

## DEVELOPING GROUPS

### THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

- Topic: Reconciliation: The Challenge  
of Environmental Racism to Catholic Theology
- Convenor: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University
- Moderator: Peter Ellard, Siena College
- Presenter: Sylvia Washington, Northwestern University
- Respondents: Alex Mikulich, Saint Joseph College  
Byran Massingale, St. Francis Seminary

Sylvia Washington, "Struggles for Environmental Justice and Health in Chicago," delivered a lecture (supported by a Power Point presentation) on the realities of environmental injustice, specifically as it relates to the lives of people of color in Chicago. She began by situating the conversation within the Church's position regarding "right to life" issues. These teachings need to be expanded to include the recognition of the inherent destruction of all forms of life as a direct consequence of the pollution that has accompanied industrial development and production. Washington pointed out that when environmental concerns gained momentum in the last part of the twentieth century, much of the focus became ecocentric and directed toward the destructive impact of human activities on non-human life. Industrial development and production also had and continues to have a destructive and deadly impact on human life. This destructive potential is and has been borne disproportionately by poor people and especially people of color.

This phenomenon of the disproportionate environmental costs that have been and still are carried by people of color was brought to the public's attention with the birth of the environmental justice movement in the 1980s. Through the efforts of those who made the connection between racism and environmental injustice, public policy makers and part of the wider public became aware of the fact that people living in communities of color or who are poor were and still are suffering from industry-induced abortions, learning disabilities, cancer and death as a result of the inordinately high and inequitable levels of pollutants that have descended upon their communities. Washington demonstrated that this is also a global phenomena and poorer countries and nonwhite countries are now bearing the costs of worldwide pollution by accepting toxic and hazardous wastes from Western and industrialized nations. Washington's presentation was filled with statistics of the disproportionate effects that the injustices environmental racism has created.

If we embrace the notion of the sanctity of life we must then actively acknowledge and respond to those among us who's "right" to a healthy and productive life is being corrupted or destroyed by the disproportionate levels of pollution in their communities. Engaging or even supporting industrial practices that lead to reduced IQs, birth defects, and the termination of life in utero or post utero violates the very notion of the "right to life," such like abortion and euthanasia. Washington concluded by stating that "environmental racism" speaks implicitly to a life and culture of death among people who have traditionally and historically suffered from social, economic and racial injustice.

Alex Mikulich offered the first response to the presentation. He noted that Washington's incisive description of pervasive social suffering and death cries out from the earth to God as Abel's blood cried out from the ground in Genesis 4:9-10. The earth cries out for communal repentance and reconciliation. Mikulich highlighted how environmental racism thrives in the U.S. context of white privilege and that "whiteness" marks the privileged position white Americans historically protect inside multiple patterns and processes that intersect between spatial, institutional and structural realms. White theologians' acceptance of white privilege in scholarship or action only reinforces lethal environmental racism. Acceptance of white privilege denies how our authentic humanity and liberation is rooted in the same divine tree of life that nurtures us all. Mikulich concluded by challenging the audience: "The voices of our African American, Latina, and First American brothers and sisters cry out from the earth: How do we respond to them? How do we respond to God?"

Byran Massingale's response noted that Abraham Isaac Heschel's understanding of the Prophetic call for justice was tied to a call to recognize the "monstrosity of injustice." Massingale indicated that this is precisely what Washington had done in her paper. He thanked her for surfacing these sometime uncomfortable issues. He supported her position by noting that in fact we do not drink the same waters, eat the same foods, or live in the same places. Massingale tried to answer the question: What does a consciousness of environmental racism contribute to theological reflection on ecology? He demonstrated the deep interconnection between social and ecological justice issues and focused on the lack of the ability to participate in the decision making processes that effect local communities on the part of Black and Latino/a Americans. The stereotyping of urban areas as high-crime, poorly kept, rat-infested ghettos has become synonymous with the description of "Black" America. Massingale echoed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call by indicating that White Americans must be made to see the self-interest involved in solving the problems of environmental justice and finally, that the Catholic Church's long-standing social teaching and slowly growing ecological teachings can be put to work in this effort.

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