



## Tennessee Interfaith Power & Light

*A Spiritual Response to Climate Change*

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## Climate Justice

The effects of climate change are already being felt, especially by the poorest and most vulnerable who have contributed least to the cause of the problem. This is the injustice at the core of the climate problem: those least responsible suffer the most. While politicians debate whether to solve the problem, the scale of the impacts and the numbers of people affected grow.

The effects of the increasingly harsh and erratic changes in climate include new strains of debilitating diseases, more intense flooding, more frequent and destructive tornadoes and droughts, scorching hot summers and polar cold winters. Climate change intensifies the disparities experienced by lower income people and deepens their suffering. Disadvantage and discrimination affect them at every stage: in the immediate aftermath of climate disasters and during official planning to cope with the current and future impacts of climate change.

Climate change is far more than an environmental challenge. It is a profoundly human issue with immediate and far-reaching implications for jobs, homes, health, food, and lives.

- Climate change affects the livelihood of people dependent upon land and water, agriculture and tourism. The loss of livelihood due to climate change increases hardships on the household level.
- Climate protection inaction degrades human health. Extreme heat and cold cause heat stroke and hypothermia; floods and droughts worsen malnutrition and the spread of communicable diseases.
- Climate change is a hunger risk multiplier. Food prices increase when crops are diminished from drought, floods, and extreme temperatures. The risk of hunger rises among those least able to afford food.
- Climate protection inaction compromises the human right to adequate shelter. Vulnerable households already cannot afford the rising costs to heat and cool their homes, and as we move ever deeper into the extreme temperatures of climate change, more people face eviction from their homes because their power has been shut off.

Injustice underlies our experience of climate change as those who are being hit hardest by climate impacts have contributed least to the problem. The most vulnerable communities are those who already suffer from deprivation, exclusion, and inequality, with climate change compounding the injustice. As the poor have the least capacity to cope with the impacts of climate change, climate change will make the poor poorer.

Climate justice demands effective and equitable policies that place people at the center, protects the most vulnerable, and equitably shares the burdens and benefits of our responses to climate change. It is possible to take action on climate change while pursuing sustainable development with due regard to protecting people and treating them equitably.

We need to hear the voices of the most vulnerable to climate change and respond by designing fair climate protection plans. Plans must protect those who contribute least and suffer the most significant impacts. The plan must ensure that all people - regardless of where they live or how wealthy they are - have equitable access to the opportunities created by the transition to low-carbon, climate-resilient development. This includes access to energy efficiency, to a secure food supply, and to education and jobs.

Aspects of climate justice in setting climate policy include:

- The voices of the most vulnerable to climate change must be heard and acted upon when designing new climate policies.
- Attention to human rights must focus attention on the people who are most vulnerable to climate impacts. This focus helps identify the source of threats and who is responsible for taking action. Human rights make clear the deep injustice of climate change, acting as a moral spur to action. Human rights deliver valuable minimal thresholds that are widely supported on which to build climate policies.
- The principle of equity of future generations, which is central to sustainable development and climate justice, should be stated as a priority, equal to the concern for those alive today.
- Different jurisdictions will take different action in different forms and in different timeframes, but all need to ensure that those living in poverty benefit from low-carbon, climate-resilient development while those who have reaped the benefits of carbon pollution provide support and lead the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Ultimately, we will be judged by the adequacy of our commitment to prevent dangerous climate change. Commitments are not just related to carbon emissions, they also relate to actions taken to adapt to climate change and in so doing to protect citizens from risk.

There is much to be done. We must continue to make known how the poor suffer from climate change disasters, but we must also act to mitigate climate change. We must call on the offices of our elected officials at all levels of government to make all of their decisions within the understanding of the very real effects of climate change.

We must prepare for the impacts of climate disasters of too much heat or cold, floods and drought, hurricanes and tornadoes, preparing for rescue and recovery of every citizen, including the most vulnerable. We must prepare for a different climate through affordable housing, greener cities, and secure food systems. We must put policies into place to provide assistance to those who cannot afford skyrocketing heating and cooling costs.

By keeping in mind those living today and in the future, the most vulnerable here within our community and those around the globe, we participate in the collective moral response to ensuring climate justice and climate protection. We as a society can rise to this moral challenge of our generation through our actions today and take pride that we have done the right thing to do.