

Environmental Justice and the Soul of America: An Interview with the Reverend Dr. Gerald Durley

Summary

The Reverend Dr. Gerald Durley is best known for his 25 years as pastor of Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, where he connected faith, civil rights, and climate justice. In this conversation, Rev. Durley traces his path from the civil rights movement of the 1960s to becoming one of the country's most prominent faith voices on climate change, and explains why he believes the environment is, in his words, the soul of America.

Key Takeaways

- Rev. Durley joined the civil rights movement in 1960 alongside figures like Andrew Young and John Lewis, and spent decades focused on civil and human rights before climate change entered his consciousness at all.
- A meeting with Sally Bingham, founder of Interfaith Power & Light, introduced him to the environmental movement, and he came to see it as, in many ways, a continuation of the civil rights struggle.
- Rev. Durley found early environmental movement spaces well-funded and knowledgeable but lacking the enthusiasm and urgency he'd known in civil rights work, which led him to spend the last several years trying to show that faith and science aren't incongruent, but work together.
- He connects environmental justice directly to public health disparities in the African American community, including asthma and cancer rates tied to toxic waste sites, arguing that pollution and air and water quality often lose out to more immediate priorities like housing and safety.
- Rev. Durley frames the current moment through the civil rights era's three guiding words, organize, strategize, and mobilize, and says the movement is now entering its mobilization phase, encouraged by seeing young people of different races and faiths coming together around climate and lifestyle change.

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Rev. Dr. Gerald Durley: You cannot talk about health, you cannot talk about economics, unless you talk about the environment in which you live. Dr. King taught us that we've got to look at the soul of America, and in my estimation, the soul of America is the environment. If you destroy the

soul, then nothing else exists. If you destroy the air, if you destroy the water, if you destroy the wildlife, if you destroy the plants, that's the soul of America.

One of the goals in my life was never to become a pastor. That wasn't something I was interested in. When I got married, my wife, my fiancée at the time, said, "Two things I never want to marry are a pastor or a doctor, because they take too much time away from the family." But having joined the civil rights movement in 1960 with Andy, and John, and Martin Luther King, and all of them, I was always involved in how we uplift individuals who weren't necessarily part of the mainstream of society.

But mine was always civil and human rights, marching and boycotting and whatever it took. As far as religion and all that, I figured, let the holy rollers do their particular thing, let them do that. We have to deal with nuts-and-bolts issues, rather than talking about getting on our knees and praying and God making a difference in all of that. Even though my dad was a preacher, so I'd grown up in that environment. I became a psychologist, I finished all three of my first degrees in psychology. But then, at 40, I said, it's one thing to understand the mind, it's another thing to understand the soul and the spirit, because that's what moves the mind. So I went and got another master's degree, in religion, at Howard University, and I was asked to come down here to Ebenezer, in Atlanta, as assistant pastor. That's when I found civil rights and the spiritual coming right together.

I wasn't concerned, or didn't know, it wasn't a priority for me, about climate change, global warming, melting glaciers, polar bears disappearing off the planet, carbon dioxide in the air, fracking. I didn't know these words, they were alien to me. Then I met a young lady out in California named Sally Bingham, who had founded Interfaith Power and Light, and I began to grow, and I began to see that the major civil and human rights movement now is in the area of climate change and the environment, and what it's doing to all people.

But when I first got into the environmental movement, I'd go to meetings, and understandably, I'd be the only person of color in the room. They were some of the most articulate people I'd met, very well-financed in many instances, very knowledgeable about the environment. Someone would say, "Well, I read a book, I read a report, I read a study." They were knowledgeable, they were articulate, and they were well-heeled. But you know what, they were dull as dirt. I was almost falling asleep. I said, "I can't take any more of this." And then they'd say, "Well, when are we going to meet next?" And they'd meet again and do the same thing. And I said, I can't be a part of that, because there has to be a level of enthusiasm and excitement about what you believe in. So I've spent the last eight or nine years trying to bring that level of awareness, showing that faith and science aren't incongruent, that they work together. That's the history.

In the African American community, it becomes very real when you look at the diseases that disproportionately impact those we're called to serve, asthma, cancer. Down in Louisiana, a lot of that was because of toxic waste dumps and environmental justice issues that couldn't be mitigated through law enforcement. So we could use that from the pulpit to tie into something

bigger, because it's one thing to have a heavenly experience, but if you have an earthly disaster, the two don't come together. So we had to begin doing that. Pollution, air quality, and water weren't a priority when you're also looking at rent, at police brutality, and other factors that had to take priority. It was really about trying to raise awareness in the African American community, which was disproportionately impacted by climate change, while being the least responsible for causing it.

Initially, there was a lot of denial, or not quite denial, but people said, "We ought to just be glad we finally got a chance to ride in the front of the bus." So few people believed climate change was really real, and if it was real, they figured it was far off in the future, not something imminent, not something happening day to day. When I go back to my Christian tradition, all Jesus did was tell stories, we call them parables. He told stories about the lost coin, or this or that, and people held onto them. He spoke to farmers in farmer language, he spoke to merchants in merchant's language. It's one thing to try to create something in someone's mind about what might happen, but when they walk out of their house into 60 days of 100-degree temperatures, when they see wildfires burning, when they see flooding happening, you don't have to paint that picture in people's minds anymore. In the pulpit, we paint a picture of what hell is like, but if you're already living in something like it, you understand, I don't want to go there. Then you can start saying, these are some of the issues we have to look at right in front of our face, and how do we begin to change this.

That brings us right back to where we started in the civil rights movement, with the right to vote. And after the right to vote, then, vote for what? So we can come back with a story and say, now let's vote for this, because it directly impacts you, and you understand that because it was in the story we told, and the stories are true. There were three words that made us strong: organize, strategize, and mobilize. It makes no sense to organize and strategize if you don't mobilize. So we're moving into the mobilization phase of this destructive era around climate and what it's doing to us. Because everything, every word out of your mouth, starts with a thought, and a thought gives you your word, and your word dictates what you believe and your values, and your values dictate your behavior, and your behavior becomes your destiny. If our destiny is victory, we've got to start with the thought that we have to say something, and say it so people believe it.

I'm so optimistic now, because I've seen young people, Black and white and of different faiths, when they start coming together, really talking about the bigger issues of life and lifestyle change. So I'm seeing them get involved. When I ran track, I was on the relay team, running the second leg. The first guy would come out, get a good lead, hand me the baton, and I'd run my leg of the race. Mine was at least to not fall back, maybe pick up a few yards, and pass the baton on. So I think the story is, I'm merely running my leg of the race right now. Drawdown is running its race right now, and then we pass it on to the next generation. That's enough to really inspire you. If we're ever going to cross the finish line, meaning a balanced environment, then each of us has got to run our leg of the race. I want to be on the winning team, and the winning team is made up of winning individuals who believe we can make a difference. Remember this, never forget this: we're on the winning team.

