

# Environmental Racism

## Theological Background

In Isaiah we are given divine insight into our relations with one another "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday" Isaiah 58:9. We are further called both in Leviticus and by our Lord Jesus Christ to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we turn from this divine will, we as a broken people promote systems that are unjust and inequitable. One manifestation of these injustices is the persistent problem of racism.

## Background:

The United Methodist Church is committed to understanding and eliminating racism. One generally ignored aspect is environmental racism. People of color are disproportionately affected by toxic contamination due to the production, storage, treatment, and disposal process of hazardous materials and wastes. African American, Hispanic North American, Asian American, Native American, and citizens of developing nations are usually the least able, politically and economically, to oppose the sitings of these facilities.

As a result, their communities have become the dumping grounds for waste with devastating economic and health consequences.

The pervasive problem of environmental racism within the United States first came to light in the early 1980s. The birth of the environmental justice movement can be traced to the historic protest in 1983 in Warren County, North Carolina where over 500 people were arrested for blocking the shipment of toxic waste (PCBs) to a landfill in a predominantly black county. That same year, a General Accounting Office (GAO, now Government Accountability Office) study concluded "blacks make up the majority of the population in three out of four communities where landfills are located."

In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice issued the landmark report Toxic Wastes and Race. This report, expanding on the GAO findings, established that race—rather than poverty, land value, or home ownership—is the most reliable predictor of proximity to hazardous waste sites in the United States. And in 1992, the National Law Journal study, Unequal Protection, uncovered racial disparities in the enforcement of environmental protection laws. The report highlighted a "racial divide in the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters." According to the report, "white communities see faster action, better results and stiffer penalties than communities where blacks, Hispanics and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs whether the community is wealthy or poor."

These and other reports provided strong empirical evidence of environmental racism.

## Among the findings:

1. Race is consistently the most statistically significant variable in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. Three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in the United States are located in communities of color; communities with commercial hazardous waste facilities have two to three times the average minority population of communities without such facilities; and three out of every five African Americans and Hispanic North Americans live in communities with toxic waste sites.<sup>1</sup> The African American community of Mossville in rural Louisiana is home to over thirty petrochemical and industrial plants located within a two-mile

area. A U.S. government report in 1999 highlighted alarming levels of dioxin in the blood of the residents and linked those levels to local exposures.

2. Communities where hazardous waste incinerators are sited tend to have large minority populations, low incomes, and low property values. The minority portion of the population in communities with existing incinerators is ninety-eight percent higher than the national average. In Houston, Texas, six of eight municipal incinerators are located in predominantly African American neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup>

3. The asthma rate among African American children is 26 higher than that among white children. (US CDC) In 2002, 71 percent of African Americans live in counties that violate federal clean air standards compared with 58 percent of whites.

4. Fifty percent of the children in the United States suffering from lead poisoning are African American. At every income level, black children are contaminated with lead at twice the rate of white children.

5. Farm workers' children (mainly Hispanics) in the United States suffer a higher rate of birth defects due to their mothers' exposure to pesticides during the early stages of pregnancy. In farm worker communities, children with cancer are common. Pesticide exposure among farm workers can result in death, birth defects, cancer, nerve disorders, skin diseases, and other health complications.

6. Navajo teenagers have cancer rates seventeen times the national average, due to countless uranium spills on Navajo lands that contaminated their water, air, and soil.<sup>3</sup>

7. The growing trend during the 1980s and 1990s has been to dump toxic wastes in developing countries. Countries such as Liberia have been offered much-needed foreign capital if they accepted several shipments of toxic wastes in the past few years. Globalization has enabled environmental racism around the world, with developed countries increasingly looking to developing countries as new dumping grounds for unwanted and often toxic wastes. Unfortunately, these countries often lack the appropriate infrastructure to adequately handle the environmental and health problems that accompany these wastes.

As the evidence of environmental racism has grown, so has the number of grassroots activists committed to environmental justice. In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit gathered activists from across the country and around the world to share stories, strategies, struggles, and victories. The summit produced principles of environmental justice and a challenge to the mainstream, mostly white, environmental groups who were found to be exclusionary in both their composition and policies. A decade later, hundreds of activists gathered for a second summit to evaluate progress and develop strategies for continued work to combat persistent environmental racism.

