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Study guide

Climate change

Alaskan village tries to preserve its culture

By Robert C. Blezard

Residents of Shishmaref, Alaska, may be our country's first "climate refugees"—people forced to leave their homes because of rising seas attributed to climate change. But they probably won't be the last, as scientists predict the effects of a warming trend will continue.

Exercise 1: God's good creation

The book of Genesis explains how God created the earth and heavens. Read Genesis 1:1-25 and discuss:

- As you read the passage, what words came to your mind? How did you feel? What did you think?
- How did creation come into existence? Who is the maker of all that was, all that is and all that will be?
- Read the passage again and note the number of times that God calls creation good. What does that mean to you?

Exercise 2: Caretakers

Creation was pretty well established by the time God got around to creating human beings. What does that signify to you?

Read Genesis 1:26-31 and discuss:

- How are human beings different from animals in God's creation?
- What instructions does God give to human beings? What is our role in the earth?
- Is creation ours to use as we will, or do we have a responsibility?
- How do you see the instruction to have "dominion" over the earth? Does it mean we can use the planet's resources for our benefit? Does it mean that we can abuse the resources for our benefit?
- Where is the balance we have to draw between using the resources and abusing them?
- Ultimately, whose planet is it?



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Exercise 3: Wacky weather

Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy. Midwestern tornadoes—in the winter! Flash flooding. Extended drought. Climate scientists say that extreme weather events like these are signs that the climate is changing. Discuss:

- How have weather patterns changed in your lifetime? What was the weather like when you were a child?
- How do you feel about the changes? Are you anxious about the future for yourself or your children and grandchildren?

Exercise 4: Warming planet

Scientists at NASA, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and other agencies worldwide say that 2016 was the hottest year since people began collecting global data in 1880. Not only that, but it's the third year in a row that the planet saw record temperatures. Here are some facts that scientists note (see more at climate.nasa.gov/evidence):

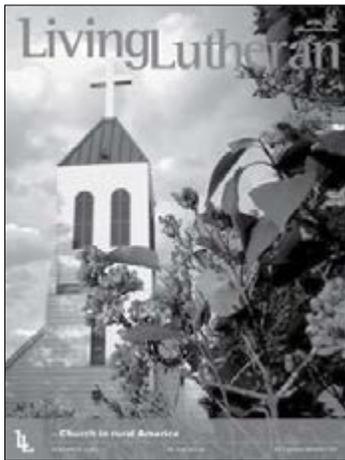
- Sea ice is at record lows at both poles.
- Glaciers that had been stable for centuries are receding at an alarming pace.
- Sea levels are rising at alarming rates, imperiling not only Shishmaref but also low-lying lands across the globe.
- Our oceans are warming as they absorb heat.
- Our oceans are becoming acidified as water absorbs carbon dioxide.
- Warmer water and acidification is upsetting ecosystems and killing fragile sea life, including coral reefs such as Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Discuss:

- What do you think of these developments? What emotions do you feel? Are you worried about the future?
- If human beings can do anything to help stop this warming trend, should we do it? Why or why not?
- What responsibility do people have to care for God's earth?

Exercise 5: Rising CO₂

Atmospheric scientists conclude that the heat-trapping properties of carbon dioxide and other gases is the primary culprit in global warm-



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ing and climate change. As explained at climate.nasa.gov/evidence, for hundreds of thousands of years the temperature of the Earth rose and fell as carbon dioxide levels fluctuated between about 180 parts per million in the atmosphere and 300 ppm. Within this range of carbon dioxide concentration were successive ice ages and recovery from them.

The recent warming trend coincides with a dramatic increase in carbon dioxide well above the 300 ppm level. Since the mid-20th century that level in the atmosphere began to spike. It is currently at 405 ppm. Scientists say the spike is caused by a dramatic increase in the use of fossil fuels that release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

- If human beings can alter the climate through fossil-fuel use, can we change it back by using less fossil fuel and developing cleaner sources of energy? If we can, should we try?
- What would be the reasonable consequences of not reducing the carbon dioxide we're putting into the atmosphere? What are the stakes?

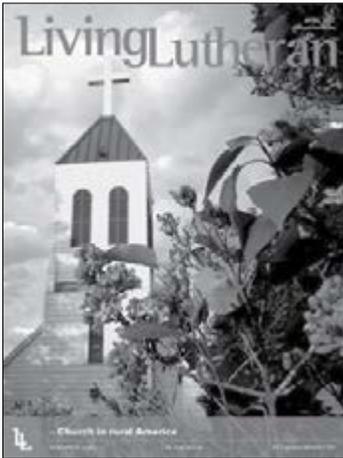
Exercise 6: Culture change

For the residents of Shishmaref, climate change means a big culture change—first with a dramatic reduction in sea ice that resulted in a decrease of the seal population on which residents depended. Second, rising seas mean that residents will have to leave the island where families have lived for generations.

- Climate change is real for Shishmaref. In what ways will it be real for other coastal residents soon?
- How are we now already adapting to climate change effects, such as extreme weather, floods, drought, changes in growing seasons and patterns?
- What's ahead for how we will have to adapt to climate change?
- Which would be more painful: adapting to the effects of climate change, or adapting to a lifestyle that would help slow or even reverse climate change?

