

PART TWO - SESSION FIVE

Our Health, the Earth's Health: Environmental and Public Health

Adrienne Elliott

At the conclusion of this session, participants will:

- Define environmental justice, environmental racism, and sacrifice zones, especially in relation to redlining and other systems of oppression.
- Be familiar with the history of faith-based environmental justice.
- Recognize/analyze environmental justice issues in their community or town.
- Articulate practical theological responses to environmental justice issues.
- Feel equipped to seek partnership with community organizations in this work.

Please review the primary resources, guiding Scripture, and reflection and discussion questions prior to the small group gathering. Optional resources are available for a deeper dive.

PRE-GATHERING PREPARATION

Find these resources online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/love-god-love-gods-world-curriculum/session-five/>.

Primary Resources:

- Film: “Environmental Justice: Opposing a Toxic Waste Landfill” from PBS Learning (4 mins)
- Film: “Living Without Water: Contamination Nation” from Vice News (15 mins)
- Film: “Cancer town: 'People are dying horrible deaths'” from The Guardian (8 min)
- Reading: “The Meaning of Air” by Bryce Upholt, from Emergence Magazine

Optional Resources:

- Film: The University of California, Santa Cruz, Global Environmental Justice Observatory offers several short films on environmental justice and environmental racism issues across the country.
- Website: ArcGIS StoryMap on environmental justice with basic definitions, history, and mapping.

GUIDING SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 12:12, 18-26 (NRSV)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

SMALL GROUP GATHERING

Facilitator or volunteer can use the prayer below to open your time together.

OPENING PRAYER

Dear God, Creator of the earth, this sacred home we share:

Give us new eyes to see the beauty all around and to
protect the wonders of creation.

Give us new arms to embrace the strangers among us and
to know them as family.

Give us new ears to hear and understand those who live
off the land and sea, and to hear and understand those
who extract its resources.

Give us new hearts to recognize the brokenness in our
communities and to heal the wounds we have inflicted.

Give us new hands to serve the earth and its people and to
shape beloved community.

For you are the One who seeks the lost, binds our wounds
and sets us free,

And it is in the name of Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

Prayer from Carol Gallagher (member of the Cherokee Nation, bishop in The Episcopal Church, and regional canon, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts), “A Prayer for Our Time and for the Earth,” from the 2019 meeting of the House of Bishops, Fairbanks, Alaska.

CHECK-IN

Facilitator leads the group through brief check-ins from each participant.

REFLECTION

Group can choose to read the reflection out loud together or go directly to discussion questions depending on timing and how many participants were able to do the reading prior to the gathering.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (I Corinthians 12:12, 26).

If we think of our church and the wider community as a single living organism, we all suffer when communities are exposed to environmental risks, even if we personally are less impacted. That is what it means to be in mutual relationship with one another, caring for our neighbors as ourselves and bearing one another’s burdens. From the perspective of environmental health—the branch of public health concerned with the effects of the natural and built environment—the exposures to which our most vulnerable members are subjected affect us all.

Statistically, communities of color experience disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards like toxic wastes and pollution, contaminated water, and other known health risks compared to whiter and

wealthier neighborhoods. In the United States, this is tied to **redlining**,¹ the discriminatory 1930s bank lending practices which refused loans for residents (often people of color) living in areas deemed financially risky (designated on maps by red lines). Tribal lands and reservations have similarly been used as toxic dumping grounds or test sites for the government and corporations.

Such areas have often become **sacrifice zones**² where the health and even life expectancy of poor people and communities of color are sacrificed for the prosperity, convenience, or comfort of others. Intersections of race, class, ability, age, and more can compound communities' vulnerabilities and diminish their capacity to withstand health hazards and climate-related disasters like extreme heat and storm events. Unequal political access also exacerbates a community's **cumulative burden**,³ as wealthier, whiter communities with greater access to decision-making processes say "not in my backyard" to that new highway or cement manufacturing facility. For this reason, communities of color and the poor have historically organized for **environmental justice (EJ)**⁴ - that is, fair treatment and equal access to the structures of decision-making that determine how environmental benefits and harms are distributed.

I was transformed in my own understanding and advocacy of these issues when my parish in Seattle, along with other churches nearby, participated in the Duwamish tribe's eco-tour of the Duwamish River Superfund site. This tour introduced participants to a history of injustices in the area, including the forced displacement of Native peoples from their ancestral land and lifeways; the rerouting of the river and pollution of the water, land, and air due to nearby highways, heavy industry, and Port of Seattle activities; and the drawn-out cleanup, lower life expectancy, and diminished health outcomes compared with other areas of the city. We learned about the decades of community organizing and political advocacy undertaken by various local stakeholders, as well as opportunities to stand in solidarity. Beyond raising awareness, churches in the diocese have participated in DuwamishAlive watershed restoration events, supported calls to action, and some pay "Real Rent," to the tribe, a symbolic step toward fair compensation for land that was unjustly taken.⁵

As Episcopalians, our baptismal covenant calls us to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every person. When we open ourselves up to learn something new, to bear witness to a story from someone with a perspective and experience in a body different than our own, we can be transformed. So, let us listen and learn—and act in solidarity. Let us suffer and rejoice with those who continue to advocate at every level for healthy food and clean water, land, and air; for environmental justice; for peace in their bodies; and for peace in their communities.

