

Worthwhile Travel

Twice in the last week, I've been involved in planning for meetings of environmental leaders from across the United States. They will be exciting and important gatherings -- and I'm quite uncomfortable about making those plans.

A denominational task force meeting will bring 15 of us, from all across the country, to southern California for a 3-day meeting. We'll spend time in prayer, strategic planning, developing new resources, and learning first-hand about complex eco-justice issues.

I'm also part of a coalition of leaders from the faith-based environmental movement that is trying to find a date and place for a national meeting. We need to coordinate the work of our agencies, enhance our collaboration, identify needed new resources and programs, and chart future directions for our slice of religious environmentalism.

In both cases, our ability to spend focused, extended time together will make a real difference. We'll be able to discuss emotionally difficult topics because we can make eye contact, and give a hug, and take a walk afterward. Conversations over meals and late at night will build trust and deepen commitment. We will learn about local issues, and meet local leaders. Being present with each other will give a vastly different character to our discussions, and allow us to achieve different results than would come from yet another round of emails and conference calls. These once-a-year meetings are important.

Here we are, though, some of the key environmental leaders in our faith communities, flying back and forth across the country. In our deep concern about acting on global climate change and other issues, we're adding substantially to the problem. The ease with which we decide to travel makes me uncomfortable.

In Orion Magazine last fall, Janisse Ray wrestled with similar questions in [*Altar Call for True Believers*](#). She reflected on an occasion where she traveled a long way to give a talk about climate change, and many people in her audience had also flown or driven long distances. In her article, she asks us:

Are we part of being change, or are we just talking about change? Do we consider every decision we make? Do we analyze our own impact and work to decrease it, day by day? ... [Or] do we justify harmful actions because they're done on behalf of the Earth? ... And, having been taught so well to act -- to be activists -- are we able to see that the best decisions may not look like action? That the right decision ... may be staying closer to home? Travel to these sorts of events does make a difference. But do we know when it makes enough of a difference to justify the trip?

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Several years ago, I was invited to give a series of talks in Hawaii. It would be an all expense paid trip, to a beautiful and fascinating location that I've never visited. I was very flattered to be asked. For several weeks, I agonized over whether to accept.

Finally, I wrote back to my friends in Honolulu and said no. I told them that I could not

justify flying 6,800 miles round trip, in order to give a talk about how we need to reduce our impact on the planet.

After the decision about not going to Hawaii, and in the face of choices about several other meetings in distant places, Eco-Justice Ministries established an informal policy about long-distance travel. To be considered justifiable, we need to assured of at least 20 "people hours" of programming and conversation for each 100 miles of 1-way travel.

So, when I was asked to speak to [a denominational gathering](#) in Connecticut last May, the planners and I talked up-front about the fact that I'd be flying 1,700 miles to get there. Over the course of the weekend, according to our guidelines, we'd need to engage folk in 340 "people hours" of interaction. To be sure that my travel met the policy, we not only scheduled a keynote address and a workshop session, but added on a Sunday morning in a large church, and a special ecumenical meeting with area environmental leaders. (I was also able to spend a delightful personal day with some dear friends.) We went way beyond the guidelines, and I still worry about whether the trip was worth the climate impact. But at least that factor was a conscious part of the planning.

Our travel policy means that I have declined occasions to speak and teach, or to participate in good events. I hope that, by saying no, I have been a teacher about how to make responsible choices. Sometimes, I'm sure, my staying at home provided a better and more memorable lesson that I could ever provide by making the trip.

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Is it worth it to use fossil fuels, and to generate greenhouse gasses, to go to a conference, or to a family gathering? It often seems dismissive to even ask that question. It is hard to say that a carefully planned event isn't worth my burning 4 gallons of gas. But we need to start asking those questions -- both those of us who are deciding when to travel, and those who are planning the events. As Janisse Ray said, "I want to hear of an organization that decides, because of the climate crisis, to cancel its annual conference."

Weighing the impact of our travel doesn't mean that we can't ever go to meetings. It does mean, as with my Connecticut trip, that the travel should be made as worthwhile as possible. Sometime, it means that we'll chose other ways of accomplishing our goals.

This fall, I taught a class at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City -- by teleconference. It was not as rich an experience as being there in person. I found it very odd to sit in an empty room in downtown Denver, and talk to a TV set. I think it was more expensive for the host church to arrange the technology connections than it would have been to fly me there. Clearly, though, it was the right way for me to be present for a short event in Kansas City. I look forward to doing more teleconferencing.

The Eco-Justice Ministries policy of 20 people hours per 100 miles is quite arbitrary. We may raise the standard sometime soon. But that dividing line does give us a way to begin to measure whether it is legitimate to for me to go to a meeting.

I urge you -- personally, as a church, or in your business -- to think about defining similar guidelines. Find a way to measure whether your travel justifies the use of scare fossil fuels and adding to the crisis of global warming. Just thinking about a policy is a worthwhile enterprise in itself. Once you have a rule of thumb, it allows you to discuss travel impacts

with others in a rational and helpful way.

Let me know what rules you would establish for your situation.

Shalom!
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