wrong reasons are denying that it’s a problem. They may be denying it because they’re part of a political party that has said: Don’t say those two words. They may be denying it because they’re on the payroll of the fossil fuel industry. There are a lot of reasons for deniers.

And we have not spent an enormous amount of time trying to convince the deniers because we may not be able to get anywhere. But we can talk to the skeptics. And when we’re talking to skeptics, what we do is we start with what do we have in common. And even the skeptics will—about climate change—will agree with you that they want clean air, they’d like their children to be able to go outside and play and not be threatened with an asthma attack. They want—they want clean energy. And if you start there, and people can agree, we want clean air, we want clean energy, we want a safe future for our children, well, you don’t have to use the word climate change, because the things that will keep the air clean, keep kids out of hospitals for asthma, and that will continue to keep the air clean for the future. If you like that, those are all the same things that you would help have happen if you care about climate change.

So some of our Interfaith Power and Light leaders who are in parts of the country where it is hard to talk about climate change because of skepticism, they talk about clean energy, clean air, and investments—a new industrial revolution, if you will, but this time a clean one that will create jobs for people—putting solar on the roof, building wind turbines, making products that don’t hurt the environment. We have a whole new clean energy evolution—or revolution right happening now. And we want people to get involved in that. And you can—so you can talk about all those things that even your skeptics will agree with.

CASA: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: OK.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

And our next question will come from David Hart with the Institute for Policy Studies.

HART: Hello. Thank you so much. It was a really great talk. Interested to hear the work in Baltimore, because that’s where my focus has been, and the comment about Naomi Klein’s book, which was moving for me as well. And had a question that was related to what was asked earlier. From her book they made that link between climate change and the need to change our economy, and that we can’t solve one without the other. I’m curious what you think our role is, and the faith community’s role is, in helping people open up that larger conversation about the need to build a new economy with racial justice at its core and that treats the people as well as the planet better.

BINGHAM: Well, I think that’s you’re absolutely right. And I think she’s right. We do need a new economy, and it needs to be based on clean products, starting with clean energy. We need to have—our electrical grid has to be upgraded. There are just so many—so many things that need to be done to sort of change the focus on—that has been based on fossil fuels for 200 years. And this whole clean energy economy is where we need to go. So I mean, I’m not an economist. I wish I had more economy in my background. But as an Episcopal priest I studied theology, and fairness, and justice. But I’ve read, and heard, and seen that a clean economy is on the horizon, and we all need to be pushing for that.

I can’t give the direction on how to get there, but I know it’s a start by using wind and sun. And you’re probably aware that the price of solar has gone down by 80 percent in the last five years. And they’re selling wind energy now for the same price that coal was—at something like 9 cents a kilowatt hour. So these things are starting to happen. We need to, if we can, make them happen faster. And maybe every single one of us that believes this to be true needs to make the changes in our own lives, and then be an example for what we want to see other people doing.

HART: Thank you.

CASA: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: OK. Our next question will come from Andrew Gerhart with Stanford University.

GERHART: Hi. Yeah, my question pertains to messaging as well. And I’m curious, Sally, if you all at Interfaith Power and Light have done any kind of analysis of how you message to your congregations, I’m reading that you have about 18,000 of them, and whether certain types of messaging may or may not be more effective in helping out climate skeptics understand a little bit more about the climate crisis. You know, and this kind of goes along with some thinking about types of doomsday environmental journalism that are pretty normal in our society and our dialogue, particularly statements about the human species going extinct and certain other types of things, which I tend to think may actually cause people to become more paralyzed than otherwise. And I just wanted to hear your thoughts on all that.

BINGHAM: Thanks, Andrew. Messaging, of course, is really important, and starts with before you’re even talking about climate to anyone you have to know your audience. And I had interesting experiences when first started this work, because I used to get on the pulpit and just tell everybody that climate was a problem, it was their fault, and we needed to fix it. Well—(laughs)—I’m telling you, that doesn’t work. And I found out the hard way that I was being—I was called a communist and I was after world government, and what right did I have as a priest to get on the pulpit and use the pulpit for that kind of messaging?

Well, that was 20 years ago. And as time has gone on, I have learned, and others in our organization have learned, that the first thing you have to know is your audience, and who is it—who is it out there that you’re speaking with? And when it’s a faith audience, and you’re in a congregation that either—I mean, it could be Buddhist or Hindu—but there’s that sense of the greater divine and the mystery that operates in the world that we all believe in, it doesn’t have to be called God. But every one of those religions has a sense of the connectivity between all of us and all of creation. So if you can being with: We are all one. And if you’re harming some part of it, in the way that we are with something like air pollution, we’re harming everybody.

And people don’t argue with that. I mean, in a way, my job is easier because in the Judeo-Christian religion right from the get-go in the Genesis God put Adam in the garden to till it and to keep it. And we are the gardeners. We are the people that were put here to take care of this place. And nobody will argue with that. And once you have your congregation or your audience really believing that humans are on the planet not to destroy to, but to take care of it, then you can get into specifics of how are we going to take care of it? But I think that initial helping a person understand that each one of us matters, each one of our behaviors matters. And if we’re all one, we all have to work together.

And I think that that’s a really important beginning for an environmental stewardship messaging. And I don’t know if that’s helpful. If you’re at Stanford we can get together for coffee sometime and talk more about this, because I’m only a half-an-hour away. (Laughs.)

