

Climate Brewing | Paul Bethel and WC Resolution

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Susan Oxley, Paul Bethel

Susan Oxley 00:27

Susan, welcome to project Zion Podcast. I'm Susan Oxley. I live in Seattle, Washington in the United States, and today I'm your host for this podcast. It's part of the series "Climate Brewing," which deals with the causes and effects of our climate change and the climate emergency that we find ourselves in today with climate related crises. Today, I'm interviewing my good friend Paul Bethel from California.

Paul and I are both members of the North American Climate Justice Team, and I've gotten to know him well as he served on that team. We research climate issues, we line up guests presenters and plan monthly webinars. Paul's passion for climate justice and his dedication to addressing the issues of climate change are an inspiration to me.

Paul is the one who was the impetus for the Climate Justice Team drafting a resolution to go before the World Conference of the Community of Christ in 2025, concerning the decrease in fossil fuel infrastructure that is necessary to address climate change. So Paul, thank you for being willing to share with us a little bit of the background about that resolution and your role in it.

Paul Bethel 02:05

Well, hi Susan. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share. Excited to be able to talk about this resolution.

Susan Oxley 02:15

I'm excited about it too, Paul. This is the second resolution that has come out of the North American Climate Justice Team members. The first was in our last World Conference. It's now resolution 1325, and it is the one that Andrew Fellows from Great Britain drafted concerning the need for Community of Christ to declare a climate emergency. And now this year, you proposed and drafted a resolution that the Climate Justice Team worked on and have now given to the World Conference Committee on fossil fuels. So can you give me a brief summary of the content of that resolution and why it was important to follow up World Conference Resolution 1325 with this one about fossil fuels.

Paul Bethel 03:20

Well, I think this is the next step that we need to take and build on 1325. This resolution calls on Community of Christ to take a stand to proclaim several things. First is a call to accelerate a just transition to renewable energy. We want to put more focus and more emphasis on the need to expand and increase and develop more and better renewable energy sources.

Another feature of the resolution is for community to Christ to join with other faith groups to stop the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure. And this is often misinterpreted to mean “shut it off, to turn off the spigot, turn off the hose!” But that's not what this means. This is a call to stop adding more: stop adding more hoses, stop plans to burn more oil than what we are now. So we know burning oil has put us in this emergency. You know, it's sheer madness to just continue at the rate we're going, but it's lunacy to actually increase burning oil, to burn more oil. So this resolve asks the church to take a stand, to call for a stop to burning more oil, and to work on how to reduce what we're doing now, how much we burn.

Susan Oxley 05:09

So this is significantly different from the resolution that was passed at the previous World Conference, 1325. Can you just mention some of the ways this is different?

Paul Bethel 05:24

I think honoring the sacredness of creation is a process. It's not a one and done. [Okay.] 1325, was our first step. And it kind of presented to our membership and to, you know, the world that we are aware and we're taking a stand. And we kind of said that to all of the societies where we worship. So...

Susan Oxley 05:49

We were taking a stand by declaring that we agree with other institutions we are in a climate emergency.

Paul Bethel 05:58

It was a conspicuous statement that, you know, as a faith movement, we were acknowledging the reality of the degradation of the natural world. So 1325, declaring an emergency, doesn't really address the elephant in the room, which is fossil fuels. We need to call it out. Call it what it is. We're in this emergency, because we burn stuff for energy that's highly inefficient, it's unhealthy, it's a monopoly that preys on marginalized and we need to say it's fossil fuels. We need to address fossil fuels, right?

There's a couple other things in the resolution, and that's to ask Community of Christ members, congregations and jurisdictions to kind of follow the direction that the world church is kind of already going on, which is to, you know, to research and educate ourselves and to divest from companies that continue to invest in and are dedicated to expanding fossil fuels. So, you know, it's kind of asking members, kind of, you know, what's in your wallet, kind of a thing.

Susan Oxley 07:28

So there's a couple of phrases there in this new resolution people might not understand completely. So talk to us about what a just transition is, because you're very clear that we are calling for a just transition. How does justice come into this?

Paul Bethel 07:49

Well, justice is important. Just transition is important because it touches on several social justice issues. [Okay;] And as we transition from oil to renewables, well, we first, we have to make sure that the decisions are science based, not bottom line economically based. And that means that no single group should be privileged over others. And that the upfront costs should not fall on those with the least responsibility for the climate change that we're experiencing. You know, the people that have caused the least environmental damage are the ones who are bearing the brunt of that suffering.

Susan Oxley

Yes, that's true.

Paul Bethel

Yeah. So it has to address poverty and social inequity in it. It must be sustainable, and it has to begin by putting people first. And this is especially important in countries and communities where people are very dependent on fossil fuels. Their assets are such that if we transition, they'll be left stranded. And we have to make sure that doesn't happen. The places where they're still reliant on coal, in the long run, they're the ones that have done the least to cause the problem. Those of us who have created the problem are responsible for making sure that we help them make that transition.

