

Quaker Earthcare Witness

Earthcare for Friends

_____Unit 12_____

Protecting the Sacred Gift of Air

by Ruah Swennerfelt

Purposes of this unit

1. To learn about the issues of air quality.
2. To discover the underlying spiritual basis for caring about the air.
3. To learn ways Friends can make a difference.

Sacred texts and other inspirational readings

And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

—Genesis 1:30

By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.

—Job 4:9

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

—I Thessalonians 4:17

Hymns and songs

Many and Great O God Are Thy Things. *Worship in Song, A Friends Hymnal*, #16.

The Spacious Firmament on High. *Worship in Song, A Friends Hymnal*, #20.

Spirit of God in the Clear Running Water. *Worship in Song, A Friends Hymnal*, #12.

Issue Presentations

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

(Reprinted with permission of the National Council of Churches of Christ and its Eco-Justice Working Group, 110 Maryland Ave. NE, Washington, DC 20002. www.webofcreation.org/ncc/. We obtained this article from their very useful web site and encourage others to take advantage of their resources. *This unit is not in exactly the same format as the others because it is reprinted in full from another source. However, the materials follow much the same order as our basic layout. Although this was written for Earth Day Sunday 2004, it is relevant in whatever year it is read and used.*)

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.

—Psalms 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 that can be used on 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, 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 (EPA) 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) (*Air Trend Highlights*, EPA, 2002), over 130 million U.S. residents live in counties that violate federal air quality standards. Globally, 1.1 billion people breathe unhealthy air (*Children in the New Millennium*, U.N. Environment Programme, U.N. Children's Fund, and World Health Organization 2002). 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 (*Air of Injustice*, Clear the Air, Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda, The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, 2002).

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: A Call for Climate Justice*, Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, 2003.)

Effects of pollution

HUMAN HEALTH is affected by air pollution through directly inhaled 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 bio-accumulate in plants and animals, traveling up the food chain to humans.

Worldwide air pollution causes more than 3 million deaths annually (*Children in the New Millennium*), mostly because of particulate pollution. A great majority of the deaths are 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 versus indoor pollution

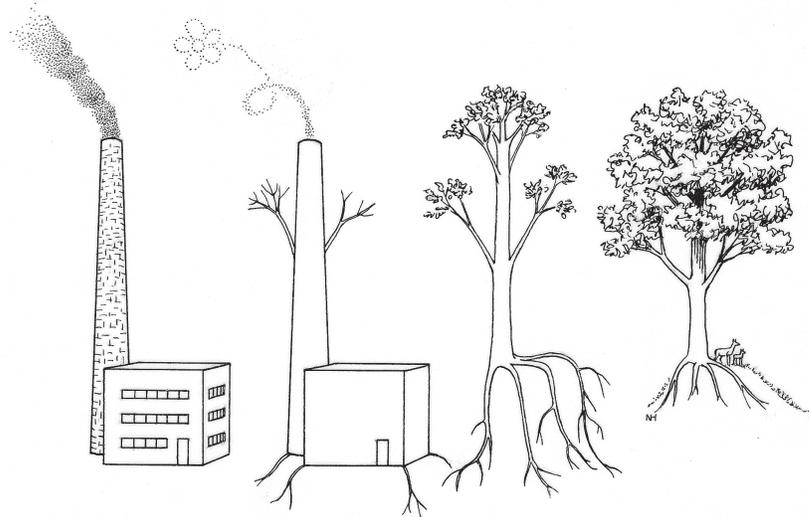
AS COMMUNITIES STRUGGLE to curtail emissions and clean up the air outside, health experts are looking increasingly at the quality of our indoor air. Humans spend as much as 90 percent of their time indoors and studies have shown that indoor air levels of many pollutants can be two to five times higher than outdoor levels (*Trends in Air Quality*, American Lung Association, 2002).

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, and 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 (*Children in the New Millennium*). 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. 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. In the United States, 25 million children live in counties that violate national air quality 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 (*Children At Risk*, Clean Air Task Force, 2002).



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- ❖ The World Health Organization estimates that 2 million children die each year from respiratory ailments, making air pollution the second leading cause of disease for children under four.
- ❖ Approximately 69 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 (*Air of Injustice*).
- ❖ Seventy-one percent of Latinos live in counties that violate 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 (Clear the Air, Washington, D.C).
- ❖ 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 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 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 gift of air.

Journey from awareness to action

JACK CHANDLER, Falcon Heights United Church of Christ, believed that protecting air resources and combating climate change was a matter of faith. So, he worked in his own church as well as in the larger community to facilitate changes. He began his efforts by conducting adult education sessions and running several information pieces in the church newsletter. The senior minister supported these initiatives by offering a sermon on global warming and challenging the church to "do its part" by participating in the Minnesota Wind Energy Program. The Church's executive board has since created an environmental committee, which includes the church treasurer, and signed up for fifty 100-kilowatt hours of wind energy (*The Cry of Creation: A call for Climate Justice*).

Power plant pollutants 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 bio-accumulating 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). 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.

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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 (verse 20 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 thanks-giving, 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.

A 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 [day]. 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

- ❖ Use compact fluorescent lights (CFLs): They last up to 10 times as long as incandescent bulbs and will keep half a ton of CO₂ out of the air.
- ❖ 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, 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.

Call to worship

O God, Holy Spirit, whose breath gives life to the world and whose voice is heard in the soft breeze, we need your strength and wisdom. Come to us and among us; come as the wind and cleanse us. We join with your Creation and with each other to sing the song of the stars; to rejoice in the sunlight; and to refresh the air.

Prayers and responsive readings

Prayer of thanksgiving

Leader We thank you Creator God, ruler of the sky.
At your Word the sky was formed
and by Your Word it is sustained.

