

Engaging Religious Leaders and Faith Communities for Forest, Climate, and Land Use Solutions

Climate and Forests 2030

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EXPERT REVIEWERS

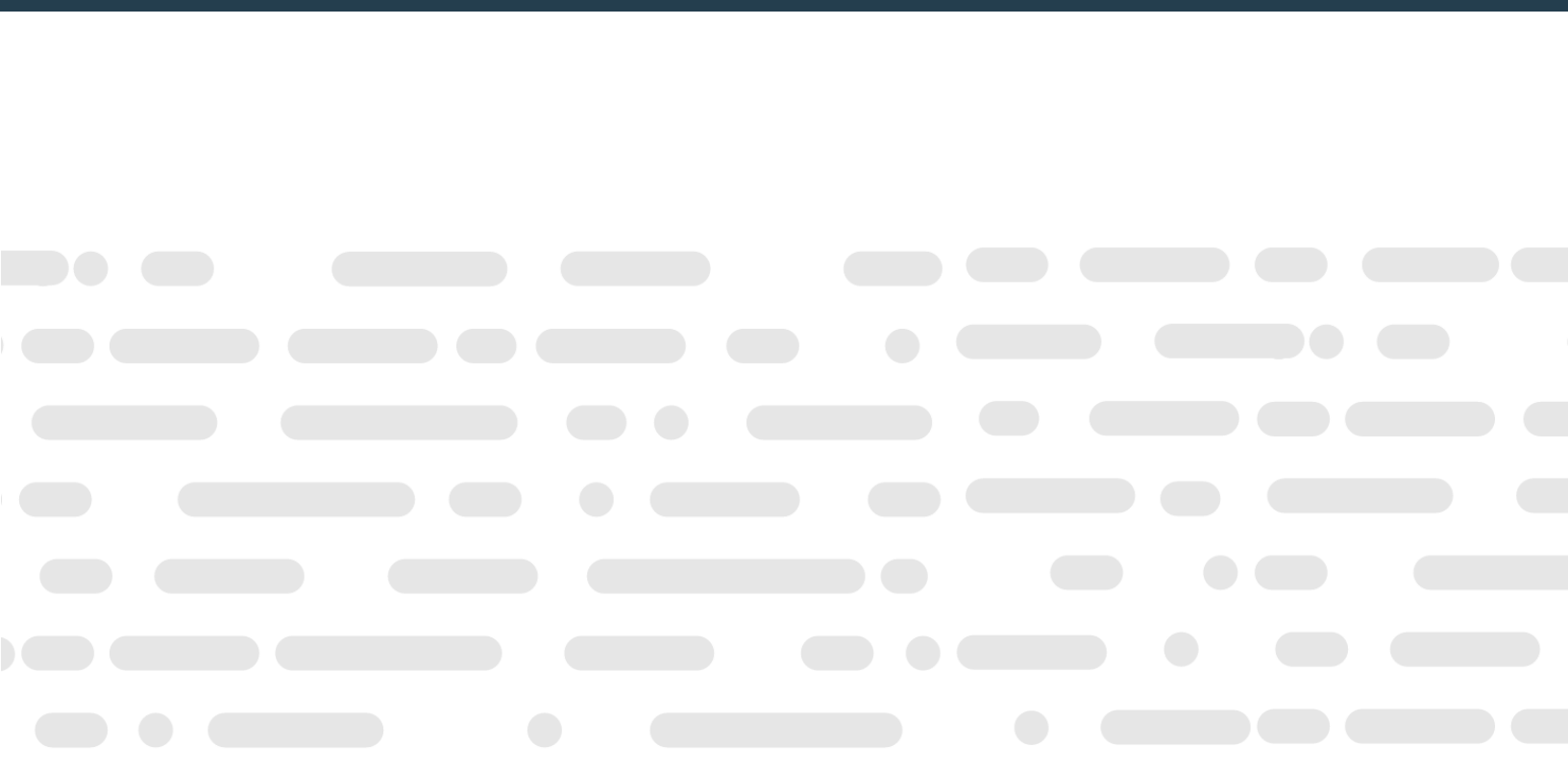
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Background

The Climate and Land Use Alliance (CLUA), with the support of Meridian Institute, is exploring the integration of climate and land use with justice, equity, health, and economic recovery through Climate and Forests 2030: Resources for Funders. This focus is intended to inspire innovation and investment in integrated work on forests, rights, and sustainable land use and will inform a new strategic plan for CLUA for the period 2021 to 2030.

To inform the thinking, CLUA commissioned a series of “thought pieces” to provide diverse inputs into developing a more integrated approach for forests and land use. These are meant to stimulate discussion and debate and are not intended to reflect the views of CLUA, its member foundations, or Meridian Institute. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They have been informed by commentary and input by a range of other experts.

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1. The Case for Engaging Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

1.1 Relevance of the Topic for Forests and Land Use

How can we change the current dynamic around tropical deforestation? In spite of considerable success mobilizing national and international actors to acknowledge the level of peril for forests and forest communities and begin to change their policies and funding priorities, deforestation rates remain unsustainably high. In fact, in many regions, tropical deforestation spiked in 2020, exacerbated by climate change, policy back-sliding, and the desperate economic conditions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic in rural areas (NYDF Assessment Partners 2019; BBC 2020).

