

Presbyterian Church (USA) Policy Brief

(Excerpted and expanded from the Christian and Citizen Election Year Resource)

<http://www.pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen/studyguide0908.pdf>

Environment and Energy

Ecological & Environmental Concerns

Presbyterian General Assemblies have been speaking on issues of environmental protection and justice since the late 1960s. Their witness ranges broadly from drinking water safety and acid rain, to protecting endangered species, to cleaning up dirty power plants, to climate change and U.S. energy policy. The Assemblies' major policy statements on environment were in 1971 and 1990, and on energy in 1981.

The 202nd General Assembly (1990) adopted a policy statement on "Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice." The policy affirmed that "restored creation is not a short-term concern to be handled in a few years, but a continuing task to which the nation and the world must give attention and commitment. . ." (*Minutes*, p. 647). One of the norms identified for keeping and healing God's creation is sustainability. It is promoted in conjunction with sufficiency, participation by those normally excluded, connecting economic justice with environmental concerns, and solidarity so that the community can be achieved in diminishing the gap between rich and poor. "Restoring Creation" also addressed global warming and ozone depletion.

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly approved "The Power to Change: U.S. Policy and Global Warming," which updated the Church's 1981 energy policy and included recommendations to all levels of the church, from individuals to the General Assembly Council, to conscientiously work sustainable living into their lives. Full recommendations may be viewed at <http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=1537&promoID=10>. The passages to follow in this section are mostly excerpted from this updated policy.

Environmental Racism

The 1995 General Assembly approved a resolution on "Hazardous Waste, Race and the Environment" that amends the 1990 "Restoring Creation" policy, calling for advocacy on environmental justice concerns on behalf of and with the poor and people of color, and "the development of public policies that result in reducing the generation of hazardous wastes and reduction in the use of hazardous substances." (*Minutes*, pp. 492-493)

Sustainability

In 1996, "Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Development" was adopted by the 208th General Assembly. It describes just and sustainable in the comprehensive enhancement of the quality of life for all, present and future; it necessarily involves the integration of economic, social, political, cultural, ecological and spiritual dimensions of being. Building upon "Restoring Creation," the 1996 policy states that human life and well-being

depend upon the flourishing of other life and the integrity of the life-supporting processes that God has ordained and environmental sustainability requires agricultural sustainability. (*Minutes*, pp. 526-528)

Carbon Neutral Lives

In 2006, the 217th General Assembly passed a resolution, “strongly urging all Presbyterians to immediately make a bold witness by aspiring to live carbon neutral lives. (Carbon neutrality requires our energy consumption that releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere be reduced and carbon offsets purchased to compensate for those carbon emissions that could not be eliminated.)” (*Minutes*, 2006, pp. 895-898)

The 218th General Assembly (2008) further identifies sustainable practices that will aid Presbyterians in living carbon neutral lives, including practicing energy conservation such as adjusting thermostats down, walking, biking, carpooling, using mass transit, turning off lights, recycling, minimizing the use of plastic water bottles; purchasing energy-efficient appliances and fuel-efficient vehicles, sustainably grown food and other local products, Green-e certified energy and/or carbon offsets; and reducing consumption of meat because its production is fossil fuel intensive and their waste emits methane, a potent greenhouse gas; investing in the renewable energy industry; and advocating for change and leadership in all forms of government regarding energy policy and global climate change. (<http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=1537&promoID=10>)

Public Transportation

The 218th General Assembly (2008) “support[ed] a systemic shift to rail-based public transportation and urban planning that emphasizes mass transit. These measures would discourage urban sprawl and the depletion of water and energy resources. Farmland in and around cities should be preserved to maintain and increase capacity for local food production. Support for public transportation will also require substantial funding to repair the nation’s highways, bridges, and dams. Efforts should be focused on increasing the quality of the nation’s transportation and energy infrastructure, not on increasing the size of it.” (<http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=1537&promoID=10>)

Climate Change

General Assemblies have repeatedly expressed concern about the impact of climate change on God’s creation. The 2008 statement, “The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming,” included many policy recommendations that intimately link the nation’s energy policy with its climate change legislation.

The Assembly began with international policy recommendations for the U.S., and started by asserting that the U.S., “which has historically produced more greenhouse gasses than any other country, and which is currently responsible for over a fifth of the world’s annual emissions,” must accept its “moral responsibility” to be a world leader in resolving the crisis. The Assembly, therefore, reaffirmed the call of four previous Assemblies for the U.S. to sign the

Kyoto Protocol and urged the U.S. government to “repent of its efforts to block consensus and to work with the international community as it develops a binding agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol” which will expire in 2012. Further, the commissioners “reject[ed] the claim that all nations should shoulder an equal measure of the burden associated with mitigating climate change. Industrialized nations like the United States that have produced most of the emissions over the last three centuries deserve to shoulder the majority of the burden.”

