

## CTAUN | Committee on Teaching About the United Nations

Annual Conference: Our Planet – Our Crisis – What’s Next?



For the third consecutive year, sisters including Sister Eileen Reilly, director of UN-NGO Office for SSND, and province and sponsored ministry staff participating in the provinces’ ministry formation process, attended the annual CTAUN conference on April 5 at the United Nations headquarters in New York. This year’s

conference focused on the looming climate crisis, and asked what we can do to address this “defining issue of our time.” Nearly 600 attended including members of religious congregations, several Fulbright scholars, educators and high school and college students from Sweden and the U.S.; Ambassador Park from the Republic of Korea; and leaders from international private voluntary organizations. The day was full, presenters highlighted the major issues affecting our environment and showcased efforts underway by UN agencies, governments, non-government organizations and individuals in finding solutions.

### **Our Planet**

Presenters shared information and materials from a worldview down to national and local perspectives, proposing responses to address climate change that each of us can adopt, as well as suggesting how teachers can effect changes in their classrooms. While each presenter offered a range of ways of looking at the climate crisis, one message came through loud and clear: Change is only possible if we make it an urgent priority. “Act as if your house is on fire, because it is.”

On an international level, the director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Jamil Ahmad, reported that U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, has called for a universal framework for sustainable development, and a high-level political forum to evaluate progress and practices involving the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This meeting takes place this summer in New York. The theme is "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality."

### **Our Crisis**

Fabien Cousteau, founder and president of the Cousteau Ocean Learning Center, and grandson of Jacques Cousteau, pointed out that only five percent of the world’s oceans have been explored and said oceans are a major driving factor of our existence. Oceans represent three quarters of the world’s surface area and 99 percent of our living space, which 95 percent of the

planet's biodiversity call home. He also gave praise to the younger generations, saying, "Young people don't know the word 'impossible'" and encouraged them to keep our generation on task. In the Q&A session, that followed, he was asked, "What is the single most important thing we can change now?"

Plastics. One million pounds of plastics are dumped in the oceans every day. On average, every person uses eight single-use pieces of plastic daily. We must stop using plastic things, straws, for example, that we use for only 30 minutes or less, yet which last more than 500 years in our waterways and on land. Plastic contamination shows up everywhere. Fifty percent of fish show signs of microplastics in their bodies, and so, when we eat fish, we're gambling on eating our own garbage.

Eve Gartner, Senior Attorney in the Health Communities Program at Earthjustice, presented some startling facts about the U.S. oil and gas industry's roll in plastic production and the increase in petrochemical products, i.e. plastics, in the last two decades.

With renewable energy sources driving down the demand for fossil fuels, and an oversupply of natural gas, the industry is rigorously developing new markets and new petrochemical products. There are 300 new projects planned in the U.S. alone, including a massive petrochemical hub where Penn., Ohio and West Virginia meet. The hub is being promoted as replacing jobs lost due to the demise of the coal industry...These facilities rely on the natural gas from hydraulic fracturing (fracking) of the shale formations in Penn., Ohio and N.Y.

In recent years, companies like Exxon Mobil and Chevron have made more money from petrochemicals and refining, than from selling oil and gas as energy. There are very few legal safeguards in place. This creates major profits for the oil and gas industries. The oil and gas industries are the major building blocks of plastic production - which has doubled since 2000.

Ms. Gartner concluded by saying that simple steps to reduce the use of fossil fuels add up to great impact. The influence of teachers, and our leverage as consumers play critical roles in effecting change.

Karenna Gore, founding director, Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, spoke about the scale and urgency of the climate crisis and placed it into the context of an ethical framework.

We first started using fossil fuels during the Industrial Revolution; we now spew 110 million tons of manmade pollution into the thin shell of the atmosphere every 24 hours, where the pollution remains, traps heat and shifts the whole planetary ecosystem. At the same time, the trees, plants and soil that remove carbon pollution from the atmosphere, are being depleted and destroyed at a rapid rate. Though the consequences are now becoming seriously

noticeable, the fact that we have known about these patterns for more than a quarter of a century has not stopped the practice.

