What Would Jesus Drive?

SESSION 2

> *There is no doubt our lives would be drastically different were it not for the creative harnessing of fossil fuels such as oil and coal years ago. But we now know what we did not know then. These fossil fuels are limited in quantity, and their use harms both the environment and humans. Alternative energy will soon cease to be an alternative. What role should Christians play now before too much damage is done?*

What Would Jesus Drive?

In May 2003, the Rev. Jim and Kara Ball drove their Toyota Prius across the Bible Belt decorated with signs asking "What Would Jesus Drive?" This campaign (http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/) encourages Christians and others to see transportation decisions as moral ones and to take positive action for change. The campaign declares, "Making transportation choices that threaten millions of human beings violates Jesus' basic commandments: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Mk. 12:30–31); and 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Lk. 6:31). In making my transportation choices with the Risen Lord Jesus, I believe He wants me to travel in ways that reduce pollution and consumption of gasoline."

The campaign encourages people to pledge such actions as organizing life so that it is easier and more desirable to walk, bike, carpool, and use public transportation; educating others about the moral concerns of transportation choices; encouraging car manufacturers to produce fuel-efficient vehicles; and calling on governmental leaders to increase fuel economy standards and to invest in research and development of new technologies that reduce pollution. While reactions to this campaign have varied, the message has raised dialogue to a new level as it questioned the assumption that "more is better" and that larger cars such as SUVs are necessarily more desirable.

Fueling a Hopeful Future

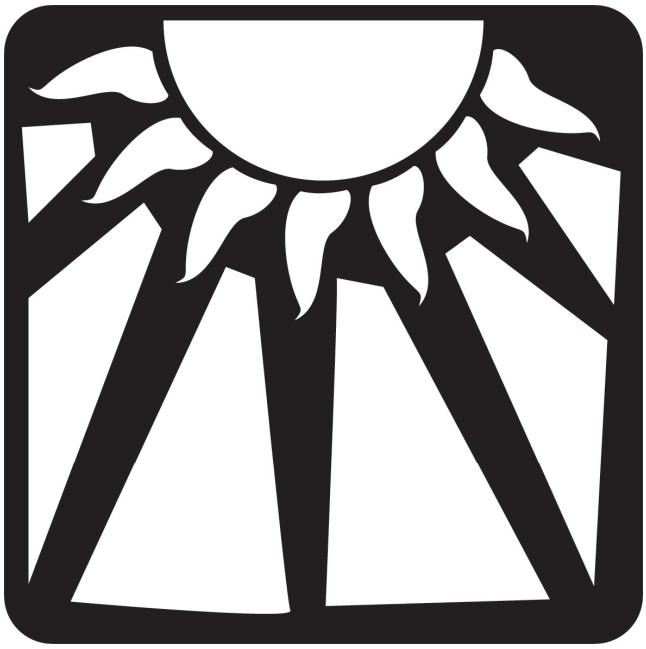
In the face of an energy crisis, hopeful solutions do exist. Effective solutions combine measures of conservation of resources, reduction of current consumption patterns, and investment in renewable energy sources. People of faith are part of this growing movement, helping to bring a biblical, theological, and ethical framework to the conversation.

The Nature of Change

In striving to make faithful energy choices, some changes are harder than others. If the problem and solution are both clear, change will come relatively easy. This kind of change is what Ron Heifetz calls "technical change" in his book *Leadership without Easy Answers*.[1] Many conservation efforts are fairly technical; if leaving excess lights turned on wastes energy, we can easily solve the problem by turning them off.

When learning is required in order to be convinced of either the problem or the solution, the change becomes what Heifetz calls "adaptive change"; this change is harder and slower. In order to be concerned about the negative effects of driving, we first must know that driving causes emissions, which lead to global warming, which harms the earth and its people. Once we learn of the problem, the solution is technical (walk to a nearby destination today) or adaptive (reorder life to have more time and energy to walk or take public transportation on a more consistent basis).

When problems and solutions both require learning, we confront full adaptive change, and this change can be slow, long-term, and sometimes frustrating. If we know carbon emissions cause global warming and that individual choices alone won't fix the problem, our government must make policy changes and work with other governments to curb emissions. And, we know that our faith communities, businesses, and



neighborhood coalitions need to simultaneously learn about, value, and implement energy alternatives. The reason these kinds of solutions feel overwhelming is that they demand adaptive change. We cannot replace one simple behavior with another. We must change a core value or belief in order to change the resulting behavior.

