

Education and Advocacy
Healthy Homes – Healthy Congregations Concept Paper

Security: Program Organizer



MINNESOTA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

HEALTHY HOMES, HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS:

**MINIMIZING TOXIC CHEMICALS IN
CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND CHURCHES**

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“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Gen 1.31, NRSV

Theological Grounding

We stand at the precipice of a crisis, which is both ecological and theological, affecting all inhabitants of our planet and thereby calling out to people of all faith. We are in need of a broader understanding of the Bible’s creation theology, which calls us into a more thoughtful relationship with God “very good” creation. We have confused abundant life with a life of excess. We remain captives of our own habits of consumption and to our ignorance of the pollution our comfortable lifestyles demand.

*“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”
1 Corinthians 19*

Caring for ourselves and God’s Earth has become more difficult as our society becomes more industrialized. Industrialization has brought pollution, and every day our bodies are exposed to pollution from vehicles, factories, toxic waste sites, and industrial wastes. We are surrounded by harmful chemicals in our homes, schools, offices, and places of worship. “These chemicals put our personal health in jeopardy, damage the environment, and often have devastating effects on vulnerable populations such as children, low-income communities, communities of color, and people with weakened immune systems.”¹

Chemical soup

Chemical pollution is contaminating the health of humans and the environment. There are approximately 82,000 commercial chemicals in use in the US, and the vast majority of them have never been tested for safety. Only 10 percent have been tested for human safety with at least 1000 new chemicals introduced each year.²

Chemicals of particular concern include: nicotine, lead, pesticides, mercury, dioxin, PCBs, flame retardants, Bisphenol-A, and phthalates. These chemicals potentially harm all of creation, but have more negative impact on fetuses, babies, and children. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency warns:

Children are especially susceptible to the negative effects of chemicals...Pound for pound, children breathe more air, drink more water, and eat more food, and when they play, they crawl and put things in their mouths. As a result, children have an increased chance of exposure to potential pollutants, and because children's bodies are still developing, they may process these pollutants differently than adults.³

We know that lead, mercury and cigarettes affect children's health, but as more research is done, scientists find less exposure is needed to have negative effects. Also, we know that asthma in children doubled in the two decades from 1980 to 2000. Air pollution and diesel pollution are two major toxins that contributed to this increase.⁴

The developing brain of a fetus is exquisitely sensitive to toxic chemicals. Besides lead and mercury, bisphenol -A can affect the development of the brain. This chemical is added to plastics called polycarbonates, which are used for baby bottles, a plastic coating for children's teeth to prevent cavities, metal food cans, water bottles, and returnable containers for juice, milk and water. Bisphenol-A is linked to learning, developmental, and/or behavioral problems, as well as hormonal changes, obesity, and diabetes.⁵

Scientists now know that toxic chemicals can pass easily from mother to her developing fetus. The American Red Cross took ten samples of cord blood and found an average of 287 chemical contaminants. 180 are related to cancer in humans and animals, 217 affect brain and nervous systems, and 208 cause birth defects or abnormal development in animal tests. Once the baby is born, the danger continues. Studies have found that toxic chemicals including dioxins, pesticides, mercury and flame retardants are found in breast milk.⁶

Just one of these chemicals, dioxin, is one of the most toxic chemicals known to science and is a by- products of waste incineration and paper production. Dioxin causes such serious health problems as cancer, as well as reproductive and developmental problems.⁷

Toxic pollution is also a justice issue. “Toxic pollutants and chemicals disproportionately threaten the health of low-income communities and communities of color. According to the report, Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007, issued by the United Church of Christ, “people of color make up the majority of those living in host neighborhoods within 3 kilometers (1.8) miles of the nation’s hazardous waste facilities.”⁸

Churches’ Responses

Many denominations and congregations are involved in environmental ministries to care for the earth. Many of these programs focus on limiting global warming and encouraging energy conservation. Fewer faith-based resources are directed towards toxic pollution and its effects on creation and humans.

Seeking to complement existing faith-based programs, the Minnesota Council of Churches will focus on toxic chemicals and their effects on people and creation. The Council’s program offers education to churches and other faith-based organizations on positive steps that can be taken to minimize the impact of chemical toxins on children, families, churches, and communities.

The Minnesota Council of Churches proposes to focus on:

- Educating individuals and faith-based organizations on the impact of pollutants on individuals and communities.
- Educating individuals and faith-based organizations about changes they can make to lessen the load of toxic chemicals at home, in congregations, and in other faith-based organizations.
- Within its capacity at any given time, the Council will provide support to communities working on eco-justice issues,
- Within its capacity at any given time, the Council will support activities that seek to influence government policies on environmental toxins.

¹ National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program publication *Mindful Living: Human Health, Pollution and Toxics*, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ As quoted in the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's publication *How to Reduce Toxic Chemicals in Your Home*. Nov 2006.

⁴ The Collaborative on Health and the Environment (CHE) publication *Our Health and the Health of the Environment*. <http://www.protectingourhealth.org>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Healthy Legacy. <http://www.healthylegacy.org>

⁷ <http://www.ejnet.org/dioxin/>

⁸ National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program publication *Mindful Living: Human Health, Pollution and Toxics*, 2007.