Susan Oxley 09:28

And how can we do that?

Paul Bethel 09:30

Well, International Labor Organization estimates that fossil fuels represent 80 million jobs, but they also say that renewable energy will create, or has created and will create, 100 million jobs. And it's important, and the people that are working on this are working very hard to ensure that those people that are who will be impacted as fossil fuels decrease, are given the opportunity to take advantage of those renewable energy jobs.

Susan Oxley 010:13

So you're talking about--at least in the industrial world--you're talking about retraining people, helping people move from fossil fuel industry to clean energy industry, those kinds of things. And putting policies and procedures in place so that that's basically guaranteed, and they just aren't out on the unemployment lines immediately.

Paul Bethel 10:40

Right. And you know, you put your investments where those industries are going away. You funnel investment in new factories and new types of, businesses in those areas. But you know, the thing about the fossil fuel industry, it's an extremely dirty and inefficient industry, so the dirty part invariably impacts marginalized communities. You know, they don't have toxic dumps in Beverly Hills. They put them in

places where people don't have the political clout to do otherwise. And so this also takes into--and indigenous communities. But the idea of a just transition takes that into account. And not only are we putting infrastructure in for clean technology, we're also aware that we have to compensate for these people that are dying because of the pollution that's currently being given off.

So, you know, and it may be something like, you know, we give something like, I don't know, \$20 billion we subsidize the fossil fuel industry. I mean, you could take that money and you could work to clean up these communities, or you can work to do more research on renewables and find ways for more people to benefit from energy production.

Oil production is a monopoly, and it benefits a few. So the just transition realizes that we can't do it tomorrow. It's a process, but we have to start it quickly. It's time contingent. [Okay.] But we have to be aware of those people who are going to be impacted.

Susan Oxley 12:47

Okay, what about the other phrase, divest from fossil fuels? Talk to me about that phrase, because it sounds like it means I have to stop going to my local gas station to get gas in my car, and that I need to do that as soon as possible.

Paul Bethel 13:08

Well, I think the idea is that industry runs on financing and there are companies-- You know your gas station provides a service. You can get a quart of milk, or you can get some gas, whatever. They wouldn't be what I would consider a company that is actively promoting an increase of fossil fuel use. I'm sure they're concerned that more EVs--electric vehicles--will impact their gasoline volume, and maybe they'll put in chargers or something.

But we're primarily referring to when you divest, it's your investments--you're doing business with companies that are actively working to expand, put more hoses in the ground. There's four major banks in the United States that make loans to the top four, that make loans to the fuel industry: JP Morgan, Citibank, Bank of America, and Wells Fargo. And combined, last year, they invested over \$130 billion in fossil fuels. So what we're suggesting by that is, if you do business with one of these banks, call, write to the CEO and say, "Hey, I don't want you to continue to spend my money on building more gas infrastructure." And if you're really adamant about it, maybe you change the credit card that you use, or you change banks. That's what divesting means, is to not allow your money to help kill you.

Susan Oxley 15:05

Yeah, yeah. It's a good way of putting it.

Paul Bethel 15:11

I saw one article and it was totally unsubstantiated, but they said, for every \$50,000--whether it's savings or business or whatever--that represents the carbon emissions of the average American for half a year. [Wow.] So, yeah, you can change your light bulbs, and you can drive an electric vehicle. But money is the biggest funder. You can make your biggest change in your carbon footprint based on

where you put your money, where you do your business, whose credit card you're paying those monthly fees to.

I think the most common thing is, who do you bank with and who does your credit cards? Okay, well, number one and number two, when you get into investments, it gets harder, because a lot of us don't actively do our own investing.

Susan Oxley

That's true.

Paul Bethel

We rely on money managers or 401K or whatever, and it gets harder there. But there are--most of these companies now have socially aware investing channels for you. I'm not saying it's perfect, but if, like myself, you don't want to take it over and, you know, micromanage your investments, at least in the company that I deal with, they do have an option for— Now, they don't specifically say fossil free, but they call it the ESG reporting. So.

And there's something called scope one, scope two and scope three. Scope one, companies have to report their own fossil fuel usage and carbon emissions. I think scope two is the carbon emissions of their suppliers. I think scope three goes beyond that to their customers and as that becomes more and more prevalent, it'll be easier and easier for people to identify what their investments are doing.

Susan Oxley 17:38

I see. And the world church has already begun that process. A number of years ago, even before I got onto the Council of Twelve, I was aware that the World Church had begun to move investments to places that did not support weapons, did not support the tobacco industry, did not support the alcohol industry. And they had begun that process of looking at where our money was being invested. And through the years, we have an investment committee that has done very well for us in terms of providing excellent returns without being involved in those particular corporations.

