



Raising a Prophetic Voice through the Social Justice Policy of Presbyterians since 1946

Spring 2022

Tell Congress to Support Environmental Justice for All

On March 18, 2021, Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.) and Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.-3) introduced the Environmental Justice for All Act (S.872/H.R. 2021) in the Senate and the House of Representatives. This groundbreaking legislation will establish various programs to “address the disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects of federal laws or programs on communities of color, low-income communities, or tribal and Indigenous communities.” Aimed at addressing environmental injustice, the Environmental Justice for All Act includes concrete measures that will strengthen communities of color across the country in the push toward racial equity. This piece of legislation is widely supported by organizations and leaders in the field of environmental justice around the country.

This legislation “amends and strengthens the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by permitting citizens to seek legal remedy when faced with discrimination based on disparate impact.” The bill strengthens the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act by requiring “reasonable certainty that a project will not harm human health before issuing a permit.” It also instructs federal agencies to “develop environmental justice strategies and requires that diverse communities be involved in research and data collection, bolstering President Clinton’s 1994 Executive Order.” Lastly, the bill provides



Protesters against climate change in October 2021. Photo by Filippo Bacci | iStock Photos

funding for health equity research grants, supports equitable access to public parks and green space, and assists communities and workers in the transition away from greenhouse gas dependence.

Too often, our government has turned a blind eye as communities of color have borne the brunt of environmental degradation and pollution. On average, people of color comprise 56% of the population living in neighborhoods with Toxic Release Inventory Facilities, compared to 30% elsewhere. The U.S. government has a responsibility to correct this historic failure and protect the lives of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) Americans. This unique legislation was created using the voices and input of those directly

impacted by environmental injustice throughout the nation, including 350 comments from members of the public and grassroots leaders. It is “rooted in the moral principle that all people have the right to pure air, clean water, and an environment that enriches life.”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) understands the call to restore Creation. The abuse of nature and injustice to people place our future in grave jeopardy. **Creation cries out in this time of ecological crisis.** We must respond by supporting this important piece of legislation. By contacting your members of Congress, you will play a vital role in the passing of legislation that will improve the quality of air

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Safe and Accessible Water: A Gift from God or a Social Inequity?

By Elizabeth Corsig

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Water has played a central role in world religions throughout history, often associated with cleansing, purification and healing. Ancient Greeks and Romans performed sacrifices to persuade the Gods to reward them with more or less water. Native Americans in the Great Plains believed water to be a source of life and expressed this belief through their religious traditions. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, water is mentioned as early as the second verse of Genesis. Water is both destructive, like the great flood of Noah and the Ark, and life-giving, like the Syrian cured of leprosy in the waters of the Jordan. Water is sacred, yet our nation often fails to take the necessary measures to protect this vital resource. Millions of Americans drink polluted water every year, with the highest burden falling on low-income communities of color.

In the United States, race bears the strongest relationship to ineffective enforcement of federal drinking water laws. This statistic reflects the lived experiences of millions of Americans of color, like those in Flint, Michigan, who faced severe health issues due to lead poisoning in the city's water. In 2014, Flint made a cost-saving decision to switch its drinking water from the Detroit system to the Flint River. Inadequate treatment and testing led to many health issues in the predominantly Black city. Nearly 9,000 children were

exposed to lead-contaminated water, and studies later revealed that blood lead levels doubled following the switch. According to the U.S. Census, Flint was 57% Black in 2017, and more than 41% of its residents lived below the poverty line. A 2017 Michigan Civil Rights Commission report concluded that the poor government response occurred "as a result of systemic racism."

The slow, ineffective governmental response to the Flint water crisis reveals a deep, historic inequity embedded in our nation's regulatory systems. However, the Flint crisis is just one of many instances of water pollution plaguing communities of color. According to data from the EPA, public water systems that consistently violate the Safe Drinking Water Act are 40% more likely to serve people of color. Even 58 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, we have failed to ensure that the color of one's skin does not impact the safety of their drinking water. While safe water should be a fundamental human right, our laws have failed to protect Black and brown Americans from these egregious acts of environmental injustice.

Introduced on March 18, 2021, by Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.-3), the Environmental Justice for All Act seeks to amend these systemic environmental inequities. The legislation amends the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to permit citizens and organizations to sue when faced with discrimination based on disparate impact. It strengthens the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air

Act by requiring reasonable certainty that a project will not harm human health before issuing a permit. The bill would require federal agencies to provide opportunities for community involvement when proposing any action that would affect an environmental justice community (defined as any place where most residents are people of color or are living below the poverty line). Lastly, the bill includes funds for health equity research and helps organizations create training programs to better identify and address environmental concerns in their communities.

