

What are productive ways to talk about climate change?

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Earlier this year, the *Century* published [a piece](#) by an environmental scientist on just how radical the current shift in CO₂ levels are—from the perspective of 50 million years. As I was working with that scientist, Lee Vierling, on the piece, we struggled to find a language that he and I and readers of the *Century* could share.

He wanted something that was fluid and scientifically absolutely accurate. He also wanted to be certain that he was not using scare tactics. “People stop listening if you play the fear card,” he told me. Vierling and I went through ten or more drafts to find what we thought might be the proper balance of science, history and call to action. We were both proud of the result, but I was chastened by just how difficult it was to address what is arguably the central crisis of our times.

The difficulty of addressing climate change is more than evident on the campaign trail. A recent [piece](#) in the *New York Times* points out that Barack Obama and Mitt Romney are using a script for talking about energy that is more *apropos* to the early 2000s than it is today.

Obama took a step closer to addressing the facts when he said in his convention speech that “climate change is not a hoax. More droughts and floods and wildfires are not a joke. They are a threat to our children's future.” He has continued to use this line in stump speeches. But the assertion has had few teeth in the campaign. Fears about our economic realities are trouncing fears of climate change, even though one is far more threatening than the other—and we don't seem able to do much about either.

One of the missing pieces is a shared vocabulary like the one that Lee and I worked to find. Response to the NYT piece has focused mostly on “yes, climate change is real” vs. “no it isn't”—a debate that isn't likely to go anywhere. Instead, we need to look more closely at the details and pay attention to creative solutions. For this, we need to listen to scientists and work to translate their efforts into a language for our churches, communities, and local and national governments. It is slow work, but not impossible.