Episode 9 Transcript: Everyday Climate Champions Podcast

The Black Church's Inspiring Work in Environmental Justice

George Dy (host): Hi there. Thank you for joining me, George Dy, your host for this episode of Everyday Climate Champions. Today's topic is the Black Church's Inspiring Work in Environmental Justice.

Picture this: a world where everyone, regardless of their background, has equal access to clean air, safe water, and a healthy environment. Sounds like a no-brainer, right? Well, that's the essence of environmental justice. It's about recognizing that the impacts of environmental issues like pollution, climate change, and resource depletion disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Today we have a very special guest with us, somebody who has been at the forefront of the environmental justice movement. Reverend Dr. Ambrose Carroll has been instrumental in advocating for policies that prioritize the well-being of marginalized communities.

As the CEO of Green the Church, he has worked tirelessly to mobilize the power of faith-based communities, inspiring action and fostering environmental consciousness across the nation.

Green the Church is located in Oakland, California, the ancestral and traditional lands of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe.

It's really great to speak with you today.

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): Likewise, glad to be here.

George Dy (host): I'd love to just get started by learning about your background and what motivated you to eventually start a ministry centered around environmental justice?

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): Yeah, so I like to tell people that even though I grew up in Oakland, California, that my family's originally from Hollywood.

That is Holly, Louisiana down in the woods. Mom attended Grambling University, school teacher, and dad attended Southern University, where he majored in agriculture and then went on to ITC Morehouse School of Religion and became clergy.

I mention that because although we moved around the country, you know, different pastoral locations, we always went home in the summers. I have five siblings, two older brothers, three younger sisters, and our connection to the land is a connection to family.

Our movement into black family, being people of the African diaspora is also a movement back towards the land. And I think that it is that impetus, that connection to land and soil, to air, to the Earth itself that allowed me to embrace creation care and environmental justice.

George Dy (host): Could you tell us a little bit about the mission of Green the Church and how that came to be?

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): Yeah. Green the Church is a sustainability initiative designed to tap into the power and purpose of the Black church community and expand the role of churches as centers for environmental and economic resilience. As the environmental organization of the Black church, we strive to teach faith communities, environmental organizations, and individual practitioners, how to work in concert in order to, "green the black church." Green the Church was created and developed to do a broad range of things, whether that be conservation – we call it God in nature – food sovereignty, building efficiency, renewable energy.

George Dy (host): How has your approach to environmentalism evolved from where it started?

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): We started 2010 and this issue of environmentalism hasn't been a kitchen table conversation for our communities. It simply has not been our language. Our language centers more around revival. You don't find a lot of people talking about being environmentalists, but we do believe that anything old, in decay, can be made brand new again.

And so really, as we started, we really were just trying to translate the things that the African American church and community did to the environmental and sustainability movement.

People kept asking, is the Black church community interested in climate change? Are you interested in the environment? And I found the question laughable because we do so many things as a culture and a community that are Earth-centered.

We fight pollution, right? A lot of our communities are in very polluted areas, so a lot of our churches go to bat against big oil around cleanup, around a lot of these toxic sites. We're always on the front lines.

We've been doing more with less for so long. So when people start talking about this movement of how to use less, these are things that our grandparents have been teaching us for years – we just don't talk about it in the same light.

So when I started, it was not necessarily to teach Black folk how to be environmentalists, but to share with the environmental movement all of the rich things that the Black church and community were already doing.

And then as we have evolved, we found we were then equipped because of those connections to help individual leaders and organizations get the resources that they need.

George Dy (host): I read about the environmental justice movement and how it dates back several decades and has ties to the Civil Rights Movement and credits, specifically, people of color for its creation.

Over the past few years, we've witnessed notable strides in federal environmental justice policy. Take for instance, Justice40, an initiative aiming to allocate a minimum of 40% of federal investments in sectors like clean energy and affordable housing directly to marginalized communities. Or the creation of the White House Office of Environmental Justice.

How do these bolster the impact of Green the Church's endeavors?

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): We've had the good fortune, being a part of the groundswell over the last 14 years, so we've been able to work with legislatures, both statewide and national to push that a lot of these things come to fruition.

I now sit on the NEJAC, the National Environmental Justice Action Committee for the Environmental Protection Agency. I've been able to be a part of bringing the church and community together to say, "These are things that we want and need." And now we are attempting to make sure, from a Justice 40 standpoint, that all of the funding and resources coming from that legislation gets to the communities that need them.

And so for us it is an exciting time, but still a challenging time because we really want to empower communities of color, communities that have been marginalized, to begin to stand on their own.