To help confront the economic and political forces that continue to drive forest loss, there is a need for new actors in the international arena that can speak more directly to governments, companies, and global consumers and offer fresh perspectives on the moral basis of environmental stewardship — new voices that can provide a moral imperative for changing everyday patterns of business and personal behavior and engaging in political advocacy on behalf of global forests (IRI 2017).

Faith-based organizations — including religious groups and associations, from local religious congregations to ecumenical organizations to interfaith associations — are well-positioned to fill this space. Across the world, religion provides an important lens for understanding and influencing human worldviews, attitudes, and behavior. According to a 2017 estimate, some 84% of people in the world have a religious affiliation. While participation in faith-based groups has declined in North America and Europe in the last few decades, globally, religious participation is still a significant social force. Indeed, the religious public can be a formidable force for positive social and environmental change when they and their institutions pursue a common goal (Pew Research Center 2012, 2017).

In fact, environmental protection is increasingly being framed as a moral and spiritual issue by religious

leaders. Many faiths from around the world have called on believers to incorporate ecological care into their religious life for the sake of the planet. This is a timely and appropriate transition. Who better to summon a new ethical and spiritual foundation for the protection of Earth's environmental endowments than religious and spiritual leaders? For many people, adopting such a change in worldview will require a change of mind and heart — the very domain of religion and faith.

The transformative potential of interfaith action on rainforest protection and other environmental issues — that is, coordinated efforts across religions and spiritual traditions — is substantial. Forests occupy a sacred place in many faiths, religions, and spiritual traditions, from the Garden of Eden in the Bible to the sacred Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment to the forests surrounding Shinto temples. Indeed, spiritual reverence for nature, life, and creation can be found across the world's religions, including among Indigenous peoples and residents of the world's tropical rainforests. Our connection to the earth, nature, and to each other has to varying degrees been celebrated and fostered by all spiritual and religious traditions for millennia. It is reflected in the theologies, cosmologies, core beliefs, teachings, and practices of all faiths (IRI 2020).

Faith communities also have enormous reach and distribution, including in rural areas where government institutions may not have a strong presence. This fact only strengthens the case for seeing faith-based organizations as important allies in the work of saving forests. Remote forest areas, where environmental enforcement is typically weak, are often the frontlines of deforestation. Religious institutions in these rural settings offer considerable potential as advocates of good forest stewardship and new allies to the coalition of partners working to protect forests. In fact, as described later in this paper, several major rainforest countries are already home to robust faith-based networks, consisting of organized local groups that could serve as agents of advocacy and on-the-ground action to protect rainforests and address the serious human rights and poverty issues associated with deforestation. To do so, however, they need to be strengthened with the tools and training to lead, the information to become informed advocates, the financial resources to fund their outreach, and the platforms to engage with the

broader coalition of partners working on rainforest protection.

This work is now underway and deserves support. Particularly in frontline rainforest countries, the spiritual resources, moral authority, and unparalleled influence and access of religious leaders and faith communities have yet to be fully tapped in the environmental arena. Efforts to coordinate religious congregations and their networks to confront deforestation and its affiliated environmental and

social problems are still in their formative stages. The next decade may be the ideal time to make progress in this area. Religious leaders and communities are increasingly speaking out about the spiritual basis in their respective faiths for action on environmental and social justice issues. However, stronger efforts are needed to invite this leadership into the broader coalition of partners working to end tropical deforestation and tackle related environmental and human rights problems.

BOX 1. Taxonomy of Faith Group Actions for Forest Protection and Restoration

To date, faith groups and their leaders have carried out a wide range of actions to influence the protection and restoration of forests and address the associated human rights and social justice issues. The suite of actions available to any group or institution varies according to location, political setting, and the strength of the institutional commitment to action. For example, the opportunities for congregations in urban, high-income, industrialized country settings will likely be quite different from those of rural faith groups in frontline tropical rainforest countries. However, regardless of setting, the actions of faith groups and their religious institutions generally fall into the following four modes:

1. Education to establish the urgency and spiritual basis for forest protection and restoration.

- Sermons, congregation discussions, school curricula, and other forms of religious and academic instruction, to communicate forest degradation trends and implications, including their connection to human rights and social justice.

2. Spiritual guidance to change behaviors of individual faith members.

- Formal and informal guidance on personal actions to help halt deforestation and promote forest restoration, including:
 - i. changing consumer choices or diets to avoid contributing to deforestation,
 - ii. adopting forest-friendly farm or forest practices (in forest settings),
 - iii. participating in or financially supporting forest restoration efforts, and
 - iv. participating in political actions in support of forest-friendly policies.

3. Internal reform to change the behavior of spiritual institutions themselves.

- Reviewing and modifying the investment and consumption patterns of religious institutions, such as through divestment of financial assets linked to deforestation, or adoption of sustainability guidelines for religious facilities and activities.

4. Public and political advocacy to influence local, national, and global policy.

- At a personal and community level, this includes political activity and advocacy to support local and national land use and forest policies that discourage deforestation and incentivize forest restoration, as well as policies that support Indigenous and community land rights and political empowerment.
- At an institutional level, this includes mobilizing religious leaders to:
 - i. publicly acknowledge — through high-level statements and interfaith proclamations at international fora — the moral urgency of halting forest destruction, and to
 - ii. actively promote a global political consensus for action, and commit to act on this within their own institutions.

