

A person is holding a large white sign with red and blue text. The sign reads: "We Want Our VOICES HEARD Not Just At Election Time". The words "VOICES HEARD" are in large, bold, blue letters with a white outline. The other text is in red, italicized font. The person holding the sign is wearing a red shirt with the word "ONLY" visible on it. The background is a light-colored brick wall.

We Want Our
VOICES
HEARD
Not Just At
Election Time

A New Heaven and a New Earth

(2 Peter 3:12-13)

We are reeling from a year that has laid bare the unjust and inequitable systems enabled by a history of structural and environmental racism. With the advent of a global pandemic, vulnerable communities at the intersections of these unjust systems -doubly affected by histories of environmental racism and subsequent health vulnerability—remain disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Take for instance the effects of residential segregation within the U.S., which sees the concentration of people of color in disempowered neighborhoods, exposed to toxins that puts them at a higher chance of impaired heart and lung function, leaving them highly vulnerable to COVID-19. Similarly, communities in East Africa find themselves affected by hunger and malnutrition due in part to COVID-19 restrictions, crop failures from flooding and locusts due to climate change. The suffering is great indeed, and as we bear witness, we are also called as lovers of all of God’s creation to speed the coming of the day of God, looking and working towards a new heaven and a new earth.

www.creationjustice.org/newheaven

Earth Day Sunday 2021: Health, Racism, and Ecological Justice



Students spent the week learning about environmental justice and how pollution disproportionately harms the health of communities of color, and included congressional meetings to discuss environmental racism in Milwaukee. March 1-5, 2020.

2 Peter 3:12-13 gives us hope of a new reality. This hope is much needed as 2020 was a challenging year filled with grief and tragedy, bringing a global pandemic that claimed the lives of millions around the world. The pandemic triggered an economic crisis that continues to render millions of people unemployed, homeless, and food insecure. Along with institutional and structural inequities, the legacy of deep-seated systemic racism and oppression in our society has once again been brought to the forefront. For far too long, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have experienced the inequitable allocation of environmental, health, and various other resources, which has led to suffering from chronic and sometimes fatal health concerns.

BIPOC communities are disproportionately burdened with a host of environmental injustices including polluted air, polluted soil, community location, and unclean drinking water. A **recent report** released by scientists from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that Black

communities regardless of economic status were “exposed significantly more to particulate matter 2.5 micrometers in diameter or less than the population at large.” High rates of particulate matter resulting from polluting facilities located in Black neighborhoods lead to higher rates of asthma, heart, and lung disease.

Facilities like oil refineries, chemical manufacturing plants, and mining facilities located near indigenous reservations often contaminate the air, ground, and water with toxic chemicals. As a consequence of exposure, Native communities are at **a higher risk** of developing cancer, heart and lung disease, among other ailments. Additionally, when natural disasters such as hurricanes occur, BIPOC communities are the **most vulnerable** due to eroding infrastructure and being relegated to flood-prone areas. BIPOC communities are **more likely to have contaminated drinking water** due

continued on page 8

Birth of a Movement to Address Environmental Racism and Health Threats

Health concerns resulting from systemic racism were at the heart of the environmental justice movement that burst into public consciousness in the summer of 1982. With the central leadership of clergy and people of faith, a six-week civil disobedience campaign pricked the consciousness of the nation as protestors placed their bodies on the line to prevent the dumping of a carcinogenic compound in Warren County, North Carolina. Warren County had the largest population of Black people in North Carolina, comprising about 62% of the population. The immediate community near the designated dump site was 75% Black. Additionally, Warren County was one of the poorest counties in the state.

The protests in Warren County were to the environmental justice movement what the Montgomery bus boycott was to the civil rights movement. One of the leaders of the movement was the Rev. Benjamin Chavis, Jr., who coined the phrase “environmental racism.” With the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice, Chavis went on to spearhead the publication of the landmark report [Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States](#), the first report to comprehensively

document the pervasiveness of environmental racism across the country with regard to the placement of toxic dump sites.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES: CANCER ALLEY

On Ash Wednesday of 2020, the United Church of Christ published another [environmental justice report](#). It focused on toxic air pollution from 100 super polluters and the surrounding communities whose members suffer threats to their health as a result. With the pandemic, the report proved to be relevant in ways never anticipated. Members of communities that suffer from toxic air pollution are especially susceptible to a virus that attacks already weakened respiratory systems.