While we can never undo the harm done by water poisoning in Flint and other communities of color, we have an ethical responsibility to prevent



Photo illustration by mriin. Photography via Unsplash

BIPOC leaders talk climate justice

Panelists discuss community impacts, reparations and COP26

by Darla Carter | Presbyterian News Service

LOUISVILLE — A diverse group of panelists concerned about how vulnerable communities are being impacted locally and globally by climate change and climate justice issues were featured in a webinar this week by the Washington office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and some of its partners.

The virtual event was co-hosted by Christian Brooks, the representative for domestic issues in the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness; Laura Kigweba James, director of grassroots organizing at The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church; and Karyn Bigelow, co-executive director of Creation Justice Ministries.

They welcomed four panelists representing different parts of the United States as well as Nigeria to discuss how minority communities are being harmed by climate change and industrial practices and how world leaders and people of faith can respond to it.

Yvette Arellano, a Mexican American gulf coast organizer who founded the advocacy group Fenceline Watch, shared how people in the heart of the Houston shipping channel are being affected by “oil, gas and fossil fuel hazardous infrastructure.” While industry churns out cheap fuel and cheap plastics, community members are grappling with infertility and other medical conditions, Arellano said, adding, “It’s our health that’s on the line.”

Fellow panelist Bette Billiot, a member of the United Houma Nation in south Louisiana, described how her area has been pounded by manmade and natural disasters, such as Hurricane Ida, and how she’s determined to stay put nevertheless.



Photo illustration by Gerd Altman via Pixabay

“Our people stretch out for six parishes,” said Billiot, who lives in the lower Terrebonne parish. “... I’m committed to staying. I love this place. I love this land. Many of my family and community feel the same way. We’re not going anywhere” despite having to rebuild or save what’s left after each disaster.

Billiot and other speakers also shared their experiences at and thoughts about the UN Climate Change Conference, also known as COP26, and related activities, such as a large march, that were held late last year.

“For me, personally, I was honored to be asked to be there to represent our indigenous people from Louisiana, from the gulf south,” Billiot said. “My favorite part is always connecting with the global south and being able to see so many relatives, so many brothers and sisters across this nation

that are going through the exact same situations that we are going (through) ... maybe in different spaces, but it’s the same fight that you see in those other countries” and communities, so it’s good to meet those people and learn “how we can do things together.”

Tiffany Fant, a social and environmental justice advocate with an emphasis on Black liberation, also spoke about the importance of networking with other people in the struggle, particularly people in African countries who have difficulty getting to COP, which was most recently held in Glasgow, Scotland.

COP is not “grassroots friendly,” said Fant, who’s based in Charlotte, North Carolina, and serves as co-executive director of Sol Nation, a climate justice organization. “We have to band together to have a loud voice.”

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It is Never Too Early to Get Involved in Climate Advocacy

By Leah Brooks

As a senior in high school, I began to realize the importance of social justice and advocacy for the betterment of society. I felt I was called to this work during college when I served as a summer intern for Raleigh Youth Mission, a faith-based nonprofit focused on mission immersion for middle and high schoolers. I had the opportunity to work with refugees, children, and people experiencing homelessness and food insecurity, while gaining an understanding of the systems that disadvantage certain communities. Since then, my passions have grown and evolved. I am currently serving as the Young Adult Volunteer for the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations (PMUN), where I work daily on advocacy on a variety of issues.

One element of advocacy that I have come to appreciate while serving with PMUN is advocacy for our planet. Prior to my time at the PMUN, I did not give much attention to climate and environmental justice. In November 2021, I virtually attended the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP26), which is the annual United Nations global climate advocacy conference where hundreds of leaders from around the world gather to discuss climate solutions. Our planet's health is quickly approaching an irreversible point of damage. One of the most unjust results of climate change is that, more often than not, countries emitting the most carbon emissions and causing the most damage to the planet are not the ones who face the repercussions of their actions. Developing countries are most affected by climate change



Climate change protester in Cologne, Germany. Photo by Tobias Rademacher on Unsplash.

contributing to famine, drought, natural disasters and forced migration.

From my experience at COP26 and continued research, I have learned the importance of implementing policies that protect our planet for future generations. While most do not craft policies or hold large corporations accountable for their effects on the environment, all can contribute to a greener earth by recycling more consistently, taking reusable grocery bags when shopping, carpooling, composting and using sustainable products. These actions may be small, but they are necessary for the preservation of our planet. The climate crisis is affecting and will continue to affect every person from every country. In the United States, it is especially necessary to live with our carbon footprint in mind, to help preserve the precious planet God gave to all people.

