

Environmental Racism and Toxic Waste Disposal:

Dialogue and Deliberation Guide

***Environmental Racism:** the way in which minority groups are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards such as pollution, toxic waste, and climate change, with little protection or response from the government¹.*

Background

At first glance, environmental problems seem unrelated to issues of racism and injustice. A closer look, however, reveals that racism and the environment are intertwined. There are global-scale issues, like the fact that brown and black people in the Global South are more affected by climate change than people in the countries responsible for the climate crisis (North America and Europe). But there are major problems of environmental racism in the United States as well. In fact, here in the U.S., people of color are exposed to 38 percent more air pollution than white people². Minnesota has one of the country's largest gaps in exposure between people of color and whites³. Not only are minority communities exposed to more pollution, they are also less able to deal with it, because their infrastructure and health care tend to be poorer and governments tend not to care. This is what we call environmental racism, and it is an issue that affects the Twin Cities.

Like many other cities in the U.S., the Twin Cities intentionally placed pollutive industries and toxic waste disposal sites in communities of color⁴. This has left us with a city in which race is the factor most likely to determine whether a person is exposed to hazardous waste

¹ Holifield, Ryan

² Hirsi, Ibrahim

³ Hirsi, Ibrahim

⁴ MPR News

and pollution. This racism can be fatal—exposure to pollution drastically increases rates of asthma, cancer, and other diseases. Minority communities are dying because our infrastructure is set up to place the burden of pollution on people who have no voice and no power.

What Your Congregation Can Do Now

Educate: Whether for yourself or others, steps toward education about the issue at hand is an essential part of environmental justice. There are hundreds of resources out there, but here are a few we find to be helpful and engaging.

- [*Rise: Standing Rock*](#) is a two-part docu-series about the Resistance at Standing Rock to the Dakota Access Pipeline through Sioux ancestral lands creates a pan-tribal protest.
- [*Urban Roots*](#): A small group of dedicated citizens has started an urban environmental movement with the potential to transform a city. With the most vacant lots in the country, Detroiters are reclaiming their spirits by growing food. A timely, moving, and inspiring film that speaks to a nation grappling with collapsed industrial towns and the need to forge a sustainable and prosperous future.
- [*For The Movement*](#) is a podcast that discusses persistent civil rights and social issues affecting communities of color. In their episode “*Environmental Racism: It’s A Thing*,” they define environmental racism, discuss how it affects communities of color, how environmental policies affect the well-fare of the oppressed, and the importance of participating in local elections.

- [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency website](#) is the place to go to learn more about how the state of Minnesota is fighting for environmental justice. In the link below, you will find the policies and framework the agency has created in regards to tribal relations, areas of highest impact, and the procedure taken to insure environmental justice is in the forefront of policy making.

Advocate For decades communities of color have been fighting for basic human rights. And as the frontline of our degrading environment, these communities are persistently left out of conversations and decision making. In saying this advocacy and meaningful outreach from your congregation can hold alot of power and change in the fight for environmental justice.

- Write letters to your representatives. Let them know your concerns and policies you believe they should be reporting and why.
- Contact the MCPA environmental justice coordinator and advisory group. Ned Brooks, MCPA's Environmental Justice Coordinator: 651-757-2557 or ned.brooks@state.mn.us
- Support, volunteer, and partner with local organizations in the fight against environmental racism. [MN350](#), [Citizen Climate Lobby](#), and [Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota](#) are only a few organizations who aim to bring political awareness and communities' voices to attention.
- Lobby!!!!!!! Lobbying is a great way to put a face to a name. Lobbying days allows for the stories of those most affected by the issue at hand to be heard by the representative directly.