One of the highest concentrations of super polluters in the country is in an area known as cancer alley, which stretches along the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. One of the counties in cancer alley is St. John the Baptist Parish, which suffered from the highest death rate from COVID-19 out of any county in the nation with a population of over 5,000 at one point. The Black communities of cancer alley suffer disproportionately from environmental injustices and the corresponding public health threats.

Like past struggles, people of faith have played a leading role in addressing environmental injustices in cancer alley. In the Saint John Baptist Parish, Robert Taylor and his pastor the Rev. Lionel Murphy turned Tchoupitoulas Chapel into a base of organizing for the Concerned Citizens of St. John. In another parish of cancer alley, Sharon Lavigne founded Rise St. James, a faith-based group comprised of residents waging a battle against Formosa Plastics Group, which plans to build one of the largest plastics factories in the world on the burial ground of the people who were slaves on a former plantation site.

Robert Taylor at a Concerned Citizens of St. John meeting. Photo by Julie Dermasky



Air Pollution: How Diesel Emissions are affecting our Children

More than half of all children in the U.S. jeopardize their health as they go to school because of fossil fuels. In the U.S., more than 25 million children ride school buses to attend school. Approximately 90% of school buses in the U.S. operate on diesel. Fumes from school buses not only pollute neighborhoods, but the children riding them as well. On average, children riding diesel school buses are exposed to **5 to 15 times more air toxins** than the rest of the population. **Diesel emissions exposure** has been found to pose as much as 23 to 46 times the cancer risks considered significant for children under federal law. This exposure increases asthma rates and respiratory illness, decreases lung function, impairs cognitive and behavioral development, and can even impact classroom performance. Fossil-fuel combustion by-products are said to be the world's most significant threat to **children's** health and future. United Methodist Women groups, as part of UMW's Just Energy for All campaign, have been working with Green for All and other partners to educate and press school districts, municipalities, and school bus companies to quickly transition to electric buses that are better for children's health, their future, and the climate.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION:

BIBLE STUDY 2 Peter 3:12-13: The second letter of Peter asks early Christian communities to orient their lives towards their hope for "a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."

As followers of Jesus, we seek a world without the racism, extreme inequality, pollution, and violence that cause so much suffering. One unique gift Christians can bring to the wider movement for eco-justice is our transformational faith in a new world where God's love reigns. When we face setbacks, opposition, and failures in our work for justice, we can take heart in the good news that God is working with us to bring about this new creation.

BIBLE STUDY Luke 24:36-48: Before they accepted Jesus' call to proclaim the Gospel message to all nations, the early disciples needed to have the experience of being close witnesses. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them his wounds; he also ate with them. Then, he sent them out.

We also need to witness closely before we answer the call. COVID-19 has been a challenging experience that has given us a dramatic overview of issues such as racism, health inequity, and economic disparity; it has shown us how fragile and interconnected our society really is. However, seeing the wounds of our society from afar is not enough to inspire us to take action. As we come closer to the people and other parts of earth that are suffering the most, as we touch the world's suffering within ourselves, we grow closer to God's purpose and calling.



Denka Performance Elastomer factory in LaPlace and its proximity to the 5th Ward Elementary School and residents' homes in Louisiana. Photo by Julie Dermansky

SERMON STARTER

This Earth Day, we invite sermons that explore how the health inequities revealed by COVID-19 follow patterns of environmental racism that churches in the US and globally have been addressing for decades. In your own context, which groups of people have been most impacted the most by COVID-19? As in the passage from Luke, how does your community get beyond disbelief and come to terms with the reality of this suffering? How do we get in touch with the destruction of creation caused by climate change, plastic pollution, food apartheid, and toxic drinking water which disproportionately impact BIPOC?

Where suffering and injustice meet, the good news can be proclaimed and enacted with power. As the passage from 2nd Peter reminds us, we are called to live our lives in consideration of our hope for a new world where righteousness is at home. With this hope, we rise above cynicism and refuse to conform to dominant patterns of injustice and disregard for people and planet. God goes with us when we seek to heal our earth, liberate those who are oppressed, and in general bring wellness and balance to our world.

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Lydia Gerard, a member of the Concerned Citizens of St. John. Photo by Julie Dermasky

ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

PERSONAL:

1. Get your soil & water tested for lead.
2. Learn about public transit and advocate for better access- air pollution leads to respiratory conditions such as asthma. Advocate for better public transit in your municipality. Also do your part to try to bike, walk, or carpool.
3. Visit The Native Land App to learn about the indigenous people from the land you occupy.

