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# GOD'S PEOPLE, GOD'S EARTH PROJECT: THE INTERRELATED OPPRESSION OF WOMEN AND NATURE

> Something deep, down within me—that mysterious something called 'the soul'—prods and pushes me, and demands of me that I break out of any unjust confinement to which sinful mortals subject me. Something good and God-like in me rebels and revolts against any and all forms of tyranny...a genuine thrust toward personhood and/or peoplehood should be regarded as sacred.[1]

## Introduction

A cry for environmental justice resounds with unabating fervency in twenty-first century black communities. This plea is for lasting actions, ending the presence of toxic environments and environmental practices that threaten the health of a disproportionate number of black people and other people of color at home, work, places of worship, school, and play. It is a cry that must reach our black-faith communities and mobilize them to

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[1]William A. Jones, "Confronting the System," in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 433.

act decisively to protect people from life-defying environmental hazards as well as to reestablish the sacredness of Mother Earth and the interdependence of humankind with her. Black-faith communities are called to "let justice roll down like a mighty stream."

While improvements have occurred in health and environmental protection over the past several decades, the twenty-first century reality is that black people and other people of color, particularly in low-income communities, still live in unsafe and unhealthy environments.[2] Numbers of these people reside in segregated areas from which they have little escape due to high rates of unemployment and poverty. All too often, these environments are situated in close proximity to crumbling infrastructure, deteriorating housing, and industrial polluters causing high exposure to lead contamination, pesticides, and water and air contamination.[3] Their experience is one of being over-burdened day-by-day, denied the right for protection from environmental degradation. They deserve to be sheltered from environ-

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[2]Robert D. Bullard, Reuben C. Warren, and Glenn S. Johnson, "The Quest for Environmental Justice," in *Health Issues in the Black Community,* 2d ed., ed. Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001), 471.

[3]See Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai, *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1962); Robert D. Bullard, "Solid Waste Sites and the Black Houston Community, *Sociological Inquiry* 53 (Spring 1983):173-288; Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1987); Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Robert D. Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 2000* (Atlanta: Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University 2000); United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987); R. Wernette and L. A. Nieves, "Breathing Polluted Air," *EPA Journal* 18 (March/April 1992):16-17; Interim National Black Environmental and Economic Justice Coordinating Committee, "Declaration" [address online] (New Orleans, LA, December 9-12, 1999, accessed 12 May, 2003); available from http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/inbee-jcc_press.htm; Internet.

mental racism. Responding to this critical need lies at the core of the project God's People, God's Earth at Interdenominational Theological Center.

## Concepts

Addressing the issue of environmental racism is an imperative task of the project and requires defining environment, environmental movement, environmental racism, and environmental justice.

### Environment

Black people tend to view the environment in holistic terms, comprising nature and its elements as well as socio-emotional, economic, and physical attributes. The natural creation of God is mysterious and beyond comprehension; yet it interacts with and speaks to God's people. This nature-focused understanding of our surroundings prompts human reverence and gratitude to God.[4] However, the environment is more than God's created natural habitat, including "where people live, work, play and go to school, as well as how these things interact with the physical

[4]Historical views of African Americans about nature appear dominantly in literary works such as poetry written by W. E. B. DuBois, Arna Bontemps, and George Marion McClellan, who is regarded as the "gentle poet of nature, of the seasons, of birds and flowers, creation, and woodland scenes." See two prayers by W. E. B. DuBois in *Earth Prayers from Around the World,* ed. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991), 293, 361; Arna Bontemps, "Gethsemane," "My Heart Has Known Its Winter," and "Nocturne at Bethesda," in *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature,* ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Mentor, Penguin Books, 1968), 421-424; George Marion McClellan, "The Hills of Sewanee" and "Dogwood Blossoms," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry,* ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1950), 95-97.

and natural world."[5] These aspects function as environmental supports to human health and well-being or present risks to health. For black people and other people of color, the latter tends to be true as indicated by the disproportionate number who reside in unsafe, unhealthy, and economically impoverished environments.[6]

## Environmental Movement

Environmentalism, in its earliest form in the United States, emerged from the progressive conservative movement in the 1890s. Classic environmentalists were concerned with "leisure, recreation, wildlife and wilderness preservation, resource conservation, pollution abatement and industry regulation."[7] A "new" environmental movement, concerned with social justice and equity issues, emerged in the black community in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the Civil Rights Movement, calling attention to environmental racism and demanding environmental justice.