Lifestyle Changes

Lifestyle changes might not directly relate to environmental racism, but by helping to mitigate climate change and lower pollution, we help communities who are most vulnerable to the dangers of global warming and toxic waste. Here are some ways that you can lower your personal carbon footprint and decrease pollution:

- **First, calculate your carbon footprint:** find out your contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and learn how you can reduce your impact at <https://coolclimate.berkeley.edu/calculator>
- **Buying less:** a lot of the stuff we buy is produced in a way that emits a lot of carbon dioxide and produces hazardous waste—which then ends up being dealt with in minority communities. Buying less reduces the demand for such goods, leading to lower levels of production. Learn more at <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/10/191008155716.htm>
- **Thrifting and reusing:** Buying thrifted or used items doesn't require that a new product be made, so shopping this way has a much lower environmental impact.
- **Eating fewer animal products:** Meat and dairy production emits a lot of greenhouse gases—in fact, research indicates that cutting down your consumption of animal products is the most effective way to lower your carbon footprint⁵. Try out meatless Mondays or eating one meal a day without animal products. Learn more at <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-46459714>
- **Eating local and organic:** Large, industrial farms are the biggest source of lake and river pollution in the United States⁶, and also emit huge numbers of greenhouse gases⁷. Small,

⁵ Carrington, Damian

⁶ Haspel, Tamar

⁷ MacMahon, Jeff

local, and organic farmers are often less pollutive and produce less toxic waste. Try out farmers' markets and look for labels like Organic, Free Range, Cage Free, Hormone Free, and Antibiotic Free.

- **Making sure your savings aren't invested in fossil fuel corporations:** Use <https://fossilfreefunds.org/> to check if your savings are invested in fossil fuels and see how you can make your savings more eco-friendly.

Policies and Campaigns to Fight Environmental Racism

Because issues like the disproportionate exposure to dangerous chemicals in minority communities were created through policies, changes in policy are necessary to fight environmental racism. The problem is, victims of environmental racism are usually not in a position to make policy changes. Those of us in more privileged positions have the opportunity to support and draw awareness to policies that we believe will fight environmental racism. Some proposed policies/actions designed to mitigate environmental racism are shown below:

Federal Level

- *The Environmental Justice for All Act (H.R.5986)*
 - <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5986/text>
 - **Purpose:** to address environmental hazards in vulnerable communities, strengthen protections against environmental harm, and ensure that victims of environmental injustice can file statutory claims.
 - **Status:** introduced to House subcommittee on Homeland Security
 - **What you can do:** contact your representative and ask them to support H.R.5986

- *The Green New Deal (H. Res. 109)*
 - <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hres109/BILLS-116hres109ih.pdf>
 - **Purpose:** to transition our economy and infrastructure away from fossil fuels in a way that furthers social justice, create millions of sustainable jobs, stay below 2 degrees Celsius of global warming, and protect communities that are most vulnerable to climate change. Additionally, the GND aims to provide well-paying union jobs to all workers who are currently employed in the fossil fuel industry.
 - **Status:** The GND is a resolution, not a bill, meaning that it is a set of goals rather than binding policy. No GND measures have been implemented at the Federal level.
 - **What you can do:** ask your representatives to support the Green New Deal. Check if politicians have GND plans before you give them your vote. Talk to your peers about the GND and why you think it is important. Support GND measures at the state and local level. Join local organizations such as Minnesota 350 (<https://mn350.org/>) and the Sunrise Movement (<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>) that are pushing for GND policy.

State Level

- *Stop Minnesota Line 3*
 - **Purpose:** Line 3 is an oil pipeline that would carry up to 915,000 barrels per day of Alberta Tar Sands crude oil into the United States. Tar Sands oil is some of the dirtiest, most carbon-heavy oil in the world. Line 3 would also violate indigenous

treaty rights, polluting the water sources and wild rice fields of Minnesota's Ojibwe Nation. The movement to stop Line 3 aims to protect the rights of the Ojibwe and fight climate change by keeping oil in the ground.

- **Status:** approved, but challenged by several lawsuits.
- **What you can do:** talk to your friends about Line 3, join in protests and demonstrations, sign petitions, contact your representatives, vote for politicians who oppose Line 3, and write letters to your local newspaper. Find out more at <https://www.stopline3.org/#intro>
- *The Climate Majority Project*
 - **Purpose:** to make climate justice a political priority by putting pressure on elected officials and keeping environmental justice in the news.
 - **Status:** ongoing.
 - **What you can do:** join the movement at <https://mn350.org/climate-majority-project/> and start making calls, letters to the editor, emails, and even meet with your representatives.

