

SCIENCE



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Faith groups backing march see an ally in science

By [Ryan Cross](#) Apr. 20, 2017 , 5:00 PM

On Saturday, thousands of Chicagoans are expected to hit the pavement on South Columbus Drive in support of one of the hundreds of rallies being held under the auspices of the March for Science. In the crowd will be Brian Sauder, who grew up in a deeply religious Anabaptist community in rural Tazewell County in Illinois, where he passed time fishing and hunting. Now a minister in Chicago, Sauder is just one of many faith leaders who are planning to join the march, and see little conflict between faith and science.

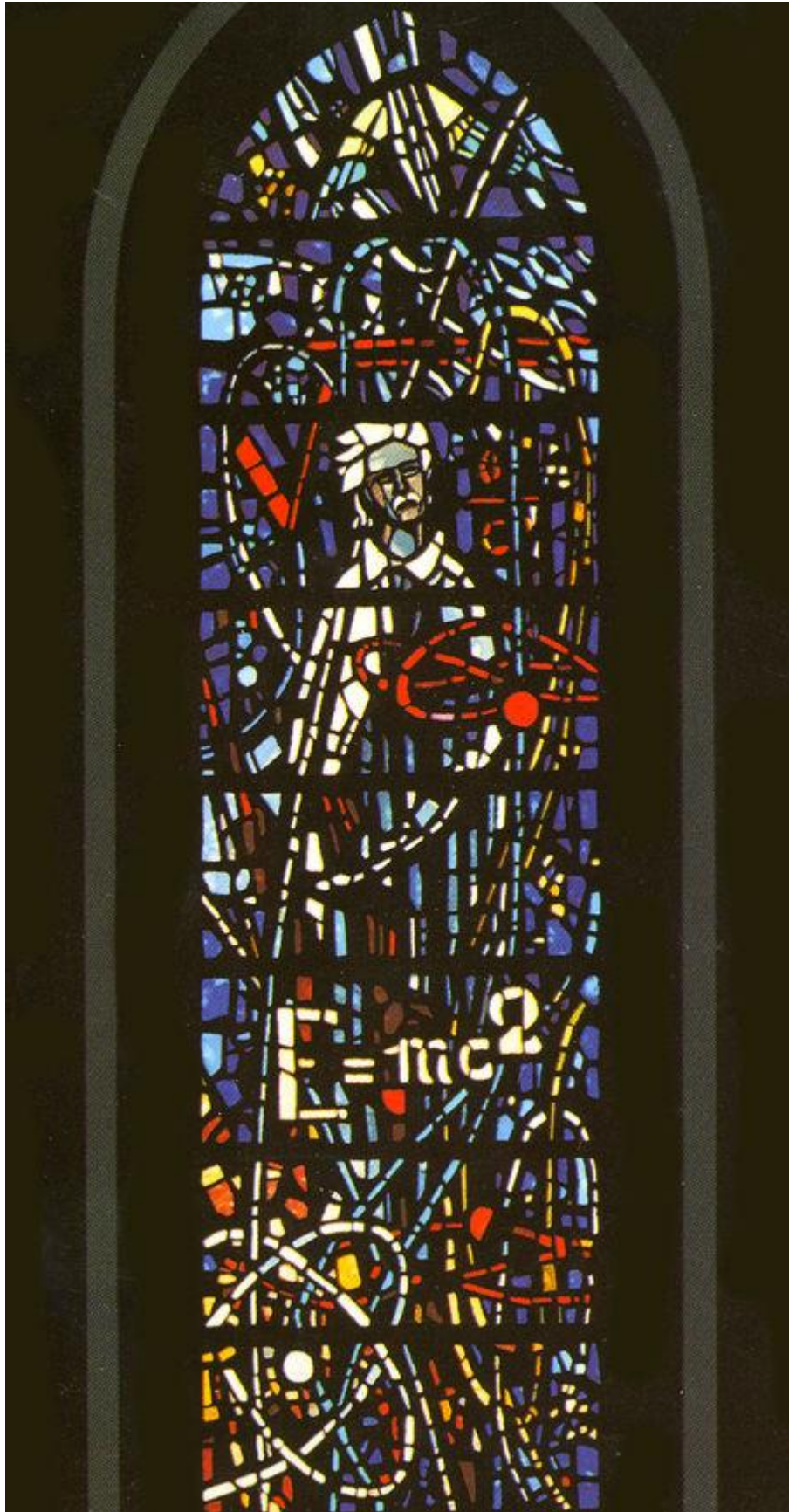
“Our goal is to get people of faith from across Chicago to march for science,” Sauder told *ScienceInsider*. “We want to show that people of faith do take science seriously and that this perception that there is a deep divide is indeed not true.”