1.2 Current Status and Emerging Trends

The emergence of faith groups as a moral force in the global environmental arena has proceeded steadily but gradually since the 1990s. As early as the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, prominent religious organizations were weighing in on an individual basis on the ethical dimensions of the treaties under discussion — the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) — and the action framework of Agenda 21.

Interfaith efforts soon followed. The formation of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) in 1995 in the United Kingdom was one of the first interfaith efforts to assist major religions to develop environmental programs based on their own core teachings. ARC was a major catalyst in this field until its closure in 2019, when it decided it had completed its mission. With the UN Development Programme, ARC worked with major faith groups to develop “Long-Term Commitments for a Living Planet” — pledges of faith action on the environment meant to achieve “generational change.” By 2009, some 30 of these commitments had been publicly proclaimed (ARC 2019), and still stand as living documents. Faith leaders plan to report on progress associated with these commitments and to update them in the run-up to the upcoming UNFCCC COP 26 in Glasgow in November 2021.

Also influential in the environmental education and mobilization of faith leaders has been the work of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. This Forum arose from a landmark series of 10 conferences on the interface of religion and ecology held at Harvard from 1996-1998, resulting in 10 edited volumes on World Religions and Ecology. These conferences and books contributed to the emergence of a new field of study within academia and a broader force of religious grassroots environmentalism. The Forum remains an important platform for interdisciplinary workshops, dialogue, publications, and communication, with its website serving as a source for topical articles, statements, bibliographies, news, and project descriptions (YFRE 2021).

Another early voice and significant influence in the awakening of faith-based environmental efforts was the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Turkey, who is the spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodox Christians and is often referred to as the “Green

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Patriarch.” Beginning in 1995, he led a series of symposia on Religion, Science, and the Environment which sought to explore common ground in the interest of protecting the environment (RSE 2021). The 6th Symposium, convened in Amazonia in 2006, highlighted the importance of the region’s biological treasures, its central place in climate protection, and the need to stand in solidarity with the Indigenous peoples residing there — an early acknowledgement of the linkage between environmental concerns and Indigenous rights (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 2006).

Likewise, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)’s Sacred Earth Program, although now inactive, worked for many years to build a global dialogue between the conservation community and religious leaders and faith institutions on actions, organizations, and lifestyles that are ecologically sustainable and spiritually principled. For example, WWF helped the Tibetan Buddhist community in the eastern Himalayas establish *Khoryug*, an association of Buddhist monasteries, which has subsequently developed environmental guidelines for these monasteries and has spearheaded a variety of monastery-led environmental projects (WWF 2021).

In recent years there have been a number of developments that have demonstrated interfaith leadership on environment issues. In September 2015 in Bristol, United Kingdom, faith leaders representing 24 spiritual traditions from around the world, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and Shintoism, declared their support in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Likewise, in December 2015, many religious organizations joined with governments and NGOs in Paris to proclaim their support for the Paris Climate Agreement and contribute to the accompanying public events.

With these and similar high-profile actions,

policymakers have begun to look to faith-based organizations to play a greater role in strengthening environmental conservation and natural resources management. For example, the UK government has actively reached out to the Vatican and a range of faith-based and interfaith organizations for help in promoting and supporting a successful public mobilization for the upcoming UNFCCC COP 26.

One of the most prominent recent examples of the entry of a faith group into environmental advocacy is Pope Francis' issuance in June 2015 of his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home) (H.H. Pope Francis 2015). The encyclical, over its 95 pages, presented in some detail the spiritual imperatives for respecting God's creation and caring for the global environment as a matter of faith and out of respect for the rights of all species to flourish. Notably, the encyclical specifically mentioned the importance of tropical forests as centers of diversity, as well as the need to respect and work with Indigenous peoples and forest communities to care for these global treasures.

The attention subsequently focused on *Laudato Si'* has served to greatly heighten interfaith interest in and focus on environmental concerns. It has created new space and momentum for faith-based leadership on environmental and social justice issues that carries on to the present day. In fact, since the encyclical's release, the Catholic Church has methodically expanded its commitment to environmental activism. In May 2021, it plans to launch its *Laudato Si'* Action Platform, which is meant to help Catholic parishes, schools, hospitals, and religious orders become environmentally sustainable within seven years (Roewe 2021).

The action platform is framed around seven *Laudato Si'* goals grounded in the encyclical's concept of "integral ecology." The goals cover the range of Catholic social teaching, and each lists benchmarks to measure progress. The nearly two dozen benchmarks include becoming carbon neutral, defending all forms of life, adopting simple lifestyles, promoting ecologically-centered liturgical celebrations and educational curricula, and divesting from fossil fuels and other economic activity harmful to the planet or people. Catholic climate leaders believe the Church can be a major force in addressing global warming by mobilizing the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, and leveraging its enormous property footprint (Roewe 2020).