Discussion

In this guide, we've discussed community action, lifestyle changes, and policies that can help to fight environmental racism and climate change. These are not the only things we can do, and we don't have to limit ourselves to just one strategy. As you discuss what you've learned and your own thoughts on environmental racism, think about the following questions:

1. Had you heard about environmental racism before this dialogue? Do you think your friends and family are familiar with the term? If not, how can you spread awareness about this issue?
2. Why is environmental racism such an unfamiliar topic? Why do you think governments don't tend to prioritize fighting environmental racism?
3. Can you think of any real-world examples of environmental racism besides those we've discussed in this dialogue? What caused these issues, and what is being done about them?
4. Should we focus most on changing our personal behavior—consuming less, eating less meat, buying sustainable products, etc—or on our political behavior—advocating, voting, lobbying, etc—in order to fight environmental racism? Which makes more of an impact on the environment?
5. We know that our consumer behavior causes climate change and pollution, and that climate change and pollution worsen the effects of environmental racism on vulnerable communities. Do you think that what we consume is a moral choice?
6. Line 3 was approved even though it violated the legal treaty rights of the Ojibwe Nation. How is this an example of environmental racism? What can you do about it?
7. In your opinion, where should policy action against environmentalism start: at the local, state, or Federal level?
8. If you could design a policy to fight environmental racism, what would it look like?

Bibliography: Recommended Reading

Barnes-Davies, Rebecca. *Environmental Racism: an Ecumenical Study Guide*. PDF file. March 27, 2020. https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/racialjustice/enviromental_racismecumenicalstudyguide.pdf

This source is a great resource for us as facilitators. It is a nice example of how others within the theology communities have tackled understanding the Environmental racism and climate change justice. In addition, this guide can be used as a framework to create a guide best suited for the congregation in its entirety if the Green team chooses to do so.

Center for Earth, Energy, and Democracy. “Twin Cities environmental justice mapping tool.” CEED. <http://ceed.org/twin-cities-environmental-justice-mapping-tool-released/> (accessed April 2, 2020).

This mapping tool from the Center for Earth Energy and Democracy provides an interactive way to view what types of pollution occur in the Twin Cities and where they can be found. Congregation members can use this source to gain a visual understanding of pollution distribution and to find specific information about areas with higher exposure.

Hirsi, Ibrahim. “Huge gap in pollution exposure by race surprises U of M researchers.” Minnpost. <https://www.minnpost.com/community-sketchbook/2014/04/huge-gap-pollution-exposure-race-surprises-u-m-researchers/> (accessed March 27, 2020).

This source explains how environmental hazards are disproportionately placed in minority and low-income communities. Crucially, however, it highlights that minority communities are more at risk regardless of income, indicating that racism is at play. This article clearly explains how environmental racism functions in the Twin Cities and throughout the country, providing good background information for the congregation.

Minnesota 350. “MN350 - Climate Solutions.” MN350. <https://mn350.org/> (accessed April 2, 2020).

This is the website for Minnesota 350, an organization committed to fighting climate change and furthering climate justice. The Minnesota chapter is quite active, and this website contains information about trainings, events, and causes that our congregation can contribute to. It also describes environmental justice issues in Minnesota such as the building of Line 3. The website is an excellent resource for finding ways in which congregation members can get involved.

MPR News Staff. “What does environmental justice look like in Minnesota?” MPR News. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/09/28/environmental-justice> (accessed April 3, 2020).

This radio broadcast provides an excellent introduction to environmental racism in Minnesota from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s Environmental Justice Advisory

Group. It emphasizes that environmental racism is deliberate, not accidental, and draws attention to efforts to address environmental injustice in Minnesota through reforming the pollution permitting process and empowering communities.

Other Sources

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Minnesota 350. "The climate majority project." MN350.

<https://mn350.org/climate-majority-project/> (accessed April 17, 2020).

Stop Line 3. “Stop the line 3 pipeline.” Stopline3.org <https://www.stopline3.org/> (accessed April 18, 2020).

United States Congress. “H.R.5986 - Environmental Justice For All Act.” Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5986/text> (accessed April 18, 2020).

United States Congress. “H. Res. 109.” Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hres109/BILLS-116hres109ih.pdf>

This dialogue and deliberation guide was created by DeAnia Brown and Shanthi Chackalackal for the course, “Theo-Ethics of Climate Change,” taught by Kiara Jorgenson at St. Olaf College in Spring 2020. These guides are intended to be used by congregations and can be replicated and distributed to other faith congregations in full and with proper attention to the authors.