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Massachusetts interfaith group walks for climate rescue

Nine-day trek begins in Northampton blizzard, ends in Boston rally.

By [Michelle Bates Deakin](#)

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Members of the Interfaith Walk for Climate Rescue enjoyed sunshine on the Belchertown to Ware, Mass., leg of their 85-mile trek. (Robert A. Jonas)

On March 16, in driving snow, a band of 130 multi-denominational walkers, bundled in parkas and wrapped in determination, left Northampton, Mass., and headed east. Nine days and 85 miles later, the group, swollen to more than 800 people, arrived in Boston, carrying a warning about the dangers of climate change and a call to dramatically reduce global warming pollution.

The Interfaith Walk for Climate Rescue was conceived by Religious Witness for the Earth (RWE), a national interfaith network dedicated to reducing environmental devastation. The Rev. Fred Small, of First Church Unitarian, in Littleton, Mass., founded RWE, and was one of the organizers of the walk. "People of faith are waking up to our religious and moral obligation to confront climate change," said Small. "The scientists have done their job. They have stated very clearly their consensus that global warming is real and that human beings are contributing to it. So it's time for people to do our job and demand that we achieve 80 percent reduction in global warming pollution by 2050."

The interfaith walkers set out from the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence, and walked each day a distance of between five and 16 miles. Along the way, the walkers were welcomed into Jewish synagogues and churches of Episcopal, Protestant, Methodist, Congregationalist, and UU denominations for lunch stops and overnight accommodations. Walkers represented all of these groups, and also included Muslims, Quakers, and Baptists. Each evening, the walkers were entertained by singers and performers, and educated about the environmental consequences of global warming.

Fourteen UU ministers participated in all or some part of the march. On Saturday the First Parish Church of Billerica and the Littleton church brought in their youth groups to accompany marchers.

“This is an issue that every person of faith can agree on,” said the Rev. Kate Stevens, minister of the First Congregational Church in Ashfield, Mass. “Every one of us sees creation as sacred, and we’re walking to protect creation.”

Some of the walkers joined the pilgrimage to Boston for just a day or night. Others, such as Stevens, walked the entire journey. Small had hoped to walk most of the journey, but an injured foot sidelined him for most of the week. He still joined the group for sleepovers in churches along the way, and he led the rally in Boston on the last day of the protest.

“A walk is an important form of religious witness,” said Small. “Gandhi walked in India for the liberation of the Indian people. The civil rights movement walked in Selma for freedom and dignity. And we walk in defense of creation.”

Twenty-three religious, environmental, and scientific groups were endorsers of the Interfaith Walk including the Environmental League of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light, the Massachusetts Climate Action Network, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life.

Another of the sponsors was the Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network, a network of Bay State UU ministers and lay people working on social justice issues at the legislative level. Nancy Banks, UU Mass Action’s executive director, began the walk in the mid-March blizzard, and rejoined it a few days later in milder, more seasonal weather. She answered her cell phone in Newton huffing and puffing to describe the walk. “I’m on Heartbreak Hill right now,” Banks said, referring to the infamous incline that marks mile 16 of the Boston marathon. She was surrounded by more than 100 walkers marching up Commonwealth Avenue, many carrying signs, earth flags, and placards emblazoned with “Religious Witness for the Earth.” Passersby honked horns and shouted encouragement. “In the rural areas, the walk was much more contemplative,” Banks said. “Now we’re getting a lot of external support, which is wonderful.”

On the eighth night of the walk, the marchers gathered at Christ Church in Cambridge. And on the ninth morning they walked down Massachusetts Avenue singing “This Land is Your Land,” and “Keep on Moving Forward.” Although the walk had started in a blizzard, blue skies were high over the walkers, as Cambridge police officers on bicycles led them to the Charles River, where they crossed the bridge into Boston. By the time they reached the Old South Church in Copley Square, they were 800 strong. African drummers and dancers welcomed them into the church, which they filled to capacity. The interfaith service included Indian dancers, a Jewish folk singer, and blessings from Baptist, UCC, UU, Episcopal, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox clergy.

The crowd spilled into Copley Square at the service’s end for a rally. Speakers included Kevin Knobloch, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists; the Rev. Dr. Tina Saxon of the Peoples Baptist Church of Boston; and the Rev. Dr. Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches.

Small exceeded the 90-minute rally. He told the 1,500 people who had gathered: “When we look beyond the horizon of despair, we see however faintly a future of hope—a world where we live

harmoniously and sustainably, where individual freedom is exercised with care for creation and community, where nature is not basely exploited and wantonly despoiled but revered in awe and wonder and delight. Let us hold this future clearly in our mind's eye. Let us claim it and proclaim it and live it every moment of our lives, and as Gandhi said, 'be the change we wish to see in the world.'”

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