On recommendations for policy to regulate U.S. emissions, the “Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) supports comprehensive, mandatory, and aggressive emission reductions that aim to limit the increase in Earth’s temperature to 2 degrees Celsius or less from pre-industrial levels. Legislation should focus on the short-term goal of reducing U.S. greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent from 1990 levels by 2020, and 80 percent from 1990 levels by 2050.” In order to do so, the Assembly called for the “social and environmental costs related to greenhouse gas emissions” to be “internalize[d]” into the price of fossil fuel. Among the mechanisms for achieving this goal, the commissioners showed a preference for a system known as cap-and-trade, through which the amount of carbon emitted in a given year is “capped,” or limited, and credits for producing carbon within that cap can be traded (bought and sold) among carbon emitters in the U.S. economy. This system not only controls the amount of carbon emitted, but creates revenue for the government that can be used to offset the increased cost of energy for those living in poverty, increase energy efficiency, improve public transportation infrastructure, and expand research and development efforts. The commissioners also admitted the use of a separate carbon tax to complement cap-and-trade, but argued that the tax alone is not sufficient to reduce emissions because it lacks the “cap,” or limiting mechanism. (<http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=1537&promoID=10>)

Climate Change and Poverty

The commissioners at the 218th General Assembly (2008) introduced the policy recommendations on climate change with a commitment to “stand with ‘the least of these’ and advocate for the poor and oppressed in present and future generations who are often the victims of environmental injustice and who are least able to mitigate the impact of global warming that will fall disproportionately on them.” When discussing government revenues that would be generated by a cap-and-trade system and/or carbon tax, the commissioners recommended that they be “utilized nationally to redress the regressive impact of higher energy prices on people who are poor... Internationally, the United States needs to contribute funds to help poorer nations adapt to the social dislocation and ecological devastation caused by global climate change.”

U.S. Energy Policy

Commissioners to the 218th General Assembly (2008) approved a number of specific energy-related policy recommendations, including:

- “Shift[ing] subsidies and financial incentives toward industries specializing in renewable energy and energy efficiency and away from fossil fuel and nuclear power industries.

- “Adopt[ing] significantly increased efficiency standards for all energy consuming appliances, buildings, and vehicles,” including CAFE standards for cars and trucks.
- “Mandat[ing] that an increasing percentage of the nation’s energy supply be produced renewably and sustainably” and calling for a “20 percent national Renewable Energy Standard (RES) by 2020.” At the same time, the GA cautioned against the “environmental problems associated with ethanol production related to the federal Renewable Fuels Standard (RFS)” and the “dangers associated with ratcheting standards up too quickly.”
- “Remov[ing] market barriers for producers of renewable energy... [and] encourag[ing] decentralized and distributed power generation.”
- “Plac[ing] a moratorium on all new coal-fired and nuclear power plants until related environmental concerns are addressed,” citing that “it would be irresponsible to build new coal-fired power plants or coal-to-oil technologies until it can be demonstrated that the carbon can be captured economically and sequestered permanently. Similarly, given the extreme toxic danger that spent nuclear fuel poses to future generations for thousands of years, it is irresponsible to build new nuclear power plants until a permanent means of disposing of this waste is placed into service.

Fuel Exploration

The 218th General Assembly (2008) called for legislative and policy proposals that: “limit exploration and exploitation of new fossil fuel supplies to parts of the nation where this can be done without adverse damage to people and the environment. As the climate in the Arctic warms, it is doubtful that the economic benefits of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge can outweigh the environmental damage that this will do to one of the nation’s most beautiful and wild places. Another example of such a limit would be the ecological devastation associated with mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia.” (<http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=1537&promoID=10>)

Energy as National Security

The 218th General Assembly (2008) called on the U.S. to revise national security policies. “Decrease attempts to control oil resources owned by other nations and the profligate use of energy supplies to enforce inevitably temporary as well as massively tragic military interventions. Increase the authority of science-based international standards for addressing the issue of global climate change. Strive to decouple nuclear power from nuclear weapons production so as not to encourage a new round of nuclear proliferation.” (<http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=1537&promoID=10>)

Endangered Species

In *A Call to Halt Mass Extinction*, the 213th General Assembly (2001) declared, “the Creator-Sustainer of all life wills its continuance, diversity, beauty, and interconnectedness. When human actions and inactions desecrate the natural systems ordained by God, they affront the Creator. When decisions and actions protect and restore creation’s integrity, diversity, beauty, and

interconnectedness, they affirm God’s wisdom and glory and please the Creator.” The Assembly further:

- [In affirming its hope for prevention of species losses, affirmed] a more frugal and less materialistic way of living by those with more than enough; “Population Stability” and reduction, to bring human numbers into balance with natural systems and nonhuman species, by attending to the key factors that lead to fewer births; and “Environmental Sustainability and Food Sufficiency,” particularly as pertaining to global warming, economic arrangements for sustainable sufficiency, and community-based sustainable agriculture.
- Call[ed] upon the United States Congress and the Bush administration, particularly the Environmental Protection Agency, the Forest Service, and the Interior Department (especially its Fish and Wildlife Service), and also the governments of the states to refrain from or turn back all efforts to abolish or undercut established policies and recent initiatives to protect endangered species, to preserve wetlands, to restore the Florida Everglades, to minimize road building in national forests, and to preserve roadless wilderness areas.
- Call[ed] on the U.S. and other governments, on U.S. and international development and lending agencies, and on national and multinational corporations and banks to desist from the large-scale projects, such as old-growth timber cutting and forest fragmentation, megadam construction, and oil exploration and drilling in vulnerable regions, that devastate ecosystems, threaten wildlife survival, and displace indigenous people. (*Minutes*, 1996, pp. 527-28, 533-36)

Cleaning up Pollution / Clean Air Act

In 2002, the 214th General Assembly expanded to past policy addressing the issues of pollution damaging to God’s creation by adopting a resolution “On Cleaning Up Power Plant Pollution” which asked “all Presbyterians to exercise stewardship by urging government officials to support federal policies and multipollutant legislation that will, in the most cost-efficient way, enforce current clean air laws by federal and state governments; resist efforts to abolish or undercut established clean air programs; enact new clean air laws for power plants that will substantially reduce pollutants that cause smog, acid rain, respiratory disease, mercury contamination, and global warming; end the ‘grandfather’ loophole that exempts older coal-fired plants, and encourage federal funding of technologies that will facilitate and/or reduce the cost of implementing these recommendations.” (*Minutes*, 2002, pp. 598-9)

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