

Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels

by Meighan Pritchard
Minister for Environmental Justice

Last summer, delegates at United Church of Christ's General Synod passed three resolutions concerning fossil fuels: standing against mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia, encouraging congregations to become carbon neutral, and urging divestment from, or shareholder activism with, fossil fuel companies.

Fossil fuels are all over the news these days. We see debates over hydraulic fracturing in North Dakota and Alberta, Canada. Derailed and explosive oil trains are catching headlines, while coal processing chemicals are dumped into West Virginia waterways, contaminating drinking water for hundreds of thousands in nine counties. Russia is threatening to decrease its flow of gas to Ukraine as a flex of political muscle and factions are fighting over control of oil wells in Iraq.

And that's just a small sample.

Fossil fuels are a dead end in two senses: they exist in a finite supply, and more importantly, they are causing climate change, which makes our planet less hospitable to many species including our own. The extraction processes also take an increasing and enormous toll on our environment—talk to anyone in West Virginia whose mountain has been leveled by coal mining.

Yet our society is built on fossil fuels. Everything we do depends on them: growing and transporting food, heating homes, traveling, and so on. As people of faith, we are taught to love our neighbors and care for the planet. What are we to do about fossil fuels?

In my job as United Church of Christ Minister for Environmental Justice, I get to meet people who are doing something. Michael Dahl of the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota speaks passionately against the proposed

Sandpiper Pipeline, which would carry oil from the Bakken Formation in North Dakota to Lake Superior. The route would come within a mile of wild rice lakes in Minnesota. The tribes of that region were guaranteed the right to harvest wild rice in the Treaty of 1855. A spill into those lakes would be a catastrophe not only for the wild rice and all the animals living there but also for the people who depend upon this rice as a staple of their diet.

Michael and many others have attended community hearings about the Sandpiper Pipeline. Attorney Frank Bibeau has spoken about treaty rights. Many have written letters to their legislators and to the Minnesota Department of Commerce. UCC members in Minnesota have participated in this work as well. We can't make a difference if we don't speak up!

Some UCC congregations are divesting from fossil fuels, and the United Church Funds is developing fossil fuel-free investment options for them. Other UCC members are engaging in shareholder activism, along with United Church Funds and the UCC Pension Boards.

Some congregations have community gardens on their grounds. Others, including Mayflower UCC in Minneapolis and University Congregational UCC in Seattle, have installed solar panels.

Can we break ourselves of the fossil fuel habit? The transition will not be easy, but it needs to happen quickly. As people of faith who care about our planet and our neighbors—including future generations and other species—let us lead the way with faith, hope, and love. May there always be clean lakes for wild rice and a healthy environment so that all of God's creatures may thrive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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