## Environmental Racism

Robert Bullard states that environmental racism refers "to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups or

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[5]Robert D. Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century," [article online]; available from http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/ejinthe21century.htm; Internet; accessed 9 May 2003. This writer added brackets within the quote.

[6]See Robert D. Bullard, ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 17-19; also Bullard, "Quest for Environmental Justice," in *Health Issues in the Black Community*, 471.

[7]Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*, 9.

communities based on race or color."[8] Benjamin Chavis also adds:

> Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.[9]

Because these experiences are routine in the lives of disproportionate numbers of black people and other peoples of color, there is desperate need to dismantle environmental racism and replace it with environmental justice.

## Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is forthright action that assures "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."[10]

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[8]Robert D. Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century," in *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 2000,* ed. Robert D. Bullard (Atlanta: Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University, 2000), 13.

[9]Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism,* with a foreword by Benjamin F. Chavis, 3.

[10]This understanding of environmental justice derives from the definition provided by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. See Bullard, "The Quest for Environmental Justice," in *Health Issues in the Black Community,* 475.

## Historical Background

In order to understand the distinctive focus of the God's People, God's Earth project, some historical background and critique is instructive. What has become known as the environmental movement developed along two parallel and sometimes conflicting paths. One path emerged from concerns of mainstream groups for wise resource management, pollution abatement, wilderness and wildlife preservation, and population control. The second path has been forged by activists of color who began "to challenge both the industrial polluters and the often indifferent mainstream environmental movement by actively fighting environmental threats in their communities and raising the call for environmental justice."[11] The following summarizes the development of the two paths:

## Mainstream Environmentalism

Mounting attention to environmental issues has been traced to scientists, activists, public agencies, and grassroots organizations, who, over the twentieth century, criticized human misuse of the earth's resources and called for the embrace of an intentional stewardship of the earth. As early as the 1930s, concern for the environment followed the disastrous Dust Bowl in Western United States. This catastrophe called attention to years of improper soil conservancy. In its aftermath, W. C. Lowdermilk, then assistant chief of the Soil Conservation Service, presented what he called an "eleventh commandment" during his 1939 address on soil conservancy in Jerusalem:

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[11]Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*, 24.

> Thou shalt inherit the Holy Earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt safeguard thy fields from soil erosion, thy living waters from drying up, thy forests from desolation, and protect thy hills from overgrazing by thy herds, that thy descendants may have abundance forever. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth.[12]

After World War II, concerns about environmental threats posed by atomic radiation resulted in the formation of the Atomic Energy Commission in August 1946. This independent agency conducted ecological studies and documented ecological damage due to atomic radiation.[13] During mid-twentieth century, health scientists also began to focus on chemical toxicity caused by the escalation of pesticide and chemical fertilizer usage and on air pollution in industrial sectors of society. The 1953 publication, *Fundamentals of Ecology,* by Eugene Odum emphasized the imperative need for a holistic approach to the care of nature, assuring the kind of healthy natural systems needed for life quality.[14] Rachel Carson's, *Silent Spring,* followed in 1962 with a critical exploration of the deleterious effects of chemicals, particularly pesticides, on ground water, human health,

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[12]See W. C. Lowdermilk, "Conquest of the Land Through 7,000 Years: The Eleventh Commandment," (U. S. Government Printing Office, issued August 1953, revised August 1975) [article online]; available from http://www.nativehabitat.org/conquest-1.html; Internet; accessed 6 June 2003.

[13]See Government Printing Office, "Records of the Atomic Energy Commission: Administrative History" [article online]; available from http://federal_records_guide/atomic_energy_commission_re326.html#326.1; Internet; accessed 6 June 2003.

[14]See Eugene Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1953).

and the fitness of the earth.[15]

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 declared a national policy directed toward the establishment and promotion of greater harmony between humans and the environment. Moreover, the intent of the Act was to promote efforts to prevent or eliminate damage to the environment and biosphere in ways that would assure the health and welfare of humankind.[16] The first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970. The brainchild of then United States Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, this annual observance was envisioned as a time for Americans to commit themselves to ways of living as partners with planet Earth. The observance responded to concerns about population growth; and through a small network of scientists, politicians, and youthful citizens, consolidated efforts were directed toward protecting water, land, endangered animals and plants, by promoting changes in lifestyle and policy. A wave of enthusiasm followed the Earth Day, and the 1970s became "the decade of the environment." The 1980s were touted as a "turnaround decade" in which a mainstream movement was born that became known as "environmentalism."

