

As Cape Town's water crisis nears 'Day Zero,' faith groups spring into action

Climate change's toll is increasing in South Africa.

by [Brian Pellot](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue



More than 1,000 Muslims from multiple mosques gather in an early morning prayer for rain at the Rylands sports complex in Athlone, Cape Town, South Africa, on February 4, 2018. RNS photo by Brian Pellot.

A trickling sound echoed through the chapel as Garth Q. Counsell, the Anglican bishop of Table Bay, South Africa, slowly poured one pitcher of water into another.

The sound of running water, once considered soothing, now triggers anxiety in drought-stricken Cape Town, where residents are hoarding bottled water and showering over buckets in anticipation of “Day Zero.”

Currently estimated to occur mid-May, Day Zero would mark the unprecedented moment when engineers shut down most of the city’s water service. Nearly 4 million residents would be left to fetch daily water rations of just 25 liters (6.6 gallons) from fewer than 200 central collection points until rains resume or alternative sources become available.

Major political parties and faith groups in South Africa have long recognized the toll that climate change is taking. As tensions rise, faith groups are working across spiritual divides to offer their flocks hope and a way forward.

Counsell's deliberate water display and his opening sermon kicked off the Anglican Diocese of Cape Town's Water (In)Justice Conference in February. More than 120 laity and clergy joined the event, aimed at infusing the Lenten season with messages and prayers about water's sacredness.

Rachel Mash, environmental coordinator for the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and Green Anglicans, organized the conference, which featured practical water-saving tools and ideas. Goody bags included dense green plastic blocks to be dropped in home toilet tanks to save water.

"Our job as the church is to reduce water ourselves, inspire others to reduce water, share ideas on how to do that, get the message out into the community, and avert Day Zero," Mash said.

The Anglican Diocese is performing environmental audits on individual parishes and fixing leaks. If or when the countdown to Day Zero drops below 30 days, Mash said, the denomination plans to install representatives at each parish to help coordinate home delivery of water for vulnerable people of all faiths and none.

"If we do need to be queuing for water, it would be helpful if faith leaders are there to help marshal and to make sure the elderly, vulnerable, pregnant mums, et cetera, aren't standing in the hot sun for hours," she said.

New water restrictions came into effect February 1, regulating the use of borehole water wells and limiting Cape Town residents to 50 liters (13.2 gallons) of water per day. By comparison, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that Americans use 80 to 100 gallons of water each per day.

Behind these numbers, and the growing panic in Cape Town's wealthy and middle-class neighborhoods, is a grim reality, Mash said.

"Because Cape Town is such an unjust society, the leafy suburbs have always had enough water for swimming pools and totally ignored the fact that on the other side of the city people don't have enough water to even throw into their toilet, and they're sharing one toilet between 20 families," she said.

Thabo Makgoba, the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, reminded those attending the conference of past struggles against the HIV/AIDS epidemic and apartheid.

“We have stopped major crises in the history of our country, and even this one will come to pass,” he said.

At a gathering of interfaith leaders at St. George’s Cathedral on February 5, he said the current crisis was also “a beautiful opportunity for South Africans to come together.”

“When the interfaith voice opposed apartheid as a movement, it worked,” he said. “Therein lies our hope.”

Cape Town’s Jewish community, which is predominantly Orthodox, has held several gatherings and fasts to pray for rain. Many mosques throughout Cape Town have installed aerators on taps and are providing worshipers with spray bottles or single cups of water to perform ablutions.

On February 4, the Muslim Judicial Council South Africa joined Habibia Soofie Masjid and Masjidul-Quds to lead more than 1,000 Muslims in an early morning prayer for rain. Presiding sheikhs offered a refrain that highlighted sin and redemption.

“The root cause is the way we live, the sins we commit,” added Riad Fataar, second deputy president of the judicial council. “You have a hand in it, and you can correct it.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on February 26, appears in the print edition under the title “Faith groups take action in Cape Town as water crisis worsens.”