

Local rabbi to sign climate change declaration at Vatican next month



JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Rabbi Daniel Swartz of Temple Hesed in Scranton will travel to the Vatican in October to draft and sign a declaration for the upcoming 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference.

Swartz one of 40 religious leaders selected to participate.

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When Rabbi Daniel Swartz becomes one of only two rabbis worldwide to sign a climate change declaration at the Vatican next month for the United Nations, he hopes it will save lives.

Swartz, 59, the rabbi at Temple Hesed in Scranton, was one of 40 faith leaders, along with 10 scientists, invit-

ed by the Vatican to draft and sign a declaration for the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in November. He was one of four Americans selected to participate in the declaration, which includes both Western and Eastern religious leaders from every continent aside from Antarctica, Swartz said.

“If ... people commit to taking care of climate change, and that starts happening, then under the guidance of Pope Francis, more

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RABBI: Swartz has helped draft four revisions of climate declaration

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souls will have been saved than by religion over the course of its history," he said. "If we really can be a force to just get people unstuck and have people make this a priority universally, across the globe, across rich nations and poor nations, and get folks working together on it ... that would be such a blessing to the world."

Swartz, who holds degrees from Brown University in environmental policy and geological sciences, first met virtually with the group, which includes economists and sociologists among the scientists, in February. He has since met with them online eight or nine times, drafting four revisions of the declaration.

When he first received an email in December notifying him the Vatican wanted him to fly there to participate in

the declaration, Swartz thought it was someone pranking him. Then, he thought it was just a general invite before realizing how exclusive it was.

After graduating from college in 1983, he began doing some work in the environmental and Jewish communities. He became ordained as a rabbi in 1990, and he became more involved with environmental work in 1993.

Since then, he's written about Judaism and the environment, conducted interfaith work and has written and spoken widely about Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment. He still doesn't know exactly how the Vatican selected him, but he hopes to find out in Rome.

Following his invitation, he had to overcome doubts regarding his status among the faith leaders.

"The recurring thing going on in my mind was one

of these things is not like the other: Rabbi Swartz from Scranton and the general secretary of the World Lutheran Church," he said.

Swartz credited the Most Rev. Joseph C. Bambera, bishop of the Diocese of Scranton, for giving him the courage to speak up in the group, that his concerns would be taken seriously and that he was there for a reason. Bambera was one of the first people he reached out to after learning of the invitation. In addition to the confidence boost, the bishop even offered to give him recommendations on where to eat in Rome, depending on where he stays.

In an email Thursday, Bambera praised Swartz as a well-respected religious leader in the diocese, a colleague in ministry and a good friend.

"In my many years of friendship with Rabbi Swartz, I have come to know just how passionate and dedicated he is to addressing the crisis of

environmental justice and demonstrating the connection between Judaism and the environment. As religious leaders and scientists gather at next month's conference, Rabbi Swartz possesses the deep insight and wisdom to help address the many challenges that our planet faces in the coming decades and centuries," Bambera said.

The two-page declaration is a prophetic call from faith leaders to world leaders, Swartz said.

"This is a moral issue that is of the utmost urgency, and you need to take care of it," he said.

The technology exists to get the world off of fossil fuels without having what he described as "massive economic dislocation."

"But that would require folks working together, and it would require a lot of investment. And, it would require making that a priority," Swartz said. "You have to

deal with the environmental problem, but you have to deal with the human problem."

Transitioning from fossil fuels entails helping those who rely on the industry for work transition into other jobs, he said.

"I'm not so worried about the president of Exxon, but all the workers of Exxon, and all the people who are dependent on jobs that are related to that — down to gas station attendants," he said. "We have to get off of those fuels, but we also have to take care of those people."

Faith leaders and scientists will sign the declaration Oct. 4, Swartz said. He feels his role is to get other religious leaders and scientists to sign onto the declaration beyond those that will meet at the Vatican. With their support, the declaration is the floor of what they will accomplish — not the ceiling, Swartz said.

"Every religious leader in

the world should agree to (this) and push to do (this). The higher we get that floor, the higher the ceiling can be," he said.

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