## Environmental Activists of Color

Over the twentieth century, large numbers of black people steadily moved from rural and small-town environments to crumbling urban areas where they typically found themselves not simply in low-paying, unskilled, nonunionized occupations, but politically powerless as well. The limited benefit system of

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[15]See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962).

[16]See The Council on Environmental Quality, "The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969," [article online]; available from http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/nepa/regs/nepa/nepaeqia.htm; Internet; accessed 6 June 2003.

these citizens required "mass direct action mobilizations for basic civil rights in the areas of employment, housing, education, and health care."[17] Black people were not part of the mainstream environmental movement whose supporters were primarily middle- and upper-class whites with greater access to economic resources and a higher degree of personal power. Neither did the mainstream environmentalists tend to widen their base to include the poor.[18]

Yet, importantly, black people in particular have a long-standing history of involvement in environmental justice efforts within and beyond black-faith communities. They developed grassroots efforts in confronting specific environmental issues in their communities. However, neither black women nor men have typically received notice for their activism in confronting environmental issues. The research of Robert Bullard has helped to uncover a history of grassroots efforts dating back to the late 1960s. Environmental activism among people of color occurred as the result of the inability of millions within their ranks to escape health-threatening environments due to their poor economic circumstances, housing discrimination, redlining, and other market forces. The early mobilization of this activism has been traced to the 1968 report of the United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. This report revealed "that systematic neglect of garbage collection and sanitation services in African-American neighborhoods contributed to the urban disturbances in the 1960s."[19] Inadequate services, unpaved streets, lack of sewers and indoor plumbing were environmental problems in the 1960s and [remained] environmental concerns in the 1990s.

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[17]Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*, 22.
[18]Ibid.
[19]Bullard, "Introduction," in Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*, 9.

Bullard goes on to cite a riot in Texas stemming, in part, from the drowning of an eight-year-old black girl in a city-owned garbage dump.[20] Moreover, he refers to the 1968 economic and environmental justice dispute about poor wages and work conditions of striking black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. This activism resulted in the presence and intended efforts of clergyperson and civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., with the approval and active involvement of other black supporters and faith communities.[21] The attempt to bring resolution to the environmental injustice being perpetrated in Memphis was thwarted by the assassination there of King.

In 1979, African-American home owners, with the assistance of Linda McKeever Bullard, filed a class action lawsuit in Houston to keep a sanitary landfill out of their middle-income suburban neighborhood. This was a decisive struggle on the local level that led to the formation of the Northeast Community Action Group. The lawsuit, *Bean vs. Southwestern Waste Management, Inc.*,was the first to use the civil rights law to challenge the placement of a waste facility.[22] This decisive event, along with other grassroots initiatives across the country, predate the emergence of the national environmental justice movement.

A Coalition for Community Action was also formed in 1979 to challenge the Rollins Environmental Services hazardous waste incinerator operation located near the unincorporated black community of Alsen, Louisiana. The area lies between a stretch of land from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, which has been called the beginning of "Cancer Alley" because of the production there of one-quarter of the nation's petroleum.[23]

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[20]Ibid.
[21]Ibid., 10.
[22]Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century," 2.
[23]Ibid., 27-28.

Hazel Johnson's environmental justice work earned her the title "mother" of the environmental justice movement.[24] She organized and worked untiringly to bring attention to, and to help eliminate, the glaring environmental racism of poor black people on the south side of Chicago. In 1979, Ms. Johnson organized a group of women in the basement of a church and founded the People for Community Recovery (PCR), the oldest community based environmental justice organization in the Midwest, to address environmentally related health problems in this community. PCR's mission is to "address harmful toxins and pollutants surrounding public housing."[25]

Still more activism burst forth in the 1980s in several areas across the country. In 1981, the Dallas, Texas Neighborhood Committee on Lead Pollution sought to close the polluting lead smelter located in the segregated black enclaves of the city. In 1985, black people and Latinos joined to form the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles to fight the installation of a solid waste incinerator in their neighborhood. In 1989, the West County Toxic Coalition in Richmond, California, was founded to address the problem of toxins discharged by the city's petrochemical corridor adjacent to the living environment largely comprised of black Americans.[26] From these efforts, a national agenda took shape.

