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First of all I want to congratulate the ad hoc group who pulled together this event – and to all of you for turning out today to explore together the theme of ‘joining the dots’ for climate justice. The fact there are 60 people here today, representing over 40 different groups right across the community in Northern Ireland, is testament to the vibrant civil society and faith groups in Northern Ireland. We have people here from all the major churches, from the Inter-faith forum, the Bah’ai community, the GAA, the Mothers’ Union, Trócaire, as well as several key non-faith groups such as Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful. We have many Laudato Si animators too. The positive spirit here today points to a deep commitment and a shared hope that we can build something together.

I am really humbled and honoured to be here to share a bit of my own story with you – and my reflections on how we need to join the dots for climate justice. This is a topic so close to my own heart. Hopefully in the time we have together this morning we can start to join dots and formulate ideas and plans around how to work on climate justice in this crucial year where we know there will be a general election.

A bit about me

Before getting into the details of our topic, I wanted to share just a little about my own story on waking up to the climate crisis. I really believe that each of us has an important story to tell – and that the more we share our own stories, the more we can find our own place in this great story and respond in the best way to the challenge we are facing as a world today.

I grew up in Central Scotland – in the shadow of the Grangemouth oil refinery. One of my early memories is waking up in the middle of the night during the winter and looking out the window. It was snowing heavily – yet the entire street was bright orange – as bright as day light due to the flares from the oil refinery. All of our neighbours worked in the refinery and most of my mum’s family worked in the North Sea oil industry. In fact some of my family still do. This early childhood experience of heavy industry fascinated me. I did my first project on global warming at school when I was 13 – examining the impact of Grangemouth on the environment. What I read back in school books in the 1980s said that by the mid-2020s the world would be feeling the impacts of global warming – caused by burning fossil fuels. I understood that we couldn’t solve this without changing the economy – since everyone depended on oil and gas. My response was to study economics and to try to understand if there was another way of seeing and thinking about the economy which was more sustainable, more just. I found that there most definitely are different ways of conceiving of the economy – but it all comes back to which deep values we decide both individually and institutionally to put at the centre of our decision-making.

These studies brought me eventually to Trócaire in Maynooth, County Kildare and to work for 20 years on influencing Irish and UK policy on economic and environmental justice. We had some quite extraordinary successes during that time. We managed to get the Irish

government to convene the landmines conference in the early 2000s and to get them banned; we influenced the government to raise the aid budget in UK and Ireland; we fought together for cancellation of third world debt; we were instrumental in the creation of the SDGs in 2015 and perhaps most significantly – we got the Irish government to become the first in the world to legislate to divest their sovereign wealth fund from fossil fuels in 2017.

For me, Pope Francis' publication of *Laudato Sí*, a fantastic letter on the environment, was a major turning point in my professional and personal commitment to this work. It was a moment when I joined the dots between my faith and action on climate and ecology more generally. If you haven't read it – I would encourage you to do so. *Laudato Sí* was written for everyone, not for Catholics. It makes the point that caring for our common home is something we can all do together. God, the divine creator, didn't give us different planets for Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus. He gave us one to share. Here in Northern Ireland you can understand what this means better than most! The call to care for our common home is also a call to building unity in diversity, to radical collaboration with each other. The gift of *Laudato Sí* has given birth to a movement in the Catholic Church which I am honoured to lead in a voluntary capacity right now as board chair.

During the pandemic, after 18 years service, I decided to move from Trócaire to help start a brand new organisation called FaithInvest – where I am now the CEO. This organisation has a focus on mobilising all faiths to put their own resources to work – especially their financial investments – to help shift the economy towards greater sustainability. Faith communities count for 80% of the world's population, they have over \$4 trillion on stock markets, and own or manage around 12% of the habitable land. All of them have signed up to environmental action in recent years and started to implement this in their own organisations. Many are vocal in public advocacy around climate justice, with over 30% of all divestment commitments being from faith groups. Our mission is to make sure they don't just preach or campaign about this – but use their critical influence, especially their money, and put their assets where their mouth is! Or as Rabbi Jacob Seigal said recently: 'put your money where your soul is'.

Where we are at now

In terms of the climate and biodiversity, if you are here today, I probably do not need to tell you that we are in a dire crisis. We now know that last year was the warmest year in over 100,000 years – or from when humans walked on this planet. We can all see the unravelling of the seasons ourselves now with our own eyes. We know that the pace of change is accelerating too – we can almost feel the tipping points all around us. I think one of the first things we need to do as a group of people is first acknowledge this: it is scary. It is also very sad. I think coming into 2024 more than any other there is a deep sense of weariness amongst those who understand and care about what is happening. Looking at all the graphs and seeing the pictures from round the world, there is a feeling that somehow this is beyond us – it has suddenly gone far beyond what we can do anything about.

