

Faith Harris

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Faith Harris: I'm Faith Harris, uh, Executive Director for Virginia Interfaith Power and Light.

Adrian: Thanks. Um, do you like to be, um, like, do you like to be addressed as Reverend Harris or Reverend Doctor?

Faith Harris: I like being, um, addressed as Faith.

Adrian: Okay.

Faith Harris: Yes. I am a Reverend and a Doctor, but, or Doctor of Ministry. Yes, but I prefer my, that's my name is Faith. Those are nomenclature or titles. So,

Adrian: Cool. Okay. Thanks.

Um, so as the director of Interfaith Power and Light, um, I know that you're also on the Virginia Council for Environmental Justice.

Faith Harris: Yes.

Adrian: Okay. Um, can you just, could you, would you be able to describe, um, what the Council for Environmental Justice does? Like, what is your role, and what kinds of power does the council have?

Faith Harris: So, the Environmental Justice Council was established under, it started under, uh, Governor McAuliffe. Um, and it, As he was leaving and his administration was winding up, um, he established it and, uh, we started, and actually our organization along with several other coalition partners, uh, appealed to the governor to create it. Um, and we thought it was really important. It was a model that we thought could actually make a difference in Virginia. And, um, so he, you know, he did do that. Um, and, uh, we were, I've had the pleasure and really privilege and responsibility to be part of it since its inception.

Um, so the role that the Environmental Justice Council, the way that we envisioned it, that, is that it would be a avenue or a clearinghouse where, um,

you know, community members, residents, citizens of the Commonwealth could, uh, appeal, make appeal, um, share stories, um, , express, uh, concern about, uh, permits, about air quality issues, about, uh, water quality, about, uh, other kinds of environmental justice kinds of, um, concerns and issues occurring in their community. Uh, anything from landfills, pipelines, uh, you know, water contamination, all of those kinds of things. And a body that could hear those concerns, uh, respond to them, learn as much as possible, share that information with the governor as well as the General Assembly, and, uh, make appeal and recommendations to the administration to actually, um, you know, rectify those concerns. So that's, you know, how we envisioned it.

Um, and I think for a good part of it, uh, we've been able to do that. We have the responsibility of, of, uh, you know, taking in that information and, um, you know, kind of curating reports every year and submitting those to the governor. Um. And I think we've, you know, we've been able to, uh, I feel good about the fact that we've been, we are a body that people are increasingly learning, are, um, are interested, that we're interested in hearing their concerns, learning about their, the issues, um, in their community and, um, and are, you know, using whatever kind of influence and power that we do have to try to bring attention to it.

Adrian: Cool. Great. Um, so in terms of where the council is at right now, or what you're doing right now, or in the past year, I saw in your annual report from 2022, um, a letter requesting to rehire for the role of director of environmental justice in the DEQ. Um, could you say more, or would you be able to tell me about how, about what the council is asking for in terms of environmental justice in the Department of Environmental Quality.

Faith Harris: Um, so, I mean, I think it's kind of somewhat self explanatory. We, um, you know, it was one of the recommendations that we've long, um, you know, appealed to the administration, to the various administrations to create, that office. Um, and, uh, we had hired, uh, under, uh, Governor Northam, there was a, a director hired, um, and when the new administration came in, um, some, for some reason, um, and we're not all the way clear on [00:05:00] what all the reasons were, but that, um, position was vacated. First it was demoted and then it was, um, uh, vacated. Um, you know, the, person, Renee Hoyos, was separated from the position.

So, um, it is, uh, it's an important role, um, for the Department of Environmental Quality that, you know, has the responsibility, and even more so now, um, with the, uh, you know, with the Air Board and Water Board no longer having, uh, authority to approve or, or, you know, over any kind of permitting, um.

It's even more important for the Department of Environmental Quality to be concerned about that, to have, um, that knowledge to be curating the information, to be, uh, engaging and interfacing with communities on the issues that are, um, impacting the environments where they live. And, um, you know, having, you know, concentrated, uh, you know, professional, uh, staffing in the Department of Environmental Equality that is concerned about and is focused on environmental justice is critically important. And so, not Um, that's a, that's a important role.

Now, there are, still are coordinators, um, but to not have, um, a director who can help, um, kind of lead the charge and lead that work is, is still something that, um, we feel, that we believe, uh, needs to be, um, filled. That's a position that needs to be filled.