However, the defining event in the establishment of a national agenda occurred in 1983 when black women residents in rural Warren County, North Carolina, sought to halt the construction of a PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) landfill near

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[24]See Environmental Justice Resource Center, "Unsung Sheros and Heros on the Front Line of Environmental Justice," [article online]; available from http:www.ejrc.cau.edu/(s)heros.html; Internet; accessed 6 June 2003, [3].

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid., 28-29.

their predominantly black residential area. Black church women and men banded together to end exposure to unhealthy and unsafe environmental practices and policies. Placing their lives on the line, they lay in the road to prevent trucks from dumping toxic waste. Dollie Burwell led the volunteer group, called Warren County Concerned Citizens, in an effort to prevent the dumping of soil contaminated with PCBs, a highly toxic substance associated with the high incidence of cancer and behavioral problems in the surrounding area.

Burwell and her pastor called the Justice Office of the United Church of Christ and initiated its involvement in the environmental justice movement. Her denomination dubbed her "grandmother" of the environmental justice movement.[27] The action of Burwell and the Warren County residents drew the attention of black political and church leaders—Congressman Walter Fauntroy, Reverend Joseph Lowery from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. from the Commission for Racial Justice—to the reality of environmental racism. The Warren County activism catapulted the reality of environmental racism to the national spotlight and set in motion the environmental justice movement.[28]

Thus, the activism known as the "environmental justice movement" emerged subsequent to the "environmental movement." Abstractly speaking, environmental justice overlaps to some extent with environmentalism but maintains its own dis-

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[27]Adora Lee, Minister of Environmental Justice, United Church of Christ, telephone interview by writer, 17 June 2003, Atlanta, Georgia.

[28]The North Carolina protest is identified as the inception of the environmental justice movement in Robert D. Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 1994-1995* (Atlanta: Environmental Justice Resource Center, 1994), 2. Also see Robert D. Bullard and Beverly H. Wright, "Environmentalism and the Politics of Equity: Emergent Trends in the Black Community," *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 12 (Winter 1987): 32-33; and Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie.*

tinctive genesis, focus, and social location. The God's People, God's Earth project seeks to bring both movements together into an authentically distinctive educational ministry.

## The Contemporary Situation

On the basis of the foregoing, black people and their faith communities have not been silent partners in the environmental movement. In fact, it is appropriate to say that black people and faith-based initiatives helped to frame the contemporary environmental justice movement, which has moved forward from the closing decade of the twentieth century.

In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in Washington, D. C. This event drew attention to the broader sweep of environmental issues, including not simply concerns for toxic threats but for workplace hazards, land exploitation, housing and transportation concerns, resource allocation, and needs for community empowerment.[29] Dana Ann Alston, a speaker at the Environmental Leadership Summit, led a delegation of environmental justice leaders to the Earth summit held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. Seeing the connection between the exploitation of the natural environment and of people in the U. S. and abroad, she became active in the effort that helped dismantle apartheid in South Africa. She launched a crusade, focusing on the multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural issues of environmental injustices.

Robert Bullard's report of grassroots environmental group activism showed that, by 1994, 306 grassroots environmental

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[29]See C. Lee, *Proceedings: The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit* (New York: United Church of Christ, Commission for Racial Justice, 1992).

groups had been formed by people of color across the United States. Of these groups, 139 served black people and multi-ethnic constituencies. Moreover, slightly more than a third (33.8 percent) included church-based participation. These activist groups have sought to address the environmental risk-burdens carried by people of color and to confront the unequal protection often given by governmental agencies responsible for assuring environmental health.[30] In addition, 116 groups also formed with particular focus on environmental justice resources mainly in the form of technical assistance and legal aid.[31]

The *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 2000* indicates that, although twenty-five groups no longer exist, 115 new ones had been formed since the 1994-1995 list was compiled. The total number of grassroots environmental groups in the 2000 Directory is 396. Of this number, 209 served African-American/Black/Multiethnic constituencies. The proportion of faith-based members is slightly more than a quarter (27.7 percent).

It is important to add that, in 1994, The Environmental Justice Resource Center was established at Clark Atlanta University as a research, policy, and information clearinghouse on issues related to environmental justice. Interdenominational Theological Center joined this initiative in 1995. The latter 1990s saw, as well, the formation of the Black Church Environmental Justice Program, a joint project of the NCC's Eco-Justice Working Group and the ecumenical Black Church Liaison Committee of the NCC and U. S. Conference of the World Council of Churches.[32] Additionally, the Ford Foundation

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[30]Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups 1994-1995*, 28-107. Environmental justice efforts of grassroots groups is also reported in Robert D. Bullard, Rueben C. Warren, Glenn S. Johnson, "The Quest for Environmental Justice," 471-488.

