Drawdown Georgia for Congregations: Time to Take the Next Step

Summary

How can Georgia's congregations put Drawdown Georgia's 20 high-impact climate solutions into practice, on their own campuses and in their communities? In this EcoFaith From Home session, Hannah Shultz and Codi Norred of Georgia Interfaith Power & Light (GIPL) walk through how the Drawdown Georgia research came together, what it means for houses of worship specifically, and the facility upgrades, everyday practices, and policy advocacy congregations can pursue with GIPL's support.

Key Takeaways

● Drawdown Georgia's research team narrowed Project Drawdown's roughly 100 global solutions down to 20 for Georgia, screening each for local relevance, market readiness, meaningful carbon impact (at least one megaton of annual reduction by 2030), cost competitiveness, and "beyond carbon" effects on equity, health, and the economy.

● GIPL encourages every congregation to form a Green Team, a small group of dedicated volunteers who evaluate the congregation's current practices, draft sustainability policies, engage faith leaders, and communicate progress back to the broader community.

● Through GIPL's Power Wise and Solar Wise programs, congregations can get free energy audits, up to $10,000 in matching grant funds for efficiency upgrades, and support installing rooftop solar or EV charging stations on site.

● Codi Norred outlines GIPL's state-level advocacy priorities, expanding access to energy efficiency and solar, opposing the growth of biomass energy in south Georgia, and pushing for the excavation of unlined coal ash ponds like the one at Plant Scherer in Juliette, alongside opportunities to engage on federal infrastructure policy.

● Congregations can stay engaged with Drawdown Georgia by signing up for its newsletter, contributing to the GroupIt crowd-solving app, and hosting or attending a Civic Dinner to bring their own communities into the conversation.

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Hannah Shultz: All right, welcome again, everyone. My name is Hannah, I'm the program associate at GIPL, and tonight Codi and I are really excited to talk to you about Drawdown Georgia for Congregations. We'll give a brief introduction to what Drawdown Georgia is, in case you missed the very first session of our EcoFaith From Home series, and then we'll dive into ways you and your congregations can take the next step to implement these solutions. So, a little bit about Drawdown Georgia.

Drawdown Georgia was directly inspired by the work of Project Drawdown, a nonprofit founded in 2014 to help the world reach drawdown. Drawdown is the point in time when levels of CO2 in the atmosphere stop climbing and actually start to steadily decline, a term coined by Project Drawdown. That organization identified about 100 scalable climate solutions that could be deployed globally today to help the world achieve drawdown. These solutions span traditional engineering solutions, like solar power and electric vehicles, as well as social solutions, like educating more women and girls.

While Project Drawdown looks at a global perspective, Drawdown Georgia looks specifically at climate solutions for Georgia, translating that global work into a local roadmap. This project was launched thanks to funding from the Ray C. Anderson Foundation. Drawdown Georgia is grounded in research, a team of researchers from Georgia Tech, the University of Georgia, Emory University, and Georgia State led an 18-month process analyzing the Project Drawdown solutions through a Georgia lens, also collaborating with public and outside groups. The research was led by Dr. Marilyn Brown of Georgia Tech, it began in 2018, and the data was released in October 2020. If you want to learn more about the research team, who was on it and what they did, you can visit Drawdown Georgia's website, on the About Us tab.

This research team analyzed the 100 global solutions identified by Project Drawdown, and each one was considered through a specific lens. They asked questions like: is the solution relevant in Georgia? Is it technology- and market-ready to scale by 2030? Is there sufficient local experience and available data? Can this solution deliver one million metric tons of annual greenhouse gas reduction by 2030? Is it cost-competitive with other solutions? And what are the significant beyond-carbon impacts of each solution? You'll hear a bit more about what beyond carbon means in just a few minutes.

The result of all that analysis and research is 20 Drawdown Georgia solutions, the ones they identified specifically for us here in Georgia. This list fits into five categories: electricity, buildings and materials, food and agriculture, land sinks, and transportation. Most of the solutions focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but it's important to note that the three land sink solutions, afforestation and silvopasture, coastal wetlands, and temperate forest stewardship, focus instead on expanding natural carbon sequestration, by expanding, supporting, and preserving Georgia's forests and coastal marshes. Those sinks sequester about 46 million metric tons of carbon a year. One more thing worth noting: a couple of these solutions, recycling, retrofitting, and alternative mobility, are actually bundles of similar solutions. Retrofitting, for example, includes a whole list of common energy efficiency

improvements to existing buildings. If you want to learn more about any of these individual solutions, you can visit Drawdown Georgia's website, they have really great information on each one, so you can dive a bit deeper into what they all mean.

