

# DEEP DIVE

with

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## We asked Audrey Kitagawa.....

**Can you share with us what role religious and interfaith leaders can play in addressing the threats of nuclear weapons and climate change?**

**Audrey Kitagawa:** The majority of the world's population adhere to some faith tradition or belief and represent a huge resource that can be mobilized to address two of the largest existential threats posed to human existence: environmental degradation and nuclear weapons. Communities of faith represent the moral, ethical voices that have been increasingly moving into action to address our global challenges.

On the environment, alarms were going off for years from scientists who indicated that we were on a trajectory of self-destruction if we did not change our behaviors to stem the environmental destruction that was taking place. Communities of faith took seriously the call to get engaged and they started networks to help grow a global movement. Today, there are hundreds of faith organizations that are dedicated to fighting environmental degradation, undertaking reforestation projects, water purification projects, and encouraging divestment from fossil fuel investments.

A pivotal change occurred in 2010 when the United Nations formed the [UN Interagency Task Force for Religion and Development](#). This opened the UN's doors to communities of faith to begin helping with its work. Two important initiatives in the [UN Environment Programme](#) were launched in 2017: the [Faith for Earth Initiative](#), and the [Interfaith Rainforest Initiative](#).

The Faith for Earth Initiative has three main goals. The first is to “inspire and empower faith organizations and their leaders to advocate for protecting the environment.” [1] The second is to “green faith-based organizations’ investments and assets to support the implementation of [SDGs](#).” [2] The third is to “provide them with knowledge and networks to enable their leaders to effectively communicate with decision-makers and the public.” [3]

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) galvanizes communities of faith to bring their moral authority to “protect the world’s rainforests and the indigenous peoples that serve as their guardians.”<sup>[4]</sup> It provides “a platform for religious leaders to work hand in hand with indigenous peoples, governments, civil society and business on actions that protect rainforests and safeguard those that serve as their guardians.”<sup>[1]</sup> IRI has released important documents that give specific guidance to communities of faith to educate themselves and their constituents as to what they can do to participate in the global mobilization to protect rainforests. These publications are the [Resource Guide On Rainforest Protection](#), [Forests and Pandemics](#), [Forest Restoration](#), [Tropical Forests and Climate Change](#), [Indigenous Peoples](#), and [Tropical Forests](#).

On the threat of nuclear weapons, faith leaders have taken strong stands against nuclear weapons. For example, [Pope Francis said that the use as well as the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral](#). Buddhist ethics teach non-violence, non-killing and peace. [His Holiness the Dalai Lama indicated that there is a need to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons](#) and end the production of weapons. Many faith based organizations have made the abolition of nuclear weapons an integral part of their mission.

The involvement of civil society and faith based organizations participated in the UN open ended working group (OWEG) meetings in 2013 and 2016 in the negotiations on a nuclear test ban treaty. Joining with [Mayors for Peace](#) and [Parliamentarians for Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament](#), [Religions for Peace](#), an international faith based organization, gathered endorsements for a joint statement from religious leaders, mayors and parliamentarians titled, [A Nuclear Weapons Free World: Our Common Good](#), which they presented to the OWEG negotiations to motivate governments to take serious and concerted action to ban nuclear weapons.

On January 22, 2021, the [Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) came into force, thanks in important measure to the vigorous engagement of civil society organizations which also included faith based organizations. Communities of faith can continue their mobilization to apply pressure on the remaining Member States that have not signed or ratified this Treaty to do so. The voices of faith communities have, in large part, declared nuclear weapons to be immoral. Increasing their activism and advocacy to end the possession, use, testing, manufacturing or stockpiling of nuclear weapons must continue. Putting pressure on governments to adhere to this Treaty <sup>[1]</sup> Ibid. can help to bring about the ultimate result we wish to see; a nuclear weapons free world.

**Voices: What actions can individuals take to positively impact these crucial issues?**

**Audrey Kitagawa:** On the environment, there are a number of ways individuals can immediately participate. First, each person should evaluate his/her own lifestyle. [ActNow](#) is an app based campaign initiated by the UN. It is designed to help people change their daily habits and make choices that would be cumulatively less harmful to the environment. The ten lifestyle changes which it advocates are: cutting down on food waste, taking 5 minute showers to cut down on water wastage, bringing your own bags while shopping instead of using plastic bags, driving less, turning lights off, shopping for local produce, eating plant based diets, recycling refilling and reusing bottles, unplugging from electrical circuits when not using devices, and shifting to zero waste fashion, which utilizes existing textile materials to their full capacity to cut down on wastage.

On nuclear weapons, each person can educate him or herself about this issue, and begin to get involved in groups that are dedicated to a nuclear weapons free world. For example, URI's Cooperation Circle, Voices for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons is spawning many exciting initiatives. It includes participants from different disciplines, and has former and current high level diplomats, activists, humanitarians, scientists, youth and members of different faith traditions. [The Nuclear Prayer](#) written by URI Founder and President Bishop William Swing is read before the start of every meeting. A weekly Fireside Chat series hosted by youth member Haneen Khalid, was launched earlier this year. A Youth Award for a young individual, youth initiative or organization that is dedicated to a world free of nuclear weapons was initiated last year, and many more plans are underway. I encourage people everywhere to support Voices For A World Free of Nuclear Weapons.

#### References:

[1] UN Environment website homepage

<https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative/why-faith-and-environment-matters>, [2] Ibid., [3] Ibid.,

[4] <https://interfaithrainforest.org>, [5] Ibid.