**Environmental Racism & Justice**

**Workshop topic:** In this workshop, we will look at how a concept of “eco-justice” encompasses ecological, economic, and social justice for all people on a thriving earth. Particular attention will be given to how environmental racism and classism affect economic well-being, for individuals and communities, in the States and around the world.

**Time:** 1 hour

**Preparations:**

* flipchart and markers or blackboard/chalk
* PowerPoint capability
* Computer, projector, screen and audio (speakers)- wifi connection
* Print out small group discussion scenarios

**Awareness/Opening (15 minutes)- slide one**

- **Think fast** *(if smaller group, under 30 people) (*large group: “stand up if”)

* Where would you rather get outside: Urban park or rural countryside?
* For taking a fun trip: wilderness area or a big city?
* Do you prefer: beaches or forest or open sky?

*OK, now a little more serious…*

* For a justice issue would you rather feed people at a soup kitchen or attend a march?
* When confronting racism do you think first about policy brutality, prejudice that you or your friends experience, or access to clean air and water?

**- Stand up if:**

* you have a grocery store or farmers stand or other fresh food within 5 miles of your house?
* you live within 5 miles of a park, playground, or other beautiful outdoor space?
* you live more than 5 miles from a factory or industry?
* you have heard about Flint Michigan and wonder what happened?
* you think there is something bigger going on in racism than just personal prejudice or accidental unfairness

**Knowledge of Environmental Justice (25 minutes)- slide two**

- **Brainstorm:** what do you think of when you think of environmental racism? - 3 min

- **Play YouTube video** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dREtXUij6\_c**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dREtXUij6_c)(3:33)

- **Add to brainstorming** if needed 2 min

*“In the United States and around the world, people of color and the environments in which they live are most susceptible to environmental ills and furthest from receiving environmental benefits….*

* Numerous statistical studies have documented the definitive correlation between the locations of toxic waste sites and the places where people of color live. Race, more than class, has been shown to be a determining factor in where hazardous, toxic sites will be built and maintained. …
* Communities of color receive slower, less effective response from regulatory agencies while companies caught polluting these communities have fewer penalties and cheaper fines than their counterparts in white neighborhoods. …
* People of color face worse health burdens (asthma, cancer, birth defects) because of environmental pollution and have less access to health care. …
* These communities face barriers to their access to information, means of participation, and economic and political influence in the processes of environmental decisions, laws, and policies….”

Excerpted from “Environmental Racism: an ecumenical study guide” (p.2), produced by the NCC Eco-Justice Working Group

Charles Lee, founding member of EJ movements: Environmental racism refers to the disproportionate impact of environmental contamination on communities of color. It refers to racial discrimination in formulating and carrying out environmental policy. It refers to the decisions to put hazardous waste facilities and other unwanted land uses in predominantly poor and people-of-color communities. It refers to the adverse health effects that result from the unkind treatment of the environment in these communities. And it refers to the lack of persons of color in the leadership of the environmental movement and in the environmental workplace.

**Small group discussion** over 5 scenarios: La Oroya; Warren County; migrant workers and Native American land (rural EJ issues), lead poisoning and asthma plus low-income housing (urban EJ issues), and Flint, MI. 15 min

- **Discussion questions** (PowerPoint)—have a “recorder” for each group because we’ll have a very few minutes to share later:

* What is the make-up/composition of the community affected?
* What environmental issues were involved? What are the economic issues involved?
* How have/how can people of faith respond in a situation like this? What could bring hope?
* What is your main learning/take-away?

**Values/ Why we do what we do** **(5 minutes)** Read Micah 6:8 with a bit of interpretation/sharing about hope, what’s our responsibility, etc.

