

Prayers, petitions and boycotts: Desmond Tutu's climate activism

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Following the death of anti-apartheid and peace activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu aged 90 on Sunday, 26 December 2021, world leaders have praised his life-long advocacy on social justice issues from inequality, racism and homophobia to climate change.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu. | Source: Reuters/Mike Hutchings

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate became an environmental icon as the effects of global warming became more apparent, using his influence to hold governments and the fossil fuel industry to account while giving African youth climate activists a voice. Here are some of the ways he put a spotlight on the climate emergency:

Boycotts

Anti-apartheid activists were able to bring down white minority rule by calling for boycotts and sanctions against South Africa's racist regime - a tactic Tutu often said should be deployed to cut the use of planet-heating fossil fuels.

In articles, interviews and speeches, Tutu encouraged consumers to steer clear of media, sports teams and events sponsored by fossil-fuel firms and to buy low-carbon products. He also called for universities, municipalities, foundations, corporations and cultural institutions to cut ties with big oil companies and to invest in clean energy.



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Petitions

In 2015, Tutu used his profile to gather nearly 333,500 signatures for a petition calling on then US President Barack Obama, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other leaders to set a target of 100% renewable energy by 2050. In the petition, Tutu called climate change one of the "greatest moral challenges of our time".

The effort was part of an international campaign by religious leaders to pressure politicians to deliver ambitious climate action ahead of the 2015 UN summit where about 195 countries adopted the Paris Agreement to curb global warming. Tutu's work also inspired University of Cape Town students to launch their own petition, asking the university to divest from fossil fuels and invest in sustainable energy.

Since the petition handover in 2016 and further years of campaigning, this August the university's responsible investment panel recommended full divestment from fossil fuels by 2030.

The Elders

Tutu was the first chair of The Elders - a global group of senior human rights activists and political leaders advocating for peace - and used this platform to push publicly for urgent measures to tackle climate change.

Under Tutu's guidance, The Elders lobbied world leaders to keep alive a path to the lowest 1.5 degree Celsius limit on global warming in the Paris pact, through conferences, blogs written by youth climate activists and other advocacy campaigns.



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Peace lecture

As part of the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation - established to promote human rights research and leadership training - an annual Peace Lecture held on Tutu's birthday has brought together various human rights experts over the years.

For the 10th edition in 2020, Ugandan youth activist Vanessa Nakate, among others, was invited to talk about climate justice, highlighting the unfair impacts of a warming planet and how African women and children face both poverty and climate shocks. Nakate, who has worked to promote youth climate protests alongside Swedish teen Greta Thunberg, has gained international attention for using platforms, such as the Peace Lecture and U.N. climate talks, to spotlight the issues affecting Africa.

South African youth climate activist Ayakha Melithafa was also invited to speak at the Tutu foundation lecture, with other voices from the continent and high-level political figures.

Prayers

As during the apartheid era, Tutu used his position as a religious leader to push inter-faith interventions such as petitions, marches and prayers to end human rights abuses, support marginalised groups and tackle climate change. His 2015 Paris petition was part of the "Faiths for Earth" initiative which brought together religious leaders from across the world to pressure governments for stronger climate action. Tutu also shared an online prayer for the planet ahead of a key climate leaders' summit at the United Nations in 2014.

"We pray for our leaders, custodians of Mother Earth ... may they negotiate with wisdom and fairness ... and lead us in the path of justice for the sake of our children and our children's children," Tutu wrote in the prayer.



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Earth hour

Tutu was also a supporter of the Earth Hour movement, led by global green group WWF, which unites businesses, communities and individuals in turning off electric lights for one hour at the same time each year to save energy and raise awareness. An event that started in 2007 in Sydney has now become an international campaign involving millions of participants.

"If we all perform this one simple act together, it will send a message to our governments too powerful for them to ignore," said Tutu in a statement.

"They will know the eyes of the world are watching," he added.

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