

Arctic explorer Steger warns of global warming

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NEW ULM — The polar ice sheets that helped make explorer Will Steger famous in the 1980s are disappearing, according to the explorer himself, speaking at Our Savior's Lutheran Church Tuesday night.

Minneapolis native Steger led the first confirmed dogsled journey to the North Pole without resupply in 1986 and led the longest unsupported dogsled journey expedition in history across Antarctica in 1988.

He told bits and pieces of his expeditions across the arctic wilderness and the effects that global warming has had on those places to a crowd of about 400, after speaking to crowds at Farmfest 50 miles west of New Ulm earlier Tuesday.

Although he grew up in the Minneapolis area, Steger still lives "off the grid" in a cabin nearly Ely, where he first moved in 1970. He began dogsledding three years later and says he's been hooked on it ever since.

"I think the moral implications grab peoples' attention the most," Steger said. "People spend so much time inside these days in their car driving to work. Some of us remember the '50s, the '40s and society was much more engaged back then. That's one solution to global warming, is for people to get engaged."

Steger visited the same continent — Greenland — as famous explorers like Amudson, Scott and Shackleton. He took three dogsled teams of Canadian Eskimo dogs across ice shelves that have existed for thousands of years.

He said he's noticed changes in the places he once sledged across that have taken place in the last 15 years. He showed the audience satellite photographs of an Iowa-sized chunk breaking away from one the ice sheets he crossed. Those ice sheets were thousands of years old. The chunk broke away in three weeks, Steger said.

He said the permafrost — ground that has been permanently frozen for thousands of years — that covers the upper reaches of North America and Russia will start to melt. After it begins to melt, it will release methane into the atmosphere.

Steger was joined by U.S. Congressman Tim Walz, Lutheran Bishop Jon Anderson, and J. Drake Hamilton of St. Paul-based Fresh Energy as a part of "Eyewitness to Global Warming," a public forum that was sponsored by several non-profit organizations.

Walz was the first to speak. He said Congress now has a committee on global warming and lots of talk about new environmental standards is taking place in Washington. He said new emissions standards are "moving forward" and making progress in Congress.

"...But are baby steps quick enough?," Walz questioned.

Hamilton said natural and human global warming factors are responsible for the climate changes. Carbon dioxide is one of the culprits, she said, and the largest increase of it came during the Industrial Revolution.

"If we keep going without any change, then winter in Minnesota will be like winter in Chicago — lots of rain," said Hamilton.

Summer will be more like Kansas — very dry and hotter — and the temperature will threaten terrain that Kansas doesn't have, such as lakes, and will create more extreme weather events, such as flooding. Higher carbon dioxide also triggers allergies like hayfever, Hamilton said.

Twenty-eight Minnesota cities, including Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, Hutchinson, Winona and several suburbs and small towns like Mountain Iron, have made pledges to reduce emissions within their borders, she said.

Aside from environmental science, the evening also had a Christian theme. Anderson relayed a digital video message from an ELCA convention in Chicago, telling the audience that global warming is about stewardship of the land and that stewardship isn't just about taking care of the environment, but is really about how people care for everything, including each other.

Pastor Mark Peters of the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota ended the speaking portion of the evening by encouraging the audience to practice what it preaches.