In response to the demands of the environmental justice community, the Environmental Protection Agency established the Office of Environmental Equity (later changed to Office of Environmental Justice) to address inequities in environmental protection. In 1994, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898 requiring federal agencies to develop strategies for ensuring compliance with principles of environmental justice and with a commitment that all communities have the right to safe and healthy environments.

Despite the clear evidence and growing awareness our society's attitude toward the production and disposal of hazardous products remains one of "out of sight, out of mind." But "out of sight, out of mind" is most often where the poor and powerless live and work. These communities have thus become toxic "sacrifice zones." Hazardous waste is still exposed in many communities such

as Aniston, Alabama even in the year 2003. The work must continue. We must be persistent and consistent in exposing these atrocities with a commitment that all communities have a right to safe and healthy environments.

Other evidence suggests that the problem is worsening. The findings of the Interdenominational Hearings on Toxics and Minorities, held in September 1990, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the General Board of Church and Society-sponsored consultation on Responding to Communities Facing Toxic Hazards held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in October 1990, poignantly demonstrated that communities are still having problems related to toxic contamination more than ten years after the media exposed the problems. Our society's attitude toward the production and disposal of hazardous products is one of "out of sight, out of mind." But "out of sight, out of mind" is most often where the poor and powerless live and work. These communities have thus become toxic "sacrifice zones." The continued pattern of environmental racism represents a serious challenge to the conscience of all Christians. We therefore ask our local churches, conferences, and general agencies to join with other religious bodies and groups in actions to end this form of racism:

1. We request the Council of Bishops to address environmental racism in any formal communication to the denomination concerning racism or the environment.
2. We urge annual conferences, districts, local churches, and general agencies to become more involved with community groups working end environmental racism.
3. We urge all general program agencies and the General Commission on Religion and Race to:
  - a. disseminate the "stories" of people and communities affected by environmental racism;
  - b. find expertise, build leadership, and develop networks that can help empower people within communities in crisis; and
  - c. develop programs that help annual conferences, districts, and local churches respond to these concerns.
4. We call upon the General Board of Church and Society to:
  - a. advocate a moratorium on the siting of hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities in low-income/ people-of-color communities;
  - b. advocate comprehensive legislation that remedies these injustices and adequately protects all citizens and the environment;
  - c. advocate compliance with international agreements including the Basel Convention and Stockholm Convention to prevent the dumping of toxic wastes in developing countries; and
  - d. develop programs that help annual conferences, districts, and local churches respond to these concerns.
5. We request the General Council on Ministries to assist the General Board of Church and Society in conducting research in this area.
6. We call upon the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits and other church investors to advocate in dialogue and shareholder resolutions with corporations on environmental racism issues and to urge companies to adopt environmental codes of conduct (such as the CERES

Principles and to engage in greater transparency and public reporting modeled after the Global Reporting Initiative).

7. We urge individual United Methodists to:

- a. become aware of how and where their community's wastes are disposed and who in their community is adversely affected by the production and disposal of industrial chemicals; and
- b. make a personal commitment to reduce their use of hazardous chemicals by one each day;

8. We call upon the U.S. federal government to:

- a. institute comprehensive risk-assessment and health tracking studies of communities at risk and their affected populations;
- b. enable these communities to participate in clean-up decisions that affect them directly;
- c. fully fund the Office of Environmental Justice in the Environmental Protection Agency and pursue vigorous enforcement of environmental protection, civil rights and equal protection laws to end racial disparities in environmental protection;
- d. give these communities priority in receiving Superfund funding to clean up existing sites; and
- e. prohibit hazardous waste exports and imports.

9. We urge industry to:

- a. assess the adverse impacts of their production and disposal processes on workers and surrounding communities;
- b. implement comprehensive Toxics Use Reduction (TUR) programs;
- c. develop nontoxic alternatives to commonly used hazardous materials;
- d. comply with local, state, and federal environmental and safety laws;
- e. respond to community concerns and grievances;
- f. sign comprehensive environmental guidelines developed with public input, such as the CERES (Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies) Principles; and
- g. develop industrywide standards for environmental accounting and auditing procedures similar to those required for financial accounting.

ADOPTED 1992, AMENDED AND READOPTED 2004

See Social Principles, ¶ 160; Resolution 7, "Environmental Justice for a Sustainable Future"; and Resolution 161, "A Charter for Racial Justice Policies in an Interdependent Global Community."

1. "Toxic Wastes and Race," Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, 1987.
2. Playing with Fire: Hazardous Waste Incineration, Greenpeace, 1991.

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