[31]Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups 2000*, 108-145.

[32]See National Council of Churches 1998 News Archives, "African American Church Leaders Pledge Their Support to the Struggle Against Environmental Racism" [article online]; available from http://www.ncc-cusa.org/news/news21.html; Internet; accessed 16 June 2003.

and the National Council for Science and the Environment established a partnership with the four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Environmental Justice Centers: Clark Atlanta University's Environmental Justice Resource Center, Florida A & M University's Center on Environmental Equity and Justice, Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall Law School, and Xavier University's Deep South Center for Environmental Justice.

Second Nature, Inc. also has a partnership with the HBCU/Minority Institution Consortium focused on environmental literacy. The institutions involved in this partnership include Clark Atlanta University, Hampton University, Howard University, North Carolina A & T, Texas A & M, Texas Southern University, Tuskegee University, Xavier University, and Northern Arizona University. The partnership project includes emphases on faculty development, community outreach, and campus stewardship.

## Theo-Ethical Implications

The God's People, God's Earth project understands environmental racism as more than a socio-political problem. Environmental racism has theological and moral implications.

## African Worldview

The concerns of black people for the environment and, in fact, the interconnectedness of human life and God's earth are not new. Indeed, traditional African religion and philosophy make clear that the tie of persons with the land and the whole of nature is organic.[33] That is, humanity in African thought is

[33]See Chukwunyere Kamalu, *Person, Divinity and Nature: A Modern View of the Person and the Cosmos in African Thought* (London: Karnak House, 1997), 157-174.

tied to nature, is in community with nature, and feels "kinship" with nature; remaining in harmony means preserving nature.[34] Laurenti Magesa describes this kinship from the perspective of responsibility for it:

> As all human beings are children of God, no one can claim to have a monopoly of ownership over those aspects of creation that are deemed to have been placed by God's will in public trust for the public good. Perhaps a good way to describe this understanding is to see goods and resources in terms of the image of the lender, the borrower, and the article lent or borrowed. In African ethical thought, the universe has been lent by God to humanity through the ancestors and the living leaders to use on the condition that it must be kept in good order and used by all for the promotion of life, good relationships, and peace....If those conditions are broken, humanity forfeits the right to it....[35]

Magesa adds hospitality as a contrasting metaphor and antonym to greed which contributes to the misuse of the universe. For him, hospitality negates greed and signals readiness and availability to form community, to remember and honor God, the lender of the universe to humanity, and to make known human beings' presence as an intimate part of a larger entity that must be preserved. He states further that "the purpose of hospitality is to enhance life in all its dimensions."[36]

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[34]For these views of Ghanaian theologian Kofi Opoku see Ian Richie, *African Theology and Social Change: An Anthropological Approach*," chap. 3, "Creation in African Thought," 8, web site: http://www.3sympatico.ca/ian.ritchie/ATSC.Contents.htm.

[35]Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 62.

[36]Ibid.

## Western Worldview

Western theo-ethical thinking is characterized by patriarchal notions of dualism, domination, and dichotomies. Dualisms are problematic, not just in human interaction and relatedness, but also impact humanities' relationship with nature. The ideological dualisms of human/nature, male/female, mind/body, nature/culture and sacred/secular are part of the dynamics of oppression. They seek to negate that which is non-white, female, or natural.

Western ideologies are steeped in dichotomous thinking that belittles, demeans the humanity, and environmental consciousness of black people. Because black people do not necessarily use the language of "ecology" or belong to the "circle of ten,"[37] they have been pegged as uninterested and uninvolved in environmental justice work. As we have shown, nothing is farther from the truth. Our heritage as black people is a holistic engagement of life that sees the environment, both human and natural, as one community. We are "Sons and Daughters of the Dust" whose roots lead back to the worldview and ethos of African communal life with nature and humanity as sacred creations of God. Our African foremothers and fathers understood that everything created by God was/is sacred and to be respected. Their sense of stewardship guided their use and care of the natural.

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[37]The circle of ten refers to the "Group of Ten" or the "Big Ten." According to Glen Johnson, these are the top ten environmental organizations in the United States. They are also considered to be mainstream organizations who use a "top down" political approach to addressing environmental issues/problems. They tend to be more concerned with saving the whales, wilderness, and endangered species; they are given large sums of money for their environmental work. They are: The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, Natural Resources and Defense Council, Friends of the Earth, Izaak Walton League, National Audubon Society, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, National Wildlife Federation, National Parks and Conservation Association, and Environmental Defense Fund. Glen S. Johnson, Environment Justice Workshop, ITC, March 2002, Atlanta, Georgia.

