December's 193-nation 16th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Cancun Mexico was widely hailed as a 'success'. Was it?

Flattering comparisons were drawn with Cancun's predecessor (Copenhagen, December 2009) whose acrimonious end saw 120 attending heads of state and government failing to adopt a legally binding, wide-ranging post-2012 climate change regime as mandated by the 13th conference in 2007.

No such regime from Cancun. Instead, decisions on institutional issues 'The Cancun Agreements' shunting off difficult topics to the next conference (Durban, 29 November-9 December) - not widely expected to generate a new regime either.

The ever-rising alarm of scientists and environmentalists is well expressed below. "They may have saved the UN process, but they haven't saved the planet. World leaders must significantly raise their game... Time is running out... the atmosphere doesn't negotiate with politicians," Alden Meyer, Director of Strategy and Policy of the Union of Concerned Scientists, USA.

"From the standpoint of the twenty-year negotiations, Cancun was ... an ethical failure of those nations most responsible for climate change. The commitments made (in) Cancun... are not environmentally sufficient, distributively just, nor provide for just adaptation responses for vulnerable developing countries." Dan Brown, Associate Professor, Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law, Penn State University, USA

Yet governments of such responsible (i.e. developed) nations are well aware of the stakes.

In 2007 the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 4th Assessment Report urged that industrialised nations' greenhouse gas emissions must peak by 2015 and by 2020 be cut by 25 to 40% below 1990 levels. Industrialising developing countries (like China, India) should achieve substantial deviations from business as usual trends. Such reductions would give a 50/50 chance to limit by mid-century or later the increase in global average temperature to +2°C over pre-industrial levels, beyond which catastrophic runaway climate change would occur.

Global temperature is already 0.75°C over the pre-industrial level, another +1.0°C thought to be 'built in' to the climate system.

However, pledges registered in Cancun would cut emissions only 11-16% below 1990 levels - leading to a devastating +3-5°C within this century. And threatening by 2020 a dramatic decline in output of key African food crops.
The lowest pledge - the USA's, the world's second biggest emitter after China - is now gravely compromised by the 'climate sceptic' House of Representatives' Republican majority emerging from November's mid-term elections.

Since the IPCC Report, new scientific findings warn that +2°C seems far too risky, +1.5°C is urged instead - strenuously advocated since Copenhagen by 112 of the world's most vulnerable developing countries. However, +2°C was confirmed in Cancun accompanied by a hard-won undertaking for review between 2013 and 2015.

In a speech this February, UNFCCC's executive secretary, Christiana Figueres admitted "a 2 degree increase is in fact no guarantee for the survival of small island states or the limitation of water stress in Africa."

Meanwhile, surveys worldwide show how much still needs doing to mobilise public opinion sufficiently to bring governments to take adequate, timely action.

The Archbishop of Canterbury in his lecture 'Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment' (March 2009) set the issue in its spiritual context. "Climate change has been characterised as a matter of justice both to those who now have no part in decision-making at the global level yet bear the heaviest burdens as a consequence of the irresponsibility of wealthier nations, and to those who will succeed us on this planet. God's faithfulness will not be a safety net that guarantees a happy ending... The earth remains the Lord's... it would be dangerously illusory to imagine that this material environment will adjust itself at all costs so as to maintain our relationship to it."

In contrast to the ever more media-savvy and politically sophisticated year round climate change advocacy by environmental movements and their global networks, and by such high-profile Christian NGOs as Christian Aid and Caritas, the churches have been slow to effectively rise to this challenge to creation.

Some recent statements from the Pope have included passing mentions of climate change, but no encyclical or homily has focused on it to date. The Nuncio (and staff) accredited to the country hosting each UNFCCC conference has usually represented the Holy See; its delegation, sometimes flanked by one expert, is thus not endowed with the continuity and expertise of other delegations. A part-time layman carries the issue at the Vatican. The Anglican Communion UN Observer Office is not represented at all.

The long-standing World Council of Churches Change Programme and its delegations to conferences are not widely perceived as having had much impact, any more than the Church of Sweden's Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto, 2008.
The charismatic public appearances in downtown Copenhagen of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Archbishop Tutu, respectively at a packed ecumenical service in the Lutheran Cathedral and a massive outdoor rally contrasted with their non-appearance, for reasons unknown, and unlike the Prince of Wales before the thousands of delegates (and media) at the UN conference venue.

There have been two recent developments, however. Last October the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace convened a meeting in Rome of Bishops from the South (i.e. developing continents) which drafted the still confidential but nonetheless leaked "Climate Change: a call to justice" (Rome: South-South Dialogue Declaration). Apparently the support of developed nation Bishops' Conferences is being sought for the document to be issued shortly before the Durban conference.

On 31 January, the Anglican Primates' meeting in Dublin adopted a 'Statement on Climate Change'.

The lofty sentiments expressed in both documents are impeccable but lack a ringing call to action by all peoples of every faith. Both miss the chance to focus with the same clarity as the UN secretariat, the environmental NGOs and scientists on the key unresolved UNFCCC negotiating issues or to challenge the responsible nations as forcefully as Messrs. Meyer and Brown. Sadly, some of these documents' technical vocabulary and even use of proper names are not those currently in use elsewhere. Bad for credibility.

Between now and Durban two opportunities arise for launching new, effective and truly collaborative and multi-level interfaith climate change campaigning. First, the series of activities leading up to (also at) the Durban conference, including an ecumenical conference in June planned by the All African Council of Churches (not mentioned in either of the above documents!).

Second, the interreligious 'peace summit' in Assisi on 25 October chaired by the Pope. Its current focus on peace as meaning an end to armed conflict and to the persecution of religious believers must surely be broadened to include 'peace with Creation' and within that, a commitment to proactive, enduring global interfaith advocacy and action on the terrifying prospect of runaway climate change.

This would surely be an extended focus of which their 'saintly host' St. Francis would greatly approve and which could hopefully inspire the Franciscan family (1.3 million) to find its own climate change advocacy pathway.