

# Climate Brewing | Rod Downing and Climate Advocacy in Community of Christ

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, World Conference Resolution, high priests, environmental issues, climate change, ipcc, activism

## SPEAKERS

Rod Downing, Susan Oxley

### **Susan Oxley** 00:26

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Susan Oxley, from Seattle, Washington in the United States. And this is the series "Climate Brewing." Today I'm interviewing my good friend, Rod Downing, the chairman of the North American Climate Justice Team. He's been working for over 40 years as an advocate for justice, the environment and the earth. In a previous podcast, we talked about Rod's involvement in the War of the Woods protest in Vancouver, British Columbia. And he shared with us how activism has changed in the last 40 years. Today, Rod, I'd like to explore how you express your advocacy within the Community of Christ, including the environmental resolutions at World Conference in the past and in recent years. So Rod, let's start with: what was your role in the church back in the 1980s, at the time you became politically active in advocating for environmental issues? And tell me: how did your activism affect your ministry among the people?

### **Rod Downing** 01:33

Sure. Thanks, Susan, for the intro, and glad to be part of this. Okay. I do remember clearly, one motivating issue. And I remember, every month, opening up the Herald article... opening up the Herald, our main church publication, looking for someone, looking for one of our key leaders to have written an article on the environment and the importance, and just how we're messing it up so badly and everything, and what we can do. And so I would open it up one month, and then go through it. Nope. Do it again next month. And anyway, this went on for about five or six months. And then: "Whoa, man, why isn't anybody writing about this?"

And, you know, that kept going for another couple of issues. And then I sort of decided, well, I'm pretty sure, like, these are really bright people in our church. And I bet you, they would really like to, I think they're just probably too busy that, that... Yeah, you know, they're just swamped with things. So I gave it another couple of issues, hoping somebody would. And then I finally said, "Well, darn it all! If nobody else is going to write anything, I will!" And it was agony, I just... Oh, man, I actually enjoy writing. But to write an article. Yeah, no, I am not one of these people can just whip it off it. Oh, I agonized over it. Anyway, I got it in. And as far as I know, it was the first article on the environmental issues. So that was the start of it.

Second thing then. So I decided, well, let's see if we can get a resolution on environmental issues. This is back when we were districts and regions. So I proposed one, went and got it through the branch, went to the district, through the district. And I sort of gave two versions. One was a little softer one, and one was a little more detailed one. And I thought they'd go for the softer one. But no, they wanted the one that got right down to details. Because they basically were saying, you know, "Don't just have a resolution that says, 'Oh, start a committee to study it and come back to the World Conference with recommendations.' We already know a lot of things that need to be done. Let's just get them done. Let's just tell the World Church get these things done."

So anyway, that's sort of--I call it a little snarkier type of resolution because it was being more directive, which we tend not to do for resolutions. We tend to be much, much more indirect. But I had to agree. I mean, why spend time, not necessarily reinventing the wheel, but reading about a wheel that's already been invented, when you could just plain start using the wheel. So anyway, that did eventually pass at World Conference.

Now you won't find it as a World Conference resolution anymore because it got folded into another one from Australia by my friend Rick Saare, who... We had actually had a conversation on the Brunt-- what was called the Brundtland Report, our common future. And he wrote a resolution at that much higher level. So that in the end, they combined the two resolutions, and then it ended up getting folded into a third one. So you won't find the actual resolution anymore. But that was sort of the next step in the process.

Locally at the church, I would be doing, you know, some classes. And on occasion, we'd go further to see who was interested in joining on a protest or so, or helping out in a couple of other fashions for the environment, various environmental issues.

**Susan Oxley 06:18**

Did you have any pushback from some of the members saying, "What are you doing? You're not supposed to be doing that that's not the role of the church! You know, you need to stay out of that."

**Rod Downing 06:30**

In some areas, I'm sure I would have. Again, I was born and raised back in Eastern Canada. Guelph High School, Ottawa, undergrad in London, Ontario--may have been a little more push back in a couple of those. I don't know, interesting question. But moving out to British Columbia, it was very open to pushing boundaries, I guess is one of the polite ways of, of putting it. That is, it was one of the first--and I was all for it--one of the first jurisdictions to have resolutions for women in the priesthood, and then later LGBTQ rights and things like that. So no, there wasn't any push back. I mean, there were some questions and some clarifications, absolutely, as there ought to be. But if there was, there wasn't anyone saying, "Oh, that's—" in that particular branch in Vancouver--that was saying, "Oh, no, we shouldn't be about that." You have to remember Vancouver's where Greenpeace was born. So people were used to a lot more vigorous demonstrations than, than this simple resolution.

**Susan Oxley 08:04**

Was that the only resolution that you brought to the World Church? Or have you been--you've been involved with some others, haven't you?

**Rod Downing 08:12**

Yes. Things changed a little, because our conferences went from going every two years to every three years. So there were longer gaps now in between. And our staff had been somewhat reduced. And what that meant was a longer gap, a lot more could have happened in that time period. But submission: submitting to the next World Conference used to just be, it had to be in six months before. But now in the last recent years, it's a full year. You have to submit your resolution a full year beforehand. So I have to be honest, there were a couple of times I was really ready to send a resolution in, but it was already too late. You know, I hadn't noticed that at all. It's already less than a year till the next World Conference. And, you know, it's got to go through the branch (or the congregation we call them now). And then the Mission Center and stuff. So I was just plain too late.