Exercise 7: Care for refugees

- What responsibility do we, as a nation, have to help the residents of Shishmaref who are being pushed off their island by rising tides?
- If our government assists victims of hurricanes and other natural disasters, shouldn't we help "climate refugees" build new lives?



About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees

from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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For more study:

The ELCA has some free resources that can help your congregation study this important issue. Download at elca.org/resources/caring-for-creation or order copies from the ELCA.

- **“Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping”** is a 50-page study workbook that in four lessons helps guide faithful people to understand the complex environmental issues facing us in the 21st century. Looking at creation care from a theological and faith perspective, this resource provides down-to-earth guidance on how to understand the issues and respond to them proactively as Lutherans.
- **“Poverty and Hunger in a Changing Climate”** is a four-page color booklet that explores how the problems and negative impacts of climate change are born mostly by the world’s people in poverty and developing countries.
- **“Hunger and Climate Change”** is an eight-page color brochure that helps draw the connection between the change in climate and its impact on agriculture and food security.

Climate change

Alaskan village tries to preserve its culture

By Cindy Uken



The idea that climate change is a political issue or a matter of debate makes no sense, said Thomas Richter, pastor of Shishmaref Lutheran, the only congregation in the Alaskan village.

“This is not a question that my people struggle with,” Richter said. “We are too busy wondering how we can eat, what we can do with no sea ice, and what will be the future of our way of life. There is nothing political about our homes collapsing into the ocean or the thinness of the sea ice, whose thickness we depend on for food and protection from the storms. There’s just suffering.”

The island, located north of the Bering Strait, is about a quarter-mile wide and 2 1/2 miles long. It’s being gobbled up by flooding and erosion attributed to climate change.

“We’re really only two good storms from being completely underwater,” Richter said.

In a move that caused division, residents voted in August to relocate their entire community to the mainland about 5 miles away. The decision, which carried by 11 votes, thrust Shishmaref into the national spotlight. Residents have become known as “climate refugees.”

“Many of the older generation have not lived anywhere else their whole lives and do not plan to,” Richter said. “Many of the younger generation are frustrated with the insecurity of life here and are ready to try somewhere else. The hope with the vote to leave is that we can do something to preserve our culture and our way of life before ... we are forced to be scattered to the world.”

Residents, of which there are about 600, were caught in a catch-22, Richter said. If they voted to stay, they might have received more funding for basic needs, including central plumbing. But the reality is, he said, even if they received the money, they might end up having to leave anyway.

“There is no money either way,” Richter said. “We do not have the money to relocate. ... Before we were climate refugees, we were already Native Americans. People here already feel largely ignored, forgotten and betrayed by our government. Add to that the way America is currently leaning toward refugees, [and] it doesn’t look hopeful that this new name of refugee will give us any different treatment.”

ELCA Advocacy has worked to raise the profile of Shishmaref through traditional and social media, blogs, action alerts and more. “Advocacy is one form of us being Christ to our neighbors,” said Ruth M. Ivory-Moore, ELCA program director for environment and energy.

For a related story on the ELCA’s advocacy work with Shishmaref, go to LivingLutheran.org.



Photo: Courtesy of Thomas Richter

Thomas Richter, pastor of Shishmaref Lutheran Church, provides spiritual strength to village residents, who voted in August to relocate to the mainland about 5 miles away. Shishmaref Lutheran is the only congregation in the village.

Homes in Shishmaref, a village in Alaska, have been sliding into the water due to erosion attributed to climate change.

Richter said one of his primary roles is to provide space for people to grieve and to feed residents both physically and spiritually.

The lack of sea ice makes hunting for seal, the primary food source, almost impossible. This year the ocean has frozen only twice. It used to be that it would freeze and stay that way all winter. With no sea ice, there are no seal.

“That simple math leaves us with food scarcity and a deep mourning for the way life used to be,” Richter said.

Shishmaref Lutheran, which averages about 50 parishioners in worship every Sunday, is networking with the ELCA and other churches to help in small ways during the meantime. When the relocation and expansion efforts start in earnest, the church will be there to do anything it can to bridge the distance, Richter said.

“The people of Shishmaref don’t have the luxury of considering climate change from a political perspective,” said Shelley Wickstrom, bishop of the Alaska Synod. “Regardless of how we explain the disappearance of winter ice, coastal people face food

insecurity because of the lack of ice and its impact on walrus.”

When Shishmaref Lutheran moves, Wickstrom said the synod will raise funds for a new church and parsonage.

Not everyone sees what’s happening as something negative. Archie Kiyutelluk, 46, a musician at Shishmaref Lutheran and a congregation council member, is one of them. He doesn’t like being portrayed as a “victim.” He praises the warmer weather and longer summers for gathering plants and berries.

“Some may say [and] think we are in dire trouble because of climate change, but I think we are doing OK,” Kiyutelluk said. “We can continue to trust God will always be there for us in all situations and he will continue to bless us with what we have—our land, our community and our lives.”

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at LivingLutheran.org.



Cindy Uken is a veteran, award-winning reporter based in Palm Springs, Calif. She has worked at *USA Today*, as well as newspapers in South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana and California.

Photo: Gary Braasch

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