



Conversations with Faith Leaders

Exploring Faith-Based Perspectives on Heat Resilience in North and South Carolina

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Extreme heat is the deadliest weather-related hazard in the United States, disproportionately impacting low-income communities, older adults, and people with chronic conditions. In rural and semirural areas along the I-95 corridor in North and South Carolina, congregations are often among the few consistent institutions providing care and connection.

The [Cooling Communities project](#) engaged faith leaders across North and South Carolina to understand how church communities perceive and respond to extreme heat and explore their potential role in broader resilience efforts. This community engagement component involved Duke Divinity School students working with partners including the Heat Policy Innovation Hub at Duke, North Carolina Council of Churches, and North and South Carolina Interfaith Power and Light.

COMMUNITY PROCESS AND TIMELINE

From fall 2024 to spring 2025, students from Duke Divinity School participated in conversations with community stakeholders to better understand North and South Carolina communities, specifically those in the Sandhills and Coastal Plains experiencing extreme heat and energy poverty.

The engagement process began with an in-person gathering of churches (pastors and lay leaders) and community partners invited to participate in this work. Participants engaged in a range of activities:

- Focus groups about extreme heat in their communities
- Workshops on heat-related challenges
- One-on-one follow-up conversations

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

Target Population

Full-time and bivocational leaders from the Sandhills/Coastal Plains regions. Bivocational leaders are those for whom pastoral responsibilities are balanced with work outside the church.

Recruitment Methods

- Email outreach
- Phone outreach
- Regional partner networks

Geographic and Demographic Diversity

The churches selected represented both urban and rural settings across North and South Carolina, with leaders from diverse congregational and demographic backgrounds chosen for their leadership roles in communities experiencing heat-related challenges.

Participation

- 19 clergy members initially accepted into the cohort
- 15 clergy members ultimately interviewed due to availability and scheduling constraints

INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

Format

Researchers employed semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, conducted via virtual platforms over four months using a qualitative, rapid analysis approach.

Interview Questions

1. How are people navigating heat in your community?
2. Are there any remedies to extreme heat you have seen or been a part of?
3. When do you see heat-related issues begin in your community?
4. What specific actions, if any, have your congregation taken to address extreme heat-related health issues like heart disease and diabetes in the community?
5. What barriers do you encounter when trying to implement heat or environmental-related health initiatives, especially for low-income households, and how do you overcome them?
6. What interests you about this project?
7. Is there anyone else in your community (faith or secular) with whom you think we should have this conversation?
8. Is there anything that hasn't been spoken about that you would like me to know about your community/congregation in this context?

DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the project’s purpose, their right to have conversations not recorded, the right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Analysis Process

- Conversations were recorded with participant consent
- Transcribed verbatim
- Analyzed by team members using thematic analysis
- Focused on identifying recurring themes, patterns, and divergences in responses
- Identifying information was removed from interviews
- Multiple team members reviewed conversations to identify recurring themes and areas for additional questions

Analytical Framework

The qualitative, rapid analysis approach examined community concerns, perceived feasibility of interventions, and institutional roles in climate adaptation, with attention to recurring patterns and novel insights across congregational settings.

KEY FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Theme 1: Heat is Escalating, and the Burden is Uneven

Respondents consistently observed that heat waves arrive earlier and last longer than in years past. Many noted an uptick in energy costs, air-conditioning breakdowns, and requests for assistance from congregants most affected by heat, including elders, unhoused individuals, and people living in substandard housing. Clergy described the emotional and physical strain of managing multiple overlapping crises during the summer months.

As one pastor put it, “We served 95 families last week at our food pantry... They stay in their cars because it’s quicker and easier that way, but the heat has made that really hard.”

Theme 2: Congregations Respond with Compassion— but Limited Capacity

Most congregations reported informal actions such as wellness checks, distributing fans or water, and offering health reminders during services. A few had partnered with local organizations for food distribution or disaster kits. However, none had formal heat response protocols, and most lacked dedicated funding or training to scale their efforts.

Clergy emphasized that their buildings could be used for cooling, but that logistical barriers remain. “We’d need volunteers on-site, maybe drinks and a light snack, just so people could come out of the heat and relax in the unused space,” one leader explained. There was also a shared sense that while congregations want to help, they need tangible examples and clear protocols to feel confident doing so.

Theme 3: Barriers Include Funding, Infrastructure, and Communication Gaps

Key challenges included a lack of financial resources, limited volunteer availability, building infrastructure constraints (e.g., lack of air conditioning or flooding basements), and difficulty communicating with high-risk groups, including elders without internet or unhoused individuals. Several noted that their communities are often left out of larger funding opportunities or resilience planning conversations.

Some clergy also spoke about the challenge of keeping people engaged across generations. “They’d sooner give to save a cat or dog than to help a person,” one pastor reflected. Others described the challenge of helping older adults or people with limited mobility navigate assistance programs and of building awareness among congregants about what help is available.