Hoping for an outdoors career in fisheries or wildlife management, Sauder studied environmental science at the University of Illinois in Champaign as an undergraduate. But as he began to understand the science of climate change, he noted that people living in developing countries, who make the smallest contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, are likely to suffer the most drastic consequences of planetary warming. “I started thinking,” he says, “that if my faith calls me to care for the least of those among me, how does the science that I am learning integrate with my faith?”

Sauder found his answer by going to seminary and then joining a Chicago-based nonprofit called [Faith in Place](#), which works with faith communities across Illinois to promote environmental justice and sustainability. He is now its executive director. And like many science marchers from faith communities, Sauder says his group views many science-related issues primarily through an environmental lens.

Faith in Place is the Illinois affiliate of a national organization called [Interfaith Power & Light](#) in San Francisco, California. “We think climate change is the most important moral issue facing our generation,” says Interfaith Power & Light President Sally Bingham, who will be marching in San Francisco. “It is particularly important now with an administration that is trying to undo everything that we’ve worked so hard for over the years,” she adds.

Other environmentally minded faith groups have also announced that they will support the march. Daniel Misleh, executive director of the [Catholic Climate Covenant](#) in Washington, D.C., says “it is important to have sound scientific arguments that can help direct public policy.” Yesterday, the group released an [official statement](#) in support of the March for Science. And the environmental advocacy group [GreenFaith](#) is co-sponsoring the march planned for their hometown of Trenton. (But though they are behind the March for Science, all three groups—the Catholic Climate Covenant, Interfaith Power & Light, and Greenfaith—say they are funneling most of their energies toward another national event on 29 April, the [People’s Climate March](#) in Washington, D.C.)



Grace Cathedral

More widespread support comes from the [Clergy Letter Project](#) in Olympia, a group of some 14,400 ordained clergy members that supports teaching evolution and climate change. Founder and executive director Michael Zimmerman says a survey of the group's members showed strong support for the march. Negative responses mostly came from people who said they believed the event wouldn't change anything, and might even further polarize science, Zimmerman says. "The new slightly more political focus of the march might have turned some members off," he says. (In contrast, he notes, responses in favor of supporting the People's Climate March were unanimous.)

Many faith groups and individual churches that *Science* spoke with expressed disappointment that the March for Science and the People's Climate March were not combined into a single event on Earth Day. Faced with a choice of putting their efforts into backing just one of the events, the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco chose to [support the March for Science](#). Ellen Clark-King, executive pastor of the Episcopal church, says she doesn't think that choice shocked church members, who regularly see the [stained-glass likeness of Albert Einstein](#) and astronaut John Glenn in their cathedral, alongside Biblical characters and saints.

Clark-King hopes that groups like hers will invite other marchers to ask questions about why a church is at the march, and show the science community that "we are on the same side," she says. "I am looking forward to being part of what sounds like a very good-tempered, positive experience, not marching against something, but marching for something."

Another theme expressed by faith groups supporting the march is the need to search for truth. They see science and religion as two means, albeit in different realms, of finding it. Lee Norrgard of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Reston, Virginia, decided to lead a group from his church to the March for Science in Washington, D.C., because of the broader message of "looking for truth and meaning in data."

"We think both religion and science teach humility, and that we are part of something larger," Sauder of Faith in Place says. "We believe we have a moral obligation to take care of the Earth and to care for each other. And science can help service that."