



**WITNESS  
FOR JUSTICE**

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## **Once You Knew: Climate Grief and the Courage to Act**

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Last February, I traveled to Houston to join faith leaders in protest outside CERAWeek, the fossil fuel industry's annual meeting of executives, investors, and policymakers. We stood shoulder-to-shoulder, praying for justice and calling for an end to the \$20 billion in fossil fuel subsidies—\$2 million a minute—that fuel planetary destruction. Imagine what that kind of funding could accomplish if redirected toward feeding the hungry or healing the land.

We also traveled to Freeport, Texas, a frontline community devastated by petrochemical expansion. Local leaders Gwen Jones, Melanie Oldham, and Manning Rollerson guided us through neighborhoods erased by smokestacks and poisoned soil. Where homes and churches once stood, there are now pipelines. Where Freeport and the Gulf of Mexico meet is too toxic to swim, fish, or drink. Most people have been displaced. Reparations remain a distant dream.

We were invited to bring water from our home communities for a sacred water ceremony on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico—a ritual of connection, lament, and hope. I carried water from Lake Erie, where I live, and stood on the shores of the Gulf, grief hollowing me out. As we gathered in prayer, one member of our group suddenly jumped into the ocean, intending it as a baptismal act, a gesture of sacred immersion in creation. But the locals recoiled. They had warned us: "You don't swim



here.” “That water could kill you.” Bacteria levels are known to cause flesh-eating infections. What he saw as a spiritual offering, they experienced as painful ignorance. That moment shattered something in me, and forced me to ask: am I really listening?

The next day, we took to the streets of downtown Houston in nonviolent resistance. We sang. We marched. As we approached the site, we divided into red and green zones, safety categories. The green zone was for supporters not risking arrest; the red was for direct action. Those in the red zone sat in the intersection, blocking traffic. Then mounted police charged. I watched in horror as eight peaceful protestors were violently arrested and others injured. It was clear: the police were not there to protect us, but to protect the billionaires behind the glass towers.

I carried that experience home, its ache, its rage, and above all, its clarity. We no longer have the luxury of witnessing from a distance. Not when real people are being harmed.

It’s a big reason why I said yes to leading the Climate Hope Campaign at the United Church of Christ. We launched Climate Hope Affiliates, a national network of local teams committed to addressing the twin crises of climate and justice. These chapters don’t just raise awareness—they organize, strategize, and act faithfully in their communities.

In the past week, we faced a painful setback. Despite significant public pressure, Congress passed a reconciliation bill that guts key climate investments from the Inflation Reduction Act. The new law dismantles some of the biggest actions the federal government has ever taken to fight climate change, including eliminating wind and solar funding, cutting environmental justice enforcement, and slashing programs to improve air quality and public health. These cuts are dangerous. They will make it harder to meet emissions goals, and they disproportionately harm the very communities who have already borne the brunt of environmental degradation.

But the fight is far from over.

Right now, Congress is debating the 2026 federal budget through a series of appropriations bills. Our job is to make sure that more damage isn't done. We're calling on lawmakers to protect funding for a clean and just energy system, including programs that advance renewable energy, expand EV infrastructure, hold polluters accountable, and improve public health. One critical focus is safeguarding the National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (NEVI) program, which aims to put an EV charger every 50 miles on major highways. It's a tangible, forward-looking investment in both climate action and economic access.

Faith communities across the country are stepping up. Through letters, town halls, and public witnesses, Climate Hope Affiliates are making our moral values heard.

Frances Moore Lappe once said, "Our real problem is not a heating planet... it is our own feelings of powerlessness." Climate Hope Affiliates exist to dissolve powerlessness—through courage, community, and committed action.

Grief is holy. But grief alone won't save us.

What will you do once you know?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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