¹ Read more about the consequences of redlining, including higher average temperatures (<https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=1d7c77f1b13c4a688bf123fd469d9792>), less access to nature (<https://www.nrdc.org/bio/drevet-hunt/california-seeks-reduce-inequity-access-nature>), and food apartheid (<https://www.nrdc.org/bio/nina-sevilla/food-apartheid-racialized-access-healthy-affordable-food>).

² Read more from the Climate Reality Project. <https://www.climateRealityProject.org/sacrifice-zones#:~:text=Sacrifice%20zones%20are%20areas%20where,adverse%20impacts%20on%20their%20health.>

³ "The multiple inequities marginalized populations face such as increased exposure to climate or environmental impacts and reduced access to healthcare" (ECOS Introduction to Environmental Justice storymap).

⁴ From The Episcopal Church's Creation Care and Eco-Justice [Glossary](#): 1. Fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies (EPA). 2. The universal right to collective environmental, political, economic self-determination.

⁵ To learn more visit www.drcc.org

Discussion Questions

Facilitator guides the group through the discussion questions.

1. Were you familiar with the idea of environmental justice and/or sacrifice zones before this session? How have these ideas and these communities' stories transformed you?
2. We often think of the environment as pristine wild areas and parks, but environmental justice reminds us that the places where we live and work are also our environment. How have you viewed the environment, and has your understanding of it changed or expanded?
3. Redlining is a topic that comes up multiple times in this session's resources. Often, these discriminatory maps from the 1930s reflect present-day environmental health (and other) inequities. Was this connection surprising to you? What do you know about the neighborhoods that were redlined in your area or other places with which you're familiar?
4. Faith communities have an integral part to play in the environmental justice movement, as we saw in the PBS video "Environmental Justice: Opposing a Toxic Waste Landfill." What was your reaction to the United Church of Christ's involvement, and how might The Episcopal Church address the intersections of justice, extractive economies, and care for the bodies of suffering members of our communities?
5. Think about your city or region. Are you aware of any local environmental health concerns and groups working to advocate on behalf of those impacted? What can your church do to support local environmental justice efforts?

CLOSING CHECK-OUT & PRAYER

What word describes how you feel right now? After you've shared, please invite another person to go.

After all have offered a word, the facilitator or volunteer can pray a simple prayer bringing together the hopes and prayers of the whole group.

ACTION OPPORTUNITIES

These are activities and engagement opportunities to explore different ways to get involved and learn more.

- There are many ways your faith community can work toward safeguarding human and environmental health, whether it's advocating alongside community-based environmental justice groups, providing space on your church property for a community garden and accessible food, or participating in civic engagement, such as leaving public comments or hosting candidate forums to ask about their environmental health policies. To get started, let's learn about what environmental and socioeconomic factors are present in your area.
 - Activity: Use the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice (EJ) Screen <https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen>, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention EJ tracking <https://ephtracking.cdc.gov/Applications/ejdashboard/>, or The Episcopal Church's Explore Your Neighborhood mapping tools <https://generalconvention.org/explore-your-neighborhood/> to research EJ issues in the area around your congregation or community. For the Explore your Neighborhood map, climate impact layers will soon be available for sea-level rise, urban heat island effect, and more.
 - Use one of the tools and look at different sites to learn more about some of the environmental and public health impacts associated with nearby exposures like Superfund sites, urban heat, air pollution, food access, etc. What do you notice and what do you wonder about some of the areas most impacted? Is your parish, home, school, or workplace located in or near these communities? Do you know folks living in these areas?

- After using the tools, research local or regional EJ organizations already working on these issues in your area. A quick Google search with your city plus “environmental justice” and the type of exposure you’ve identified might yield some results. You may learn of other EJ concerns or threats beyond the ones identified on EPA’s EJScreen or the CDC’s dashboard. Do these EJ organizations have any campaigns or requests ongoing? How can you share these concerns and opportunities for advocacy with your church or wider community?
- Once you know about these EJ groups and their current areas of focus, get into action! Maybe your parish is located in or near a sacrifice zone/frontline community, and your parishioners are impacted by and already aware of these organizations. For folks outside of these areas, do you have opportunities to show up, support financially, and connect with members from parishes in these EJ communities? Ask how you and your (faith) community can amplify needs and fill gaps, and then listen. Work on building connections between your church, local EJ groups, and other community stakeholders like municipal officials, nongovernmental organizations, and other faith communities.
- CDC Environmental Health Tracking links:
 - Heat Dashboard <https://ephtracking.cdc.gov/Applications/heatTracker/>
 - State resource inventory—government environmental health and justice organizations by state <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/tracking/EJinventory.htm>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



***Adrienne Elliott** works for the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia in western Washington as the program coordinator for multicultural ministries & community transformation, which also includes some creation care. In 2022 she finished her master’s in climate science and policy at Scripps Institution of Oceanography and has remained in San Diego to be close to family. Beyond the work she does for Olympia, she is also involved with the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego’s creation care community. Elliott is passionate about the intersections of environmental justice, grassroots organizing, and activating the church for partnership with the wider community. In her free time, she enjoys coaching high school cross-country and track.*