For each of the 20 high-impact solutions, the research team estimated what it would take for that solution to contribute one million metric tons, or one megaton, of reduction or sequestration of CO2. That's a meaningful unit of change, the state's net carbon footprint is currently around 125 million metric tons. So, for example, to reach that one-megaton reduction, we'd have to divert about two million tons of organic waste from landfilling to composting by 2030. Those are just examples for a few of the solutions, but again, all of this information is on their website, so if you're curious about any of the others and what it would take to reach that one megaton of carbon reduction, I'd encourage you to go look.

This chart shows one estimate of how much the 20 Drawdown Georgia solutions could reduce carbon emissions in the state. If all 20 solutions are scaled to ambitious but achievable levels, we could cut carbon emissions by about a third, or 35%, by 2030. To read this graph, the top black line represents a projection of total statewide carbon emissions if current trends and policies continue. The gray section in the middle shows our current average carbon sinks, how much our forests and marshes are currently sequestering, that number again is about 46 million metric tons, this is business as usual, how things stand right now. The bottom gray line shows projected total carbon emissions, business as usual, if things just continue as they are. Each colorful wedge represents how a Drawdown Georgia solution could reduce emissions if scaled to ambitious but achievable levels, and combined, you can see the net reduction they're looking at. All of this is on their website too, they have a Carbon Reduction Visualizer you can play around with, to look more closely at how each solution contributes to that net overall reduction for Georgia by 2030.

As I mentioned earlier, part of the research team's work was looking at how each of these solutions could impact communities outside of climate change itself, the idea that each solution could have a positive or negative impact on our communities, and that we need to move forward with our eyes open to all those possibilities. So they looked at each solution's impact across four key areas: equity, the environment, public health, and the economy. I won't dive into this too much right now, but again, it's all on the Drawdown Georgia website, when you click into each solution, you'll see the carbon reduction potential, and also how they're anticipating each solution might affect communities beyond just reversing climate change. I wanted to make sure to note that, because it's a really important part of our work at GIPL too, understanding that justice is intersectional, and that justice for creation can't be achieved without fully addressing the environmental injustices impacting our neighbors and communities.

We know that low-income communities, people of color, children, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations disproportionately suffer the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, so we believe it's our responsibility as people of faith to help

dismantle the systems that perpetuate environmental injustice, environmental degradation, and climate change. We can't love God, creation, and our neighbors without dismantling those systems and getting engaged in transforming local and state policy. I'm so grateful this is part of the consideration built into Drawdown Georgia's work, and it's important for all of us as we think about implementing these solutions in our personal lives, and at a congregational level too.

So how do we actually do this work? We're a grassroots organization, and we believe the best way to start is by forming Green Teams. If your congregation doesn't have a Green Team yet, please contact us after this presentation, let us know, we'd love to help you form one. Green Teams are dedicated individuals at congregations, it can be as few as three or four folks who are really committed to doing this work for the congregation, taking climate action. They're the ones who help with education and advocacy, and inform their congregation about the importance of this work.

A few Green Team entry points: many of you are already doing incredible things to reduce your carbon impact and be more sustainable, so look at what you're already doing, and evaluate what your possibilities are to do more, figure out what people are passionate about and what kinds of tasks you want to take on. Another entry point is drafting a sustainability policy, these can act as guidelines for sustainable purchasing, setting recycling expectations, and banning hard-to-recycle materials, it's really just a way to let your congregation know what the expectations are. A third step is involving your faith leaders, it's so important to get them on board, to have their support and their commitment to engaging in environmental justice. And lastly, you need a communication strategy, because the hope is that as a Green Team, you'll take this work to the congregation, tell them what you're doing, build your team, and then the congregation can take it out into the community, and it spreads from there. So you start implementing these solutions at a Green Team level, then a congregational level, then out into your local community too.

We also have a Green Team coaching program, so whether you're a new Green Team, relaunching, or you've been around a while but want more support and structure, please contact us, we'd love to serve as your coach. It's a 12-month program, we'll provide strategic planning, show up to your Green Team meetings, work with your Green Team leaders, and really help you identify strategies for implementing these solutions and other sustainability initiatives with your congregation.

