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Report of Social Action / Community Involvement

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY?

“And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8

It has become increasingly apparent that environmental justice is a social issue requiring our immediate attention just as much as police brutality and criminal injustice. Across this nation, landfills, sewage plants, and other facilities that process dangerous chemicals--poisoning the air and water--are predominantly located in poor and minority communities.

The people of these communities, most of which are African American or Latino, have little to no voice regarding the siting of these facilities or the harmful effects caused by their processes. Because their residents have much less political clout, regulators can and often do ignore them. Even middle income African Americans are more likely to live in more polluted neighborhoods. In fact, a recent study found that black Americans earning \$50,000-\$60,000 per year are more likely to live in polluted neighborhoods than white Americans making just \$10,000 per year! The present administration seems to have little to no concern for the health risks (cancer, childhood asthma, skin disorders--to name a few) posed by their practices.

A few examples of the many affected communities are discussed below:

Cancer Alley, Louisiana

The tiny community of St. Gabriel, Louisiana, is called "Cancer Alley" because of the extremely high incidences of cancer in its residents. At one time, there were fifteen cancer victims in a two-block stretch. Half a mile away, there were seven cancer victims living on one block. The eighty-five-mile stretch of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans was formerly referred to as the "petrochemical corridor" but after reports of numerous cases of cancer occurring in the small rural communities on both sides of the river, the entire area became known as Cancer Alley. In the early 2000's, Louisiana had the second-highest death rate from cancer in the United States. With a population of 4,469,970 people, the state produced 9,416,598,055 pounds of waste. Industrial accidents and accidental releases have been common occurrences in Cancer Alley. Condea Vista, one of the operating companies in that area, was charged with contaminating local groundwater supplies by discharging between 19 to 47 million pounds of ethylene dichloride (EDC), a suspected human carcinogen, into a local stream.

The population of Cancer Alley is primarily African American and low-income. Despite the large number of industrial facilities—more than 200—unemployment is high in many communities and most residents do not have a college education. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Cancer Alley have been organizing to limit the siting of noxious facilities in their neighborhoods. Presently 13 plaintiffs are suing Denka Performance Elastomer and DuPont, the companies responsible for the chloroprene emissions fouling the air in LaPlace and nearby towns for 48 years.

Rubbertown, Jefferson County, Kentucky

Rubbertown is a neighborhood of Louisville, Kentucky, located along the Ohio River. During World War II, it became the home of many industrial plants which remained after the war and led to its name. Its largest businesses include American Synthetic Rubber, Borden Chemical, DuPont Dow Elastomers, Noveon, Dow Chemical (formerly Rohm and Haas), and Zeon Chemicals. All total, Rubbertown is host to 11 large chemical plants, the largest source of industrial emissions in the Jefferson County area. The Rubbertown area accounts for 42% of air emissions in Jefferson County.

Since the area is a potential health issue to residents, in recent years it has come under attack by various organizations in the community. As a result of increasing pollution the Rubbertown Emergency Action (REACT) group was established in April 2003 as a campaign of the Justice Resource Center. The group consists of Rubbertown residents who believe that clean air is a human right and use legislative, judicial and political action to improve air conditions. REACT became an independent grassroots organization later that year. REACT is fighting for:

- Strong laws to stop toxic air pollution from chemical plants;
- The protection of residents in the event of a leak, fire or explosion in a chemical plant or railcar;
- Full disclosure and easy access to information concerning the impact of Rubbertown industry emissions on residents living nearby.

For many years, residents of western Louisville and nearby areas in Jefferson County had complained of health problems they attributed to air pollutant emissions from

the many industrial facilities in Rubbertown. Citizen organizations such as REACT were formed to advocate for more assessment and control of air emissions.

Flint Water Crisis

Most recently, in Flint, Michigan, where nearly 60% of its residents are African-American, with 40% of its population living in poverty, 100,000 residents have been poisoned with toxic water contaminated with high levels of lead, due to fiscal shortcuts taken by the state. Concerned Flint residents protested for over a year about the taste, smell and appearance of their water, which began after the city's water source was switched from Lake Huron and the Detroit River to the cheaper Flint River, but they were ignored. Officials failed to apply corrosion inhibitors to the water, and as a result, several problems occurred that resulted in lead contamination, creating a serious public health danger. Between 6,000-12,000 children were exposed to drinking water with high levels of lead which may cause them to experience a range of serious health problems. Children under age five, and especially infants and unborn children, bear the greatest risk of dangerous and irreversible health outcomes from lead poisoning. Over the long term, lead poisoning in a child can lead to learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and even mental retardation. An outbreak of Legionnaires' disease in the county, which killed 10 people and affected another 77, was also a possible result of the water change.

In January 2016, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder declared the city to be in a state of emergency, followed by President Barack Obama's declaring it to be a federal state of emergency, which authorized further help from FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security. Many celebrities, organizations, and other individuals made high profile donations to assist Flint, and Gov. Snyder deployed the American Red Cross, assisted

by the United Way and Michigan Army National Guard to deliver bottled water and filters. One group donated 1 million bottles of water to the city, since its residents were unable to use the water.

Four government officials, including one from the EPA, resigned over the mishandling of the crisis, and one official was fired. Fifteen criminal cases were filed against local and state officials in regards to the crisis. In later investigations, it was discovered that many earlier official reports regarding the safety of Flint's water had been falsified. Laws have now been enacted that would make falsifying such information punishable. The state of Michigan and the U.S. Congress budgeted nearly \$400 million in funds to correct the crisis, including the upgrade of the city's water system. Public health initiatives and committees were established to ensure that residents, especially children, were tested and followed regularly for lead levels and for any health issues resulting from the lead poisoning. Stricter monitoring of and regulations for testing the water system were initiated. The Flint Water Crisis was one of the most highly-publicized economic justice cases.

What Can the Church Do?

The Black church played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement by bringing awareness to the community of what steps needed to be taken to gain our rights and privileges. Although marches and nonviolent protests were organized, one of the strongest movements was voter registration. Not only were people encouraged to register, but to *vote* in order to bring about necessary and desired changes to government. Many of our ancestors lost their lives for demanding this right. The church is needed

once again to encourage its members and its neighborhood residents to register and to vote. Emphasis *must* be placed on informing our young people of the significance of voting, not just on Sunday mornings, but by actively canvassing our communities. They should be informed that when choosing a candidate, environmental justice should be a part of that person's platform. The environment has for a long time not been taken seriously by people of color, but for the sake of our young people and the generations to come, it should be of the highest priority. It is every person's (not just the rich and privileged) God-given right to breathe clean air and to use and partake of clean water. Classes may be offered by the church to teach the importance of a safe environment, environmental justice *and* environmental *injustice*. If the next generation and those to follow desire to live safe and healthy lives, they must be informed! We, the people of God, must be concerned about the spiritual, mental and physical well-being of every person, especially the poor and downtrodden; those that are forgotten and ignored. We can no longer pretend we don't know about the Cancer Alleys, the Rubbertowns, and the Flint, Michigans.

***Deliver those who are drawn toward death,
And hold back those stumbling to the slaughter.
If you say, "Surely we did not know this,"
Does not He who weighs the hearts consider it?
He who keeps your soul, does He not know it?
And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?
Proverbs 24:11-12***

Now that we know, what will we do?

Humbly Submitted:

Rev. Sherry Gay-Green, Chair – Social Action/Community Development