Motivated by these and similar acts of official encouragement, faith groups have shown they are capable of taking effective action to advocate for their moral positions on environmental matters. In Indonesia, the country's highest Islamic authority issued a *fatwa* declaring it a sin for people to deliberately burn forests to clear the land for growing crops. In April 2018, Caritas Internationalis, Catholic banks with total balance sheets of approximately EUR 7.5 billion, archdioceses, and a coalition of dozens of Catholic institutions announced their divestment from fossil fuels (Roewe 2020b). At the local level, religious communities have also begun to take action. In a bid to save their local forest, the monks of Samroang Pagoda in northwest Cambodia have acquired legal protection of the forest land, established patrol teams, and raised environmental awareness among local communities, based on Buddhist principles of nonviolence to all beings (UNDP 2016).

While these actions were taken by individual religious organizations, interfaith environmental action has also increased. One example is the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, described in detail in Section 2, which focuses specifically on marshalling interfaith action to battle tropical deforestation. A second — and in many ways a complementary — example is the Faith for Earth (FfE) Initiative, launched by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2017, which recognizes the key role that faith-based organizations and faith leaders play at the global, regional, and local levels. Its intent is to incorporate the cultural, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of sustainable development into the UN's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and, using an interfaith platform called the Faith for Earth Coalition, to tap the dynamism and reach of faith communities to deliver on Agenda 2030 (UNEP 2020).

The FfE Coalition consists of four interfaith councils — the Council of Eminent Leaders, the Youth Council, the Network of Faith-Based Organizations, and the Faith-Science Consortium — that work both independently and collaboratively with each other on three goals: to inspire environmental action by faith leaders and their institutions; to green faith-based investments and use them to finance sustainable development; and to provide the needed information to educate their communities and communicate effectively with decision makers and the public (UNEP 2021). As a high-profile interfaith effort, the Coalition

is still young, but at its recent 2020 Faith for Nature conference, it succeeded in assembling some 450 participants from 60 countries, including 30 high-level faith leaders, who adopted a joint declaration of commitment to nature-based climate and land use solutions.

1.3 Interaction with Equity and Justice Issues

Saving tropical forests is not only an environmental issue, but a human rights issue as well, and more specifically, an Indigenous rights issue. Involvement of faith communities in tropical forest advocacy and action will necessarily require support for the rights of Indigenous forest communities. Indigenous peoples are intimately involved in and affected by the management of tropical forests. These communities often stand as the primary guardians of the rainforest and, unfortunately, are the most frequent victims of forest loss. For this reason, Indigenous rights are among the foremost social justice and human rights issues connected to tropical deforestation (IRI 2019a).

Of course, the social injustice and economic disruption that deforestation brings are by no means confined to Indigenous peoples. Forest loss and its associated soil loss and watershed impacts can significantly disrupt rural incomes and destroy cultural landmarks and heritage, impoverishing a range of local people economically and spiritually. But in many areas these impacts fall disproportionately on Indigenous communities, which already face high levels of poverty and legal and political marginalization.

Advocating for rainforest preservation and health will require grappling with issues such as forest tenure and the invasion and exploitation of Indigenous lands by outside actors — issues at the heart of the struggle for Indigenous rights. Indigenous peoples and forest communities lack legal rights to a significant proportion of their traditional lands (RRI 2020). In the last decade, attention to the importance of Indigenous land rights has increased, and there has been an uptick in the total area of legally-recognized Indigenous lands. However, even when Indigenous peoples or local communities are granted formal land rights, those rights are frequently unenforced and violated, leaving them and their land vulnerable to personal, social, and environmental harm. Moreover, defending their land rights against outsiders has proven very dangerous. In 2019 alone, 212

environmental defenders were killed protecting their lands, territories, and forests from destruction, a disproportionate number of them Indigenous people (Wachenje 2020).

This is tragic both for Indigenous forest communities and for the health of rainforests more broadly. Indigenous forest management practices have been shown to preserve and nurture forest health. It is no coincidence that in areas where Indigenous communities manage tropical forests, and where land rights are legally protected and enforced, deforestation rates are significantly lower than in forest areas not controlled by Indigenous peoples (Stevens *et al.* 2014). In the Peruvian Amazon, legal recognition of Indigenous and local community rights through land titling was linked to an 81% reduction in deforestation the year following titling, and a 56% reduction in the second year (Blackman *et al.* 2017). Deforestation rates in Indigenous forests within the Brazilian Amazon were below 1%, compared to 7% outside these areas (Stevens *et al.* 2014). Conversely, when land rights of Indigenous peoples and forest communities are unrecognized or weakly enforced, forests are more vulnerable to deforestation. The inescapable conclusion is that without recognizing and enhancing Indigenous land and cultural rights, there can be no effective response to the forces driving tropical deforestation and unsustainable land uses.

The need to act decisively on issues of inequity and injustice involving Indigenous forest communities could be a motivating force for many faith groups. Many religious leaders and congregations have histories of advocacy for human rights, and may therefore find common ground with Indigenous rights efforts. In South Africa, Mexico, El Salvador, the United States, and many other countries, churches have traditionally supported civil rights efforts to confront racial inequity, support farmworkers rights, advocate for economic empowerment, and confront poverty. Religious figures such as Reverend Martin Luther King, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, and the Dalai Lama have all vigorously supported civil rights efforts in their countries as expressions of their faith. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis wrote that as we improve our care for forests, it is also imperative to care for and support Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions and rights. The cultural loss experienced by Indigenous

communities as forests are destroyed is as tragic as the loss of forest ecosystems, he warned (H.H. Pope Francis 2015).