Communities of faith may be particularly suited to address the adaptive changes that are necessary to solve aspects of the energy crisis. We believe in the goodness of all that God has created. Proclaiming our duty to take care of creation is a core value needed to move society forward in accepting necessary long-term changes in our energy future.

Conserving Energy through Technical Changes

Adopting technical changes is a helpful path to conserving energy and making a difference. Having made a difference, we feel more confident and empowered to make another change. As technical changes add up, the world's resources are saved, and we all are moved closer to taking the hard jump into adaptive change.

These kinds of technical changes might seem to be only making an incremental difference in the face of huge global realities such as climate change. However, the more demand is created for the products that serve a technical change, the more companies and governments will work to provide these products, perhaps investing along the way in new technologies and research that will prove beneficial to long-term change. Also, the more technical changes build, the more they create the core value that leads to adaptive change. If everyone recycles as second nature, it is not as huge a leap to the next steps: reusing and reducing.

Easy first-step changes to conserve energy include technical changes such as turning off lights, caulking windows, and unplugging any appliances with automatic features—such as blinking lights or a clock—when we're not using them. Even conservation efforts that might not seem to be directly linked to energy use—such as not letting water run while at the faucet and recycling aluminum cans—matter. As water runs, it will heat to the temperature you have set, so not only water but energy is wasted. Every time you recycle an aluminum can, you conserve by 95 percent the energy it would take to make a new can, according to the Can Manufacturers Institute (www.cancentral.com/funfacts.cfm). In fact, most small environmental action steps can be related to energy use.

Changing our individual and corporate consumption patterns demand a bit more thoughtfulness and intentionality on our parts. These changes combine some technical and some adaptive aspects.

Our choices about transportation, food, and building energy are adaptive change with some technical aspects. Deciding to walk, bike, or forgo an errand or trip requires both some simple replacement behavior and some learning about the positive impacts on our own health as well as on God's whole creation. Some food choices that are both adaptive and technical are buying local foods and eating seasonally (preparing salads means not turning on the stove or oven in the summer when we're trying to stay cool). In our homes, when we can buy energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs or ENERGY STAR appliances, we are changing the way we shop as well as the way we use energy. According to the EPA, if every U.S. household would replace five light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs, we would not need the energy produced by twenty-one power plants. And, an ENERGY STAR clothes washer uses 50 percent less energy than traditional washers.

EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL CHOICES

The Union of Concerned Scientists (www.ucusa.org) said that the top three most effective environmental choices are those of transportation, food, and housing. When possible, choose some of these items:

Transportation: Combine errands into a single trip; use public transportation; walk or bike when possible. When buying a car, choose one with good fuel efficiency. Make sure your tires are inflated to the proper pressure and your car is well tuned. Go easy on the brakes and gas pedal.

Food: Eat less meat. Buy organic produce. Buy from farmers' markets or join a Community Supported Agriculture group.

Household: Choose a home with just enough space. Install energy-efficiency fixtures and appliances. Choose renewable energy for your home. Insulate and weather-strip the building.

Adaptive Changes for a Healthy Energy Future

Full adaptive change is the hardest change to accomplish. But, it is absolutely vital because technical changes can only move us so far down the path of creating a long-term, healthy future. Adaptive change requires a shift in cultural norms and societal values. We will need to have support systems, realistic expectations, long-term strategies, and faith and hope.

Included in this category are such things as renewable energy alternatives. Investigating renewable energy sources demands that we acknowledge the true cost of each type of energy resource (governmental subsidies, trade protections, human health effects, environmental impact). Full adaptive change also includes advocating for governmental and corporate change. This change requires that we learn the full scope of the problem, research solutions that may not be readily apparent, and still have the energy to educate and persuade others to do the same. The extra steps of reaching out, educating, and advocating require patience, perseverance, and faith. Working toward adaptive change in our community, and with long-term vision, can help us to celebrate victories along the way and to notice even small changes along the spectrum of norms and values.

Alternative Energy Sources

God created the world and all that is in it, as it says in Psalm 24:1, and sent Jesus so that the world might be saved (John 3:17). By using renewable resources, we can truly affirm, value, and invest in God's gifts in the natural world such as the sun, wind, and the earth itself. Even human, animal, and plant waste can be used carefully to create local biomass energy.