Adrian: Great. Yeah, thank you. Um, I'm gonna try, I'm, I'm gonna kind of like change subjects now.

Faith Harris: Okay.

Adrian: So, I'd like to ask you how and where you see communities of faith and faith leadership supporting environmental justice goals in Virginia, um, like, recently in the past few years.

Faith Harris: So, there are a couple of, I, I, I could give you a couple of, uh, examples, one maybe a little longer ago, but, um, and which really kind of were for Virginia Interfaith Power and Light.

It was one of the first pastors that we worked really intensely with, and that was Pastor Paul Wilson of Union Hill in Buckingham County, Union Hill Baptist Church, uh, in in Buckingham County, when they were, um, um, resisting the uh, the um, compressor station, uh, being built there as well as the pipeline going through that pristine Freedman's, uh, African American Freedman's community.

Uh, Pastor Paul used to say quite often that he never knew he was an environmentalist until he had this challenge, until people, membership in his congregation, uh, you know, saw trees being felled a hundred feet off of their back porches. And so, um, this is the kind of, uh, thing that often, you know, awakens, um, that passion and interest and concern on the part of, um, you know, faith leaders.

But I think, so he's one person. Um, and he, um, you know, in a very, in a very, you know, practical way address those issues for his community and, and stood up for his, his membership. Um, but I think there are, uh, faith leaders have a unique role and a responsibility, but they also have unique influence because they are, engaged with people each and every week, uh, numbers of people that they can, um, you know, help to educate and bring, and bring awareness of the issues too.

But also those same people can, can help, um, those, their faith leaders learn about what they're experiencing in their homes and in their, um, you know, in the communities where they live. Um, and we believe that the faith voice is critically important to this issue for a number of reasons.

First of all, when you think about environmental justice, historically, it started because faith, faith leaders and, and community residents got together and actually, you know, resist, uh, you know, address the issue in Warren County, right? Um, with the, um. Yeah. Um, the UCC church.

But it was also, I can't, I was trying to think of the chemical that they had dumped. Uh, I can't remember what it is now. I had a little COVID a few weeks ago. I have COVID brain, but, but I, but, but environmental justice, we, you know, we often, we trace it back to that time, right. And, uh, recognizing that it was faith leaders, Benjamin Chavis and some, and others who were really, uh, you know, intricately and intimately involved in the community and involved in the, in the work.

Um, But I, but you can even take it further uh, back, because I think when we talk about environmental justice, when the way that I [00:10:00] approach it as a minister, um, I recognize that this is, this is social justice, right?

It's not, um, it's not a separate issue, uh, from social justice. It is actually, uh, what it means to achieve social justice, um, um. And without, um, achieving environmental justice, any of the other social justice issues, no matter what they might be, um, cannot really thrive. Um, they're, they're dependent on, you know, people being able to live, uh, healthy lives, to be able to live in, um, you know, unpolluted, um, you know, communities, uh, to not have to be concerned about air quality and water quality and soil quality.

Um, but also, um, environmental justice has, you know, grave economic impact as well. Um, those same communities when, you know, when you choose, or when, or industry and government gets together and chooses to cite polluting industry in black, brown, uh, low wealth, moderate wealth communities,

indigenous communities, it, that means that those communities can't build wealth on the land that they even own.

And that's one of the, that's kind of, that's supposedly the basic, you know, lowest rung of reaching, you know, middle, the middle class, or, you know, as we talk about, the American dream. Um, if I own land and I build my home and then some corporation or industry is allowed to build in my community right next to me, um, you know, a polluting industry, then I've lost the, I've lost the, the property values.

Um, and that there are, so there are a number of level, uh, levels and ways in which, uh, African American, uh, Latin communities, low wealth, white rural communities are experiencing, um, those, that kind of injustice. And that's why, um, for me. This is the most important, um, work, um, related to, one of the most important works related to environmental justice, and that it intersects with all, almost all the others.

Um, and so if we can achieve environmental justice, we can actually give people, uh, opportunity to actually experience what, you know, some people call freedom. Um, and so for me that's, that's important and that's what, that's the work of faith communities.

And then the other part of it is that faith communities, every tradition, no matter whether it's Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, they all have some mandate or principle or some way of talking about the importance of caring for neighbor.

