

## Environmental Justice

As Unitarian Universalists, we are inspired to live in right relationship within our human family and within the beautiful, complex web of life of which the human family is a part. We often use Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s concept of "Beloved Community" to express the vision of wholeness, harmony, equality, peace, and sustainability that guides us. We affirm these shared values and covenant collectively to work toward them in our personal lives and in our communities. They are expressed most directly in our first and seventh Principles, which affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the interdependent web of all existence.

### Our Theological and Spiritual Grounding

Our vision, our ethics, our soul's nourishment, come from diverse sources of truth and wisdom, all of which have much to teach us about our interconnectedness and our relationship with the natural world:

- Our direct, loving relationships with other humans and other types of animals as well as plants and certain landscapes, offer us beauty, comfort, wisdom, companionship, and a glimpse of transcendence.
- We gain knowledge and inspiration from physicists, astronomers, geologists, and other scientists who help us understand that we and everything else on this planet are comprised of stardust, that our conscious existence at this moment in time is part of the magnificent unfolding evolution of the universe.
- Religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions from around the world invite us to treat all the elements we need for life as gifts, as a sacred inheritance to be shared by all, restored and protected for future generations.
- Prophets and teachers call us to appreciate and create beauty, to transform systems of oppression, violence, and degradation, and to bend the arc of history toward justice and ecological balance.

This is a theologically, spiritually, and morally vibrant time for Unitarian Universalists. We are unpacking legacies of racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism on the environment as well as on political, economic, and social institutions—including our own denomination. We are coming to greater awareness of how these destructive forces have shaped the very way we think about and live in the world. It means we are called to dismantle these destructive institutions, to collaborate in their transformation as well as in the creation of new ones, and to be willing to be changed ourselves in the process.

This is a time in which we are investigating our religious history and sources of inspiration, reinterpreting and refashioning them as needed. Among other things, this awareness challenges us to grapple with the very notion of "the environment" and "nature" as European and North American philosophical concepts, which have assisted in the subjugation of people's bodies and souls, as well as the land, creating immense inequalities.

Since World War II, various governments and individuals have slowly begun to recognize the folly of a long-standing assumption that we can “tame” and exploit the land and its resources without regard to the consequences of the exploitation and pollution we create. For instance:

- Mining uranium on Indigenous lands has led to high cancer rates and deaths in those communities.
- Testing and using atomic weapons create long-term health and security threats—far beyond the “targets.”
- Burning and logging large swaths of forests around the world have contributed mightily to climate change.
- The widespread construction of dams across the U.S. is problematic when they impede natural water flows, which are critical to managing huge rainstorms made worse by climate change.
- Pesticides used to enable large-scale commercial agriculture have been found to harm human reproductive systems and cause various forms of cancer in human beings. Toxic chemicals make no distinction between human beings and the species they were intended to target. The majority of farmworkers put at risk are people of color. Furthermore, toxic chemicals do not respect private property boundaries. An application can run off in rain water or blow into another field—contaminating a neighbor’s organic crop or someone else’s drinking water.

Human beings are part of the natural world and are affected by environmental decisions both unequally and unpredictably.

*We are a people in process as we work with others to advance environmental justice.*

### Our understanding of environmental justice

Unitarian Universalist theological and spiritual grounding and moral commitments fit well with principles that various groups of low-income, Indigenous, and people of color in the U.S. and in international gatherings have articulated:

- We affirm that all forms of life are interdependent and sacred. It is wrong to commodify or objectify any form of life.
- We uphold an ethic of intergenerational justice in relation to access to, use of, and preservation of natural resources.
- We uphold an ethic of intergenerational justice in relation to access to, use of, and preservation of natural resources.
- We affirm that all people deserve a healthy and safe environment wherever they live, work, play, worship, and go to school.
- We recognize that economic policies and institutions and the systems they are a part of must contribute to equitable and sustainable development. This, in part, requires just transition strategies in addressing climate change and its impacts. This also means that there should be no “sacrifice zones”—communities and lands—sacrificed in the name of economic growth and prosperity.
- We are called to protect and promote human rights and the dignity of all, invoking U.S. and international human rights laws to the fullest extent possible to protect people and the planet and restore right relationships.

- We honor the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, including free, prior, and informed consent for any government and/or business activity involving their lands, resources, and sovereignty.
- We commit to follow the leadership of the most affected local peoples and communities in decision making that affects their rights and well-being.
- We recognize that those who have contributed the least to the climate crisis are those most affected by it.

## Examples of EJ organizing

The concept “environmental justice” requires us to notice connections with many different forms of injustice and oppressions and address them synergistically. It requires us to be sensitive to cultural and spiritual concerns and bring our emotional intelligence to bear upon our organizing, advocacy, and service efforts; religious education; worship; and congregational leadership.

All across North America, UUs are bringing dedication, persistence, courage, vision, creativity, love, passion, knowledge, relationships, and financial resources to environmental justice struggles. Examples are numerous! Here are a few:

**The human right to water.** Water is necessary for life, but not everyone in the U.S. and around the world has access to safe and affordable water. Water insecurity aggravates international conflicts, jeopardizes traditional forms of agriculture, undermines the health and academic achievement of children, and threatens the value of homes and businesses and even the very existence of some communities due to fracking and oil and gas pipeline construction. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) provided critical assistance and support to local partners who advanced water rights in such countries as Mexico, Peru, Argentina, and Kenya. UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth (UUMFE), UU Young Adult Climate Justice Network, and UU state action networks and various congregations are playing vital roles in a variety of U.S. states and Canadian provinces.

**Farmworker rights.** UUs are backing farmworkers who are organizing to obtain fair wages and safer working conditions, namely protection from pesticide poisoning and sexual harassment in the fields.

**Disaster relief.** For years, UU congregations from around the country have raised money and made pilgrimages to New Orleans to help rebuild homes lost in Hurricane Katrina, and they have generously responded to UUA and UUSC calls for other disaster relief contributions. UUs in Florida are working with coastal low-income communities of color on better disaster planning and equitable rebuilding after Hurricane Matthew and the health impacts of climate change.

**Climate-forced displacement.** Under the auspices of UUSC, Indigenous peoples in Alaska, Louisiana, Washington, the South Pacific, and Bangladesh are meeting to develop strategies and share wisdom about resiliency, displacement, and community building.

**Indigenous rights.** UUs are building respectful solidarity relationships with Indigenous tribes in the Pacific Northwest, the Dakotas, and other locations. The UU congregation in Bismarck, South Dakota, played a critical role in establishing a base for activists coming to Standing Rock. UUs are supporting seven tribal members prosecuted for their roles in that protest. Meanwhile, UUA and UUMFE staff are

working with Lakota leaders on longer-term bridge building through the International Initiative for Transformational Collaboration.

**Lack of affordable housing and access to healthy food.** Many congregations invest in affordable housing funds and work in interfaith coalitions to advocate for better local affordable housing policies, including initiatives to upgrade or build homes with greater climate resiliency and green energy sources. Others collaborate with low-income neighbors to address local hunger and nutrition needs.

**Intergenerational justice.** A UU youth is one of the plaintiffs in *Juliana v. the United States*—a path-breaking court case in which the U.S. government is accused of violating the constitutional rights of life, liberty, and property for our youngest generation and failing to protect essential resources within the public trust by not effectively addressing climate change.

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To get involved and for more environmental justice information, visit:

[uua.org/environment](http://uua.org/environment)

[createclimatejustice.net](http://createclimatejustice.net)

Packs of 25 copies of this pamphlet can be ordered from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop at [uua.org/bookstore](http://uua.org/bookstore).