Social media platforms are important tools for raising awareness about climate change. On PMUN's Facebook page, posts promoting climate advocacy are live weekly with resources on how to get involved in climate justice. You can access the page here: facebook.com/PresbyterianMinistryUN

Thinking about the state of the world's climate is overwhelming. It is difficult to grapple with the effects a couple of degrees of warmth has on people, animals, nature and natural resources. Thus, it is necessary for everyone to play a role in supporting our planet and promoting practices that create a healthier future for young people like myself and generations to come. While not all of us can be world leaders and attend COP26, all of us can be leaders in our own communities. We are stewards of God's earth; to honor the planet is to honor God.

CSW66 – Another Virtual Commission with Surprises in Store

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the largest gathering on gender equality at the United Nations. It meets for two weeks every March. This year it will be held from March 14–25. Prior to the pandemic, over 5,000 delegates from all over the world gathered at U.N. headquarters in New York, and a total of 15,000 participated in various events around the U.N. Last year due to the pandemic, the commission was held virtually. Over 25,000 participated on the virtual platforms. This year, it is anticipated that 50,000 will sign up for various events from around the globe.

Every year a theme is selected for the Commission. This year's priority theme is "achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programs." The U.N. secretary-general has called climate change the existential threat of our time. Not only do we read about it in the headlines, but we have also been impacted by climate change in our daily lives — from floods, droughts, wildfires, and the extreme weather patterns that have caused loss of life and property. We can no longer ignore the fact that climate change is adversely impacting people's lives, but what may not be as obvious is that climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls, particularly from marginalized communities and communities of color. We aim to raise awareness and to use this platform to engage Presbyterians for greater action to combat climate change

especially for those most affected by it.

For the past two decades, the PC(USA) has brought a delegation to CSW. Presbyterians from across the nation were selected to fill the 20-person delegation. However, since Presbyterian Women became accredited with the U.N. Economic and Social Council in 2018, we have had a joint delegation of the PC(USA) and Presbyterian Women doubling in size

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and increasing our presence at CSW.

We are very excited for this year's delegation. We have over 50 delegates from all over the globe and across the U.S. Through the global partnerships, we have delegates from Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Niger, Philippines, Fiji, Indonesia, Puerto Rico, and from Alaska to California to Kansas to upstate New York. The delegation is intergenerational. Seven young women, Young Adult Volunteers and a seminarian, are part of the youth delegation, as well as Presbyterian Mission Agency staff who will take part in CSW66 to gain greater knowledge about the intersectionality between gender and climate.

Bringing a delegation to CSW is a collaborative effort. We start in September of the previous year. We form a planning team from various programs and offices — consisting of staff from the Advisory Committee on Women's Concerns, Presbyterian Women, Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries, and Compassion, Peace & Justice staff to write the Presbyterian Statement, to form the delegation, and plan events such as worship, orientation, mid-week gathering and Presbyterian parallel event. This year's event, Women Leading in the Church on Climate, will bring women faith leaders from Madagascar, Peru and the U.S. for a conversation about the work they are doing for climate and environmental justice. It will take place on Tuesday, March 22, 2022, from 1–2 p.m. (EDT).

The table has been set, and we wait excitedly for the Commission to begin. What will each delegate take away from CSW66? We accompany delegates to engage with the issues, to gain knowledge, to provide leadership training and prepare delegates to do advocacy back in their communities. Previous years' delegates have given presentations at their congregations, presbyteries, synods and local libraries. They have led Sunday school Bible studies. They have engaged with allies in local community organizations. They have written articles for local papers. Some have run for office in their districts. They continue to advocate for the issues back home. We wait to see how the Spirit will move among us this year!

Fierce Urgency: Advancing Civil and Human Rights

VIRTUAL ECUMENICAL ADVOCACY DAYS TAKING PLACE APRIL 25–27, 2022

Go to advocacydays.org to register today!

Stay tuned for more info about Compassion, Peace & Justice Training events coming soon!

Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2022 calls us into solidarity to restore, protect and expand voting rights in the United States and to realize human rights around the world. As people of faith, we know each person to be created in God's image, imbued with dignity and having a voice that demands to be heard, heeded and treated justly. We arise in unity, holding up a mirror to leaders of nations, putting injustice on display and tearing down the veil of oppression that obscures the beautiful, God-born light shining from within us all.

United States policymakers are citing election security to resurrect Jim Crow-era policies that restrict voting rights and further disenfranchise communities of color. States are withholding the right to vote from those with felony convictions, cruelly punishing them beyond the limits of a judge's sentence. Smaller windows for early voting, reduced ability to vote by mail, and more restrictive ID rules make access to voting — a fundamental right — dependent on where you live. Our vote is our voice at the policy-making table; if a community isn't represented at the ballot box, the issues affecting that community aren't on the government's agenda. This erasure of important voices shatters our national ideals and terminates the path to new creation envisioned by our faith.