Another factor that may increase the desire of faith groups to act in common cause with Indigenous forest peoples is that they both invest forests with spiritual meaning. The relationship of Indigenous forest peoples with tropical forests is fundamentally spiritual, reflecting a world view in which they are not merely users or residents of the forest, but rather are woven into the living fabric of the forest world (IRI 2019). This spiritual view can find congruence with the fundamental motivations of faith groups in their desire to better care for forests and take action on their behalf: to honor God's creation, to see in its complex workings the hand of the divine, and to find fellowship with and concern for the creatures inhabiting the forest realm. This view of the forests as sacred can be the basis for a kinship among faith groups and Indigenous groups that can flower as a powerful motivating force for forest action among religious communities.

1.4 Uncertainties and Risks

The examples of high-level interfaith action and environmental activism cited in earlier sections make it clear that faith leaders can and are becoming more vocal in linking religious belief and moral standards to environmental responsibility. But will this be effective in actually changing the situation on the ground and reducing forest pressures? One of the greatest sources of uncertainty in the drive to mobilize faith communities to reduce deforestation is knowing how much the moral, ethical, and religious arguments advanced by religious leaders will affect the political forces, business practices, and personal behaviors of those in local faith communities at the level where forests are affected. While local imams, priests, monks, and other religious clergy and faith leaders may be widely respected, this may not always translate to great impact on personal or business behavior, given the many factors that influence personal decisions around livelihoods, lifestyles, and politics. One strategy to counter this risk is to stress the educational role of local religious leaders and their ability to deliver information that is accurate and morally persuasive, but gives local context to the information provided, so that community members can begin to understand the effects of their decisions.

Another related risk is the difficulty of translating high-level interfaith proclamations to identifiable action at the local community level. For example, even with the full embrace of the Vatican and high-level clergy throughout many countries, translating the *Laudato Si'* encyclical into an action plan required six years of behind-the-scenes action and local organizing, and its translation into transformative action at the parish level will undoubtedly require much more effort. To address this, the Catholic Church has provided tangible benchmarks for action, an overall timeline for progress, and on-line tools and examples to help inspire and guide action at the local level.

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Yet another source of risk may be the difficulty of engendering trust and cooperation among different faith communities or between faith communities and Indigenous communities as they pursue similar environmental goals. For example, a potential obstacle to the close collaboration of faith groups with Indigenous communities is the historical reality that, in the past, religious organizations have in many instances participated in the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples by settlers, government agencies, and corporate business interests, as well as the displacement of forest communities from their ancestral territories. Though the attitudes of modern faith groups desiring to work on forest issues may be sharply at odds with past attitudes, the historical record of harms may be hard to set aside, at least at first.

However, it may be that working together on issues of forest protection and Indigenous rights will offer an opportunity to address this tension and develop a new working dynamic based on shared interests and trust. For example, at the launch of the Indonesia program of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in 2020, leaders of all the six formal religious groups in Indonesia — Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians — stood together with the country's major Indigenous leaders and declared in unison their solidarity on Indigenous rights to land and culture. This was significant as a prelude to their

joint work on deforestation because these groups have often been at odds in the past.

2. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) as an Example of the Engagement of Faith-Based Actors

2.1 Structure and Intent of IRI

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) is an international, multi-faith partnership designed to rally spiritual and religious communities to act for the protection of rainforests and the rights of the Indigenous peoples who safeguard them. The initiative is a shared platform for the world's religions to unite in their efforts to end deforestation and to work within their respective faith traditions, networks and institutions to make rainforest protection a moral and political priority (IRI 2021a).

IRI was launched in June 2017 by an alliance including GreenFaith, Parliament of the World's Religions, Religions for Peace, Yale University's Forum on Religion and Ecology, the World Council of Churches, the UN Environment Program (UNEP), Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), and Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN). Partnership activities are hosted by UNEP under its Faith for Earth Initiative, and coordinated by a small staff funded by NICFI. IRI's planning and work program are guided by a Global Steering Committee.

IRI helps religious and spiritual leaders craft a shared action plan to create a popular movement to save rainforests today and sustainably and equitably manage them in the future. This includes expanding political will at the highest government levels as well as organizing on-the-ground action. The initiative acknowledges the previous statements and commitments that churches, councils, faith leaders, and religious institutions have made in support of rainforests, and seeks to enhance and expand on these commitments as a way of creating a united interfaith voice and a mechanism to coordinate actions and foster information sharing and education. In many ways, IRI is a concrete expression of UNEP's Faith for Earth principles in action, and shows what the collaboration and partnership espoused in the

Faith for Earth Strategy looks like as a real world example.