The oppression of people of color and women is closely aligned with the oppression of nature and is interrelated. Women in general have been aligned with the physical and nature. Women's creative, procreative abilities align them closer to "Mother" earth. Men, white men that is, have been aligned with the intellectual. This sort of thinking legitimizes the abuse of nature and women by keeping both "in their place." Both women and nature have been used to satisfy the needs, desires, and wishes of men. Too often, women's contributions are acknowledged only in relationship to their husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, or other men in their lives. Nature's cosmological value has been predicated upon its ability to provide food, shelter, clothing, fuel, and other human needs.

In western ideology, the natural environment, along with people of color and women, have been the "permissible victims" of domination, abuse, and misuse. "Permissible victims" refers to those persons or things in society that can be oppressed with the least amount of repercussions.[38] Environmental racism places African Americans, other people of color, and the poor at special risk with minimal socio-political consequences to the offending agencies.

All communities are not treated equally. The vast majority of dumps are located in poor black areas. Many playgrounds and schools are built on landfills. New housing developments have sinkhole houses with the rubbish and trash of the construction process buried in the homeowner's yard. People of color often live, work, play, and go to school or worship in or near toxic sites. This injustice has health, economic, and socio-political implications.

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[38]See Frances Woods, "Take My Yoke Upon You," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

The environmental issue of African Americans, people of color, and the poor is not just a socio-political problem. It is a theo-ethical problem. The hierarchical dualism of patriarchy asserts that people of color and females are disposable commodities and can be used for the satisfaction and accommodation of others. Environmental injustices deny the *Imago Dei* in the poor, non-whites, and females. It denies the sacredness of all humans and the right to live life abundantly in places that support human flourishing. To be created in the image of God means that every human is worthy of respect, love, safety, and communal harmony. Medical and scientific research shows that the residents of our communities suffer from debilitating diseases, eye and skin irritations, asthma attacks and upper respiratory illnesses, chronic headaches, as well as other health problems caused by chemical air emissions, water and soil contamination, and noise pollution. Children and seniors are the most vulnerable to toxic emissions. National studies have linked air pollution to higher rates of asthma among blacks, especially children. Lead poisoning continues to be a lingering problem. This health crisis, due in large part to environmental injustice, affects all Americans by way of increased insurance costs and lower productivity. This is not human flourishing.

The oppression goes deeper. Environmental racism is anthropological. It denies the *humanity* of its "victims." Not only is the image of God negated but the claim of humanness is negated when black bodies are targeted as the appropriate population for life threatening environmental projects. Because black people and women are counted as less than human, places like "Cancer Alley," "The Toxic Donut" and the Dixie dumping sites are allowed to exist.[39]

The ideologies of domination characteristic of patriarchy are

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[39]See Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*, for extended discussion of these sites.

at the roots of environmental injustices. The biblical mandate to "subdue" the earth and to have "dominion over" it has been misinterpreted. (Genesis 1:28) The use of the word *radah,* translated "rule" in the text, most often in the *Hebrew Bible* refers to political context that is "a humane and companionate rule that displays responsibility for others and that results in peace and prosperity."[40] The Genesis narrative does not advocate exploitive, tyrannical use of the earth. Rather it espouses an ethic of care and stewardship, providing harmonious living and flourishing for all living things.

## Call to Action by Faith Communities

It can be said that significant activity has been directed toward environmental justice over more than a quarter of the twentieth century. However, it may also be said that there is insufficient faith-based participation in grass-roots efforts identified in the volumes on people of color environmental groups. Environmental racism persists and demands greater action! The statement of Robert Bullard stands as a renewed twenty-first century wake-up call especially for the black community in general and black-faith communities in particular: "Whether by design or benign neglect, African American communities ranging from the urban ghettos to rural 'poverty pockets' face some of the worst environmental and health problems in the nation."[41] It is clear that black communities and those of other people of color are not receiving the same benefits from the application, implementation, and enforcement of public health, environ-

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[40]Marcia Bunge, "Biblical Views of Nature: Foundations for an Environmental Ethic" [article online]; available from http://www.webofcreation.org/education/articles/bunge.htm Internet; accessed 13 June 2003.