But, so, and therefore, also caring for Earth. And you can't care for your neighbor without also caring for the Earth that sustains their lives. And so that's, for me, what, um, you know, how I understand the importance, and the influence, and the value of the faith voice in the, uh, climate and environmental justice, uh, movement.

Adrian: Wow, that was really comprehensive.

Faith Harris: Oh well, thank you.

Adrian: Yeah, you just answered, like, most of the questions I had, so, um, but I did want to, um, ask you kind of about this. So this is a specific, like, Christian idea, um, that, uh, our practitioner, Nathaniel Kurtz, um, pastor, uh, in Newport News brought to me. When we were talking about the role of his faith-based organizing and their environmental justice struggle around coal dust air

pollution there, um, it's that idea of like pneuma or pneumatology, this sort of like, um, like P N E U M A .

Faith Harris: Mm hmm. That spirit. Yeah.

Adrian: Can you help me understand like what that is and what that means?

Faith Harris: So that's talking about, uh, that's the study of the Spirit, uh, Holy Spirit, right, in the, in the Christian tradition. Um, and so I'm not sure what, how he was, what context he was, uh, how he was using it. But I think the idea of, um, when, uh, you look in the, in the Hebrew Bible, in the, uh, chapters in the Genesis story, um that, uh, the Creator breathed into the human the breath of life.

That's Pneuma. Right? That's the breathing in from the divine, um, life into the earth, into the human, into, um, into reality, actually. And so it's, it kind of starts there. Um, and then, you know, in the Christian, in the New Testament, for instance, that idea of, um, the spirit indwelling and embodying, uh you know, [00:15:00] humans coming from the divine, um, awakening, uh, understanding, awakening, um, you know, love and devotion to God. And, or, and for, if you look at it from the perspective and following that thread from the Hebrew Bible all the way through the New Testament, you could say that that breathing in of the life into the human and into the earth, um, was actually the place where you could, you could say that that is how God is, shows up in, in, in the environment, shows up in the garden.

Um, and so, um, and, and it, and it makes the, the, it makes the work divine. Uh, it makes the work, um, you know, an eternal work for in the, in the minds of many, um, Christians. But also for other faith traditions as well.

Adrian: Yeah. And so I think like my question is, what can it mean to, um, to communities of faith in the environmental justice struggle in like the specific scenario in Newport News, in Norfolk, and in Hampton Roads, when folks are breathing in this coal dust that is like part of the environment that's been, like, extracted and exploited, and it's, like, you know, affecting their health, um, and their, like, abilities to, like, continue to live full lives.

Um, like, what, how do we understand, like, I guess, that relationship between, like, breath and, like, the ability to breathe, and that, like, divine breath?

Faith Harris: Yeah, so I, I think that that is, you know, a, a, a wonderful metaphor for what it means to be alive. So if you, uh, the breath, if the breath is

a gift from the, the Creator, from the, the, the one that you say is divine, right? The one that you say is, and you call God, then what right does, uh, an industry, or a government, or another entity have in taking that away, or preventing, um, you know, preventing that freedom, right?

That's why I related it to freedom, right? Um, to me, that's the purpose of life that each and every creature, um, be able to breathe freely, um, to be able to, to access and, um, and the gift of this earth, right, which is, you know, air, water, soil, what, what the soil is able to produce. Um, and so this is, you know, it is actually, you know, Lion King "Circle of Life" kind of thing, right?

You know, so if you, if there's an impediment to that very basic gift of God, breath of life, um, you, and your, it's, and it's impacting your ability to breathe freely, to breathe without illness, to not be asthmatic, or have COPD, or all the other lung diseases that come from constantly and continually breathing in polluting, uh, polluted air, but, but that coal ash for that specific, um, community.

I think it says, you know, it's, you know, and I don't want to get too theological, but it's kind of the opposite of God. It's demonic, right? To, to not, to have that very thing that God gives to all life, breath, uh, even plants have a breathing mechanism, right? That's something that is, is fundamental to all life.

And to have that impeded or trampled on by, by another entity is the opposite of, of God in my, in many ways.

Adrian: Wow. Yeah, thanks for helping, like, make that connection. Um, I, you know, time has flown and we really only have a few minutes left, um, but I want to bring it back to something that you said sort of at the beginning of our conversation, um, about how you understand, um, your faith practice working with your environmental justice practice.