IRI's strategy has seven elements (UNEP 2017):

- **Mobilize high-level religious leaders** | Mobilize leaders from all religions, faiths, and spiritual traditions to make the ethical case for protecting rainforests, securing the rights of Indigenous peoples, and ending tropical deforestation as an indispensable part of global efforts to address climate change.
- **Develop and incubate faith-based networks for forests** | Mobilize faith-based networks in major rainforest countries, building up from the grassroots and equipping religious leaders with the resources, data, and cross-sector partnerships that they need to undertake effective advocacy, public engagement, and on-the-ground action to protect rainforests.
- **Build multi-stakeholder coalitions** | Create a platform for exchange, learning, and collaboration between religious leaders, Indigenous peoples, governments, the science and research communities, NGOs, and businesses, effectively building a stronger, more potent coalition of partners working towards the shared goal of protecting rainforests, strengthening land rights, and achieving climate justice.
- **Exert moral influence** | Create a values-based platform for political advocacy, bringing the ethical and spiritual case for protecting rainforests to policymakers at local, national, regional, and international levels and leveraging the networks and institutional presence of the world's religions to advocate for the enforcement of laws and policies that protect, restore, and sustainably manage forests.
- **Build faith-based leadership capacity** | Build the capacity of religious leaders at all scales to become public advocates for the protection of rainforests, offering training on rainforest issues, community organizing, and campaign coordination and providing them with the resources they will need to engage in advocacy, action, and partnerships to halt deforestation.
- **Engage faith communities through social mobilization** | Use strategic communications

plans that combine scientific data, traditional ecological knowledge, faith messages, and social marketing tools to tell the story of tropical deforestation, the moral imperative of taking action to end it, and the entry points for leadership, engagement, and action by faith-based communities.

- **Bridge the knowledge gap between the science and faith communities** | Work to equip religious and faith-based communities with the scientific data, research, and advocacy materials they need to engage substantively with the issues underpinning tropical deforestation, serving a “translation” function between the science and religious communities.

2.2 Performance to Date

IRI works simultaneously at the global level to raise the profile of rainforest protection and bolster policymakers’ political will, and at the country level to organize and inspire national and local action in the five most significant rainforest-containing countries. The initiative has already achieved successes at both these levels.

At the global level, IRI has succeeded in establishing a global platform for interfaith action and elevating it to prominence on the international stage. The Initiative’s high-profile launch in June 2017 at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo was presided over by His Majesty King Harald V of Norway. It was followed by a first-of-its-kind summit in which Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist religious leaders joined forces with Indigenous peoples from Brazil, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Meso-America, and Peru, jointly committing to make the protection of rainforests an ethical priority for the world’s faith communities.

A second high-level action precipitated by IRI took place in August 2019 at the Religions for Peace 10th World Assembly, where over 900 of the world’s most senior religious leaders from 125 countries and representing a constituency of more than 1 billion people joined together to endorse the *Faiths for Forests Declaration and Action Agenda*. The declaration states that the protection of tropical forests and Indigenous peoples’ rights is a moral responsibility, is essential to global efforts to combat climate change, and is an issue that demands the mobilizing power, influence, and reach of the world’s

religious leaders and faith communities. As part of their endorsement of the Declaration, religious leaders agreed to work together through IRI to achieve the Declaration’s goals (IRI 2019b).

At the national level, IRI has launched country programs in Brazil, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, and Peru — nations that collectively contain 70% of the world’s remaining tropical forests. These country programs bring together the influence, reach, and commitment of the nation’s most prominent and established faith-based organizations and religious leaders. Each country program is hosted by a national interfaith organization, led by a national facilitator and directed by an Advisory Council with representatives of prominent faith-based organizations, national Indigenous peoples’ groups, the United Nations, NGOs, climate scientists, and rainforest experts.

Country programs are tasked with network building to establish action coalitions in areas of the country where rainforests face the greatest threats. Public outreach and awareness-raising on key rainforest issues are a second major focus, including workshops for religious leaders and faith communities on key rainforest issues. Country programs also work to influence forest and Indigenous policies at local, subnational, and national levels, and to advocate with companies that are invested in deforestation through logging, industrial agriculture, mining, oil production, or other extractive industries. Through its country programs, IRI has trained thousands of religious leaders to become rainforest advocates, and more than 50 local chapters have been launched in regions where deforestation threats are highest (Corcoran 2021).

Recent activities in IRI’s Colombia program profile what can be accomplished through this kind of faith-based advocacy. In 2018, IRI Colombia set out to improve both national-level and local-level development policies to make them more protective of standing forests. First, they lobbied members of Congress to get two major Articles introduced into the National Development Plan of Colombia: one Article ensures that the Colombian government recognizes the protection of tropical rainforests as a national priority; and the second Article commits the government to develop a public policy on halting deforestation, to be prepared and implemented in cooperation with all affected sectors (including religious leaders).

With this national-level commitment in place, IRI Colombia mapped those regions of the country with the highest rates of deforestation and set out to launch “local chapters” of faith-based action coalitions in those areas. In addition, with the aim of using municipal elections to further their goals, IRI Colombia brought mayoral candidates together in 14 departments throughout the country for public debates where they asked each candidate to sign a commitment statement that — if elected — they would actively promote rainforest protection and stand for Indigenous peoples’ rights. Once the elections were over, IRI Colombia came back to the newly elected mayors and negotiated to have IRI representatives serve on municipal planning councils for eight-year terms, where they are now able to monitor and advise on forest and land use planning.

By the end of 2020, more than 36 local IRI chapters had been launched across the country, creating a powerful faith-based local movement for education, on-the-ground mobilization, and political advocacy.

They are also working at the national level, regularly meeting with Congress, Ministers, and even the President to call for enhanced action on forests and Indigenous peoples. This includes a recent collective call by faith leaders for the President of Colombia to increase the ambition of Colombia’s Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Climate Agreement.

