



Environmental justice

The 'value gap' in America hurts nonwhites and the poor

by Lawrence J. Jennings

This summer, I was part of an interfaith team leading a convergence of young religious environmental leaders in New Orleans. We spent an enlightening, infuriating, heartbreak day in the Bayou, visiting tribal and community leaders on the Isle de Jean Charles (this was enlightening), which became home to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw band of Native Americans in the 1830s as the result of the Indian Removal Act (which is infuriating).

The state of Louisiana's current flood mitigation efforts literally leave the island behind: A planned 72-mile floodwall, called the Morganza-to-the-Gulf-of Mexico Hurricane Protection Project, does not include the Isle de Jean Charles. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' cost-benefit analysis concluded that the expense was not justified. So now displacement is ongoing (which is heartbreaking). After each big storm, fewer residents remain because of the effects of coastal erosion, exacerbated by oil and gas exploration, and climate change, reflected in the rising sea level and increased storm surges. This has resulted in a loss of 98 percent of its land mass since 1955.

There is only one road—essentially a bridge frequently impassable due to flooding—that provides access to the island. Once the size of Manhattan, Isle de Jean Charles is now about a third of the size of Central Park. (A 1963 survey recorded the island as being 11 miles long and five miles wide. Today it is about two miles long and a quarter of a mile wide.)

Scientists estimate that the island will be completely submerged by 2050, and although some residents insist that they will not leave their beloved ancestral homeland, the tribe has voted to relocate to higher ground elsewhere in Terrebonne Parish. They are developing a plan to relocate the remaining islanders and reunite the dispersed tribal family in a single location. It is a huge undertaking. This spring, they were awarded a first-of-its-kind federal grant to help support the move. Everyone involved anticipates that their planning process will be adopted as a best-practices model that will be relevant for other coastal communities confronting the need to relocate because of the effects of climate change.

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Perhaps I am particularly affected by the plight of the people of Isle de Jean Charles because of my family's Creole roots. But it is deeper than that. Their story is emblematic of America's sordid history and, sadly, our present-day political environment: dismissing, displacing, disregarding and even demonizing nonwhites, non-Christians, the poor and the powerless. That reality, combined with my Christianity, led me into faith-based environmental justice work. Similarly, a call to follow the radical, ever-loving and compassionate Jesus of the Gospels led me to find a home in the Mennonite church. And the importance of speaking truth to power convinces me we have a responsibility to participate fully in civic life—to share our perspective that every person is a precious treasure and that all God's creation requires loving care.

Two years ago, I was part of the organizing committee for the faith contingent of the People's Climate March in New York City. Over and over, I met people who expressed high regard for Mennonites. Some knew about Mennonite Central Committee; some were vaguely aware of Mennonite "peace and justice" work. They were uniformly delighted that a Mennonite was part of their team—and somewhat dismayed (as was I) that there was no official "sign-on" from Mennonite Church USA in support of the March.

When asked about the Mennonite position on climate and environmental issues, I sometimes reference the centrality of creation care in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* or talk about our denomination having created resources for study and teaching, such as the "Every Creature Singing" curriculum. I mention the work of Mennonite Creation Care Network and that Mennonites have an unusually long history of creation care resolutions, with the most recent one adopted in 2013. But I'm disturbed by the reticence to publicly identify with environmental/climate advocacy and awareness efforts—even when those efforts bear no cost and are in keeping with the ideals espoused in our confession of faith, our study guides and our resolutions.

I know Mennonites have a longstanding commitment to stewardship of the earth and caring for its inhabitants. I also know that our individual and congregational commitments—to live simply or reduce our carbon footprint or to eat less meat—are not sufficient to address, let alone avert, environmental problems that must be addressed via public policy. And I am deeply concerned that our denomination is not sufficiently visible or vocal regarding climate and environmental issues.

Our commitment to creation care needs to be

expressed in ways that connect with the broader public and in particular with the work of other faith communities. "Sign-on" campaigns, public actions, social media and endorsements are among the tools of 21st-century activism that we must employ in order to make our convictions known and to help leverage the influence of

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likeminded folks. We do not need to agree with everything that an organization (or an individual) believes in or represents in order to participate in and collaborate on efforts to address climate change. In fact, we don't even need to agree on whether or not or how much human activity contributes to our changing climate.



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We must recognize what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the fierce urgency of now” and engage—individually and collectively—with the political processes that ultimately determine how resources are appropriated. That is the only way to ignite systemic change.

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In his recent book, *Democracy in Black*, Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr., professor of religion and African-American studies at Princeton University, identifies the “value gap” prevalent in America. Not values, but value—specifically, the value placed on white Americans versus the disregard shown toward nonwhites (historically and currently). From police violence and mass incarceration to inadequate schools and healthcare, the value gap has been apparent and persistent. (Hence, the need to assert that Black lives do indeed matter.)

In the 1980s, Dr. Robert Bullard, now a dean at Texas Southern University and known as the “father of environmental justice,” identified the

correlation between race and exposure to environmental toxins. To this day, three out of every five African Americans and Latinos live in areas near toxic waste sites. The impact on our food, water and air affects every area of our lives.

Our environmental issues are far-reaching and multilayered. Black, brown and poor communities are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and the least equipped to deal with its financial and physical ramifications. We are more likely to live in low-lying areas and less likely to have good medical care. One in nine black Americans suffers from asthma (only one in 20 whites do), and we are twice as likely to die from an asthma attack. Eric Garner, an asthma sufferer, protested “I can’t breathe” when an NYPD officer put him in a chokehold. Garner died, the medical examiner pronounced asthma to be the cause of death, and then the local prosecutor refused to bring charges against the officer—the “value gap” in full view.

As a follower of Jesus, I know that I am called to love, and that love is more than a feeling—it requires action. Sometimes love requires taking risks. Faith can be the catalyst for taking action, but just as important, it also provides assurance that whatever the challenges or consequences, we are surrounded by God’s love and care.

Congressman John Lewis frequently talks about love and faith and the importance of getting into “good trouble”—challenging the status quo, regardless of potential consequences. In June, he said: “We have been too quiet for too long. There comes a time when you have to say something, when you have to make a little noise, when you have to move your feet. This is the time. Now is the time to get in the way. The time to act is now. We will be silent no more. The time for silence is over.”

Those remarks were about the need to reduce gun violence, but they are equally relevant as we consider our responsibility to care for the earth and all its inhabitants. Lewis’ words are an expansive echo of the exhortation in 1 John 3:18: “Little children, let us not love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” So let’s say something. And move our feet. The time for silence is over.

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Faith and Election Day



As Election Day 2016 draws near, my faith compels me to study the records and positions of local, state and federal candidates and vote for those who will advance social justice

and especially diversity, inclusion and equity. I won’t sit on the sidelines and let others decide the future of my community and my country, as I did for much of my adult life. I was a journalist for 26 years and wanted to be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest, so I didn’t express personal opinions about candidates. That meant no bumper stickers, no yard signs, no campaign work and no contributions to candidates or causes. Since arriving at Goshen (Ind.) College nearly 10 years ago, I’ve had the freedom to support candidates and express my opinions. And I’ll continue to do so now that I’ve joined a denomination and a congregation dedicated to dismantling racism, healing divisions and valuing the gifts of God’s diverse people. To me that

also translates into backing candidates who support affordable health care, adequately funded public education, decent housing, fair wages, an equitable tax system, non-discrimination laws, an end to police brutality, justice for undocumented immigrants, and inclusion and equity. And I encourage others to do the same.—Richard R. Aguirre

