Life-Giving Breath of God: Protecting the Sacred Gift of Air

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures ... When you send forth your breath, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. – Psalm 104:24,30

Thanking and praising God for the beauty of God’s creation is an essential part of our ongoing faith journey and worship experience. To help celebrate God’s wonderous works, each year the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches of Christ develops a resource to be used to celebrate Earth Day Sunday. The emphasis for 2004, entitled “Life-giving Breath of God,” is on God’s gift of air. The following resource highlights a number of ways individuals and congregations can celebrate and protect this integral part of God’s creation. We have included some basics on the state of the world’s air quality; worship resources including a sermon starter and bulletin insert; and ideas for personal, congregational, and community action to protect the air we breathe. We hope these ideas inspire further thoughts, conversations, and actions in answering God’s call to be faithful stewards of creation.

The Sacred Gift of Air

Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your soul. – Jeremiah 6:16

As people of faith, we understand our responsibilities to protect the sacred gifts given by God and to heal a world torn by brokenness and human strife. Air pollution, like all human-induced environmental degradation, is a sign of this brokenness—a sign of our having stepped away from the “ancient paths” described in Jeremiah. So that we might find the “good way,” a place of rest for our souls (and clean air for our lungs), we first must acknowledge our sins and examine where we stand today by delving more deeply into the issues and explore the local, regional, and global connections of our actions and inactions. Only then can we take informed and inspired steps down the right path—“the good way”—of healing, wholeness, and reconciliation.
Just Breathing
Clean air is essential for human life. An average person breathes in over 3,000 gallons of air each day. At the same time we inhale life-sustaining oxygen, we also breathe in the byproducts of our lifestyle choices—car fumes, fine particulate waste of industrial production, and chemicals and off-gases from synthetic products in our homes.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the United States alone emits 160 million tons of pollution into the air each year. And while regulatory enforcement of the Clean Air Act has significantly reduced aggregate emissions (down 48 percent since 1970), over 130 million US residents live in counties that violate federal air quality standards. Globally, 1.1 billion people breathe unhealthy air. Furthermore, the accumulation of greenhouse gas emissions in the upper atmosphere is contributing to global warming and climate change.

How the Air Gets Polluted
We can only imagine the purity of the air that existed when God’s breath first swept across the waters or first filled Adam’s lungs. Today, our industrialized societies have made smog, haze, and “code red” days commonplace.

Major contributors to poor air quality include power plants and industrial factories; mobile sources such as cars, trucks, planes, and trains; and natural occurrences such as wildfires and windblown dust particles. Among the largest sources of air pollution in the United States are coal-fired power plants. These plants emit 67 percent of the sulfur dioxide, 23 percent of the nitrogen oxides, 34 percent of the mercury, and 38 percent of the carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels.

Effects of Pollution
Human health is affected by air pollution through directly inhaling polluted air and also through “indirect” exposures such as drinking water or eating foods that have been contaminated by pollutants emitted into the air, which then fall back down to earth. These pollutants enter our systems through contaminated water and soil, and can bioaccumulate in plants and animals, traveling up the food chain to humans.

Worldwide air pollution causes more than 3 million deaths annually, mostly because of particulate pollution. A great majority of the deaths are among children in developing countries who die of acute respiratory infections brought on by indoor air pollution from burning traditional biomass fuels for cooking and heating. In the United States, escalating rates of asthma, particularly among children, are being linked to poor air quality.

Outdoor vs. Indoor Pollution
As communities struggle to curtail emissions and clean up the air outside, health experts are looking increasingly at the quality of our indoor air. Humans spend as much as 90 percent of their time indoors and studies have shown that indoor air levels of many pollutants can be two to five times higher than outdoor levels.

In developed countries, indoor air pollution is the result of increased use of household chemicals, use of synthetic building and furnishing materials, increased insulation, decreased ventilation, and second-hand smoke. In developing countries, 1.8 billion people still rely on traditional biomass fuel—wood, charcoal, animal dung, crop wastes—for household energy needs including cooking and heating, which results in indoor air pollution levels many times higher than international air quality standards allow. Promoting cleaner, renewable energy sources in developing countries would help improve the air quality and health of people living in these regions.