Supporting these national and global efforts is a collection of educational materials and teaching tools developed by IRI in multiple languages. Written in collaboration with leading science, policy, and Indigenous peoples’ experts, these resources provide congregations the information and impetus to gain inspiration and take action. They include basic “primers” on current rainforest conditions, the linkages between tropical forests and climate change, the role of Indigenous peoples in forest protection, and the connections between rainforest loss and global pandemics. Country-specific reports profile the current state of forests, the drivers of deforestation and the existing initiatives to protect forests in each of the five major rainforest nations. Resource guides and faith toolkits on rainforest protection have also been developed for eight major faith traditions, with sermons, prayers, talking points, and lesson plans for use by religious leaders and faith communities (IRI 2021b).

IRI’s success demonstrates that, if properly supported in the 2021-2030 period, interfaith platforms and initiatives will continue to grow into their potential as principal players in the effort to end tropical deforestation, support Indigenous and forest community rights, and promote sustainable forest management.

3. Blue Sky Vision for 2030 and Suggestions for Funders

3.1 Blue Sky Vision for 2030

The rapid growth and success of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative since 2017 shows that faith groups, when inspired, informed, and organized, can bring needed energy and moral authority to longstanding global environmental problems. Indeed, IRI’s success demonstrates that, if properly supported in the 2021-2030 period, interfaith platforms and initiatives will continue to grow into their potential as principal players in the effort to end tropical deforestation, support Indigenous and forest community rights, and promote sustainable forest management.

What will this look like? The following elements will be markers for realizing this potential:

1. Faith-based organizations are fully integrated into existing climate, forest, and land use coalitions and policymaking forums and their moral stance translates to policy impact at global, national, and local levels.

As faith-based organizations have stepped forward on the global environmental stage, their voices have gained currency and influence. Within the family of UN organizations, their standing has increasingly been officially recognized and their participation in public fora sought out. Some of these organizations have also begun to demonstrate their convening power and ability to set an environmental agenda, as in the examples of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s Religion, Science, and the Environment symposia, and the Catholic Church’s efforts around *Laudato Si’*.

At the national and local levels, too, the political relevancy of faith-based organizations in the environmental realm has been growing. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, landmark legislation is currently being considered by the National Assembly that for the first time specifically recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights. Through IRI, religious leaders in the country have come together across faiths to support this legislation with a Declaration that explicitly recognizes Indigenous peoples as holders of rights, valuable traditional knowledge, and a unique and valid spirituality.

However, even as the influence of faith leaders on environmental policy and advocacy has grown, it has also become clear that the best use of this influence is not always in stand-alone efforts, but standing in solidarity with and adding to the existing policy efforts of Indigenous peoples, NGOs, and other forest partners. Religious leaders and faith-based communities often can be most effective when "plugged in" to the coalition of partners already working on forest, climate, and land use issues, adding their unique value and mobilizing power to existing alliances rather than striking out on their own.

In a Blue Sky future, faith-based organizations will step forward more forthrightly into the broader climate and land use coalition as full partners in the advocacy for new policies, action agendas, and budget priorities. An appropriate bridging step to this level of empowerment would be for faith-based organizations to become key contributors to the upcoming UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and active in the planning and project work of international forest restoration efforts such as the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), the Bonn Challenge, Initiative 20 X 20, the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative, and similar initiatives. Forest restoration is the necessary complement to ending tropical deforestation and, for faith groups, could offer a route to spiritual renewal and recovery as they work with nature to rebuild a bond with forest ecosystems. Grounded in the belief that forests have inherent spiritual value, the work of forest restoration and stewardship can become a profound spiritual practice.

The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, set to begin in 2021, would be a particularly appropriate venue for faith-based groups to use their powers of

education and moral suasion to press their networks to weigh in on forest-friendly policy processes and to take a leadership role in designing and carrying out local forest restoration projects (UN Decade 2021). Faith-based organizations may also become increasingly influential in the UNFCCC COP context by inducing governments to raise the ambition of their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to meet the challenge of achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement.

2. Country-based programs for rainforest action convened by faith-based organizations have matured, allowing coordinated action at the national and local levels.

Highly visible and coordinated interfaith efforts at the global level are essential to project the moral case for tropical forest protection, educate the religious public about its urgency, keep the issue before the eyes of policymakers, and influence the forest and Indigenous peoples policy agendas. But much of the transformative potential of faith-based forest work lies at the country and local levels. It is at this level that problems with national forest policies become more real, and potential projects and solutions can take shape. Indeed, most on-the-ground projects such as forest restoration projects and projects to develop sustainable forest livelihoods to reduce pressure on rainforests take place at the local level.

However, country and local faith-based efforts focused on forest protection and Indigenous community support take time to mature. Local network expansion and capacity building are often gradual processes, and creating consensus among local and national groups on a plan of action also requires time. Experience with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative shows that country programs are not uniform and each takes its own development path, nurtured by the broader vision of the global program, but not directed by it. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative multistakeholder Advisory Councils in each country are crucial platforms to ensure that the power and influence of religious leaders and organizations are directed towards those areas where they can make the greatest difference, benefiting to the greatest extent possible the larger coalition of partners already working on these issues locally and nationally. In a Blue Sky future, many more national programs will be supported, local chapters of country programs will have proliferated, and this kind

of maturation process will be largely complete. That will allow local chapters to provide training for forest advocacy and to supply participants for local forest restoration efforts, coordinated at the national level.