Solar. The gift of sunlight is powerful. It is used by plants for food. It is necessary for human health—vitamin D deficiency and seasonal affective disorder both stem from lack of sunlight. Ancient sunlight, stored in fossil fuels, is what has fueled our energy use for a long time. However, we know that we can use today's sun to create energy, rather than depleting ancient sources of sunlight in a process that pollutes the world around us.

Solar power can come through photovoltaic panels, solar thermal technology, and passive design. Photovoltaic panels convert sunlight into electricity. Solar thermal technology heats water through similar sun-absorbing panels. Today, Trinity Community House and Oxtoby Hall are student residences at San Francisco Theological Seminary whose hot water is heated by the sun through rooftop panels. The gift of the sun can also be used in passive solar design. If we design a building based on when and where the sun will strike it, we can use the sun for natural lighting (rather than electricity). Also, a building can be built so certain types of walls absorb heat for cooling or heating.

Wind. Wind power, now sometimes offered through local utilities, is cost competitive to fossil fuel energy. Improved technology in the past few decades has created better, safer, and more efficient turbines. Investing in wind power often also means investing in farms and rural communities, places where turbines can be placed and will generate ongoing income for these communities. In South Dakota, Native Energy has helped the Rosebud Sioux Tribe to create a new wind turbine on their lands that helps in the fight against

global warming and provides economic development to the community at the same time.

Geothermal. The earth itself creates heat that can be used to help heat our homes and churches. Hot ground water, steam from hot ground water, the earth's radioactive core, and the temperature differences between the earth's surface and subsurface are all natural gifts.

Biomass. Plant material, organic waste from humans and animals, and garbage are alternative sources of energy. Long have we known that we can heat by burning wood. Now we're discovering, if done carefully and with attention to human and ecological health, that other sources of biomass can be used. A creative woman in a small town in Nicaragua has covered the manure heap from her cows with black plastic and inserted a tube that brings the methane from the pile into her kitchen stove; she is cooking with biomass.

Hydrogen. Hydrogen can be a clean source of electricity. However, hydrogen occurs naturally only with other elements, so the process for separating out and purifying hydrogen takes energy. If this process can be done with renewable energy such as wind and solar power, it is a renewable energy source.

Nuclear. Nuclear power is created when heat from nuclear fission reaction is converted to electricity. It does not produce greenhouse gases. Nuclear plants occupy relatively little land. However, radioactive waste is created in the process and so far we do not know a safe way to dispose of it. This waste often gets placed in low-income communities and poor countries around the world, and it is toxic and dangerous.

Other creative community alternatives. Some helpful alternatives to fossil fuel energy include low-technology communities and sustainable design. Energy can be saved by using local, free natural materials for construction and building with an eye toward the environment (where is the sun, the shade, the best ground?). In a small, poor neighborhood in Nogales, Mexico, a community used an old refrigerator and black plastic to absorb and hold heat for water. In some cities, rooftop gardens absorb carbon dioxide while cooling the building underneath.

Signs of Hope

In recent years, we have witnessed increased global concern about climate change, energy efficiency, and renewable energy development. In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted. In spring 2005, the Kyoto Protocol (which holds developed nations to legally binding targets to limit or reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 5 percent of their 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012) was finally ratified.

While the U.S. government refuses to sign the Kyoto Protocol, a bipartisan coalition including more than 130 city mayors is implementing the Kyoto Protocol in an implicit rejection of the administration's policy. These cities include Seattle, Los Angeles, and New York. St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, buys only renewable energy from its utility and offsets other energy use through "green tags" (energy offset donations that go toward the development of future renewable energies). U.S. citizens will continue to attend the climate-change conferences and to pressure the U.S. government to sign on. Through the efforts of both the Interfaith Climate Change Network and Interfaith Power and Light, twenty-five U.S. states have faith-based campaigns to fight climate change and pursue alternative energies.

Conclusion

Opportunities abound for participating in a healthy energy future. Whether we are able to conserve in small ways or advocate for global policies, we can be effective. The small and large actions are shaping a growing movement for change, a new sense of values. As a culture, we are beginning to reclaim our time and to reevaluate our consumer choices. As people of faith, we take small steps on a long journey, knowing that the ultimate outcome is not in our grasp but in God's.

About the Writer

Rebecca Barnes-Davies is a consultant for Environmental and Social Justice Ministries. She also serves as the coordinator of Presbyterians for Restoring Creation.

Endnotes

1. Ron Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994).