Tonight we're here to talk specifically about the Drawdown Georgia solutions, and I want to start by looking at what you can do at the facility level, how you can assess your facility and make improvements to reduce your carbon impact. One of the first things you can do is retrofit your building. We have our Power Wise program, which helps with energy efficiency audits and retrofits, you send us your electric and natural gas bills, and we'll send an engineer to your site, they'll conduct an energy audit and make recommendations for energy efficiency upgrades, then we'll do a review with you and help you think through how to upgrade your building to be more

energy efficient. We know the inefficient use of electricity and natural gas makes up more than 30% of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere, so by making these upgrades, we're not only reducing our carbon impact, we're also helping fight the injustices associated with coal and natural gas plants. We have some funding to help too, an energy efficiency matching grant program you can apply for in the fall, which qualifies your congregation for up to $10,000 in matching grant funds, a great way to implement the recommendations in your energy audit report and make really impactful changes at the facility level.

We also encourage congregations to consider rooftop solar. We offer free solar assessments, and work with you every step of the way, from evaluating and procurement through installation, we also have a solar loan fund and other financing options to help. And lastly, we're really excited to start looking into the possibility of putting electric vehicle charging stations in congregation parking lots, we think that's a great way to implement this solution and make electric vehicles more accessible to your community. We'd love to talk with you about what that could look like for your congregation.

There are a lot of ways to implement these solutions beyond just changes to your facility too, from recycling to composting, reducing food waste, switching to a more plant-forward diet, alternative mobility, and planting trees. You can get involved as individuals and families, or as a whole congregation. What I love about these Drawdown Georgia solutions is how accessible they are, a lot of them are things you might already be doing, or just slight lifestyle changes. We have a number of programs to help you think through how to engage with some of these too.

We have a Waste Wise program, we can send you a waste audit that encourages you to look around your facility, dump out your trash, see what's in it, and think about ways to reduce, reuse, recycle, or compost what you're currently generating on site. There are a number of composting options, if that's not something you're already doing, we'd love to help you figure it out, you might have space on site for a garden or outdoor composting, or if you're not ready for that yet, there are commercial composting companies too, they bring you a bin, come pick it up, make it really easy. We also have classes and film screenings if you want to learn more about these topics, there's a great documentary we recently featured as part of EcoFaith From Home called Kiss the Ground, if you missed it, or there's another documentary you'd like to see, we can set that up, host a discussion afterward, and pair it with a letter-writing campaign or other advocacy pieces. Codi's going to talk more in a bit about those advocacy opportunities. We can also create a custom class on any topic you're interested in, just let us know.

I also want to make sure you're all aware of our Four Directions Fund, associated with our Active Hope workshop, held virtually once a month. You can attend that workshop and then apply for a Four Directions Fund grant, seed money of up to $500, a great way to fund an eco project for your faith community. Say you want to get into composting and have the space, but need some materials, seed grant money like this could help with a project like that, or another eco project that benefits you and your community.

A few other ideas for implementing Drawdown Georgia solutions: planning meatless meals occasionally for congregational events and suppers, this plant-based diet piece is a Drawdown Georgia solution too, it doesn't mean cutting out meat completely, maybe once a week or once a month you have a meatless meal, or you switch from beef or pork to lower-carbon meats like poultry and fish. We're encouraging folks to bike or walk whenever possible, or plan carpool opportunities for congregational events off campus, there are a lot of ways to get involved in alternative mobility and change how you're getting to and from your congregation. You can also plan a tree-planting event, start a recycling program, or learn more about recycling options in your city and county. I mentioned sustainability policies earlier too, a great way to set direction for how your congregation handles recycling and waste at events, you can even ban styrofoam or other hard-to-recycle products from your property. These are all really easy, simple ways your congregation can start taking the next step toward reducing your carbon impact. I'll turn it over to Codi now to talk about some policy opportunities.

Codi Norred: Hey, everybody, thank you for tuning in, and thank you, Hannah, for walking us through that. I'm going to talk a bit about local and state policy, and then a bit about federal policy, because ultimately, of these Drawdown Georgia solutions, about half we can implement at the congregational and individual scale, and the other half really require us to pressure policymakers, lawmakers, and stakeholders to make the kinds of investments and just policy decisions we need to implement these solutions at scale. So let's talk about some of that.

I'll also note, Hannah mentioned all the classes we offer, one of the things we do is advocacy training. That can look a lot of different ways, it can be a film screening on a topic you're interested in, coal ash, deforestation, offshore drilling, followed by a letter-writing process, or it can be training on how to set up legislative meetings and talk to legislators. We can set those meetings up for you, and participate in them with you, at the local, state, and federal level. Hannah mentioned environmental justice is a core piece of what we do, everything we do around climate and environmental solutions really relates back to environmental justice, because, as Hannah said, we can't love God and love neighbor without caring for creation, and likewise, you can't care for creation without caring for neighbor, because our relationship with the environment directly impacts our neighbors.