[41]Bullard, "Quest for Environmental Justice," 479.

mental and civil rights laws.[42] The pressing call is for new rounds of consciousness-raising, plans of action, and concrete initiatives by faith communities that help to stop and prevent further incidences in which communities of color are "sacrifice zones" or dumping grounds. The call is for guides that point the way for the promotion of "zones of health and well-being." Faith communities have a pivotal role in preparing present and future generations to recognize and address environmental issues. These communities are needed, as well, to help pave the way for people's taking responsibility for developing and maintaining lifestyles that honor Mother Earth's resources and that ensure the health of the natural world as well as future human life.[43]

## Environmental Justice and the Practices of Faith: A Proposed Agenda

Black-faith communities constitute a crucial institutional presence in American society. There are around 190 distinctly black-oriented and black-controlled church bodies and networks. These entities encompass in excess of 75,000 black congregations, including parishes in predominantly white denominations.[44] It is further estimated that greater than 40 percent of the entire black population participates in a faith community, with seven out of ten attending one or more times each month and two-thirds

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[42]Ibid., 485.

[43]These ideas are incorporated in the final two "Principles of Environmental Justice" crafted at the October 7, 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D. C. The seventeen principles are reproduced in Robert D. Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 1994-1995* (Atlanta: Environmental Justice Resource Center, Clark Atlanta University, July 1994), 4.

[44]See Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); J. J. Dilulio, "Living Faith: The Black Church Outreach Tradition," *The Jeremiah Project: An Initiative of the Center for Civic Innovation* (Report No. 98-3), 1-10; web site: www.manhattan.institute.org/html/jrp-98-3.htm.

holding membership.[45] In addition, the majority of black laity "believes that part of the church's mission is to liberate individuals from economic, political, and physical suffering."[46] In light of the presence of numbers of black faith communities and the active pattern of black people's attendance in them, these communities stand as important participants in the environmental justice movement.[47] Indeed, black faith communities are called to be intentional catalysts with the capacity of melding together environmental justice activity with the practices of faith. Five interconnected practices are suggested, building on Anne Wimberly's typology that supports the faith communities' role in assuring black people's overall health and well-being. They are: caring practices, educating practices, mediating practices, sustaining practices, and advocating practices.[48]

## Caring Practices

Black communities' involvement in environmental justice efforts begins with their acceptance of moral responsibility for assuring a health-giving, health-sustaining interdependence of people and Mother Earth. Accepting this burden lies at the center of caring practices. The faith communities' embrace of this obligation necessarily points to their giving attention to environ-

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[45]See A. Scandrett, "Health and the Black Church," *Journal of Religion and Health* 35 (1996): 231-244; also R. Staples and L. B. Johnson, *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

[46]Staples, *Black Families at the Crossroads*, 217.

[47]Anne Wimberly cites the indispensable role of black churches in the overall faith and health movement. See Anne Streaty Wimberly, "The Role of Black Faith Communities in Fostering Health," in *Health Issues in the Black Community,* 2d ed., ed Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 132-133.

[48]Ibid., 137-141.

mental abuses that threaten the lives of people within and beyond them and that endanger the Earth-home in which humans dwell. This concern involves black-faith communities' affirmation of and intent to respond to environmental justice principles set forth by the multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.[49] Of particular importance are principles that address the sacredness of the earth; the right of all people to live, go to school, attend faith communities, work, and play in healthy environments; the need for policies that ensure the cleaning up and rebuilding of hazardous living environments; and adequacy of access for all to the full range of resources needed to care for self, others, and the environment.[50]

## Educating Practices

Educating practices refer to intentional efforts by black-faith communities to arouse in people within their reach an intense awareness of the nature and seriousness of environmental justice issues affecting the well-being of black people, other people of color, and the earth. Educating practices extend to these communities' creation of forums to talk about and design strategies to respond to the unhealthy environments in which a disproportionate number of black people and other people of color live. Through forums and other information dissemination approaches, these practices focus on informing people about and preparing them to address hazards such as lead paint, pesticides, asbestos, tobacco and drug use, dumpsites, and other industrial pollutants in or near residential areas as well as ways of addressing the hazards. In addition, educating practices include the dis-

[49]Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 1994-1995*, 4.
[50]See Wimberly, "Role of Black Faith Communities," 141, 143.

closure and critical appraisal of the nation's environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Importantly, the goal of educational practices is also to voice the imperative need for people to embrace their own personal lifestyles that promote present and future human and environmental health.[51]