**Action skills (practicing breaking the silence, naming realities, being succinct and articulate) 10-12 min**

Large group report back (sharing the main take-away and/or what people of faith can do in the situation—from each scenario)

* Name main take-a-ways from earlier, and what people of faith could do. (call on 2-3 groups to share, then ask if any other unique insights from others)**- slide 7**
* What around you (or around the world) do you think is environmental racism?
* If there is time for a recap (and to pick up any pointers on naming the issue), one more video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrbeuJRPM0o> (2:56)**- slide 8**
* What are helpful—and unhelpful—ways to address hard issues? – **slide 9**
	+ **Listen** to the people most affected and **learn from** their wisdom and experience
	+ **Acknowledge** the role we all play and the impact of our own daily choices
	+ **Speak up and ask hard questions; use whatever privilege you have to make it better** (ask: who has power in the situation and who is most vulnerable, who benefits from this situation financially? Use: education, race, gender, public speaking skills, mentoring, etc.)
	+ **Spread awareness**—talk with your parents, your church, your school, decision-makers—about these issues (online petitions, action alerts, emails, marches), while being humble and being sure you aren’t taking on the “leader” role (which belongs to those most impacted and already working for solutions)

**Action/Closing:**

* For further resources, go to **pcusa.org/hunger**
* Closing prayer (unison) “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which Christ blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are Christ’s body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” ― [Teresa of Ávila](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/74226.Teresa_of_vila)

**La Oroya, Peru[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In 2005, a study conducted by the St. Louis University School of Public Health showed that 97.2% of La Oroya’s children between the ages of 6 and 12 had dangerously high levels of lead in their blood. Lead poisoning affects children’s brain development permanently. Now, La Oroya, a small impoverished town in the high mountains of Peru, is considered to be one of the worst polluted places in the world.

The source of the pollution in La Oroya is a factory that processes various metals (including lead). In 1997 the State of Peru sold the plant to Renco Group (Doe Run Peru) in a secretive bidding process. The company was supposed to complete a nine-step Environmental Adequacy and Management Program (PAMA). That plan would reduce the levels of toxic emissions to safe conditions. Instead, Doe Run Peru increased levels of toxins put into the atmosphere. And, the company did not want to follow the plan or fix the environmental problems.

Unfortunately, Doe Run Peru continued to avoid its responsibility to complete the PAMA. Meanwhile the government of Peru kept giving them extensions. In 2009, Doe Run Peru entered into bankruptcy hearings so they wouldn’t have to pay for the environmental fixes needed. In 2011 Renco Group sued the State of Peru for trying to make the company meet the environmental standards.

In 2016, the situation continues to be hard, children’s health has not recovered, and we still don’t know what is going to happen… although just this week (July 18th) Peru won the arbitration dispute. However, the work continues and in the midst of it all lives of several people of faith working to protect public health and the environment have been threatened.

In 2011, a new voice for La Oroya was born – the voice of CAMBIALO, a children’s organization to awaken a culture of care for the environment and for the rights of all to breathe clean air. Also, the Joining Hands network in Peru (connected to the Presbyterian Hunger Program and World Mission), continues to be a strong voice for change.

From the 1990s until 2016, our partners in Peru continue to ask U.S. Christians to join our voices with their voices for fairness and justice. Many Presbyterians in the St. Louis area (Giddings-Lovejoy presbytery) and others across the country have visited La Oroya and continue to work for justice, fairness, and children’s health.

**Warren County, North Carolina**

Warren County was one of the poorest counties in North Carolina and in 1982, citizens and friends of this predominantly African-American community protested for six weeks the siting of a poly-chlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfill in their neighborhood. This is often classified as the first case of resistance that sparked the environmental justice movement in the U.S.

PCBs have been identified as probably human carcinogens (cancer-causing agents) and can also cause a variety of non-cancer health effects as well. They have a range of toxicity and can be thin, light-colored liquids to yellow or black waxy solids. PCBs can remain for long periods cycling between air, water and soil. PCBs can stay in the leaves and above-ground parts of plants and food crops that people then eat.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The community in Warren County knew the potential hazards of the landfill, did not want their neighborhood to be a dump for other people’s toxic waste, and decided they would not tolerate it.

Black churchwomen laid down on the road to block the dump trucks with the PCB-contaminated soil. This act of civil disobedience communicated that the community was not in agreement with accepting a PCB landfill in their community. A biracial march also protested the dumping. In two weeks, over four hundred protesters were arrested.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The protests didn’t stop the landfill from being sited, but participants believe that they kept the site from accepting larger amounts of PCBs from other places, and also stopped it from becoming an ongoing landfill that would last for years or decades. This movement in the 1980s was a time for white, black and native citizens to come together and to realize that it was their civil right to try to stop environmental injustice.