3. Faith-based organizations have contributed to a realignment of global investment, leveraging their substantial portfolios to divest from companies that profit from deforestation and supporting calls for companies to remove deforestation from their supply chains.

The basic case for socially and environmentally responsible investment is well-established, at least in many high-income developed nations, where greater awareness among investors and even among the consuming public has begun to increase pressure on companies to improve the sustainability of their operations and supply chains. However, to remain effective, the argument for more responsible investment must continually be reinterpreted and made relevant to new investors and changing market conditions. Faith-based organizations, with their wide access to all layers of society, are eminently suited to this. In a Blue Sky future, faith-based organizations will have continued their current trend toward divesting their assets in companies and supply chains whose activities contribute to deforestation. In other words, they will have put their own houses in order. But more than this, they will have urged their congregations to embrace the tenets of socially and environmentally responsible investment as religious values per se, and to see them as morally applicable to all commerce and investment, providing relevant local examples. In this way, they will bring greater public pressure to bear on investors of all sorts to support rainforest-friendly investment.

4. Faith-based organizations are provided full and timely access to environmental data, findings, and analyses, and use this scientific knowledge base to educate their communities, providing relevant background information, interpretation, and moral guidance that supports increased environmental advocacy.

Education — through sermons, religious and academic instruction, and discussion and exchange within the community — is one of the prime activities of faith communities, and one of the most effective means to influence on-the-ground behavior. Religious leaders are often among the most trusted figures in any society, looked to for ethical and

spiritual guidance on economic, social, and political life. They are also teachers and conduits of education, awareness, and learning. As such, they are key actors in the effort to raise awareness about the deforestation crisis; the risks that deforestation poses to progress on climate change, sustainable development, and global health; and the entry points for people of faith to fight for the protection of forests. In fact, religious institutions and places of worship can be in the vanguard of ecological education.

In a Blue Sky future, care for the planet and the moral case for protecting rainforests will become a universal part of the curriculum in churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples, and will inform sermons and prayers. Formal or informal educational programs on rainforests, climate change, and the rights of Indigenous peoples will be instituted at places of worship, theological training centers, and affiliated schools. Interfaith platforms such as the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative will act as sources of up-to-date information on both global and national deforestation trends, as well as opportunities for national and local action. In addition to a curated and publicly-accessible library of general support documents, sermons, and teaching materials, country programs will produce locally relevant case studies, fact sheets, and newsletters tailored to serve local faith groups. In this way, local advocates will have the information they need to make forest-friendly actions personally relevant to local congregations.

3.2 Funding the Blue Sky Vision

Bringing about this Blue Sky vision will require greater attention from funders in the following areas:

1. Supporting the build-out of interfaith environmental programs at the country and local levels.

The foregoing description of successes in mobilizing religious leaders to find common purpose and cooperation on the forest agenda speaks to the effectiveness of interfaith platforms and the potential of faith communities to make meaningful contributions to awareness raising, on-the-ground mobilization, and influencing public policy. Funding such platforms can support the essential work of facilitating dialogue among religious groups, forging consensus, and mobilizing their various constituencies to pursue a common strategy and

concerted action.

Continued support for global-level work will be essential, particularly to highlight the progress made toward interfaith consensus on climate and forest issues, and to continue the development of educational resources tailored to religious audiences. But in the next decade, much of the most pressing work in mobilizing faith groups to environmental action will need to be done at the country and local levels. Interfaith platforms such as the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative can catalyze this growth by establishing autonomous country programs and providing them core planning, capacity-building, and educational resources. These country programs can then tailor their efforts to local conditions and target country-specific opportunities. In fact, in many cases, country programs will want to foster further build-out of local chapters. Resources will be needed to build the capacity of these existing national programs and local chapters, to support the establishment of new programs in many other countries, and to fund their organizing and communications work. Currently, interfaith environmental platforms are severely under-resourced, given their potential to contribute to forest protection, especially for country program work.

2. Create a funding mechanism to support forest restoration work led by faith groups that contributes to the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

Faith groups in front-line tropical forest countries are good candidates to lead, co-lead, or participate substantially in community-based forest restoration projects, including agroforestry projects. Such projects have a long record of producing strong environmental, social, and economic benefits for local forests and communities, and often comprise an effective local strategy to ease deforestation pressures (UNDP 2016). For faith groups, restoration projects offer a concrete way to express their faith and put their commitment to sustain forests into practice. Even faith groups far distant from the restoration site can participate by contributing financial support and solidarity.

The start of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration is an appropriate time to establish a mechanism to fund restoration activities in which faith groups play a key planning and operational role. In creating such a mechanism, care should be taken to establish basic criteria which such projects must

meet, so that sanctioned projects are consistent with and contribute to larger landscape-level forest planning rather than act as isolated, one-off projects, and that affected communities are active and willing participants in such projects. Establishing such a funding mechanism would not only incentivize restoration as a viable option for faith groups, but would allow these groups, by participating in the UN Decade, to appreciate the larger consequences of their work as a contribution to meeting global climate and forest preservation goals that benefit the whole planet.

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