Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Reclaiming our rabble-rouser roots

Clay Nelson © 15 August 2021

You may remember the movie *The Perfect Storm* that came out in the year 2000. It was about a real storm in 1991. A variety of factors came together to create a hurricane that was never named. In the northern hemisphere hurricanes form in the tropics and move north. This hurricane started as a nor'easter that became a hurricane that formed off the Atlantic coast of Canada and New England and then moved south causing considerable damage.

The term "perfect storm" was coined by journalist Sebastian Junger after a conversation with Boston meteorologist Robert Case in which Case described the convergence of weather conditions as being "perfect" for the formation of such a storm. It has entered our lexicon to describe an especially bad situation caused by a combination of unfavourable circumstances. It certainly applies to our new reality.

Two of the unfavourable circumstances are the recent surge in the Delta variant of COVID-19 and, even worse, the growing but irrational desire to return to a pre-pandemic "normal" as even more deadly variants are evolving. The normal people long for is a clear and present danger to ourselves and the planet. That normal includes our failure for decades to take climate change seriously. That normal is described in the epic AR6 Climate Change 2021 - Sixth Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released this month. Normal is beginning to look like the eye of a perfect storm.

A recent Newshub article detailed Kiwi scientists' characterisation of the report as "frank and blunt", "sobering and authoritative" and "nothing but bad news".

New Zealand won't escape the effects of the warming climate. We're mentioned dozens of times in the report.

Our mean temperature has increased about 1.1C since records began at the beginning of the Industrial Age, with human influence the dominant driver.

Decreases in snow and ice or increases in river flooding will affect sectors such as winter tourism, energy production, river transport, and infrastructure, and that's just with 2C of warming compared to pre-industrial times, which we're likely to reach in just thirty years at the present rate.

Fire weather is projected to increase throughout Australia and New Zealand, again with just 2C of warming. Snowfall is expected to decrease throughout the region at high altitudes in both Australia and New Zealand, with glaciers receding in New Zealand.

Wellington and Dunedin in particular will become far more at risk of fires. The south and west of the country will likely get wetter while the north and east dry up.

Agricultural and ecological droughts will be more common, landslides will be more likely in the South Island and eastern half of the North Island thanks to total precipitation rates, precipitation intensity, mountain permafrost thaw rates, glacier retreat and air temperature and there will be a continuing reduction in snowfall during the 21st century.

From 2030, areas below 1500m will likely go without snow for entire years.
As mean sea-level rise is projected to continue for at least several more centuries, there is very high confidence that this will lead to large increases in the frequency of extreme sea-level events in Australia and New Zealand.

Many New Zealanders were involved in the science behind the report, as well as in writing it. One of those, Bronwyn Hayward, said the report showed things are getting worse much faster than the IPCC's 2018 report predicted.

“The report doesn’t put a precise date on when we know we have crossed the dangerous threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, but says unless we make far-reaching change, this will occur over the next 20 years using average temperatures. This will expose many more people and our natural environment to even more devastating consequences including intense flooding, storms and unprecedented droughts and fires.”

Kiwi cities are particularly at risk, she said, “as hotspots where the experience of localised heat and flooding will be more intense than global averages. This matters because cities in New Zealand are already home to nearly 90 per cent of our population.”

She said it was time to stop “magical thinking” that technology would solve the problem before it was too late.

Iain White, a professor of environmental planning at the University of Waikato, thought he was desensitised to alarming climate reports before sitting down to read this latest one. He said the emissions reduction plan the Government is required to deliver by the end of this year will be “vitally important”, but is sceptical authorities will act with enough urgency. “At the same time as politicians in Wellington react to this report with concern, climate advocacy groups are suing Auckland Transport and Auckland Council over a long-term Land Transport Plan that fails to reduce emissions. It’s a sign that our institutions helped create the current situation, and action may involve new governance structures or fundamental changes to leadership, budgets, or sectors.”

He also pointed to locals who oppose efforts to make streets safer and better for cyclists and pedestrians over cars. “If anyone is in doubt at the scale of the challenge, reflect on how hard it was to reorient just a few individual streets towards walking and cycling during the Innovating Streets trial. Now do that to a city.”

Nick Cradock-Henry, a scientist at Landcare Research, said drought was now “Aotearoa New Zealand’s costliest hazard, with economic and social implications for rural communities” — and the report predicts things will only get worse — and farmers need to adapt, as well as cut emissions.

“Mitigation will be insufficient to address the changes in climate presented here. To ensure sustainable long-term futures for Aotearoa New Zealand, the report is a stark reminder of the need for adaptation. Adaptation will require strategic and even radical adjustments to practices, processes, capital, and infrastructure in response to climate change, and must begin now.”

Sara Mikaloff-Fletcher said New Zealand’s strategy of offsetting carbon emissions with new forests will become increasingly infeasible.
“Models predict extreme temperatures and droughts brought on by climate change will weaken the ability of forests and other green spaces to absorb carbon dioxide. This is particularly significant for Aotearoa New Zealand, because our forests and land use offsets roughly a third of our total greenhouse gas emissions.”

Like Covid, climate change is affecting every country on the planet. Unlike with Covid, New Zealand cannot create a fortress that will protect us from its devastation.

I know it feels overwhelming and we don’t have much time to do what we can, but Unitarians need to be in the thick of it. We are good at rabble-rousing. It is part of our spiritual DNA. We know that if we stand and silently watch the world go by — it will.

Our peace and social justice committee is doing some wonderful work on key areas of need in our community and in Oceania, but I would like to propose that we create in addition a climate action team. We have both expertise and passion to contribute. They would be focused on education both within and outside our community, creating alliances with other faith groups, treaty partners and NGOs that share our passion, and planning events to lobby local and national political leaders to take climate change as deadly serious and respond more quickly in the hope we are able to weather this storm.

If you are interested in being part of such a team, contact me and I will organise a meeting with all those who share your passion. If you are watching this from far away from Auckland, thanks to Zoom, you could join the team as well.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

Do you believe our small congregation can make a difference to climate change?