



THE OHIO COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

POLICY STATEMENT ON EARTH STEWARDSHIP

AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Background

The Ohio Council of Churches is concerned about the consumptive use of resources that affect the health of our environment and the people of our region, state, nation and world.

Ohio is a state blessed with abundant water, land and wildlife resources, and a long history of agriculture, forestry, outdoor recreation, and conservation. Our resources are finite, the only “input” being the sun which drives all ecological processes. Humans and all life on the planet rely on these processes for clean air, food and water. As the most recent of God’s creation, we are altering the planet at an alarming rate. The United States, representing just 4% of the world’s population, uses more than 25% of the world’s resources. The resulting depletion and pollution disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable members of our human family. For example, the 2002 resource demands of Columbus citizens will require 70 times geographic land area of the city to produce. We need only look at the international origins of our food and consumer goods to realize that our local actions have global consequences. In fact, if everyone on Earth lived a North American lifestyle, the resources of three additional earth-like planets would be required to sustain them.

While Ohio ranks 35th nationally in land area, our 11 million residents make us the seventh most populous state. This population density helps drive urban sprawl, industrial development and corporate growth which continually presents new challenges to our resources and inhabitants. Thirty-three federal Superfund sites - uncontrolled or abandoned places where hazardous waste is located - on the National Priority List are located in Ohio, as are more than 5,000 leaking underground storage tanks. Our 29 power plants burn more coal than any other state -- more than 109 million pounds in 1998. Ohio has the 5th largest traffic volume among the states and many Ohio counties exceed current Federal Clean Air limits, yet we the largest state in the US without an inter-city passenger rail system. Power plant and automobile emissions are primary causes of respiratory diseases, especially among children and the elderly. Two-thirds of Ohio’s land run-off feeds into the Ohio River, which is the 4th most polluted body of water in the nation. The federal Toxic Release Inventory ranks Ohio first in the number of facilities required to report their emissions, 3rd in releases to the land, 4th in releases to deep-well injection, and 9th in releases to the air.

Environmental justice, advocated by both religious institutions and government, demands that all have access to clean air and water, mechanisms of environmental decision-making, and to the beauty of nature. Our understanding of the Earth and its creatures as made by God challenges us to respect the dignity of all life. Our gifts, educational resources, and history of partnership gives us a unique potential in Ohio to face these challenges.

Theological Basis

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it...”(Psalm 24:1) reminds us that we are created in God’s love.

The Bible expresses that the whole earth (including the grass of the field, the birds of the air, the wild beasts, and the monsters of the sea) is an integral part of God’s good creation and that God’s providential care and love extends throughout (Mt. 6:25f, Lk. 12:22f, Psalm 104). Humans, made from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7), have a responsibility to God’s creation and future generations (Gen 9:12) as stewards and servants (Gen 1:28, 2:15, servant and steward parables of Jesus).

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves...(1 John 1:8) reminds us of our alienation. Our consumption and greed are sins that alienate us from God, one another and the whole of creation. We have become earth-consumers rather than earth-keepers. When we consume our inheritance with little thought for tomorrow, we fail as stewards and become prodigals, following in the footsteps of Ezekiel’s Tyre (Ez. 27) and Revelation’s Babylon (Rev.18:9f).The consequences of our sin are falling disproportionately on the poor and people of color.

“Do not be conformed...but be transformed...”(Rom 12:2) is our call to reconciliation. We are called to a new way of life. Through reconciliation with God (2 Cor. 5:18), we are called to a ministry of healing. We have been called out of Babylon (Rev. 18:4f). We are called to be advocates for justice (Micah 6:8) and a friend to the poor (Psalm 41:1, Mt. 25:31f). We are called to respond to God’s redemptive activity which includes the whole of creation (Isa. 11:1-9, Rom 8:18-24, Col. 1:15-20, Rev. 11:15-18, 22:1-5).

Emerging & Related Issues:

Global climate change: the impacts of fossil fuel use on local & global environments & peoples

Urban Environments: water and air quality, toxic substances and landfills

Human health: exposure to toxins, respiratory diseases and cancer

Energy consumption: CO₂ and other emissions, oil spills, mining practices, transportation efficiency

Conservation of natural resources: bio-diversity, species extinction, deforestation, soil erosion

Food production and distribution: protection of fisheries and arable land

Environmental injustice and racism: protection of everyone from environmental risks, equal access to decision-making.

Urban sprawl: habitat conservation, ground and surface water pollution, air pollution

Guiding Principles

As a body that speaks for moral dimensions and the long-term, and is trans-national, the church has a very important role in promoting environmentally sustainable living. As a community of faith, we will act on behalf of creation according to these principles, confident that the One who made us walks with us.

- The Earth was made by God and we are called to be faithful stewards of creation. We are inextricably linked to all of creation, each element of which is worthy of our respect and care.
- As followers of Christ, humility, simplicity, sacrifice, service and prophetic courage guide our decision making and our actions.
- We are, individually and collectively, responsible for the ecological impacts of our consumption, locally and globally.
- We are, individually and collectively, responsible to the entire human family, particularly “the least among us” and future generations who bear the cost of our excess.

Call to Action

We will continue to educate ourselves about local, state and global environmental issues and cultivate a spirituality and faith-filled response which honors our interdependence.

1. We will model in our churches and homes energy and resource conservation.
2. We will advocate for environmental justice, by voicing our concerns about policies affecting environmental impacts on the poor, inviting diverse participation in our deliberations, insisting on clean air and water, resource protection, reduced dependence on fossil fuels and more sustainable practices. We will accomplish this in collaboration with concerned religious and secular stakeholders.

(Policy reflects changes made at the May 24, 2002 General Board)

For more information on the earth stewardship and environmental justice work of the Ohio Council of Churches: www.ohcouncilchs.org. The National Interfaith climate and energy campaign: www.protectingcreation.org.

Contact Sr. Leanne Jablonski FMI, PhD, Coordinator, c/o Marianist Environmental Education Center, St. Joseph Hall, Mount St. John. 4435 East Patterson Road, Dayton, OH 937.429.3582. Jablonski@u Dayton.edu.