

The COP26 Experience: Healthy Skepticism and Abiding Faith: Memorable Moments and a Call to Action



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I am grateful to the Creation Care Ministry at Saint Mark's Cathedral for giving me a chance to reflect on my experiences as a member of the [Presiding Bishop's delegation](#) to the 26th UN Conference of the Parties (COP 26), widely known simply as the Glasgow Climate Conference. For two weeks, I observed and participated in a wide array of presentations and workshops.

I urge you to explore the full list of online events at the [UN COP26 website](#). But, be forewarned, there are literally hundreds to choose from. Below I share the events that most inspired me as well as those that captured the mixed emotions that many felt as COP26 closed.

How it started

The opening plenaries on November 6th were inspiring, especially hearing the voices of Indigenous Youth. There were so many. [Ms. Elizabeth Wathuti](#) of Kenya described the devastation of drought on the people of Kenya, citing a figure of 2 million people facing climate-related starvation. She quotes studies that by 2050 climate impacts will displace 86 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa.

As COP26 opened, the leaders of countries most impacted by climate change made a compelling call for action. Notable among them was the [speech](#) by Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley who spoke at a Presidency Event on Exploring Loss and Damage -- her remarks starting at 2:24 with these key points:

1. **Failure to fund Loss and Damage is a denial that 20 to 40% of the world is in Code Red zone right now.**
2. **Loss and damage contrasts.** German floods last year - less than 1% of GDP lost. 2017 Atlantic hurricane season – two category 5 hurricanes in two weeks including Hurricane Maria. Island nation of Dominica lost 226% of GDP in 4 hours. There is a front line to the climate crisis and it lies between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.
3. **Warsaw Loss and Damage mechanism was agreed upon to win support for the Paris Accord in 2015.** The promise was that insurance markets would help, but the climate crisis is ultimately uninsurable. Insurance works for infrequent, stable, collectively predictable but individually uncertain risks. This is not the case with climate change.
 - *Her analog:* asking victims of car accidents to pay for actions of people driving the car who do not pay. "It is unjust, immoral and wrong."

How it ended

The final agreement left [COP President Alok Sharma clearly frustrated](#). In closing, the visibly emotional President said he was "deeply sorry" for the way the process had unfolded.

The frustration was echoed by young leaders, notably Chief Negotiator for Panama Juan Carlos Monterrey Gómez [speaking for Panama](#) at the final plenary session: "1.5 is not a choice. It is a necessity. It is a moral obligation. It is a lifeline. And in order to do that, fossil fuels must be kept in the ground. So, Mr. President, let's keep them in the ground."

U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [addressed the press](#) at the close of COP26. A veteran of many COPs since 1992, Kerry gives a masterful status report at the end of a grueling day of final negotiations. Key points:

- "We are in fact closer than we have ever been before to avoiding climate chaos."
- "A positive take on accomplishments (e.g., "real plans"), emphasizing progress since Paris COP in 2015. Glasgow was not the finish line. It would not end the crisis. 'Paris built the arena and Glasgow started the race.'"
- "No government in the world has enough money to be able to affect the transition we need to make. We need to bring it to the table from the places where it is and that's principally the private sector."

But it's not really over - time for action

The COP is an ongoing process of international negotiation. I have sympathy for those who see it as a terrible process, but, for the moment, it's the only one we have. In Paris in 2015, the COP made a significant shift in strategies from a (unenforceable) top-down model to set global emissions to an agreement for each nation to set its own ambitious voluntary targets (i.e., National Determined Contributions, NDCs). This was a huge step.

As people of faith we are called to join what UN Secretary-General António Guterres referred to in his closing remarks as the "[climate action army](#)." Guterres acknowledged the power of activists to propel governments and companies beyond words and into action. He urged them: "Never give up. Never retreat. Keep pushing forward."

The push to move forward faster is propelled by youth and young adults. I urge you to read the [blog post of Ms. Solveigh Barney](#), a student at Macalester College.

I share Solveigh's urgency. I look forward to our ongoing conversations about how we at Saint Mark's are called to action to achieve the ambitious but do-able goal of stabilizing the climate crisis.

"I am afraid to witness the catastrophic events of the future if we don't act now....I think of the children of Madagascar who are experiencing one of the first famines directly linked to climate change. They simply do not have the funds to adapt to climate impacts. This is a tragedy and if we don't change our habits, I'm afraid to see what comes next. I know this is a dire narrative, but young people are frustrated. We wish people could just realize that our planet and very existence are at a breaking point. It also seems some of our peers have given up out of frustration and make remarks of pessimism that they don't have a future. But not all of us have lost hope. We keep on fighting, for this is not the end, but it is the beginning."

— Solveigh Barney, a delegate and Macalester College student

Dr. Lisa Graumlich is a Saint Mark's Cathedral Creation Care Ministry member and recently served as part of The Episcopal Church delegation to United Nations COP26. Learn more at www.saintmarks.org/creation-care.