Disproportionate Impacts
While air pollution affects everyone on God’s earth, certain populations suffer a disproportionate impact. Among those who are suffering the most from the burden of our lifestyle choices, are often the very ones contributing least to the problem—the children, the poor, people of color, and residents of developing nations.

- Pound for pound, children breathe 50 percent more air than adults and therefore inhale a greater proportion of the pollution burden. In the United States, 25 million children live in counties that violate national air quality standards.

Air Pollution as Global Warming
Earth’s atmosphere is ideally composed for life, with just the right mix of elements to sustain and support plants and animals. This mix includes small traces of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. While these greenhouse gases are essential to life on earth, too much of this “good thing” can be devastating. Human activities are making massive changes in the global atmospheric chemistry, which is causing global warming. The major greenhouse gas that humans are adding to the atmosphere is carbon dioxide, and the second largest greenhouse gas being emitted by humans is methane. Roughly three-quarters of human-caused greenhouse warming comes from the burning of fossil fuels—coal, oil, and gas. Global warming not only raises the temperature of the Earth, but also increases the likelihood of severe storms, threatens biodiversity, contributes to heat-related illnesses, and causes flooding in sensitive areas such as island nations.

Decreasing greenhouse emissions by transforming our energy system from one based on fossil fuels to one based on natural, renewable energies is a way to help eliminate air pollution and curb global warming.
(Adapted from The Cry of Creation)
standards and 35 million children live within 30 miles of a power plant, areas where the greatest health impacts occur. An estimated 2 million of these children have asthma.9

- The World Health Organization estimates 2 million children die each year from respiratory ailments making air pollution the second leading cause of disease for children under four.

- Approximately 68 percent of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant. Today, asthma attacks send African Americans to the emergency room at three times the rate of whites.9

- Seventy-one percent of Latinos live in counties that violated federal air pollution standards and are more than twice as likely as either blacks or whites to live in areas with elevated levels of particulate matter.10

- According to the World Health Organization, average annual concentrations of particulate matter are four to six times higher in cities in China and India than in cities in North America, Western Europe, and Japan.

People of Faith Speak Out
Over the years, religious leaders and people of faith have spoken out to protect clean air and the integrity of God’s creation. In 2001, members of the faith community turned their collective voices to the topic of energy production, a process that is one of the greatest contributors to air pollution. The National Council of Churches of Christ joined with other major faith communities through the Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign to issue a statement that called for energy conservation and climate justice. The letter, signed by 1,200 religious leaders including 41 heads of denominations and senior religious leaders, affirmed the importance of developing a sustainable energy policy that would protect the future of God’s creation on earth and the quality of life of future generations. Recently, in response to proposed energy legislation, various denominations of the National Council of Churches of Christ issued a letter to Congress, urging them to meet current energy needs without sacrificing environmental protection for the future.

Take Action to Protect the Air
Congregations and individual people of faith have the opportunity to put their faith into action to protect our precious air resources and to give glory to God’s creation. Reduce your energy use both at home and in the office, use energy efficient transportation such as fuel efficient cars, and use less toxic substances when purchasing items such as carpeting and paint for home and office use.

Since our energy use is a major contributor to both local air pollution and global warming, reducing our consumption and choosing cleaner, greener alternatives will help protect God’s precious air resources.

For more ideas on how you can help protect God’s sacred gift of air, visit: www.webofcreation.org/ncc.

The Four “P”s: Power Plants and Human Health

Mercury: A metal found in coal, which converts into a gas when coal is burned, becomes airborne, and pollutes waterways. Bacteria in the water convert elemental mercury into methylmercury—its most toxic form—which is a bioaccumulating toxin that affects the brain, spinal cord, and liver and can impair a fetus or child’s ability to learn, speak, feel, see, taste, and move.

Nitrogen Oxides (NOx): A family of chemical compounds formed when coal is burned. They react in the presence of sunlight to form ozone smog, which can trigger asthma attacks.

Sulfur Dioxide (SO2): A highly corrosive gas that is formed when coal is burned. In addition to contributing to acid rain, SO2 mixes with nitrogen oxides to form fine particulate matter, which can lodge in the lungs affecting respiratory and cardiovascular systems.

