

# Progressing Spirit

## Now's the Time to Defend Science Against Fundamentalism

Essay by Rev. David Felten  
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To most of us, the latest survey results from Pew Research are no surprise. The "Nones" (Americans claiming no religious affiliation) have risen to become the largest "religious" cohort in the country. At 28% (Catholics are 23% and evangelical Protestants are at 24%), many of these unaffiliated Americans point to the church's anti-science stance as one of the main reasons for their disaffection.

Nevertheless, Fundamentalist Christians are doubling down in their continued efforts to discredit science and advance their antediluvian worldview through state legislation and school board elections across the country. And while LGBTQ+ rights, race, and alternative history seem to be dominating their front-page efforts, creationism and anti-evolution campaigns continue just under most people's radar.

So, what better time than February 12<sup>th</sup> and Charles Darwin's birthday (by rights, one of the most important days on your Liturgical Calendar) to turn our thoughts once again to the critical role Progressive Christians have as a defense against those who think subverting science somehow promotes their religion.

I asked evolutionary biologist and ecologist Dr. Michael Zimmerman, Founder and Executive Director of [The Clergy Letter Project](#) and the Religion and Science Weekend (formerly Evolution Weekend), for some guidance in marking the day.

### **David Felten:**

Happy Darwin's Birthday, Michael! What exactly is The Clergy Letter Project, and what does it do?

### **Michael Zimmerman:**

The Clergy Letter Project is a grassroots organization consisting of clergy from around the world who've come together to not only promote the belief that science and religion can and should be considered compatible, but to show that there are advantages to both science and religion if the two

are seen working hand in hand instead of being at war with one another.

**Felten:**

But the culture warriors see a benefit in promoting a war between religion and science.

**Zimmerman:**

Yes, but it's clergy and scientists on one side and *fundamentalists* on the other side. These fundamentalists are attacking both religion AND science.

**Felten:**

Where you're promoting a conversation.

**Zimmerman:**

Yes! It's really important to get beyond sound bites. So many of the issues we deal with, not just as clergy and scientists, but as a society, are complex. You're not going to solve issues by shouting at people and calling them names and giving them one sentence answers. We're trying to get people to understand that it's healthy to have meaningful conversation where you listen before you talk and try to understand where the other person is coming from. It's okay to disagree and it's okay to make other people uncomfortable as long as you do it respectfully. And that takes time — which is why The Clergy Letter Project members come together at least once a year for Religion and Science Weekend to move the dialogue between religion and science a little deeper.

**Felten:**

How did an evolutionary biologist become a recruiter of clergy and creator of The Clergy Letter Project?

**Zimmerman:**

Purely by accident. Years ago, there was a trial in Arkansas over promoting creation science in the public schools and demanding that evolutionary biology NOT be taught. The ACLU asked me to review some papers and that experience changed my life. I discovered that there was this whole other worldview attacking the science that shaped my life. But I was an evolutionary biologist teaching evolutionary biology at colleges. Who's going to listen to me? Jeannie Scott, the head of the National Center for Science Education at the time, taught me that the way to have the most impact was not to have scientists talk about science. It wasn't to have out of state "experts" talking to local school boards. It was to have local clergy members talking about science. Because once you have people who are local and who are not expected to have a bias speaking on behalf of something that people don't

expect, people tend to listen.

**Felten:**

And after nearly 20 years, you have over 16,000 clergy signatures and hundreds of congregations participating.

**Zimmerman:**

If only everybody understood that religion and science were not in conflict, The Clergy Letter Project could go out of business and the world would be a better place. But we're not in that world yet. Bills designed to reintroduce creationism in public schools are still being introduced in 13 to 15 states every year.

**Felten:**

All the more reason religion and science is an important topic for clergy to keep discussing with their congregations.

**Zimmerman:**

It's important because religion is being redefined in the public sphere as being congruent with fundamentalism. Mainstream religious views are just being tossed out. At the same time, science is under attack from those same fundamentalists. We need to be able to show the general public that it is really important to look at the world and see it as it really is and not as others *want* it to be.

**Felten:**

And we saw the impact that religious fantasy and science-denialism had on the spread of COVID.

**Zimmerman:**

Even though we're past the worst of the pandemic, COVID-19 is still the fourth leading cause of death in the country. That's not insignificant. And yet, the attack on science is leading people not to be vaccinated. And now measles is on the return because people don't believe in vaccination anymore! We look at the world and see that there's a global climate crisis, and yet there are people saying, "Well, the scientists can't be trusted about that, either. It's all politics!" So, we need to bring the general population back to seeing how science can help make for a better world and how that's one of the things religion is all about as well.

**Felten:**

So what can we do?

**Zimmerman:**

Clergy should read our "Clergy Letter Concerning Religion and Science" and add their names to the over 16,000 who have already signed. They and anyone else who signs up will get a free monthly newsletter and altogether be part of a bigger community promoting a dialogue between religion and science. There are five letters from different faith groups and there's one overarching letter calling for immediate action to be taken about climate change. And clergy or non-clergy can share those letters with school boards, legislators, or other civic leaders to demonstrate that science and religion can come together.

**Felten:**

Along with reaching out to clergy members you know and asking them to sign up, you could also encourage your community's participation in Religion and Science Weekend.

**Zimmerman:**

Absolutely. Over the 19 years that Evolution Sunday (and now Religion and Science Weekend) have been in existence, multiple millions of people have been reached through congregations promoting the idea that religion and science are compatible: sermons, forums, news reports, radio spots, and who knows what else. The idea is simply to get the word out that there's *not* a war going on between religion and science. There are just some people with a very narrow perspective who argue that religion is this narrow thing that they alone define versus other religious leaders who think religion is something with much broader relevance.

**Felten:**

And for those clergy wondering where they might even begin, there are literally hundreds of sermons archived on The Clergy Letter Project site that have been an amazing resource in preparing my own Religion and Science weekend.

**Zimmerman:**

I've been really pleased over the years how many clergy members have delivered sermons and whose content is wonderful. It's impressive the varied perspectives that clergy members from different religions and different denominations have, and yet there's a commonality that's really remarkable!

With thanks to Michael Zimmerman for the conversation and his commitment to this effort, I also want to point out The Clergy Letter Project's list, which has contact information for 1,080 additional scientists from all 50 states representing 31 countries who have agreed to serve as technical

consultants to clergy members who have questions about the science associated with all aspects of evolution. Over one thousand scientists! Just look up your zip code and there's likely to be someone nearby available to speak to your faith community, serve on a panel, or help out in preparing your own presentation.

The demographics are clear. Because the church has failed miserably in taking people's questions seriously or to be in conversation with the scientists who are wrestling with the mysteries of life, the universe, and everything else, people are voting with their feet. There's no denying the church's complicity in promoting unjust, irrational, and harmful beliefs and behaviors.

And yet, the voice of Progressive Christians can still make a critical difference going forward. As allies with scientists and others embracing the value of rational thought, Progressive Christians can serve as a unique faith-based bulwark against the fundamentalist tide, which continues to claim a religious authority it does not possess.

Go sign up for [The Clergy Letter Project](#) newsletter, sign one of the clergy letters, or send one of the sermons to your fundamentalist Uncle (just to poke the bear!). Support a church in your area recognizing Religion and Science Weekend — or throw a birthday party for Darwin in your own faith community. Together, we can raise an awareness that not ALL Christians are anti-science and can work toward a world where religion and science cooperate in embracing the mysteries of the universe and our humble place in the midst of it all.

~ Rev. David Felten