Um, I was hoping you could help me understand better what faith-based, um, what faith based struggle offers that's different from, like, a secular orientation in, in the environmental justice movement?

Faith Harris: Well, I think, uh, the one thing that I have noticed is that there is, uh, this persistence of hope. Um, that in spite of, you know, getting up and seeing the news and watching and knowing [00:20:00] that 11, 000 people either were killed or are missing in, in Libya, right? A few, few weeks ago because of a flood. And we know that that is the result of, uh, of climate change, right? We know that it's a climate impact.

Um, that can make you feel really hopeless. That can make you say, um, you know, that there's, that we're really in for, you know, total and complete destruction. But I think the, the, um, the, the, the, the benefit, if you will, um, or the difference, um, in having a faith-based lens for this work is that, you know, I continually recognize that that breath was free, that that breath was given to all life, that that breath is the intention, that, that pneuma, right?

That was the intention of the, the universe, the divine, the creative, whatever your tradition is, I don't, you know, I don't, it doesn't have to be Christian. It can be any, any faith tradition, um, or any spirituality that, that, that there is a gift of life, um, that persists. And that somehow or another, it's baked into it, or there's the divine that is continually restoring it. However, whatever way you want to see that, there's that, there's that, uh, ability to hope and, uh, and repair in restoration, in revival, in renewing.

Um, and so, um, I often say of this work that you really actually need to be converted to this. It's another conversion. Because you have to really understand your faith from a completely different lens, and it doesn't matter what tradition you're talking about.

Because this is, becomes, and this is, and when you do make that commitment and then have that conversion, then you actually see that we can all come to the, you know, we can all come to the same table, and we're all talking about and working on the same issue. And for me, that is very hopeful because a lot of religion, religious traditions, um, have actually fostered and fomented division rather than, uh, rather than unity and community.

Um, you know, we don't have to conform, we don't all have to be the same, but we can have this dialogue and we can all work together, um, to achieve, um, you know, to achieve this, this, this vision of a thriving world, where justice actually is the, um, you know, based on justice, um, where justice is actually the thing that holds, uh, calls us all together and calls us together.

Adrian: Beautiful. Yeah. That's basically it for me.

Faith Harris: Okay.

Adrian: Yeah.

Faith Harris: Alright, great.

Adrian: That's all my questions.

Faith Harris: Okay.

Adrian: Um, it was pretty short, but, um, yeah, like I said, you've, uh, really covered it all. So, thank you.

Faith Harris: You're welcome.

Adrian: Is there anything that I asked about that you wanted to add on or expand on?

Faith Harris: Um, I did have something, but it, it, it fled away, it floated away, so I forgot what it is, so I can't call it back.

Uh, I do, I just think that, you know, we definitely need more faith of voices, um, and we need people, and that's, that's the, you know, that's the passion and commitment of my work.

Oh, I know, the one thing I do want to say is I think, um, oftentimes the other difference is that, that conversion also requires, um, an understanding that you can't just add this on to, and I think this is another difference in secular, for me. Not all people of faith tradition believe in this, but, um, that you can't just add this to what is.

It actually has to reform and transform, um, the entire, it goes back to the whole idea of, you know, adding a little leaven to a, to a loaf and, you know, or to, you know, um, the bread making, right?

That it, it, it actually takes over the entire bread. Um. And so, I think we can't just add on solutions and ideas or whatever. We actually have to kind of go back to the drawing board and retool what it is, what it means to be, uh, what, what our economics are, what they're based on, uh, [00:25:00] what our faith tradition actually, you know, what's the goal of our, of all of our faith traditions, um, and what does it mean to be, you know, human.

In human community, um, and, and also what does it mean to be in, uh, be created, be a create, a, a part of creation, right? Because a lot of us have forgotten that, right? Like we actually are part of creation, right? And so whatever, whatever we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. So, um, it's not something that, I have to say, you can't glom it on, you can't glue it on to what you're already doing.

It actually has to undo first, maybe, before we can rebuild. So, yeah.

Adrian: Yeah, like it's, it's so integrated into every other aspect of our lives. It's not like a, you can't just add it on.

Faith Harris: Right.

Adrian: Yeah.

Faith Harris: Yeah.

Adrian: Yeah. Thanks. Thank you for that.

Faith Harris: You're welcome.

Adrian: Yeah, that's it.

Faith Harris: Well, you're welcome.