**A close up of a clock

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**“Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution”:**

**Latest in the UCC’s long history of actions for environmental justice**

*“Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution” is a report prepared for the* [*United Church of Christ*](https://www.ucc.org/) *by the* [*Environmental Integrity Project*](https://environmentalintegrity.org/)*, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization established in 2002 by two former Environmental Protection Agency enforcement attorneys to advocate for effective enforcement of environmental laws. It was released on Feb. 26, 2020. The report is the latest step in a history of environmental justice work by the UCC. Here are key points on that historical timeline.*

**1982:** A proposed landfill in Warren County—the county with the highest percentage of black residents in the North Carolina—mobilized hundreds of protestors. 523 people were arrested after a [six-week protest that drew national media attention](https://www.energy.gov/lm/services/environmental-justice/environmental-justice-history). Dollie Burwell, the Rev. Leon White, and the Rev. Benjamin Chavis Jr. of the UCC’s Commission for Racial Justice played a central role in this watershed event for the environmental justice movement.

**1987:** The UCC’s Commission for Racial Justice issued a landmark report, “[Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States](https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1310/ML13109A339.pdf).” The study found that race rose to the top among variables associated with the location of a toxic waste facility. Three out of five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in a community that housed what the EPA called an “uncontrolled toxic waste site.” This sparked a national conversation over the placement of toxic waste facilities.

**1991:** The UCC’s Commission for Racial Justice led the organizing of the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. Over 600 people gathered and ultimately adopted the historic [Principles of Environmental Justice](https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/ej-principles.pdf). In those 17 principles, the document articulated a comprehensive ethical framework that directly impacted a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The principles have been reprinted in over 1,000 publications.

**2007:** Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ published “[Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007](https://www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries_toxic-waste-20).” The report found racial disparities in the vicinities of toxic waste facilities were “greater than previously reported.” People of color comprised the majority of the population in communities within 1.8 miles of a facility. Neighborhoods with facilities clustered close together had an even higher percentage of people of color.

**2013:** With a vote by the General Synod, its national body of delegates, the UCC became the first denomination to pass a resolution calling for [divestment from fossil fuel companies](https://www.ucc.org/divesting_from_fossil_fuel_companies_and_shareholder_activism). The resolution pointed to a range of inequities that result from the impact of climate change, while also highlighting the need for a just and compassionate shift away from fossil fuels.

**2019:** In another General Synod vote, the UCC became the first Christian denomination to [endorse the Green New Deal](https://www.ucc.org/news_ucc_general_synod_first_christian_body_to_endorse_green_new_deal_06232019). Among other things, the resolution called on churches to advocate “for policies and legislation that advance the goals of the Green New Deal, including its commitment to address the ‘systemic injustices’ that disproportionately affect ‘frontline and vulnerable communities.’”

*February 2020*