

On responding to environmental racism

RECOMMENDATION

The Presbytery of Monmouth overtures the 223rd (2018) General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to

1. Take action to respond to environmental racism in all its forms
2. Listen to the perspectives and voices of people most impacted by environmental racism
3. In accordance with the Gospel, position the church's approach to environmental problems to include responses to the voices most directly impacted by environmental racism

RATIONALE

Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free”

Luke 4:16-18

Environmental racism is a term, first coined by the Reverend Benjamin Chavis in 1981, used to describe the disproportionate burden of environmental problems that people of color take on. People of color are more likely to live in areas more exposed to pollutants in the air, ground, and water. Environmental catastrophes, such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes, disproportionately impact people of color, as these communities are more likely to live in substandard housing and within floodplains. And people of color generally have fewer resources to escape environmental disasters. Moreover, undocumented migrants in the United States are less likely seek government assistance in recovery efforts, as they fear detention and deportation.¹

“Environmental racism” is closely related to “environmental justice,” a concept first articulated by Dr. Robert Bullard, to connote the movement to resolve the problems created by the confluence of environmental destruction, racism, and poverty.

Bullard, a Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy and Administration of Justice at Texas Southern University, explains how Hurricane Harvey exposed

¹ We commend the following study guide for more information about Environmental Racism: https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/racialjustice/enviromentalracismecumenicalstudyguide.pdf

exacerbated the environmental racism embedded in Houston, Texas: “when we look at the color of vulnerability and we look at which communities are actually at greatest risk from disasters and floods like this, historically, it’s been low-income communities and communities of color, communities that live in low-lying areas that are areas that are very prone to flooding. And it’s very difficult to get insurance, not just flood insurance, but regular insurance, because of redlining. So, what Harvey has done is to expose those inequalities that existed before the storm.”²

After Harvey, Hurricanes Irma and Maria exposed environmental racism issues in Puerto Rico. Immediately after the storm there were suggestions that the money spent on recovery was harming the US budget, and the death count was minimalized, as if Puerto Ricans dying as a result of Maria were insignificant to people dying as a result of Katrina. Five months after the storm full power has yet to be restored to the island. The challenges in Puerto Rico are so many at this time as a result of Maria, especially in the area of public health. Puerto Ricans with chronic health conditions, using medical machinery, are dying every day due to the instability of the power grid. A report from Commit to PR, an organization of medical doctors from the US helping the island, reported that 62% of the applications submitted to FEMA have been denied.³ A recent report from the Department of Health, shows that suicides in PR increased 55% in the last four months of 2017, when compared to same period in 2016.⁴ EPA and local environmental agencies, have issued several warnings of the dangers in several water bodies. Raw sewage is pouring into rivers, and reservoirs. Unfortunately, many islanders living in the central part of the island, are drinking water from contaminate

New Jersey faces environmental racism issues with the economic engine that is the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. We all benefit from the activity at the ports, buying the products that are shipped into this country. Yet, port-adjacent cities like Newark and Elizabeth bear the burdens of pollution, poor working conditions and low wages resulting from the ports, but reap few of the benefits. Port pollution is an environmental and health injustice – increasing asthma, heart disease, and cancer rates in port-adjacent communities where a majority of residents are low income and Of Color. A majority of the goods leaving the port (85%) are moved on average by 14,000 diesel drayage truck trips per day along major highways and local roads within the region to nearby warehouses, assembly facilities, and retailers. Unfortunately, port trucks are some of oldest and dirtiest trucks on the road, spewing harmful diesel pollution and greenhouse gases.⁵

At a larger scale, it is people from the Global South, who bear the brunt of climate change. A recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for example, predicts that

² https://www.democracynow.org/2017/9/7/invisible_houston_full_interview_with_dr

³ <https://notiuno.com/reportan-que-miles-se-quedan-sin-ayuda.../>

⁴ <http://www.latinorebels.com/2018/02/11/suicides-in-puerto-rico-increased-55-last-four-months-of-2017-when-compared-to-same-time-period-in-2016/>

⁵ <http://www.cleanwateraction.org/files/gubernatorial-ports-briefing-coalition-healthy-ports-nynj-june2017pdf-0>

rising temperatures will significantly reduce the growing season in Africa, thus exacerbating hunger and poverty.⁶

To make matters worse, those who bear the brunt of environmental problems often find their voices silenced by many white environmentalists and polluters alike, who see the problem of environmental damage only through privileged eyes.

The church must combat these problems on both fronts—work to minimize environmental problems and do so by listening to the voices of those most disproportionately impacted.

⁶ <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/>