I think then when we look at what is happening around us in terms of response to the crisis at a political level, things can also look quite bleak. There is no point in sugar coating this. I was at the COP28 summit in Dubai just before Christmas and I think it is fair to say that in my

30 years of working on this topic we hit rock bottom. I don't say that lightly. I am a firm believer in multilateralism and the role of the UN, but it still beggars belief that the process for agreeing on how to respond to the climate crisis – which remember is 85% caused by fossil fuel combustion – would be hosted by a petrostate and chaired by the head of an oil company. And this year's COP will also be in such a state, Azerbaijan. You could not make it up. It makes that satirical film 'Don't Look Up' from 2022 seem like a moderate version of our current reality! It really is like the tobacco industry leading the charge for tackling smoking and lung cancer. The whole COP process is badly in need of reform – removing the 2500 oil and gas lobbyists from the process and restricting the COP to the negotiations would be a good start.

There were some glimmers of hope at COP28. The mention of fossil fuels in the final text for the first time in 30 years of negotiations is certainly a step forward – but given that it was well known in the 1980s (I wasn't a child genius) and we have been talking for 28 years whilst glaciers melt and the world burns, it is hard to get excited. Someone recently called me 'jaded' for saying this – maybe I am. But I see little point right now in latching on to Pyrrhic victories. Another slither of hope is that governments have kind of promised more finance towards the loss and damage caused by climate change – almost a billion dollars. But again, when the USA, the largest polluter on earth cumulatively, promises \$17 million to this fund it almost feels like a mockery of the whole process.

Real hope for me came from two areas – neither of which was part of the official negotiations. The first is the decision of 12 countries to sign up for a new fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty. This is a campaign that started a couple of years ago calling for a specific UN treaty which tackles the *real* underlying cause of most of our climate emissions, namely the fossil fuel industry. The fact that fossil fuels have not even been mentioned in the official negotiations until this COP yet represent 85% of the problem – and are controlled by less than 100 countries – means that such a treaty is essential. We can't 'hope' for a just transition away from fossil fuels – it requires a balanced and negotiated exit through a UN treaty process. During COP 28 Colombia became the first oil producing country to sign on to the treaty process – with others to follow soon. The atmosphere in the room when they signed on was electric. I was so glad to be there to witness history. The President of Colombia named Pope Francis and Laudate Deum, his pre-COP letter, in the reason for his decision.

The other sign of hope was the faith community coming together. At COP 28 there was a great initiative called the 'Faith Pavilion'. This was a meeting space for people of faith to come together to discuss how we are responding to the crisis. It was a fantastic new opportunity for bringing faiths together and discussing a whole myriad of issues from biodiversity to food systems change. I was there on finance day to open up a discussion on how faiths can re-align their investments to help tackle the climate crisis. All the videos, including my own talk, can be found on the YouTube channel. This trend of faiths joining forces in my mind is one of the most important developments today, especially in the face of so much division and conflicts between faiths. The faith pavilion could well represent a model for future climate action in every country, city in the world.

How to respond

In the face of all of this, it is very easy to feel disempowered and frankly paralysed. It is also a fact that many people are now experiencing climate anxiety, grief and depression, particularly younger people. It is heavy stuff – and I have experienced it myself. I went through my own struggle with this especially after I had my children and it led me to write my story in *Climate Generation* – a kind of working through my sense of grief that the world my kids are being born into is not the one I would want for them.

I think we all need to start from the stark reality of the situation – from the truth – but not allow ourselves to get stuck there. We need ways to deal with this emotional response, which for many has a deep spiritual resonance. We need to mark this somehow – to enable us to move on from it. In this marking, acknowledging, lamenting, the role of community is key. Think about how we on this island deal with grief: we know that it requires a whole family and community to move through the sadness and there is great consolation in sharing our grief. We can help each other and literally pull each other up with compassion when it gets us down.

My experience is that beyond that sense of sadness, if you manage to step out of it, there is a whole other world of compassion in action. As Leonard Cohen said: ‘there is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in’. In fact, if we think of our great heroes who struggled for human rights, the end of Apartheid, for emancipation of women, for any great cause, they all had one thing in common: they found hope where everyone only saw despair and destruction. Each of us has to find within us the source of that hope. I think as a person I am indelibly marked with this hope since we as a family faced this when I was a child – when I was just 6 we lost my father in a car crash and then our house in a fire. Despite this my mum taught us about a loving God and what it means to live in hope.

Greta Thunberg also had a great saying on hope which I agree with: hope comes when we act and only then. This is also my experience. When you step forward and take action you find hope. Hope suddenly seems all around. Joanna Macy, the American philosopher and activist also writes about this in her book ‘Coming back to Life’ – she talks about active hope. Active hope is about living into the future we want to see and building it here and now. For those of us of the Christian faith, there is a deeper meaning to this hope too. It is about resurrection. It is an escatological hope – one that is rooted in a belief that Jesus died and rose up again from death, and in doing so redeemed the whole world. Every time we move out of the despair into hope, and act with compassion, we are bearing that message of resurrection in our lives.

Living Active Hope

So where do we start in terms of building hope and fighting for climate justice? We almost need a map to guide us through this particular moment of transition we are experiencing right now – in determining where to put our efforts individually and together. I use two maps in my head when I want to think of where to start. I didn’t invent either of them but find them very useful. The first is a diagram of three concentric circles. On the outer circle is what I call the ‘circle of concern’. These are all the issues that worry us – regardless of whether we can have any impact about them. The inner circle then is our circle of control.