Carbon Dioxide (CO2): A greenhouse gas emission that builds up in the atmosphere and contributes to global warming. As global average surface temperatures rise, humans will experience an increase in heat-related stress, ozone smog, and the spread of infectious diseases.
Sermon Starters: Reflections on the Life-Giving Breath of God

The creation story begins (Genesis 1:2-31) with the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters. As each act of creation takes place throughout the chapter, God sees it as good. Finally, when the sixth day comes, God looked at “everything that he had made” and saw it as “very good.”

**Wind and Spirit.** The Spirit of God in the opening verses of Genesis (v.2) is also translated as “a wind from God” or “a mighty wind.” In continuity with this connection between wind and Spirit, we see Jesus telling Nicodemus in the Gospel of John (3:8), “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The word for wind and spirit is the same in both Hebrew (ruah) and Greek (pneuma). Ruah is also the word for the breath of God that was breathed into the first parents, as they were created in Genesis. So, the Spirit is all around us, just as is the wind, and within us, just as is our very breath. We are sanctified with every breath we take: God’s creation (the air) symbolizes God’s Holy Spirit, who, as the Orthodox pray, “is everywhere present and filling all things.” The air, then, is something intimately connected with our very life and survival; furthermore, it brings to mind the Spirit who gives us life in the first place.

**From Blessing to Calamity.** Our ancestors in the faith lived in the presence of God’s Holy Spirit, bringing to them “every perfect gift . . . from above.” (James 1:17) They lived lives that were far more integrated with the natural world, where each season was a source of thanksgiving, a gift from the God “from whom all blessings flow.” They had reverence for all aspects of creation, including the air, which reminded them of the Holy Spirit. They saw the many blessings that rained down upon them from the sky. But we modern human beings have changed all that. Now, in fact, the rain may bring death because it is so acidic. And the air we breathe is full of noxious substances, such as mercury, lead, and soot that are emitted by our factories, our power plants, our incinerators, and our vehicles. The air above us, instead of being a source of blessings from God, has been changed. We have recreated it in our own image—our fallen human image—and thus it has become a source of calamity.

Have you ever looked out on the sky on a bright sunny spring day, especially from a mountaintop or other high place? Crystal clear and blue, the sky seems as if it goes on forever. That is how the ancients saw it. But we know that it does not. The earth’s atmosphere is remarkably thin and fragile. It is easily damaged, and not easily repaired. And the damage that our modern industrial economy has brought about has become so serious, that it is now hurting us, our children, and the other creatures who share this precious Earth with us.

**Christian Response.** Many people might throw up their hands in despair when faced with the enormity of the challenges facing us in cleaning up our environment and restoring the air. As Christians, we know that this is never an option. Perhaps instead we should lift up our hands in thanksgiving on this Earth Day 2004. For we believe in a God who does not choose to leave us. Instead the Holy Spirit calls us to repentance, to a change of mind and heart—and lifestyle—for the sake of God’s ravaged creation, the very creation that God once declared “very good.” As the Spirit of God moves across our hearts, our own spirit is renewed from within, in a revival of faith and love. All that we do, in loving care of God’s children and God’s suffering world, we do in fidelity to the Creator, as a witness to the Kingdom God proclaimed.

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**West Virginia Congregations Go the Extra Mile**

Several Interfaith State Climate and Energy Campaigns focus on fuel efficient, low emissions vehicles as an example of responsible purchasing and a way to embody the values of justice, equity, stewardship, and caring for future generations by protecting air and energy resources. In West Virginia, “Go the Extra Mile” events were held in four cities and involved representatives from many congregations. Electric hybrid cars and other fuel-efficient vehicles that cut down on air pollution and carbon dioxide (a contributor to global warming) were prominently displayed and educational materials were available to all event participants. Inspired by the event in Shepherdstown, a city council member challenged the city to become “Kyoto compliant.”

The Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign is a coalition of religious American leaders, institutions and individuals who for over two years have been working in 21 states to educate congregants about the causes and effects of global climate change and to speak out about the religious and moral imperatives to protect God’s creation and all of God’s children. To learn more about the Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaigns or to join the Network, visit www.protectingcreation.org.
Selected Faith-Based Resources and Organizations

**Creation Season Liturgy.** This package of materials will enable a congregation to plan a liturgy or series of liturgies to honor creation. To order, call (800) 762-0968 and ask for EJ 8905. ($4)

**The Cry of Creation: A Call for Climate Justice.** This twenty-five page booklet and interfaith study guide presents an introductory consideration to global warming. To order, call (206) 632-2426. ($5)

**Global Warming: A Religious Issue.** A resource suited for presentations, especially to skeptical audiences. *It's God's World* strategy packet listed below included. To order, call (800) 762-0968 and ask for EJ 9955. (four copies for $1)

**God's Creation and Global Warming.** A twelve-minute video describing the risks of climate change and why it is a significant religious issue. To order, call (800) 762-0968 and ask for EJ 0017. ($10)

**Guide to Resource Efficient Church Buildings.** This guide helps readers to understand the need for “green” building and remodeling and provides plenty of resources for doing so. To order, call (406) 549-7678.

**Guide for Energy Stewardship Congregations.** This resource offers your congregation suggestions for using less energy by making your facilities more energy efficient. To order, call (800) 762-0968 and ask for EJ 9960. ($0.75)

Notes and References
4. *Air of Injustice* (Clear the Air; Georgia Coalition for the People’s Agenda, The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, 2002)
5. *Children in the New Millennium*, op. cit. note 2
7. *Children in the New Millennium*, op. cit. note 2
8. *Children At Risk* (Clean Air Task Force, 2002)

**Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign**
(www.protectingcreation.org)
A coalition of religious American leaders, institutions and individuals who for over two years have been working in 21 states to educate congregations about the causes and effects of global climate change and to speak out about the religious and moral imperatives to protect God’s creation and all of God’s children. Through this joint effort of the National Council of Churches in Christ and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, over 1,200 leading religious leaders have joined in calling for federal policies for energy conservation and climate justice. 110 Maryland Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002.

**Interfaith Power and Light** (www.thereregenerationproject.org)
An organization working to mobilize religious communities to play a leadership role in weaning the United States from its dependency on fossil fuel. 38 Keyes Street, Suites 114/115, The Presidio, San Francisco, CA 94129.

**It's God's World: Christians, Care of Creation and Global Warming.** Contains five one-hour sessions for adult study on the Bible, the environment, and the challenges of a changing climate. Concludes with suggestions on how congregations can diminish the dangers of global warming. To order, call (800) 762-0968 and ask for EJ 9701. ($2)

**For the latest web resources and advocacy actions, visit www.webofcreation.org/ncc/**

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Participate in other Eco-Justice programs designed to help protect God's creation.

- Yes! Please send me information about other programs and resources from the Eco-Justice Working Group.
- I have enclosed a donation of $_______ to help support Eco-Justice Working Group Programs such as the Earth Day resources (please make checks payable to the National Council of Churches and send to: Eco-Justice Programs, 110 Maryland Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002).

**Name**

**Congregation/Denomination**

**Address**

**City, State, ZIP**

**Email**
Our air, the atmosphere of God’s world, is a global commons. It nurtures and protects all life and belongs to no one but rather is shared by all. As a community of faith we understand our moral obligation to protect the air around us—as stewards of creation and as instruments of justice and reconciliation for our neighbors, nature, and generations yet to come. Working together, with God as our guide and partner, we can restore health and wholeness to our broken world. We can clean our air so that future generations will inherit a world as pure and clean as the one first touched by the life-giving breath of God.

For ways to take action on the local, state, and federal level, visit www.webofcreation.org/ncc/.

Ideas for Action

- Drive smart and drive less: use a fuel efficient car or an alternative method of transportation such as public transit, walking, or biking.
- Conserve energy: turn off the lights and use compact fluorescent lights, adjust your thermostat, and investigate using “green” energy options such as solar or wind power.
- Encourage your local, state, and federal public officials to support and use renewable sources of energy and provide attractive public transportation options.

To join the Interfaith Climate Change Network, a network of individuals of faith and religious organizations who are helping to protect God’s precious gift of air, visit www.protectingcreation.org or contact info@protectingcreation.org.

“Every perfect gift, is from above” — James 1:17