## Mediating Practices

Mediating practices are the means by which black-faith communities promote environmental justice through identifying and linking people with existing grassroots environmental justice activists, forming such groups where they do not exist, and assuring the voice of black people in environmental decision-making. The goal of these practices is to activate people's decision to propose and engage in strategies for individual, family, church, and community support of environmental justice principles. Moreover, mediating practices center on people's assessment of their lifestyles and making changes that support and advance a healthy environment.[52]

## Sustaining Practices

The intent of black-faith communities' sustaining practices is to keep before their constituents and community residents the dire urgency of vigilance in tending to environmental justice issues, including their readiness to act to ensure safe and clean environments wherever they live, go to school, worship, and play.[53]

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[51]Ibid., 141, 144.
[52]Ibid., 141, 144-145.
[53]Ibid., 141, 145.

## Advocating Practices

The prevailing reality of environmental racism demands that black faith communities be advocates on behalf of people who disproportionately bear its burden. Advocating practices are crucial initiatives "that push for ethically informed action and that help black people recognize [and exercise] their right and ability to use voice, action, and political clout in areas needing redress."[54] Through advocating practices, churches urge people's participation in public hearings on environmental issues and strategize action to deal with conditions such as crumbling community infrastructure, including dilapidated housing, unsafe playgrounds, unsanitary and illness-producing workplaces, and neighborhood redlining by reality companies. Moreover, advocating practices include watchful attention that is needed to assure the representation of black people in mainstream environmental groups and on decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. Advocating practices center on the unified voice of faith communities with coalitions and environmental justice groups that "brings to the surface the ethical and political questions of 'who gets what, why, and in what amount,' and insists that no community will be allowed to become an environmental 'sacrifice zone.' "[55]

## God's People, God's Earth Project

The role of black faith communities in the environmental justice movement does not exist apart from the responsibility of seminaries to partner with these communities and to prepare lead-

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[54]Ibid., 145.

[55]See Bullard, *People of Color Environmental Groups Directory 1994-1995*, 4; also Wimberly, "Role of Black Faith Communities," 141, 145.

ers for the kind of public ministry which the movement demands. As a predominantly black institution, Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) is particularly positioned to create opportunities for this partnership and leader preparation role to occur. On this basis, ITC, in cooperation with the NCC, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Faith and the City, has established a program entitled God's People, God's Earth, which is a component of "The Justice and Stewardship Project: The Environment." Over the first year, research, writing, and the development of courses define the tasks of the God's People, God's Earth project. During the second year, ITC will offer an academic course as part of the regular curriculum as well as a continuing education course. In addition, ITC will produce environmental education modules for inclusion in other required and voluntary courses across the curricular areas. ITC will also develop internships and environmental projects in environmental organizations, Atlanta area faith communities, and environmental businesses.

The environmental curriculum, "best practices," and reports will be disseminated through the NCC Eco-Justice Working Group, through the seminaries comprising the ITC consortium and other affiliates, through the networks of the Environmental Justice Resources Center at Clark Atlanta University and through the annual meetings and publications of historically black denominations. In the third year, courses will be established at three additional historically black seminaries. As the result of these efforts, the God's People, God's Earth project seeks to substantially enhance the role of black-faith communities in promoting environmental stewardship throughout the black community.

## Conclusion

The cry for environmental justice reverberates in black communities across the nation. Responding to this cry requires stewardship on the part of these communities, as well as dedicated care-taking of faith communities. The participation of black people and their faith communities in the quest for environmental justice is not new. Yet, renewed and ongoing vigor is required. Assuring safe, healthy environments at home, work, places of worship, school, and play as well as reestablishing the sacredness of Mother Earth must be seen as imperative theo-ethical tasks to be taken seriously now and into the foreseeable future. The partnership of black-faith communities, seminaries, and the historically black colleges and universities is pivotal to the implementation of these tasks. Indeed, the establishment of the program entitled God's People, God's Earth at Interdenominational Theological Center seeks to make this partnership come alive.

In short, accomplishing environmental justice has required in the past and demands now black people's and their faith communities' committed *participation* in the environmental justice movement. This participation must also be buttressed by their *remembering* the traditional African religious emphasis on the interrelatedness of humankind, the created universe, and the sustenance of both. And, it must necessarily *build on* the faith tradition that emphasizes the requirement of justice, love, and kindness (Micah 6:8) and the struggle of an oppressed people for justice.