The organizing and attention of these citizens events led to the 1987 United Church of Christ Commission of Racial Justice “Report on Race and Toxic Wastes in the United States,” the first study that documented the disproportionate placement of toxic sites in communities of color and brought this situation to other people’s attention, including Christian churches.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Rural environmental injustice scenarios**

In **rural Appalachia**, it is often the fossil fuel industries that give people jobs that also make people sick. From cave-ins and Black Lung disease resulting from traditional coal mines to current mountain-top removal coal mining (decapitated mountains, filled-in streams and polluted waters), the people of Appalachia are often torn between their love for their home, the major industries/employers in the region, and their health and their children’s health.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Meanwhile, in other rural areas across the United States, **migrant farm workers** experience health problems from pesticide-laden fields. Throughout the South and West United States, farmworkers have documented illnesses from pesticide poisoning, including death, infertility, birth defects and miscarriages, and respiratory infections.[[6]](#footnote-6) In its organizing, the United Farm Workers (UFW) fights dangerous pesticide use and helped in the eventual banning of DDT (a toxic chemical with multiple health impacts, including being a possible carcinogen).[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Native American** rural land also is contaminated.Navajos living near Rio Puerco, New Mexico have found their health, as well as that of their animals and drinking water, adversely affected by the many uranium mines surrounding the area.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Tewa Women United (which long ago actually got started with some help from Presbyterian women) is a collective, inter-tribal women's organization in the Tewa homelands of northern New Mexico.[[9]](#footnote-9) One of the women (Beata) is a mother and poet, and making connections about spiritual and economic and environmental health, she is also now an environmental justice advocate.[[10]](#footnote-10) Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) has been dumping and discharging its toxic and radioactive wastes onto Tewa ancestral land. This land is revered as sacred to the people. The contamination from this dumping and discharging has been devastating to land, water, air, food, and the overall well-being of the people and ways of life. Recently, a sampling project proved there were major contaminants found in local homes. Despite proof of this historical devastation, LANL continues to discharge and dump its toxic waste. TWU implements and teaches traditional Indigenous forms of healing medicines and foods to counteract the negative impacts that pollution and nuclear contamination have on bodies, minds, spirits, lands, air and water.

**Urban environmental injustice scenarios**

Because of environmental injustice, people who live in very urban neighborhoods often experience increased risk of major health concerns such as lead poisoning and asthma. Urban neighborhoods also have little access to fresh food or safe green spaces in which to relax. In addition, they often have highways cutting through their neighborhoods, major truck traffic, and noise pollution.

Six out of seven Manhattan **bus depots** are located in and around Harlem, a predominantly African-American community experiencing death and illness from asthma at an alarming rate.[[11]](#footnote-11) In 2003, “a bus depot was inaugurated on 100th St. and Lexington Avenue in El Barrio. It was designed to house 115 diesel buses. Its exhaust fans spewed out diesel gas and very powerful lights illuminated the sky all night. Studies indicated that children living in the neighborhood suffered from the highest levels of asthma in New York City. The pollutants that the buses emit are also linked with cancer.”

“The irony is that while officials were opening the [bus] depot in a community of many low-income residents, a similar one on Hudson Street in the West Village [a more privileged and economically advantaged area of town] was being closed *to build a park.”*

“A lawsuit recently filed by West Harlem Environmental Action alleges that MTA practices discriminatory politics in constructing their bus depots and stations north of 96th Street, in neighborhoods where mostly African-Americans and Hispanics reside. The numbers are startling: of the eight depots in Manhattan, seven are located north of 96th Street.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Also true in many urban areas, low-income housing is located **near sewage treatment plants, landfills, power plants, or toxic dumps.** Describing Atgeld Garden, a housing project in the Southeast Side of Chicago in which nearly all residents are African-Americans, Hazel Johnson said, “We’re sitting in a center of a donut surrounded by a hazardous waste incinerator that gives off PCB’s, seven landfills that are constantly growing…there are chemical plants, a paint factory, two steel mills… We have lots of cancer, respiratory problems, birth deformities.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Hazel Johnson, a mother of seven, responded to her concerns about environmental racism in Atgeld Gardens (Chicago) by starting People for Community Recovery, a community organization educating about the health and environmental hazards that minority and low-income people face.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Recent case study: Flint, Michigan**