And now the world church has begun making the transition with our investment professionals into the areas that no longer support fossil fuel, at least in scope one. So I'm really pleased with the way the world church has begun that process, and it's a continuing process. It takes a lot of work and time.

Paul Bethel 18:47

We, you know--full disclosure--we did converse a little bit with the new bishopric before we finalized the draft of this resolution. You know, quite frankly, we didn't want to put ourselves between a rock and a hard spot. As it turns out, even though that was a kind of an outgrowth of the current investing policy that they already have, you know, weaponry, tobacco, you know, things like that, that they've already phased out. The fossil fuels is kind of merged into that almost without thinking about it. And when I was talking with Ron Harmon, he said, "You know, we're kind of there already. Why do we need this resolution?" And I said, "For the very reason I didn't know that we were already there already. We need to let people know that it's a thing, it's real. And how do you--if they don't know about it--how do you encourage others to do the same?" So we felt it was important that we make that proclamation, to take that stand and kind of put it out there for everyone to see this is what we believe.

Susan Oxley 20:03

And the resolution says we're encouraging mission centers and congregations and individuals to follow the world church lead, because they've already begun the process. And it declares that the world church is ahead of us. They've already looked at this, they've already started that process, and are continuing. Ron said they would continue to examine and fine tune that, and get better and better at it. And our investments have not suffered as a result. It has not hurt the world church. Now, other things have hurt the world church economy, but our investments have not.

There is a little bit of controversy about this. Do you want to talk about the controversial aspects of this and why people might not support the resolution?

Paul Bethel 20:55

You know, I remember one of the things that came up in the discussions was people were saying that this would impact poor people, and that if we change to renewables, we were going to put hardships on poor people, and we're going to raise the price of gas. And, you know, I'd call foul on that. The price of gas is manipulated by a lot of different--and it's worldwide--factors that really doesn't... You know, whenever something happens somewhere, it's used an excuse to jack up the price of gas. So. Whether it impacts us or not.

But the reality is, right now, the oil industry has an extremely negative impact on marginalized communities, on poor people. They live where the air is the worst, where the soil is toxic, where the water is undrinkable. They're already suffering. Changing to renewables will be the beginning of easing that suffering, no matter how you do it. I don't believe you can use the price of gas as an excuse not to support this.

And the other, I think the other issue is people mistakenly think that this is a "stop the spigot right now" thing. You know, some people currently rely on fossil fuels. I think one [that] was mentioned was farmers. Yeah, if they have a diesel tractor, that's what you're going to have to use to farm with. What we're saying is, let's--instead of funding better deal diesel tractors, let's fund alternative ways to run your tractors. Not tomorrow, but somewhere down the road.

You know another thing that people are concerned about is interstate trucking and the movement of goods out of the ports and harbors. And, yeah, and I won't go into the whole consumerism and all that, which is a whole 'nother issue. But, yeah, you know, we're reliant on, you know--we consume so much that we're dependent on the movement of goods. And, you know, maybe there's ways that some of that can be taken up by rail. Everything doesn't have to be just in time, the way it is, kind of is, now.

But, you know, maybe right now, battery trucks aren't the answer, because of, you know, a battery to power a big rig is the size of 10 Volkswagens. I don't know. So, you know, that's another example where you can't just turn it off. Our economy still relies on that, but we can be working toward correcting that.

I think the Port of Los Angeles, again, it's not cross country, but there's just the dredge in and out of the port is working to reduce the amount of fuel and going electric. But you have to start. And that's what's important, is we have to start figuring it out; because we can't keep going the way we're going now. There's, you know, there's going to be gas use. We just want to try to encourage the transition, and to start looking for ways where we can cut back. Because we have to cut back. If we keep going the way we're going, we're going to get to three degrees and the world the way we know it will be unrecognizable. There'll be so many people that are thrown that have to leave where they live because it's uninhabitable anymore that we can't even conceive of it. And we need to get this ball rolling, and we need to say it out loud.

This resolution is the next step on building on 1325, it's kind of getting into the weeds. We can't fix something that we don't know about. So if we don't hold up and examine it, we can't try to figure out how to resolve it. So not only do we need to make our membership aware of these issues, but we also need to encourage our membership to learn. And to take steps to urge their elected leaders--and this is anywhere in the world--to push their elected leaders to make decisions, to make laws that save the planet instead of hastening the destruction of the planet.

Susan Oxley 25:51

Any last comments?

Paul Bethel 25:52

Well, I think it's important that we keep the environment at the forefront of our thoughts, of our ministry, of our focus. And it's a time sensitive thing. It's not something that we can put off until the next World Conference. It has to begin now, and I think it's critical that we start making that known at this coming World Conference.

Susan Oxley 26:27

Thank you so much, Paul, I appreciate your sharing with us today.

Paul Bethel 26:31

Well, thank you for helping me through this.

Susan Oxley 26:08

You did a great job. Thanks.