Most of these solutions aren't just about preventing an increase in climate change or disasters, they'll also alleviate environmental injustices, especially around clean air, clean water, clean transportation, and good food. You can participate in a new workshop we've created called Environmental Justice 101, to learn the tenets of environmental justice, how to participate in that movement, and how everything we do connects back to those theories. I want to highlight a couple of our policy priorities, GIPL is expanding both our programs and our advocacy priorities, adding new ones now and continuing to add more going forward. Two things in particular: first, expanding energy efficiency and solar. Those of you who've been involved with us for a while know we have an expansive energy efficiency and solar program for congregations, and as Drawdown Georgia points out, those are two of the most high-impact solutions we can offer and participate in to draw down carbon at our facilities. But there are real challenges to energy

efficiency and solar in Georgia, so we work at the state capitol and with the Public Service Commission to try to ensure we have the friendliest possible solar policies, and that communities that need access to solar or efficiency upgrades, low-income communities especially, actually have access to those programs. We're focused on how to make these solutions accessible and affordable for everyone, and how to make sure people who take advantage of them actually reap the financial benefits of investing in them, it's not much good if people participate but don't actually see those benefits. We can talk more about that in Q&A if folks are interested.

This happens in two ways, at the state legislature, which runs from about mid-January into April every year, we'll be gearing up for 2022 and can host workshops with your congregation on what those policies will look like, and at the Public Service Commission, a five-member, statewide elected body that decides on your utility bills, regulating our monopoly utility, Georgia Power. Everything from what resources they build, what kind of plants, what kind of renewables they procure, who gets to have renewables, how rooftop solar happens, how much it costs, how much you pay on your energy bill, all of that gets decided by the Public Service Commission. In 2022, there will be a lot of dockets opened on rates, how much your bill will cost going forward, and what kinds of resources Georgia Power will be permitted to procure. So now is the time to do some education and preparation, so you can meet with those commissioners, tell them what you think they should be investing in, and tell Georgia Power what kinds of rates and programs you want to see.

A new policy priority we're adding, which we can also talk about later, is biomass. This is a bit of an expansive topic, we have documentaries, including one called Burned, about the importance of sustainable land use and protecting forestry, but also about how our lands, particularly our trees and agriculture industry, are becoming the new coal. In south Georgia especially, biomass is starting to take hold. Biomass is the process of cutting down forests, or using downed timber, to make very compact wood pellets, which then get burned to produce fuel. Biomass has been spreading across the southeastern United States for some time, and only recently began coming into Georgia in a meaningful way, in the last IRP process. In 2019, a small portion of biomass was permitted by Georgia Power and the Public Service Commission, and biomass resources continue to be built out in south Georgia. This matters because forestry and trees are a huge part of Georgia's economy, and instead of using them for land sinks, like Hannah mentioned, we're cutting them down and burning them. Sometimes people say, well, that's fine, trees are a renewable resource, we can cut them down and plant new ones and they'll grow back, and that's true, but if you cut down a 30- or 40-year-old forest and plant a new one, that new forest isn't sequestering the same amount of carbon. That's the climate side. The other side is an environmental justice issue, communities situated around biomass plants face higher risks of asthma, breathing those toxic fumes, and they're also losing green space.

For those who've been around a while, you know coal ash has been a key tenet of our advocacy work for a long time. There are dozens and dozens of coal ash ponds around Georgia, holding waste from coal-fired power plants. As a reminder, there are two types of waste that come out

of coal-fired power plants, fly ash from the top, and a sludge that stays at the bottom, called bottom ash. That bottom ash has historically been stored in unlined liquid ponds all around Georgia. Currently, Georgia Power is excavating several of those coal ash ponds, which is great, the ultimate solution is that they're excavated and the ash is placed in a dry, lined landfill on the utility's own property, so the utility handles that waste, not the public, and it's stored properly. Right now, these ponds are unlined pits, and we know from an Earthjustice report a couple of years ago that almost all of Georgia's coal ash ponds are leaching into the groundwater.

