



Festival of God's Creation 2004

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 wondrous works, each year the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches of Christ develops a resource to be used to celebrate the Festival of God's Creation. The emphasis for 2004, "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. Included are 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. 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

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),¹ over 130 million US residents live in counties that violate federal air quality standards. Globally, 1.1 billion people breathe unhealthy air.² 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.³

Effects of Pollution

Human health is affected by air pollution through direct-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.

Worldwide air pollution causes more than 3 million deaths annually,⁴ 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.

Disproportionate Impacts

While air pollution affects everyone on God's earth, certain populations suffer a disproportionate impact. 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.⁵
- Approximately 68 percent of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant, areas where the greatest health impacts occur, and asthma attacks send African Americans to the emergency room at three times the rate of whites.⁶

The Four "P"s: power plants and human health

Carbon Dioxide (CO₂): A greenhouse gas emission that builds up in the atmosphere and contributes to global warming, resulting in heat-related stress, ozone smog, and the spread of infectious diseases.

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 (NO_x): Formed when coal is burned and reacts 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.

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 of 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, signed by 1,200 religious leaders, that called for energy conservation and climate justice. Recently, in response to proposed energy legislation, 14 religious organizations issued a letter to Congress, urging them to meet current energy needs without sacrificing environmental protection for the future.

Notes and References

¹ *Air Trend Highlights* (Washington, DC: Environmental Protection Agency, 2002)

² *Children in the New Millennium* (United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization 2002)

³ *Air of Injustice: African Americans & Power Plant Pollution* Black Leadership Forum (Clear the Air, Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda, The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, 2002)

⁴ *Children in the New Millennium*, op. cit. note 1

⁵ *Children At Risk* (Clean Air Task Force, 2002)

⁶ *Air of Injustice*, op. cit. note 4

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.

Ideas for Action

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

- 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.

For complete Festival of God’s Creation materials, including action opportunities and resources, visit: www.umc-gbcs.org.