

Wonder as an Invitation to Engage in Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

Environmental justice, a phrase first used in reference to the activism of a community in Warren County, NC in the late 1970s, is a broad category of work at the intersection of caring for nature and caring for people. Residents of the majority black county sought relief from the impending designation of a landfill site in the county as a dumping site for toxic chemicals. This effort was supported by the NAACP and both local congregations and national staff of the United Church of Christ (UCC). Their efforts led to the first true national attention on what has become known as “environmental racism.” In this article, I describe additional ways the UCC continued to play a key role in the environmental justice movement. I then describe the current effort to develop a certificate program in environmental justice by PATHWAYS Theological Education, Inc and the role wonder has played throughout all of these efforts.

Keywords: science and religion, wonder, environmental justice, environmental racism, PATHWAYS Theological Education

Editors’ Comment

Rev. Ruth Shaver, DMin, (2017-2019 Fellow) is the Interim Pastor at The Congregational Church of Mansfield in Mansfield, MA. In Wonder as an Invitation to Engage in Environmental Justice, Rev. Dr. Shaver shares a curriculum specifically developed for educating religious communities about environmental justice issues and emphasizing that environmental care is an essential part of following one’s religious faith. She describes the process in developing this program for communities who typically don’t have a strong science background. Her intention is for this program to help participants become involved in environmental justice. This article can help science educators see other ways to reach those who have less interest in science, but still hold a sense of wonder.

Introduction

Environmental justice is a broad category of work at the intersection of caring for nature and caring for people. The US Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (EPA). According to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Dialogue on Science, Ethics & Religion (DoSER) group, environmental justice is a multidisciplinary endeavor that unites people of “different socioeconomic backgrounds, nationalities, religious communities, and races” (Sloane-Barrett, 2021, para. 1).

The term ‘environmental justice’ was first used in reference to the activism of a community in Warren County, North Carolina, in the late 1970s. Residents of the majority black county sought relief from the impending designation of a landfill site in the county as a dumping site for toxic

polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Working with the NAACP, members of the national staff of the United Church of Christ (UCC) led by the Rev. Benjamin Chavis and local congregations of the denomination challenged the designation of the landfill up to and past the day the first load of toxic waste arrived in 1982. Community members and activists from around the country staged a ‘lie-in’ across the access road to the dump over six days, which resulted in 523 arrests and the first true national attention on what has become known as “environmental racism” (Skelton & Miller, 2021).

“Environmental racism” is a subcategory of environmental justice that focuses on the disproportionate effect of industrial pollution on people of color and communities with average household incomes close to or below the poverty level. Other subcategories of environmental justice include climate change mitigation, land reclamation, waterway restoration, and air quality improvement. Evidence of environmental racism often plays a role in the ways that climate change mitigation, land reclamation, and other forms of environmental justice projects are developed, whether such evidence is presented as part of the need for these projects or discovered as these projects are envisioned and planned.

The ongoing efforts to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline are aimed at preventing egregious degradation of land and water resources belonging to Native Americans in the American Midwest, a group historically subjected to racial discrimination and among the poorest ethnic groups in the United States. The Standing Rock Sioux tribe issued a call for support in preventing the contamination of their reservation lands and water sources by potential spills from a pipeline from the shale oil fields. The route of the pipeline extends from North Dakota to a terminal in Illinois, including the contentious section of the pipeline that crosses under the Missouri River a few miles upstream of the tribe’s riverfront land. The tribe contends even now that the pipeline puts their traditional food sources as well as water supplies at risk. In 2016 and 2017, in response to a call from its Council for American Indian Ministry, regional bodies of the UCC and national UCC staff gathered with the Standing Rock tribe to protest the pipeline. UCC leaders from South Dakota, North Dakota, and Colorado were instrumental in gathering an ecumenical and interfaith coalition of religious leaders to join them; those religious leaders in turn partnered with secular organizations such as 350.org and the Sierra Club to increase the visibility of the protests and raise awareness of this particular instance of environmental racism (UCC, 2021). The protests succeeded in delaying action by the Obama administration, but the Trump administration allowed the project to go forward. Before any completed segments of the pipeline officially opened in June 2017, more than 184 gallons of oil had already leaked in three separate areas. Each spill was cleaned up with no permanent environmental damage; however, tribal officials have pointed to these incidents as evidence that their fears are grounded in reality (Associated Press, 2017). The final status of the pipeline is awaiting a decision from the Biden administration and the US Army Corps of Engineers concerning its safe operation (Frazin, 2021).