Yes, in preparation for the 2019 World Conference, I had thought about a resolution because we didn't really have anything on climate change yet. In 1990, the UN had their first official report from the International—sorry, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, which is in essence a world wide consensus on the state of affairs. And then they get published every five or six years after. So they were up to the fifth report, I guess--it was definitely the fourth. And I was thinking, "Oh, gee, we have got to get something into climate change." But again, I missed it. The year, it was less than a year. So I thought, "Okay, well, that's that."

But then what happened is: six months, or actually five months, five months before the 2019 World Conference, the IPCC did something they had never done before: they came out with a special report! That is, it wasn't ready, you know, the five or six or seven years hadn't passed, because it only been a couple of years pass. But they came out with a special report that basically said, "Oops, in essence, oops, that our previous estimates, we feel were much too cautious, that things are happening faster. And we feel that this is such a dire situation that we need to come up with this interim report."

Well, that just really got to me. I thought, "Oh, Lordy, if at the 2019 World Conference, there's nothing on this after the IPCC has just come out saying, 'Look, it's not only bad, it's even worse than we thought.' And the 2019 conference is silent on the issue. And we won't be meeting for another three years!" I just saw what... you know, and we're supposed to be in the forefront of organizations? You know, they're seeking to deal with the, you know, mediate the endless destruction, and so on. The counsel had been given. So what I did is: because I was a member of the High Priests Quorum, I wrote a proposal for the high priests to go straight to the First Presidency and say, "Would you, First Presidency, please clarify this interim report, by the 2018 IPCC report? Would you please clarify that for the world church body?"

Now, I could have written the resolution to go straight to the floor, you know, to the actual World Conference. But I didn't feel that was wise, because there had been no prior, you know, hint of this coming. And there would have been no pre-legislative sessions for it or anything. Because it was only coming from a quorum, and they wouldn't have had time. You know, they were down to just a couple

few months by that time. So I thought, no, let's get the signal out there. Let's get that, so that by the time the next World Conference comes, we're really... can get up to speed.

So basically, what happened is, when to the 2019, World Conference, high priests quorum, definitely approved it, which then put it in the minutes of the bulletin. So everybody saw that the high priests are sending this letter to the First Presidency to clarify this IPCC report for the church as a whole.

The interesting thing that happened, and I was curious whether it would, is simply having it in the minutes triggered in several people, this desire to, "Ooh, let's somehow get together and start something." And so this small group of people simply emerged, which ended up becoming the North American Climate Justice Team! And, yeah. So that was a bonus that I sort of hoped might happen. But you never know, you can't know what's going to happen at World Conference. But it was a wonderful thing and, and all top people. And then I selected a couple more because just about get better balance in diversity. And so that started the North American Climate Justice Team and the ensuing-- Well, what was supposed to be a colloquy but then had to go, due to COVID. Had to go online and became then this webinar series.

And then along came 20--. So and then you get to pass the 2019 World Conference, the first presidencies got to analyze this report, the IPC 2018 report and report back. They do to the World Church. And then by 2023: That was when the British Isles contingency voted on having the World Church declare a climate emergency. And that went to the floor. And so previously, it went through all the good things that we now have in place: pre-legislative sessions. In other words, give it a chance for people to digest, dig into it before it hits the conference floor. So that it becomes, you know--so that we we... both our means and our ends are better in sync. That is more in line with a peaceful-- or a church that believes in peaceful activities. So that's the way it went. And it passed, you know, with resounding success! Wonderfully, the Quorum of Bishops unanimously had supported it. So that was the latest things that have happened.

**Susan Oxley 17:37**

I, I know that there's still a lot of work to be done. And a lot of effort still has to be made, to raise awareness, to bring people along, to encourage them to take action of various kinds. And the church is an important part of that. So let's close with you having some sort of a vision: if you could imagine the ideal future for the church, in terms of taking action along advocacy for climate change, what do you envision happening?

**Rod Downing 18:17**

Yes, well, first of all, I mean, climate change is such an enormous topic. But there's always two aspects of it, there's what can be done at the lower levels from the individual, and definitely to the congregation. And we happen to have these campgrounds that, you know, are such an ideal setting, to do things that and then at the World Church level. So, you know, we are really nicely structured to have a very consistent and meaningful impact. That simply adds to the impact of other churches, other organizations and everything.

That said, we need to take the time to make sure that we are understanding properly the certain concepts that are involved. Because it's one thing to declare a climate, for instance, a climate emergency. You do have to believe that there is a climate crisis. But beyond that, you know, you're basically pushing exactly how we're going to deal with it down to the next conference. And so we definitely need to get beyond just, you know, nice statements to real action.

And there are a number of... again, diversity is one of our strengths and Unity in Diversity is a key thing. And even to the point of: Faithful Disagreement is a valuable resource for us, when we can't find common understanding. But that's the first thing is, hopefully we'll take the time. Because these are... this is an issue that's going to impact virtually every other aspect of life. It's this notion of it being a threat multiplier, that is, it takes any conflictual situation, and will make it much worse. So it's important to both take the time and act urgently. Finding that balance is of course, yeah, art, you know--an art not a science, and we're human.

But that's the vision I would see foresee, is that all those different levels, whether from the individual to congregations, to camp grounds, up the world church, there are things that we can do. And hopefully, we will, within our ability and feasibility, start taking real, actual concrete measures to help join with others in addressing this issue.

**Susan Oxley** 21:47

Wow, thank you so much. Rod, thank you for the work you've done through the years. Thank you for your constancy and for the courage that you have shown, and the vision that has brought you forward. So, it's been a joy talking with you. And I look forward to continue to share with you on the North American Climate Justice Team as we deal with more issues in "Climate Brewing."

**Rod Downing** 22:13

Yes. And thanks. Thanks again for the opportunity to share ideas and great to chat with you.