I pray that a few years from now, we will not only lower our carbon footprint, but also that people of color, our leaders, those who go to our HBCUs and to our seminaries, are able to actually work in this field. We are praying that our friends in the movement will also stand up to make sure that organizations like mine, that have been striving on shoestring budgets, can really now prepare our own tables to do this work.

One place I've been honored to work is in the City of Berkeley. And we elected to be a hundred percent electric as a city by 2030, 2035 or so. And so African American populations, populations of color who have been gentrified, who are still holding on to a lot of these homes in South Berkeley, we need to begin to get the information to help us to shift. All of our 18 or 19 churches that we own as people of color - we need the resources, the time, the information to do things like purchase electric stoves and ovens. And so now that we've done some education because those funds are coming down. We believe that we can work in concert with our local utility and also our local legislative bodies.

My organization represents buildings that are commercial, but these buildings are a little bit different because during redlining when Black people could not own homes, and when we bought homes in our communities, we paid perhaps double for them and they did not appreciate in the same way that others did. And many that could not buy, put their funds together. They sold chicken dinners and sweet potato pies and bought these church buildings as a collective.

And so right now a lot of those buildings are in disarray and I'm really praying that our cities and individuals will make sure that these faith buildings get the upgrades that they need. And so that's one thing that we can do in the inner cities and rural areas of this country in a huge way.

George Dy (host): I am curious if you could share some of your long-term goals, and how both members and non-members could help to advance your mission.

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): One thing that we are in discussion with other nonprofits about, is the buildout of a Green the Church clean energy network. We could build a trade union of our African American clean energy providers, clean tech companies, plumbers, electricians lawyers - that focuses on the retrofitting of all of our African American-held property.

In 1910, black folks owned 19 million acres of land, but were lynched off of that land in the South. We moved to the North and the West and we bought a lot of church buildings. So it's our largest asset and we really want to see those assets brought into the movement. We want our young people to be a part of workforce development around those buildings. We want them to move into green jobs.

We are in a new era, not unlike the Industrial Revolution. So, it's about pulling together all of those assets and creating industry.

We also want to make sure our young people get out to our National Parks in a very big way all across this country. We want to make sure that we understand our history of African American Buffalo soldiers being those who helped to make sure that National Parks were clean and pristine and that we can move in and out of them.

We want to have more conversations with Native Americans that understand that people from the African continent and those native to Turtle Island were working together a long time before the Mayflower ever sailed.

Finally, we want to make sure that we're helping to put together legislation to make sure that, economically, we are thriving as a people and thriving as a nation.

George Dy (host): That's inspiring – it's quite a holistic picture. What excites you about what's happening in climate action and environmental justice today and in the future?

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): You know, regardless if I'm talking about this in the inner cities or with leaders of other environmental organizations, we are at a pivotal time in this nation.

There's a lot of fear. There's a lot of unknown. There's a lot of othering. And for us as an organization, our ultimate goal is to help bring about what Martin King and others called the beloved community.

I can tell it best through this narrative. The California State Baptist Convention owns 110 acres of land in Fresno County and we're looking at how to bring a lot of the things I talk about to bear on that land for brothers and sisters – whether they're in Watts or Oakland or Berkeley – that they can go to that land and learn about what it means to be stewards of the planet.

And so opportunities really not only to put our hands in the soil, but to put ourselves in close proximity to one another as Americans, as human beings, and get past the fear that we have one towards another.

George Dy (host): That's a beautiful vision. What advice could you give to your community and those outside, to stay positive, stay motivated, get involved?

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): I think that the message that we have right now is the message of that story of Noah's Ark, right? – that it's time to get aboard because it really is going to rain.

What I'm saying is that we must pay really close attention right now. When you look at what the scientists are telling us about what's going on with our water, with our air, with pollution – we don't have a lot of time. So the message is, "Get aboard. It's going to rain."

George Dy (host): Thank you Pastor Carroll. I really appreciate your time. I can't wait to see how many lives you change.

Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll (guest): George, I thank you so much and to your audience: just a good God bless you and keep up the great work.

George Dy (host): Hey, listeners, Pastor Carroll has shared some great resources on critical environmental justice policies, including the Justice 40 Initiative. Just check out the show notes below to find links with more information.

For this episode of Everyday Climate Champions, the sound designer was Trevor Skerbe, and the executive producer and editor was Dalya Massachi. I'm your host, George Dy. Our full production team is listed below in the show notes music in this episode by Blue Dot Sessions.