People Praise God, O my soul!

Leader We thank you, Gracious God,
for the vastness of the universe,
for the wind, and the immeasurable heights of blue above.

People Praise God, O my soul!

Leader We thank you, ruler of all the universe,
you for the stars, for the energy from the sun,
and that which is seen and unseen.

People Praise God, O my soul!

Leader You have created the universe as a garment without seams
and given us our atmosphere
and set it over us to protect us.

People Praise God, O my soul!

Leader From the sky you send rain on the hills,
and the earth is filled with your blessings.

People Praise God, O my soul!

Prayer of Confession

Leader Giver of Life, in the midst of polluted air we groan with Creation.

People Lord, have mercy.

Leader For the times we have failed to think of the harm done to air.

People Lord, have mercy.

Leader For our reckless plundering and waste.

People Lord, have mercy.

Assurance of God's love

Leader We are children of God. We carry with us the promise that we are loved. Each day is new. The future is open. Let us act in love and with justice.

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Sending Forth: Acts of Commitment

Leader God our Creator, you have made us one with this earth, to tend it and to bring forth fruit. May we bring purpose and hope, O God, in joy and in faith, in truth and in freedom.

People Lead us forth, Spirit of God.

Leader We trust God who calls us to be the church, to love and save the whole Creation; to serve justice and resist evil; to proclaim Christ our judge and our hope.

People Lead us forth, Spirit of God.

(Note: See resources in Appendix B)

Additional suggested activities

- ❖ Delight in what the air can do. Make paper airplanes, wind chimes, or windmills on a stick (possibly as an intergenerational activity).
- ❖ Make air-popped popcorn.
- ❖ Hold your breath for 60 seconds or more. How does it make you feel? How can we be thankful for this continuous gift?

Questions for reflection

1. What am I/we doing as individuals and corporately to reduce energy use?
2. In what ways am I/we working to ensure clean air for all? Are there locations in my town or city where the air is polluted more than where I live? What am I doing to make a change?
3. Do we make sure that the construction materials, such as carpets and paints, in our Meetings are free of harmful out-gasing?

Apples

During the first week
God dealt with big issues,
like water/firmament and darkness/light.
Then later in the week, maybe 5th day,
God made apples.
Then she had an inspiration:
Why not create seeds and be done
with it?
All things considered,
She was having a good week.

Thank you, God, for apple seeds.

II

It worked. Seeds became trees,
family *Rosaceae*, genus *malus*.
Roses and apples were kin, blessing
us with aroma and beauty.

Thank you, God, for roses and apples.

III

In July I get as excited as the bees about
the wild roses by the Meeting House
and the apple blossoms in my yard.
The fresh fragrance permeates
the very core of my being.
I build nesting cavities in my garden
for wild bees. I'm into co-op housing.

Thank you, God, for apple blossoms.

IV

Apples nourish us and delight our senses:
Pies, tarts, strudel, upside-down cake,
juice, cider vinegar,
Applesauce, apple pandowdy, apple pancakes
—how much paper should I use on this list?

Thank you, God, for apples.

V

Early settlers here planted apples.
Seed become tree, then fruit.
A century passes.
Helen Stevenson gives me wood
from an old tree by the lake.
I paint the ends of the straight pieces
to delay drying, wait ten years.
Now I can shape them into small sculptures,
and useful things that become beautiful.
That which was first a whole,
then many parts, is moving
toward a new kind of wholeness.

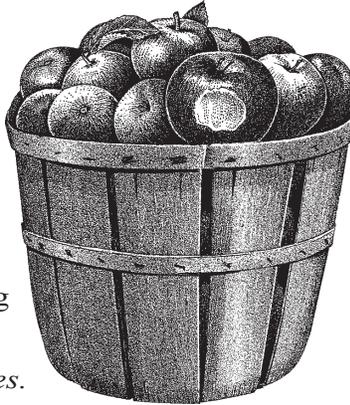
*Thank you, God, for the freedom to choose
wholeness.*

VI

Carving apple wood resembles raising children.
Or being their teacher.

If you make a plan,
an ideal programme,
you will always find
the material has a plan of its
own.
Flaws, a different grain,
an unexpected beauty.
One must trust its total good-
ness, its own strength,
respect its own realization,
something you failed to see.

*Thank you, God, for the gift of
patience.*



VII

Now hold the bird sculpture
softly in your hand.
Close your eyes.
Caress it.
Feel the graceful curves.
Let the delicate scent quiet your spirit,
bring moments of mindfulness.
(My instructions to keepers of apple birds:
polish monthly with a soft cloth
for fifty years.)
As decades pass
a new kind of beauty will emerge.

Thank you, God, for apple wood.

VIII

Now look at the wood.
Nuances of colour, subtle highlights,
undulations, circles, ellipses.
See how it absorbs its defects
to create a unique beauty.
See the century in its grain.
See eternity in its grace.
Rejoice: The seed lives!
Now the part becomes a new kind of whole.
This is your treasure:

You are loved by God, who created apples.

—Jack C. Ross
Argenta (B.C.) Friends Meeting

Unit 12. Protecting the Sacred Gift of Air

- ❖ *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. (\$4.00)
- ❖ *The Cry of Creation: A Call for Climate Justice*. This 25-page booklet and interfaith study guide presents an introductory consideration to global warming. To order, call 206/632-2426. (\$5.00)
- ❖ *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 \$1.00)
- ❖ *God's Creation and Global Warming*. A 12-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. (\$10.00)
- ❖ *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. (\$.075)

Organizations

- ❖ *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 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. 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*, <<http://www.theregenerationproject.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 St., 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. (\$2.00)
- ❖ Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches of Christ, <<http://www.webofcreation.org/ncc/>>.