At its 2017 General Synod, where delegates and visitors from all 50 states, several US territories, and international partners gathered for celebration and deliberation, the UCC recognized the Water Protectors of the Standing Rock Reservation for their dedication to the cause of environmental preservation. I was privileged to be in attendance for that ceremony and also to have a conversation with a group of delegates from Gulf Coast states, two of whom worked in the oil and gas industry. One, a chemical engineer, admitted that he had never given much thought to the potential pollution that could result from pipelines traversing a landscape. He had assumed the danger was primarily at the beginnings and ends of pipelines, where people were the likely cause of accidents. The other was a technician for an oil company whose specialty was mitigation of oil spills on land. He openly wondered if he could be using his skills for a better purpose than the profits of a fossil fuel company. His wondering came after having an hour-long conversation with one of the Water Protectors, who himself was an engineer. I do not know if either delegate acted on his newfound revelation, but I was heartened to see people of faith actively engaging with new information on both

intellectual and spiritual levels as the dialogue between the Water Protector and the technician moved between technology and the importance of caring for the creation both accepted as a gift from God.

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I find that curiosity and wonder go hand-in-hand, whether it is about how things work (science) or about the larger issues in life such as who wrote the laws that make things work (faith). For an ordained pastor who is by nature driven to teach, this wonder is a gift. Sometimes it is the wonder of a preschool child who asks where God lives that elicits both laughter and thoughtful, childlike answers. At other times, it is the more complicated wonder of an adult who wants to understand how the Bible can contain seemingly contradictory messages about God. While 1 John 4:8 presents God as ‘love’, Judges 11 describes the story of Jephtha who offered up his own daughter as a burnt sacrifice to God in exchange for his own success in battle over the Ammonite – such conflicting views can lead to serious wondering about the nature of God. Both wonderings (of the child and the adult) are theological, but the questions that adults generate are more complex and can be answered in different ways by different fields. Sometimes, especially when the questions involve elements of the natural world, science can help provide answers.

Most Christian congregations are not set up with the kind of staffing to provide classes for adults who really want to dig into the dichotomy between passages like 1 John and Judges. I am fortunate to be part of an online, asynchronous education program that invites progressive Christians to explore topics of faith with more rigor and depth than a typical congregation can provide. This education program is PATHWAYS Theological Education Inc. In this program, we explore contradictory passages, as well as content like the history of worship and preaching with confidence. As a course facilitator and writer for PATHWAYS Theological Education, Inc., I have the opportunity to watch wonder grow as our participants encounter answers to their initial wonderings, as well as new information that sparks more curiosity and a desire to keep learning.

Courses Offered by PATHWAYS

One course we provide regularly is *The History and Polity of the United Church of Christ (H&P)*. Most people who sign up for this course are taking it to fulfill an ordination requirement. However, in my first experience facilitating this class, about half the participants were taking the course out of a sense of wonder about what the UCC is beyond their local congregation. I watched as the candidates for ordination—seminarians nearing graduation and recent graduates who admitted to a sense of *just-get-this-done* at the beginning of the term—were caught up in the wonder of the ‘*newbies*’ who had not yet studied systematic theology, church history, or Biblical hermeneutics. The more experienced participants engaged with the newcomers to share knowledge and to admit that some of the questions the newcomers asked would never have occurred to them at that point in their training. At the end of the course, one candidate for ordination thanked the newcomers for restoring her ability to be in awe of God’s work again, especially as it pointed her to a topic she is now passionate about: environmental justice.

In one week of the H&P course, a newcomer presented a short paper on the beginnings of the environmental justice movement in Warren County, North Carolina. In her reply to the paper, the candidate for ordination wrote that she was ‘*entranced*’ by the opportunities presented by environmental justice, but worried that neither she nor the members of the church community in which she will be ordained have enough scientific background to know where to begin such work in their area. She is not wrong. Within progressive Christian communities, many adults have limited experience with the

basic practices of science, both for environmental justice work and for creation care¹—the practice of sustaining and preserving our environment for future generations—more broadly.

For members of the UCC and many of our interfaith partners, creation care is an essential part of our call to live out our faith. Some of our interfaith and inter-philosophical partners do not have creation care *per se* in their tenets, but still see caring for our home as essential to following their beliefs or way of living. I include ‘*inter-philosophical*’ partners because not all of our partners practice a faith but do live by a philosophy that prioritizes care of the Earth as part of being a good person. Before the exchange mentioned above even happened, the leadership of PATHWAYS had discerned the need for a certificate in environmental justice as one part of creation care. As an essential part of our faith, the environmental justice movement makes it all the more imperative that we as people of faith be knowledgeable about the practices of science because it is science that guides repair and restoration initiatives.