These are the things we can directly do something about. The one in the middle, which is the one we often don't think enough about is the circle of influence. These are the things we can't often change on our own or directly, but can start to change if we make the effort to learn something new or especially if we connect with others in our community.

When it comes to action on climate change and environment, I think you will agree that if you start with your circle of control, and move outwards there are many many things we can do if we choose to change. I wrote a lot about this in my book *Climate Generation* when I was figuring out what I could do as a mum with two boys. The circle of control often involves domestic choices – on our energy usage, our transport, our food choices, how we bank and where we invest. We can control many of these things through our consumption patterns. The circle of influence, however, takes this one step further: what if we engaged with others, like we are doing today, and decided to work together – to influence our consumer choices, to jointly apply for community based energy grants, to set up community repair cafes or other initiatives, to tell our story to the media, to speak together to politicians about our concerns and what we are doing? You see what I am saying – so much more can be achieved, and so much hope can be generated, when we start to build community collaboration. When we overcome our differences, whilst respecting our diversity, and start to build something new together! It is amazing how quickly the landscape can change when the power of community is unleashed. I'd like you think about these three circles for a bit and see how you might shift something and what supports you need to do that. In FaithInvest, our area of expertise is in the financial side of things – that is such an important lever in shifting how we bank and invest.

The second mental map I use is based on Joanna Macy's philosophy. I think of three different kinds of action – similar to what Joanna Macy talks about. I think this could be useful in terms of shaping a broad-based climate movement and joining a lot of dots. Think of it like a bridge. On the far side of the bridge are future focused actions: building the future we need. On this side there are the types of action are about preventing damage. The bit in the middle are about carving out pathways to the future from where we are now – transition.

Think about what these different 'callings' in the great transition, or 'great turning' as Thomas Berry called it, look like? The 'resisters' might be people who feel called primarily to protest – to be on the streets, to raise their voices to call attention to the damage we are doing. They may feel so passionately about this they are prepared to put their bodies on the line in peaceful direct action. They are like prophets who are often misunderstood but without them frankly nothing would change. They see the future already in ways perhaps we refuse to.

The ones on the other side of the bridge are those who are working to make the vision of the future we need a reality already. They are the businesses of the future, the institutions of the future, the homes, the schools, the faith communities of the future. They have often taken the science and technology and started to build the prototypes and the models of what can be done. I find it astonishing that almost all the technology and blueprints for what we need to solve this crisis already exists. The work of the 'practical visioners' is essential.

The bit in the middle is often forgotten but is absolutely essential too – these are the people carving out the paths, which enable the scale down of the old and the scale up of the new. They often work in politics or policy – but increasingly also in the world of investments and finance. Without creating the policy environment where we can readily invest in the new, the climate solutions, systems cannot change and we will remain stuck in the resistance. When we start to find institutional pathways – even really narrow ones at first, suddenly we will start to see an explosion of climate solutions at scale. This is already happening but needs to happen much faster. This is essentially where the work of FaithInvest comes into play in helping align our investments to the vision we have of the future rooted in faith.

When you think of the climate transition this way you soon realise that not everyone can do all three of these to the same degree or at the same time. As a society which is trying to address climate action, however, we need all three – and we need to respect all three as essential work in part of this bigger picture. Some people feel called to build the future, some feel more called to resist and others have the skills to navigate the complexity of transition. However, everyone has a role in one of these and we can help each other.

One of the pitfalls I have often seen in the climate movement we think everyone needs to do one of these things (usually resistance), when the societal change we need requires everyone – and a rich diversity of talents and skills. All of us can do a little bit of everything, especially at key points in the journey, but we need to share the conviction that we are all involved in building the one bridge together. I'd like you to think about which of these tasks you feel primarily called to – and how you can support the others who feel called to other tasks in shifting society towards a sustainable future.

Conclusion

Coming here this morning I can feel that there is a moment building here in Northern Ireland towards faiths leading in climate action. Despite the dark times we are living in – or perhaps due to them – there is an awakening that this is EVERYONE's issue. It isn't something just for youth or 'environmentalists'. It is important to recognise that within this whole there are many parts. In the Christian sense, we say we are one body, with many parts. This sense of communion is essential and is also a prophetic sign of healing between communities. The task ahead is to continue to foster this spirit of unity and to start to understand the potential for collaboration at many different levels. I hope I have given some pointers in this direction.

At times people ask me how I can remain positive and smiling when things are a difficult as they seem right now. How can I be optimistic? I reply that there is a difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is a feeling which can change – it is almost like wishful thinking. In Ireland we say 'ah sure, it will be grand'. If we continue as we are, I can tell you it won't be grand! Hope, however, is a doing word. It comes from a gritty determination to refuse to believe this is the best we can do – that this is how the story ends. Hope comes from a firm belief, from faith that with God's help, we can still join the dots and re-write the future. We can sow seeds of a new future. But the only way to do that is together. Thank you.