

## Tuvalu tells us, ignoring climate change won't make the problem go away

by Derek Duncan

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Ignoring climate change won't make the problem go away. But a bunch of other things already are, and without significant efforts to combat climate change they will continue to disappear. Things like coral reefs and tidal swamps are deteriorating. Communities who live off the water or close to the land are being forced to migrate. Multiple species of flora and fauna are becoming extinct. And eventually major coastal cities and whole island nations will succumb to rising sea levels.

Tuvalu is an example of a small island nation at risk of disappearing due to climate change. Tuvalu is a cluster of eight islands in the Pacific Ocean midway between Hawaii and Australia. The beaches and villages of these low-lying islands barely rest above sea level. Tuvaluans have lived a subsistence lifestyle for thousands of years, but due to the effects of global warming created by modern industrialization in other countries, the people of Tuvalu suffer the effects of climate change much more dramatically than we do.

Rev. Tafue Lusama is the leader of the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu. He has been appealing to international groups to pay closer attention to the immediate effects of climate change and remain committed to international agreements like the 2016 Paris climate accord that the current U.S. administration is withdrawing from. At the United Church of Christ General Synod 31 meeting in Baltimore, Maryland last week Rev. Lusama described the urgency of the situation threatening islands like Tuvalu.

Tuvalu's shores are disappearing and coastlines are encroaching as sea levels rise. The population has moved further and further inland, increasing the demand for shrinking land and resources. Many Tuvaluans are being forced to emigrate from the island. Rising seawater has also flooded underground freshwater sources needed for drinking and growing food. Residents must increasingly rely on expensive imported goods, which for Tuvaluans is not as easy as ordering two-day from Amazon.

Coral reefs surrounding the island also are being bleached by warmer, more acidic water. As the corals die the fishes that normally live among them also either die or move on. Fishing has become more costly and difficult, as person who fish are forced to spend more to fish further offshore and catch less. The deterioration of barrier reefs also hastens the erosion of beaches as stronger tides buffet the shore. The worsening problem has become a state of emergency for Tuvalu.

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When cyclones ravaged the islands of Tuvalu in 2015 churches in the US helped support emergency relief and rebuilding in Tuvalu. Several of the most low-lying islands were completely washed under and in some areas the earth was so compromised that burial grounds became destabilized. While the effects from climate change are more gradual than from a tropical storm, they are no less devastating and should no less urgently demand our attention and support.

In a speech to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in 2015, the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoaga, stressed that the experience of small island nations demonstrates that the international community must aggressively curb the increase in global temperatures. “Tuvalu’s future at current warming is already bleak,” he said. “Any further temperature increase will spell the total demise of Tuvalu.... For Small Island Developing States, Least Developed Countries and many others, setting a global temperature goal of below 1.5 degrees Celsius relative to pre-industrial levels is critical.”

The reality is that the people least responsible for Global warming—indigenous communities, poor communities, those without voice—are those who bear most of the brunt of its impact. What can we do? Rev. Tuvalu addressed that question to a group of young people in Baltimore. He explained that many people making even small efforts can make a big difference. Simple lifestyle changes like using more efficient lighting and cooling, and walking or biking instead of driving can reduce our carbon footprint. Even more, young people—and all of us—can speak out and stand alongside Tuvalu in telling others about the problem and supporting policies that curb global warming. At its General Synod the UCC passed a resolution called “The Earth is the Lord’s-Not Ours to Wreck” that declares we have a moral obligation to protect God’s creation, and call on the U.S. to recommit itself to international agreements to stop climate change.

Before we dismiss global warming because we don’t see how it affects us, the people of Tuvalu urge us to also consider island nations like theirs; before it’s too late.

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