Theme 4: Strong Interest, Practical Needs, and Trusted Position

Despite limitations, most clergy expressed enthusiasm for the Cooling Communities project and a desire to serve more proactively. Many see this work as a natural extension of their ministry. They expressed strong interest in peer examples (such as [New Wine Christian Fellowship in Louisiana](#), which is equipped with solar panels, generators, and battery storage to keep the lights on during emergencies) and practical tools tailored to their scale.

There was a particularly strong demand for low-tech, ready-to-use resources—flyers, signs, checklists, and ideas for how to organize a simple cooling day. Some leaders also requested liturgical materials such as prayers, readings, or reflections to help integrate care for neighbors during heat events into worship services. “People don’t always make the connection between heat and health,” one respondent shared. “We need something that helps people understand why this matters from the pulpit.”

Theme 5: Churches as Bundlers of Services and Bridges to Local Government

Several churches already act as de facto resilience hubs, offering food pantries, referral networks, and informal counseling. Clergy described their role in addressing homelessness, bridging to housing services, and filling gaps in healthcare and mental health support. In many rural areas, churches serve as one of the only functioning institutions and are well-positioned to connect with both residents and local officials. This dual positioning makes them valuable partners in building heat resilience, particularly where formal infrastructure is lacking.

As one pastor said, “We’re just going to keep taking it one day at a time and see what comes. I’d like to change the world, but I don’t know if I’m going to do anything that amazing.”

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IMPACT AND LIMITATIONS

The engagement process revealed that churches are already responding to extreme heat, often informally and with limited resources. The community conversations shaped the project's direction, leading to the development of theological and educational resources that faith communities can use for education around addressing extreme heat and energy.

poverty. Additionally, the funding gaps and capacity-building needs identified through this engagement informed the development of both early intervention funding solutions and the proposed network of churches and community centers that provide cooling, communications and care during extreme heat.

Due to the limited sample size, the findings provide an initial perspective rather than a comprehensive overview of faith-based engagement in heat resilience. The research represents a qualitative snapshot of how church communities in the target region perceive and respond to extreme heat challenges.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

1. **Recognize Churches as Climate Responders.** As frontline responders and community anchors, faith institutions should be included in resilience planning. With targeted investment, they can serve as trusted sites for cooling, education, and outreach.
2. **Support Churches as Service Bundlers.** Policymakers and funders should acknowledge and strengthen the role of churches as bundlers of care—where food, health, shelter, and now cooling can be delivered together in trusted settings.
3. **Develop and Disseminate Faith-Scaled Tools.** There is strong demand for culturally appropriate, low-barrier materials that congregations can deploy quickly. Toolkits should include flyers, signage templates, service checklists, volunteer guides, and liturgical materials that help clergy communicate the importance of heat preparedness and caring for neighbors.
4. **Strengthen Government-Church Partnerships.** Churches often act as the connective tissue between residents and local government. Strategic partnerships could include formal memoranda of understanding, shared emergency protocols, and coordination hubs.
5. **Invest in Messaging and Peer Networks.** Messaging that reflects congregational values and lived experience may be particularly effective. Investing in peer-to-peer networks among clergy can accelerate innovation and adaptation.
6. **Avoid Offloading Without Support.** While churches are eager to help, placing additional burdens on them without structural support risks burnout and institutional strain. Resilience planning must include funding, training, and recognition of clergy capacity.

CONCLUSION

Churches in the Carolinas are already responding to extreme heat, often informally and with limited resources. This qualitative snapshot reveals the potential for faith-based institutions to play a central role in rural and semirural heat resilience. With appropriate support, congregations can become powerful nodes in the resilience ecosystem—providing care, connection, and cooling when it matters most.

CITATION

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<https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/publications/conversations-faith-leaders-exploring-faith-based-perspectives-heat-resilience>.

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Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability

The [Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability at Duke University](#) accelerates solutions to critical energy and environmental challenges, advancing a more resilient and sustainable world. The Nicholas Institute conducts and supports actionable research and undertakes sustained engagement with policymakers, businesses, and communities—in addition to delivering transformative educational experiences to empower future leaders. The Nicholas Institute’s work is aligned with the Duke Climate Commitment, which unites the university’s education, research, operations, and external engagement missions to address climate challenges.

The Heat Policy Innovation Hub

The Nicholas Institute’s [Heat Policy Innovation Hub](#) is the first program in the United States dedicated to cross-disciplinary innovation on extreme heat policy and practice. Located in a region profoundly affected by extreme heat, Duke University is particularly well-situated to influence—and potentially transform—our nation’s approach to this critical issue. The Heat Policy Innovation Hub brings together Duke’s globally recognized expertise in medicine, health, policy, engineering, the environment, and ministry.

Cooling Communities

The [Cooling Communities initiative](#) brings together community leadership, trusted faith-based institutions, and financial innovation to explore scalable, locally rooted strategies for heat resilience. The first phase of the project has been led by the Heat Policy Innovation Hub in partnership with Duke Divinity School and Interfaith Power & Light.

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