

A MORAL LEGACY



In many traditions, there is a clear moral obligation to be the stewards of Creation. That role has never been more critical, or more tested, than now, when, to save our planet, we confront the climate crisis.

Taking responsibility for securing the future of our children and grandchildren is a core family value. Yet, though the moral argument for stewardship is clear, the form it should take and the path it should follow is often uncertain.

The Climate Legacy Initiative provides a powerful bridge that establishes our moral obligation in the law. As our legal system is intimately tied to and based on concepts of right and wrong, it needs to be updated to deal with the unprecedented wrong of climate change. Faith-based communities have a vital role to play in righting this wrong.

An Obligation to Act

The climate crisis forces us to reconsider our relationship to Planet Earth, to the law that purports to manage it, and, most importantly, to each other as guardians of our sacred home. Past strategies to contain human harm to the environment have focused on addressing degradation when it happens, curbing the worst problems. But this won't work with climate change, because it is our children and future generations who will face the worst problems.

We must bring moral accountability to the legal system both in the United States and around the world. This means explicitly recognizing the accountability of one generation to the next – and putting it into action. Moral philosophers point to many reasons why:

- The earth is held by past, present and future generations in common, as a species forming the community of humankind as a whole.

- As living members of a community, we benefit from the sacrifices and investments made by future generations.
- Succeeding generations cannot harm preceding ones, and so current generations should not inflict harm on their successors.
- Future generations are under-represented in legal and political processes, and thus the power of present generations to adversely affect their quality of life is imbalanced.
- A social contract requires each generation to pass on to the next one the gifts it has jointly inherited from the past.
- No generation should be deliberately favored or disadvantaged over another.
- No generation should have to envy the impersonal resources enjoyed by predecessor generations.
- The impact of environmentally degrading policies in the present tends to be long-term and therefore threatens future generations disproportionately.
- Present actions may not only inflict disadvantages on future generations but also deprive them of benefits.
- Scientific and technological advances have expanded the sphere of human control and thus present generations have a greater capacity to offset future risks.
- Future generations will have properties tomorrow, even if they do not have them now, and these will be shaped substantially by the values practiced by present generations.
- The policies of present generations will affect not only the interests of future generations, but also their rights and obligations their affected rights will impose on their contemporaries.
- Even if all individuals do not have offspring, all societies need and therefore have affection for their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and thus care about their future well-being at a minimum.

The task before us is to live up to this morality and to enshrine its principles in the law. Every person is endowed with rights by the Creator. The right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment – to a planet not devastated by climate change – is and must be foremost among them.