We bear witness to a global increase in violent repression of journalists, activists, rights defenders and social leaders. Political leaders around the

world are using the pandemic as cover to boldly steal power and silence opposition through intimidation, torture and murder. Our government is comfortably complicit in such abuses for economic gain and in the name of "national security," but true security demands that human rights be protected everywhere. Those asserting the right to speak for their communities and shape policy should be free from fear for their lives. We are summoned by the Holy Spirit to act immediately in solidarity with the world, insisting on an end to repression and drawing attention to God's image reflected in the rich diversity of humankind.

As we gather in 2022, we are called to reflect the urgency and determination found in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words. In his Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence speech, he reminds us, "We are now faced with

the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late." As people of faith, we are called to meet the challenges of this moment.

As such, we demand that the U.S. Congress enhance voting rights in the United States; outlaw all practices that limit Black and Indigenous people and other communities of color striving to fully exercise their right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"; withdraw U.S. assistance from militaries, police and other forces that restrict civil space; and support actions around the world that aim to fulfill human rights for all.

At Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2022, we will unite to amplify our Christian voice in advocacy for civil and human rights in the United States and abroad. Won't you join us?



Tell Congress, continued from page 1

and water throughout our nation. Our actions will allow God's love, justice and mercy to shine forth.

Join us in this call to action by contacting your senators and representative and urging them to support the Environmental Justice for All Act.

To contact your member of Congress, visit votervoice.net/PCUSA/campaigns/85224/respond

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Arellano noted that although COP26 was touted as being the most open of the COPs, "not everyone has a computer. Not everyone speaks English, so the barriers kept coming up and it's important for us to be able to name what those barriers are so we can get to a solution," the activist said. (Arellano uses "they," Mike.)

Fellow panelist Peniel Ibe talked about her native Nigeria. She described the country as one suffering from an "oil curse," which refers to the fact that Nigeria's oil has "made others wealthy while decimating communities and lives and structures."

Ibe also noted that there's been a lack of investment in various areas of the nation, including education and health care, prompting many people to migrate elsewhere to find better opportunities.

As communities around the world face various climate and environmental crises, the topic of climate reparations has been raised. Peniel offered several thoughts on the topic and tried to debunk some myths about it.

Climate reparations are "an apology and an acknowledgement that what has been done to our communities is wrong. It is not aid," said Peniel, policy engagement coordinator at the American Friends Service Committee's Office of Public Policy and Advocacy.

She went on to say, "I see climate reparations included in every section: climate reparations as part

Safe and Accessible Water, continued from page 2

such tragedies in the future. The Environmental Justice for All Act is rooted in the moral principle that every person has a right to clean air and water. As a Matthew 25 church, we are called to advocate for justice on behalf of all God's children. We cannot sit idly by while low-income communities of color are poisoned and harmed by this precious resource that God intends to be a source of life, healing and salvation for all. Baptism is one of two sacraments

practiced by Presbyterians. In baptism, water symbolizes God's covenant with us, as we are claimed as God's own and welcomed into the body of Christ. Water is sacred and life-giving for all people. We must advocate for federal policies that reflect this core tenant of our faith. We must remain deeply committed to dismantling structural racism by ensuring that all people have access to clean water, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.



Activists held signs with sayings such as "Creation — Not for Sale," during COP26. Delegates from the Lutheran World Federation, ACT Alliance and the World Council of Churches prayed for Creation and for world leaders to show the courage needed to mitigate the climate crisis. (Photo by Lutheran World Federation/ Albin Hillert)

of adaptation, climate reparations as part of mitigation, climate reparations as climate reparations itself."

She also spoke of the need for faith communities to support the cause.

"Think about climate reparations as a solidarity piece," Peniel said. "Think about working towards getting it done and addressing climate justice and environmental justice" as a way to practice your faith and your hope, realizing that "you have power to make change."

Fant went in a different direction by stressing the need for churches to address a variety of issues, from colonization to microaggressions to misogyny and affordable housing, and to take action

"in a way that's inclusive of all people."

The webinar closed with a call to action to support pertinent legislation, such as the Environmental Justice for All Act and the Black Maternal Health Omnibus Act of 2021, which includes a bill to establish a grant program to protect vulnerable mothers and babies from climate change.

"Climate change has a huge effect on maternal health," Brooks said.

Watch the full discussion at facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2487780458025250.

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