The common root of faith exploration and scientific inquiry is an experience of wonder, or what naturalist Raymo (2008) says is that which causes us to say, ‘*I don’t know*’ and then investigate the mystery (p. 29-30). This planned environmental justice certificate will engage participants in wonder on both fronts. While participants develop competency in the faith-based theological, Biblical, and historical underpinnings of environmental justice work as a practice of Christian faith, they will also practice doing science through daily observation journals. In each of the six courses, observational journal assignments will invite participants to think scientifically about the world around them. Assignments in the courses promote the generation of hypotheses and where possible, the testing and analysis of those hypotheses. Environmental justice work includes the work of scientific observation, analysis of data, preparation of reports regarding polluted sites, identification of remote sources of contamination, and systemic discrimination in the zoning and regulation of industrial plants that process known pollutants. Equipping religious community leaders with an understanding of the details of environmental justice would allow them to work with experts in the field and the affected community, thereby making environmental justice efforts more successful. Scientists often take the lead on plans for physical remediation of contaminated sites and should be instrumental in the development of forward-thinking policy but having a group of people who can ‘*translate*’ for the wider community can enhance the trust among partners and assure that both the big picture and the minutiae are given due attention.

Two courses have been developed and are planned as offerings beginning in Fall 2021. The first course is titled *Environmental Literacy in God’s Creation*. The daily journal assignments invite participants to chronicle their interactions with the habitat around their homes, with the focus on one particular species. Each week’s journal links their observations to the vocabulary and contexts of the readings and other course material. One assignment in this course is to use as many terms as possible from the science materials provided to write a psalm of praise about the habitat they are observing. This assignment was inspired by an activity from the curriculum I wrote for my dissertation that asked participants to use their scientific observations to write a proverb in the style of Proverbs 8:22-31. Another assignment at the end of the course asks participants to formulate an hypothesis about an environmental issue that is evident in the habitat they have studied, summarize the evidence for that hypothesis, and propose an experiment to test the hypothesis using notes from their journals. They are then asked to infer from their process how a group of citizens they have read about in a course assignment may have collected evidence and provided substantial proof that a change to the source of their city’s water supply caused a surge in the amount of lead in drinking water.

¹ “Creation” is a term most often used in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theology to denote the traditional belief that God created the earth and all life thereon, irrespective of the exact timeline and mechanism. In many faith communities, “creation care” might be an easy way to connect a known principle with a new idea, whether that new idea is the reality of climate change or a proposed landfill that could negatively affect the community imminently.

The second course, *Centering Creation in Love*, invites participants to use all five senses to wonder about the world. Each *wondering* begins with a verse from the Bible and poses questions that evoke further wondering: is this experience available to everyone or is it limited to people of means (income, transportation, education, etc.)? Is this human-made or natural? What words describe your experience? What memories are associated with this experience and why? A reflection assignment about midway through the course asks participants to categorize their observations by human-made and natural, to notice any patterns that emerge, and then to prepare a devotional based on their observations for their congregation. At the end of the course, they are asked to prepare a worship service incorporating the theology they have learned reading *Ecoteology: A Christian Conversation* (Jorgenson & Padgett, 2020) and their insights from their wondering journal.

PATHWAYS Moving Forward

The leadership of PATHWAYS knows, based on inquiries over the past year, that there is desire for courses like this in our constituency and beyond. We anticipate a cohort of 8-10 participants to enroll in the first course in October. We do not yet know how these courses, or completion of the certificate program itself, will influence congregations to undertake environmental justice projects of their own. Will trained religious community leaders (lay or ordained) help congregations develop partnerships with other agencies (e.g., Interfaith Power and Light) that are already involved in environmental justice work? Does the combination of scientific practice with theological and Biblical grounding make individual leaders more likely to take on a leadership role in a project that is already in process? Certainly, a measure of success for us would be the creation of new congregation-based projects. Yet, another measure may be more important: do participants in these courses and the certificate program undertake *any* involvement in environmental justice work in their communities? As I have been a part of the research team for the writing of all six courses in the initial certificate, I have learned that there is not a community in the country that is unaffected by some form of environmental degradation and few, if any, where that degradation does not affect communities of color and poorer communities disproportionately. More starkly, there really is not a community in the United States without a need for some form of environmental justice work. If we, at PATHWAYS, can help even a few communities in the process of addressing and correcting environmental concerns, we will have played a part in changing the world...all because of a few people's wonderings.

About PATHWAYS Theological Education, Inc.:

PATHWAYS is an online, asynchronous institute for leadership development in and for communities of faith. The organization uses andragogical (adult) methods which are competency-based and include a variety of learning activities specific to the objectives of each course. Participants can combine courses to meet their own specific needs, they can enroll in a certificate program in a topic of interest, or they can commit to a three-year course of instruction for ministerial preparation. PATHWAYS responds to the educational needs of an evolving world by continually striving to create innovative, online progressive theological learning and discovery that promote justice, peace, and mutual understanding.

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is an alumna of the 2017-2019 Sinai and Synapses cohort; that experience gave her the confidence to serve as a resource for fellow clergy who were trying to understand how scientific discoveries guided decision making about community safety during the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic. The Rev. Dr. Shaver currently serves as the Interim Pastor of The Congregational Church of Mansfield, United Church of Christ, in Mansfield, Massachusetts.

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