GERHART: I don’t know if I’m still on there.

BINGHAM: You are.

GERHART: Oh, I am. OK. I actually just finished a PhD at Stanford, and I’m in Austin, Texas right now. But I would love to get coffee with you sometime. (Laughs.)

BINGHAM: Excellent. (Laughs.)

CASA: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: OK. Our next question will come from Homi Gandhi with FEZANA.

GANDHI: OK. My name is Homi Gandhi. I represent the Zoroastrian faith, one of the oldest monotheistic faiths. And we have always respected and (proposed ?) the (methodology ?) for conservation of the elements of world. This is all in our prayers. We have also had a panel discussion on stewardship of our environment at the Parliament of World Religions.

As to one major issue which effects the people who want to have solar panels in their homes, the solar panels, if you are having at the homes, there are two issues which takes place. One is the subsidization by the state or federal government, and second is the use of the electricity generated by the solar energy. We are propagating this to many people, and I find the major issue is that many utilities in different states have different rules. Some of them do not take the extra energy being created. So one thing, my question is, how can we resolve around that?

And the second question I have is, when you are subsidizing the solar panels over here, there’s a large amount of solar panels which are coming from other countries, like China. And as a result, some of the solar manufacturing companies in the United States and Canada have found themselves in a difficult situation. SunEdison is the latest example of going into Chapter 11, because they have got many other reasons why—(inaudible)—but I think the subsidization and cheaper solar panels (is another ?). So how do we resolve all these issues?

BINGHAM: Oh my goodness. Well, I wish I had a nice simple answer for that. We are not going to—I can’t answer how are we going to solve all these issues. They are huge. And you’re absolutely correct that different utilities in different states have different laws. And we just had a very bad experience in Nevada, where for a long time the utility there was doing what’s called net metering. And if you as an individual put solar on your home and you created more electricity than you could use, that you got credit on your bill. And you didn’t get money back, but you got credit back for the energy that you were creating and the utility could use.

SolarCity started a factory out there. They had 17,000 homes with solar on the roof. And in the last two months, the public utility in Nevada took back the net metering that they were doing, took the incentive away from people putting solar on their homes, and 500 people lost their jobs who were working for SolarCity, and SolarCity has left Nevada, gone off some other place where the rules are not like that, or changing. So there are political issues in these states that we have to deal with. And I think that the faith community and all of us, with opinion pieces, with visits to our utilities, with conversation to let folks know that we want solar and that we can have an influence if enough of us are willing to speak out about it.

And that’s really all—I mean, we’re watching the price of solar coming down. There are a lot of creative ways that homes can get solar onto the roof without any upfront cost. And we’re able to do that with congregations now too. Some of these situations are—some of these plans for putting solar are quite complicated, but it can be done. But we need to ask for it. We can’t just sit back and complain that a utility has just taken the net metering away from it. We have to be outraged, the way—the SolarCity folks who lost their jobs went to the hearings. And apparently there were, you know, 500 employees out in front of these hearing that had a big effect on the PEU. However, they did—they did change the plans, and they haven’t gone back on it yet.

We have to speak out. I mean, we can’t just sit back and let this happen. We’ve got to cry for what we want. And that really, in a nutshell, is let’s just not be quiet. If we want these things to happen, we have to ask for them.

GANDHI: I agree with you on that. But I read about SolarCity issue a little bit, but there has been a larger issue here. And the larger issue is the greed—greed of the people who are financing those—the coal or other plants in that area. And I believe, because of Warren Buffett’s company which tried to bring the SolarCity down. So although Warren Buffett may be a good investor, so far as the environmental situation is concerned, his company—one of his companies did the damage to the SolarCity. And SolarCity has been in very bad—because of this particular issue—in a very bad financial crisis. And SunEdison, which is also related to SolarCity, is a worse situation, and has gone into Chapter 11.

BINGHAM: It’s true. I mean, you’re absolutely right. I wish that I had some influence over the folks that are dependent—the Koch brothers, whose money comes out of the oil fields and coal plants, they’re fighting solar everywhere. But be heartened by the fact that solar is still happening. More and more people are getting solar. And as I said, the price is coming way, way down, that we cannot be defeated by those folks. We have to keep fighting for what we want. And I think—is it Warren Buffett that’s got all the wind plants in Texas, I think? So the shift is going to happen in spite of those industry-dependent folks.

Times are changing. We’re moving away from coal, and there’s so many statistics to show that. And I think we just cannot be disheartened. We can’t give up. And this is where faith comes in and provides that hope. I mean, we can do—we have to believe in the human spirit, and we have to keep fighting for what it is we want and what we know is morally right.

GANDHI: I agree with that.

CASA: Thank you. Thank you, Sally. I’m afraid we’re going to have to close now. Sally, thank you for sharing your experience and knowledge with us. You’ve provided us with many excellent suggestions for moving forward. And thanks to all of you on the call for your questions and comments. You can follow Sally on Twitter at @RevSallyBingham, that’s R-E-V Sally Bingham. We also encouraging you to follow CFR’s Religion and Foreign Policy on Twitter at @CFR\_Religion for announcements about upcoming events and information about the latest CFR resources. And we thank you all again and look forward to your participation in future discussions.

BINGHAM: Thank you. And please like us at Interfaith Power and Light on Facebook.

CASA: (Laughs.) Thank you. Bye.

(END)