

**Faith-based Organizing for Climate Justice:
Campaigning for Compassionate and Sustainable Diets**

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In recent years, growing choruses of environment, food security, nutrition and global health scientists have started advocating changes in diet toward more plant-based foods as an important behavioral adjustment for mitigating climate change. Historically, the dominant focus on reducing carbon dioxide emissions by environmentalists has led to relatively less attention on other factors like the contribution of vegetarian diets to positive ecologic effects and reduced energy consumption. At the same time, interest in vegetarian eating is on the rise. For example, Google trends application data indicate a steady, clear increase in search volume for vegan-related terms.

Sustainable eating is an overlooked but potentially significant avenue whereby people can connect the complexities of climate science to their personal beliefs and values, while abating health concerns and empowering community participation in related green living initiatives. This paper examines various communicative practices enacted by members and volunteers of an internationally renowned Humanistic Buddhist organization in their campaign for vegetarianism.

Many people experience knowledge and affective gaps while relating abstract environmental issues and resolutions to their daily lives. Hence, communication efforts about climate justice that align with people's moral values and philosophy are purported to be more diverse, personal, compelling, and participatory. Few communication researchers, however, have delved into the nexus of faith-based organizing and environmental communication. As "a unique hybrid of religious beliefs and socio-political activism" (Berger, 2003, p. 16), religious non-governmental organizations offer especially interesting sites for investigating the dynamics of religious organizing. These organizations exert a potentially powerful influence over their members (see Tracey, 2012), including their campaigning as a response to climate challenges.

Therefore, this paper explores how a vegetarian campaign promotes communicative practices that enable faith-based organizing for climate justice. Specifically, our research looks at the "VERO" campaign for compassionate and sustainable diets. VERO is a catchy portmanteau of "veggie" and "hero." This campaign is mounted by members of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Tzu Chi). While Tzu Chi's headquarters are located in Hualien, Taiwan, it operates in many countries in the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia. By some estimates, it is "the largest non-government organization in the Chinese-speaking world," with more than 10 million members in more than 50 countries, providing charity, medical care, and education (O'Neill, 2010). Since 1990, Tzu Chi has also focused on environmental care by organizing recycling centers and promoting environmental education (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2010). Created by Tzu Chi collegiate youth members and volunteers (known as *Tzu Chings*, *Ching* meaning "young") in Singapore, VERO has operated as an annual campaign for the past three years (2011-2013).

Our study of the VERO campaign focuses on three communicative mechanisms that are central to Tzu Chi's faith-based organizing. *Invocation* refers to the ways organizational

members call upon and appeal to revered figures who incarnate the organization's philosophy in interpersonal interactions to motivate themselves and others to fulfill campaign goals. *Affective embodiment* denotes the verbal and non-verbal enactment of the organization's values and beliefs in executing different aspects of the campaign. And *transmediation* refers to ways the campaign's discourse on compassion and sustainability is shared across different linked and interactive platforms in a global culture of mobility and convergence.

Our study is part of a larger multi-method and multi-year naturalistic inquiry of Tzu Chi's spiritual organizing. In this paper, our exploratory analysis of Tzu Chi's environmental outreach illustrates how the VERO campaign promotes specific communicative practices that constitute Tzu Chi's organizing. For instance, findings show how volunteers and paid employees invoke or call upon their Dharma Master's words to inspire themselves and others toward holistic environmental care, including the practice of vegetarianism. They quote her aphorisms in their daily interactions to make sense of climate change concerns and motivate themselves to practice physical and environmental purity.

Second, findings highlight how *Tzu Chings* affectively embody or enact their organization's philosophy of "eating 80% well" by donating 20% of their food expenditure to Tzu Chi's charitable causes such as the Tzu Chi bamboo coin banks. Their adoption of meatless diets is complemented by vegetarian cooking demonstrations and competitions as well as experiential games and role-playing (e.g. immersing oneself in a mock slaughterhouse to reflect on animal abuse and cruelty). Third, the VERO campaign is transmediated on various linked communication platforms. For instance, the VERO Facebook page hosts educational video clips, event announcements and related news. The "Veggie country pass" is a print brochure created by the Tzu Chi organization to record the number of vegan meals consumed. Passes that are complete are used to form wall art like a mural displayed in their headquarters.

To conclude, we discuss the VERO campaign's significance regarding cultivating compassionate and sustainable diets in a context of materialistic Asian consumption and mediated culture. As we will show, this campaign is part of Tzu Chi's larger humanistic Buddhist philosophy that stresses interdependence, gratitude and civic engagement instead of traditional chanting and meditation. Thus, our research on faith-based activism helps shed light on the constructive and challenging organizational aspects of managing environmental campaigns through spirituality to promote sustainable living.

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