Some of you may be familiar with our work in Juliette, down in middle Georgia, right outside Macon and Forsyth. There's Plant Scherer there, one of the most polluting power plants in the nation, with a 300-acre coal ash pond submerged 10 feet into the aquifer, and currently there are no plans to excavate it. Neither the Georgia legislature, nor the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, nor the Public Service Commission has required them to excavate it, and the utility hasn't chosen to do it on its own either. Why is that a problem? Obviously an environmental one, we need to figure out how to store this toxic waste, and right now it's sitting in the aquifer, poisoning both the groundwater and the aquifer itself. The hydrology is really complicated, it's fractured limestone, so that water seeps into the limestone and moves around quite a bit, and then people are pulling it up through their domestic wells. The same toxins we see in coal ash show up in people's well water, so it becomes not just an environmental issue, but an environmental justice issue, since there are people living next to coal-fired power plants who are breathing that smog and dust, getting sick, with higher rates of asthma, and then when they go home and drink their water, they're being poisoned again, because there are toxins in it too. And right now, there's no action from legislative bodies to solve that problem, so it's our duty as religious people who believe in taking care of our neighbor to advocate and change these unjust policies.

There's a film screening opportunity too, Saving Juliette, a film the Altamaha Riverkeeper put out about the process in Juliette, I'd highly recommend it to everybody, it reminds me why we do this work. We'd love to screen it for your congregation and talk about how you can get involved in taking care of coal ash and passing meaningful legislation to protect communities. There's also protectgeorgia.org, a site with a lot of clean water legislative priorities, if you sign up during legislative session, you'll get alerts with pre-populated notes you can send to your elected officials, letting them know where you stand on this issue of coal ash.

Now let's talk a bit about federal policy. We do a lot at the local and state level, and have for a long time, but the GIPL team decided it was time to stretch ourselves and get involved at the federal level too, because despite the wins and struggles we have locally and at the state level, some things just can't be fixed unless federal regulations or policies move forward. Drawdown solutions like electric vehicles, mass transit, retrofitting, and solar are all tied up in things like infrastructure packages, and the current administration is keen on passing a robust infrastructure package focused on access to electric vehicles, clean public transportation, electric school buses, and of course roads, bridges, and other traditional infrastructure.

So how can you get involved? You can sign a petition, which we'll drop in the chat, we're collecting signatures encouraging Georgia's federal elected officials to support and pass the American Jobs Plan. You can call your senators and House representatives too, and let them know you support it, a call to one of those offices means a lot more than just signing a petition, so it's easy to make that call right now and leave a message. A couple of highlights of the American Jobs Plan, if you haven't been following it at the federal level: it'll modernize public transit, invest in reliable passenger and freight rail service, including things like our ports in Savannah and Brunswick, expand electric vehicles and EV infrastructure, which we've been talking about, and open a new program for congregations to invest in EV charging stations on their own property, to help build out that infrastructure. When you think about electric vehicles as a solution, it's a great one, we've been selling them for a while, I see a lot on the road, but the problem in Georgia is we don't have robust EV infrastructure to support charging all over the state. One way to help is by putting EV charging stations in at faith communities across the state. The plan also covers home retrofits, which we've talked about, clean energy generation and storage, and a lot of money slated for environmental justice and impacted communities.

Hannah Shultz: Thank you, Codi, so much for sharing about opportunities to get involved in policy at the local, state, and federal level. I'll share a couple of ways you can stay engaged with Drawdown Georgia and this movement. One really easy way is signing up for the Drawdown Georgia mailing list, on their website, you'll get a newsletter twice a month sharing highlights from Drawdown Georgia, plus a climate news digest featuring stories about climate solutions from around the state. You can also help build out the living database of climate solutions in the state through a crowd-solving app called Groopit, you can sign up for that on the Drawdown Georgia website too. Groopit lets you learn about projects reducing emissions and increasing carbon sinks across the state, and you can share information about projects you're involved in too, so if your congregation does something with one of these solutions and you want to share it, let others know, and help inspire more action, you can post it on Groopit. It's really just a way to build a community of people in Georgia working to scale climate solutions, a great way to connect and brainstorm with others doing this work.

And the last thing you can do is host or attend a Civic Dinner. Civic Dinners is a platform that helps bring small groups of people together around issues that matter, in this case, climate change. Drawdown Georgia has a Civic Dinner subscription through fall 2021, free for anyone to use, so if you learned something tonight you're interested in sharing with friends, family, or your congregation, you can sign up to host a Civic Dinner for free, they'll provide the online platform and materials Drawdown Georgia has created to help you run a structured conversation. You can host a dinner, or attend one, on Tuesday, Codi and I are actually hosting a Civic Dinner to talk more about some of these topics, focused on electricity in particular, so please sign up to attend that with us. You can also find information on the Drawdown Georgia website about hosting your own.

So now we want to hear from you. We're going to open this up for a time of conversation, if you have any questions, please feel free to ask, but we also want to hear how we can support you,

whether there are new programs you're interested in that you'd like us to host or run, or ideas that have been sparked by this conversation. What do you need from us?