

Science and Spirit

Rutland Herald editorial (adapted from Steve Pappas “Pointing to Hope” Aug. 27)

Humanity can no longer ignore the response of the Earth.

That’s the message laid out by scientists around the globe, including Alan Betts, of Atmospheric Research in Pittsford. Betts, a regular contributor to the Herald, is considered Vermont’s leading climate scientist.

During a recent interview on “City Room with Steve Pappas,” a PEG access public affairs show, Betts discussed how global population and consumption may have grown to a point that is beyond the carrying capacity of Earth. “Our impact on land, atmosphere and oceans has become global. We must consider the needs of the Earth’s ecosystem of which we are part, and on which all life is dependent,” Betts writes online.

Betts is the author or co-author of more than 160 reviewed papers in the scientific literature. For 10 years he has studied research data on climate change and, in particular, climate change in Vermont. He knows of what he speaks.

So when the fact-based conversation with Pappas turned to the recent encyclical on climate change by Pope Francis — “On Care for Our Common Home” — it seemed science and spirituality might have collided. But they merged.

In his writings, Betts asks: “So what are our responsibilities to this glorious planet, the Earth? This has become one of the great moral questions of our time, and the future of humanity and the Earth depends largely on what choices we make in the next few decades. In just a few centuries with the advent of science and technology, powered by fossil fuels, humanity has moved from feeling largely at the mercy of the Creation to a world view where we thought we were omnipotent — that our power was limitless. We have searched the Earth for all its resources, and let our population and consumer societies expand without limit; while dumping our wastes and polluting land, oceans and the atmosphere. And still we are unable to provide adequate food and a reasonable quality of life for billions of humanity. And our feverish, wasteful consumption of finite resources like oil and fresh water are nearing limits where they can grow no further.”

He goes on to say, “Now the climate is changing, the ice caps are melting, the ocean is rising and becoming more acidic, and millions of species face extinction. We have turned a full circle in barely two centuries, as once again we seem powerless to stop what we have set in motion on a global scale — without thinking and without any ethical code to guide us. We didn’t start down this path consciously, but now that we see what is happening, we are responsible.”

Similarly, Pope Francis, in his 180-page treatise, pleads, “I urgently appeal then for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which

includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest.”

Both men are using their positions — in science and conscience, as well as in social teaching and public education — to seek a universal solidarity on climate change.

Both men conclude it is “a moral choice,” as it stems from our self-centered arrogance, the corruption that comes from power without responsibility. They are correct. This debate centers on power and wealth. “Cooperating with the Earth requires several fundamental shifts. The first big step is a shift from an annual to a generational perspective. In economic terms, this means we must look beyond quarterly profits and start the ‘real costing’ of goods and services,” Betts said.

It is encouraging that such parallel messages are being touted so loudly — and boldly. Climate change is here. And at least two men who deeply understand its impact are optimistic, for different reasons, that we can — and will — make a difference.