Flint, located 70 miles north of Detroit, is a city of 98,310, where 41.6% of residents live below the poverty line. The city is 56.6% African-American. Flint once thrived as the home of the nation's largest General Motors plant. The city's economic decline began during the 1980s, when GM downsized.

In 2011, the state of Michigan took over Flint's finances after an audit projected a $25 million deficit (meaning the city would have this amount of expenses without having the money to pay for them). Even though Flint's water supply fund was $9 million in the negative, officials were using some of the water money to cover shortfalls in a general fund. In 2014, in order to reduce the water fund shortfall, the city switched to the Flint River as a water source while waiting for a new pipeline that would connect to Lake Huron.[[15]](#footnote-15) In April 2015, the water fund deficit was eliminated by an emergency loan.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Historically, the water in the Flint River downstream of Flint has been of very poor quality. In 2001, the state ordered the monitoring and cleanup of 134 polluted sites within the Flint River watershed, including industrial complexes, landfills and farms laden with pesticides and fertilizer. When switching to the Flint River in 2014, city officials said the water quality was tested and they thought it would be a positive improvement for the city.

According to a class-action lawsuit, however, the state Department of Environmental Quality was not treating the Flint River water with an anti-corrosive agent. Their failure to do so was in violation of federal law. And, since the water wasn't properly treated, lead from aging service lines to homes began leaching into the Flint water supply.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Health effects of lead exposure in children include impaired cognition, behavioral disorders, hearing problems and delayed puberty. In pregnant women, lead is associated with reduced fetal growth. In everyone, lead consumption can affect the heart, kidneys and nerves. Although there are medications that may reduce the amount of lead in the blood, treatments for the adverse health effects of lead have yet to be developed.

1. Background compiled from mission coworker Jed Koball e-newsletters, from Joining Hands network in Peru, and from “God’s Creation, Our Health: Taking Action Together” by Mike Poteet [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Read more about PCBs at <https://www.epa.gov/pcbs/learn-about-polychlorinated-biphenyls-pcbs> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Warren County article: <http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2012/pollution-poverty-people-of-color-day-9-qa-with-environmental-justice-pioneers>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Though the Warren County 1982 protest and the UCC Commission of Racial Justice statement can be found in almost any text on environmental racism and justice, one source is the article “Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?” written by James H. Cone, included in Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen, eds, *Earth Habitat: Eco-Justice and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. To learn more about communities at risk from mountaintop removal coal mining, go to <http://ilovemountains.org/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dorceta E. Taylor, “Environmental Justice: the Birth of a Movement” in *Dollars and Sense* March-April 1996 vol 204. As reprinted at <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2548/is_n204/ai_18541085>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cole and Foster. *From the Ground Up,* 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Taylor, “Environmental Justice,” *Dollars and Sense.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Read more about Tewa Women United’s EJ efforts at <http://tewawomenunited.org/programs/environmental-justice-program/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. To read more from Baeta, go to <http://www.greenforall.org/reflections_on_environmental_justice_from_northern_new_mexico/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peggy M. Shepard, “Issues of Community Empowerment,” in Hessel and Rasmussen, *Earth Habitat,* p. 160-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Slightly adapted, emphasis added, from <https://indypendent.org/2003/10/15/harlem-fumes-over-bus-depot> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Adapted from “Environmental Racism,” written by Karl Grossman in *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book,* ed. Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce, 2nd edition. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. See also <http://www.peopleforcommunityrecovery.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/04/closing\_the\_valve\_on\_history\_f.html [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://www.cityofflint.com/wp-content/uploads/Emergency-Manager-Exit-Letter.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/11/health/toxic-tap-water-flint-michigan/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)