This was what led to the UN Climate Summit called by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in Sept. 2014, where he promoted the engagement of civil society to address the problem. In response, Union Theological hosted a major gathering of religious and spiritual leaders from around the world, called “Religions of the Earth,” whose goal was to reframe climate change as a moral issue and encourage faith-based activism. This led to the creation of the Center for Earth Ethics. Simultaneously, an article appeared in the journal, “Science,” which said that over and above institutional reforms and policy changes “there is a need to reorient our *attitude* toward Nature and thereby towards ourselves,” away from the notion of anthropocentrism - that human beings are separate and superior to the rest of the natural world.

Ms. Gore praised the encyclical of Pope Francis, “Laudato Si: On Care For Our Common Home,” and Chapter 6 which speaks of the broader goals of environmental education, including a critique of the “myths” of modernity: individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism and the unregulated market. “Environmental education needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, helping people to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.” She also strongly recommended the book, “The Uninhabitable Earth” by David Wallace-Wells, a powerful depiction of the worst-case scenario waiting in our not so distant future.

In the afternoon, Irwin Arief, a veteran journalist, covering the United Nations, international diplomacy and U.S. politics, in New York, Washington and Paris, and also a member of CTAUN’S Advisory Council, served as moderator to a panel addressing, “Climate Change – a threat to Global Stability.” He talked about the Consensus project – a work of 21 years, and 4000 research papers in which 97 percent of scientists involved endorsed the consensus that climate change is real. “The science is clear - what is not is the politics,” he said.

Lia Carone, Assistant Deputy Director, Policy, NYC Mayor's Office of Sustainability, spoke about what N.Y.C. is doing to bring down carbon emissions. “New York is committed to the Paris Agreement of having a total emissions level of 1.5 percent by 2030, and has reduced emissions in large city buildings from their current level by 17 percent since 2017.”

It is heartening to note that a few weeks later, on Earth Day, New York governor Andrew Cuomo signed into law a statewide ban on single-use plastic bags. It is estimated that New York uses 23 billion plastic bags every year with 50 percent of those plastic bags ending up in landfills and around the city and waterways.

The last speaker, Cora Weiss, U.N. Representative, International Peace Bureau; President, Hague Appeal for Peace, and outspoken advocate for women and social justice and Honorary Patron of CTAUN, asked, “Where do we go from here? How will we bring climate issues into our classrooms and into our communities? Will we de-vest in fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy sources?” She asked everyone to stand, turn to someone next to them, and explain what we plan to do to translate the knowledge we received from today’s conference speakers into concrete actions.

Following a full day of speakers and Q&A sessions, our group of 24 sisters and colleagues walked through a drizzling cityscape to share a meal and discuss what we as individuals, and members of SSND ministries can do individually and collectively. As overwhelming as some of the climate crisis statistics were, we departed with a clear commitment that as individuals and members of a larger community, we must take action and our individual efforts do make a difference.

### **What’s Next?**

A group of sisters and staff met the following month at Villa Assumpta to identify actions items to take to address the climate crisis and to share with the province and encourage participation. Sister Arlene Flaherty, OP, director of JPIC, proposed a “No Plastics” campaign – something that directly addresses the crisis, everyone can participate in and that can be implemented right away. The “NO Plastics” campaign is to run over the course of nine months. A soft launch of the campaign began on World Ocean’s Day – June 8, via Get W.I.T.H. It in the AMSSND Friday newsletter and on social media. Through education and raising awareness about the detriment of plastics to our oceans and natural environment, and by sharing ways to avoid its use, we hope to reduce the amount of plastics used individually, in our ministries and across the province. We have a responsibility to help our communities learn how they can bring about effective climate action.

### **AMSSND GREEN Habits Challenge**

We invite you to get involved, to share educational articles about plastics with us, and tell us about the new ways you are choosing not to use plastic. Please send your comments, suggestions and ideas to [am-communications.com](http://am-communications.com). And, in the meantime, stay tuned for ways you can make a difference: **AMSSND GREEN Habits Challenge – Change the bag!**