COMMUNITY:

1. Get involved in gardening and/or food access justice. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the disparities in food distribution systems. Growing your own food can lower your grocery bill and it cuts down emissions from food transportation. You can also volunteer at a community garden that supplies fresh produce to food pantries.
2. Learn how your church can become a hub of climate resilience at creationjustice.org/resilience

3. Find where waste from your community goes? Waste is disproportionately disposed of in communities of color. Sometimes waste and recycling are even shipped to be disposed of in other countries. Find ways to reduce your own waste through reducing consumption, composting, and refusing to acquire products that will end up in landfills.

LEGISLATIVE:

1. Bookmark creationjustice.org/action to participate in timely monthly action opportunities.
2. Mark your calendar for Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2021 & participate in the day of action. This year is free of charge and online. The theme is "Imagine! God's Earth & People Restored". Creation Justice Ministries will be hosting six excellent workshops.
3. Do you know which watershed you live in? Learn about the bodies of water near you, the watershed you live in, and the pollutants your water faces. Water is a human right and gift from God, advocate for everyone to have equitable access to potable water.



Call to Action

In your call to action, name one or two specific options for individuals to take action for environmental justice, and name one or two specific options for your church as a whole to take action for environmental justice. Use the action steps in this resource. Challenge your community to take these action steps.

LITURGY

PART 1: GRATITUDE

Opening prayer giving thanks for the gifts of God's creation

You can utilize [this prayer](#) for Faithful Leadership on Climate

Opening Song

- [All Things Bright and Beautiful](#)
- [The Garden of the World \(Lament for the Earth\)](#)
- [Rejoice in all Your Works](#)

PART 2: RECOGNIZING PAIN IN THE WORLD

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:36-48 and/or 2 Peter 3:12-13

Call and response:

For those who are suffering from environmental injustice...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For those who do not have access to clean water...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For those who suffer health impacts from air pollution...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For the environmental racism that endangers and harms BIPOC people...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For our oceans that are overwhelmed by plastic pollution...

Lord, hear our prayer.

For young people and future generations facing the fear of climate catastrophe...

Lord, hear our prayer.

Use these prompts or others that may be specific to your context. Also, you may open up a space for members of your congregation to add additional prayers for the suffering of God's people and God's planet. After each prayer, the response is "Lord, hear our prayer."

PART 3: SEEING WITH FRESH EYES: GENERATING A VISION FOR HOW TO REPAIR WHAT IS BROKEN

(2 Peter 3:12-13)

Sermon: Use the Bible Study and Sermon Starters to present a hopeful vision of how to repair what is broken in our world, bringing a sense of hope to balance the despair we feel.

Another option: Invite one or more environmental justice activist from your local community to either preach the sermon or offer a 3-5 minute testimony about the work they are doing to repair harm and restore God's creation.

PART 4: GOING FORTH

(Call to action)

Song Options:

[Thank You God for Water, Soil, and Air](#)
[The Peace of the Earth](#)





West Virginia Water Retreat, brought together the community to talk about environmental health and clean water access in Fall 2019.

Health, Racism, and Ecological Justice, continued from page 2

to deteriorating water infrastructure and pollution from industrial plants and landfills. Contaminated drinking water has been linked to **elevated blood lead levels**, which can lead to heart disease as well as kidney and nervous system damage.

Environmental racism has resulted in various chronic illnesses plaguing BIPOC communities. These health concerns, along with inadequate access to health insurance and services, discrimination within the health care system, and other factors, render BIPOC more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that BIPOC were hospitalized at a rate **four times** that of white non-Hispanic Americans. BIPOC have died at **nearly three times** the rate of white non-Hispanic Americans. These disparities are not just occurring in the United States.

We are all connected to a shared existence that should be based on mutual respect and dignity. A society that oppresses people because of their race and exposes people to environmental harm with increased risks of chronic health issues, dishonors that existence. We require radical change.

2 Peter 3:12-13 discusses the need to tear down the old to create a new existence. An existence where there is no oppression, suffering, or inequality; one that is filled with love and righteousness. This hope for new existence is important now more than ever. As people of faith, we must take heed of Peter's words and set ablaze that which is unjust and unrighteous. We have a unique opportunity to acknowledge past mistakes, make right past wrongs and reimagine our society to be equitable for all.



Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips, and mobilizes its 38 member communions and denominations, congregations, and individuals to do justice for God's planet and God's people. Learn more at www.creationjustice.org



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
 Presbyterian Hunger Program
 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202
 1-888-728-7228 x5626
www.pcusa.org/environment
 PHP works to alleviate hunger and eliminate its causes, including climate change, sustainability and earth care concerns.

