

# Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

By James B. Martin-Schramm

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## Human Rights and Climate Change

Heavy reliance on fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas) together with ecologically damaging land use patterns have produced grave threats to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. The related challenges posed by global warming and climate change are unprecedented in human history. The first half of this paper summarizes recent scientific findings about global warming and identifies specific ways climate change imperils human rights around the world. The second half of this paper explores two different proposals for securing human rights which address intra-generational ethical issues related to global climate change.

## Climate Science

After nearly two decades of intensive study, scientists have reached a much greater consensus about the causes and likely impacts of global climate change. The United Nations established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 to review and assess the most recent scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to climate change. The IPCC has issued reports every five years and issued its Fourth Assessment Report in four installments during 2007. Over 1,200 authors contributed to the report and their work was reviewed by more than 2,500 scientific experts. Since each report for policy makers is approved line by line in plenary sessions, the IPCC's findings are arguably the least controversial and most accepted assessments of climate change in the scientific community.

The IPCC states in its Fourth Assessment Report that it has very high confidence [greater than 90 percent probability] that "the globally averaged net effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming." The report demonstrates that global atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide have substantially increased as a result of human activities. For example, the global atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, the most important greenhouse gas, has increased from a pre-industrial value of about 280 ppm (parts per million) to 379 p.p.m. in 2005. The growing atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide "exceeds by far the natural range over the last 650,000 years (180 to 300 p.p.m.) as determined from ice cores."

Direct scientific observations of climate change lead the IPCC to declare that warming of the climate system is "unequivocal." It notes that "eleven of the last twelve years (1995-2006) rank among the 12 warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperature." The IPCC also identifies "numerous long-term changes in Arctic temperatures and ice, widespread changes in precipitation amounts, ocean salinity, wind patterns and aspects of extreme weather including droughts, heavy precipitation, heat waves and the intensity of tropical cyclones."

These key findings lead the IPCC to the following conclusion. If the world takes a business-as-usual approach and continues a fossil fuel-intensive energy path during the 21st century, the IPCC projects current concentrations of greenhouse gases could more than quadruple by the year 2100. Under this scenario, global-average surface temperature will increase 4.0° Celsius (7.2° Fahrenheit) by the end of the 21st century. Put into perspective, the global-average surface temperature only increased 0.6°C (1.1°F) during the 20th century.[6] In a report issued after the IPCC released its Fourth Assessment Report, the U.S. Climate Change Science Program warned “[w]e are very likely to experience a faster rate of climate change in the next 100 years than has been seen over the past 10,000 years.”

This rapid rate of global warming will raise sea levels, endangering millions living in low-lying areas, despoil freshwater resources for one sixth of the world’s population, widen the range of infectious diseases like malaria, reduce global agricultural production, and increase the risk of extinction for 20-30 percent of all surveyed plant and animal species. The IPCC emphasizes that poor communities will be “especially vulnerable” to increasing climate change, “in particular those concentrated in high-risk areas” who “have more limited adaptive capacities, and are more dependent on climate-sensitive resources such as local water and food supplies.”

### **Climate Change and Human Rights**

Given this warning, it should come as no surprise that some poor and vulnerable communities around the world are beginning to argue that climate change is resulting in violations of their human rights. In December 2005 over sixty Inuit Indians who live in arctic regions of the United States and Canada submitted a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Faced with a rate of warming that is almost twice the pace experienced elsewhere on the planet, the petitioners requested relief “from human rights violations resulting from the impacts of global warming and climate change caused by acts and omissions of the United States.”

See more at:

[http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/407?\\_ga=1.113231245.806013466.1426012592#sthash.PZZr8Pp6.dpu](http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/407?_ga=1.113231245.806013466.1426012592#sthash.PZZr8Pp6.dpu)  
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## **United Methodist Church Social Principles**

All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect. Economic, political, social, and technological developments have increased our human numbers, and lengthened and enriched our lives. However, these developments have led to regional defoliation, dramatic extinction of species, massive human suffering, overpopulation, and misuse and overconsumption of natural and nonrenewable resources, particularly by industrialized societies. This continued course of action jeopardizes the natural heritage that God has entrusted to all generations. Therefore, let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social, and technological lifestyles to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God's creation.

### **Water, Air, Soil, Minerals, Plants**

We support and encourage social policies that serve to reduce and control the creation of industrial byproducts and waste; facilitate the safe processing and disposal of toxic and nuclear waste and move toward the elimination of both; encourage reduction of municipal waste; provide for appropriate recycling and disposal of municipal waste; and assist the cleanup of polluted air, water, and soil. We call for the preservation of old-growth forests and other irreplaceable natural treasures, as well as preservation of endangered plant species. We support measures designed to maintain and restore natural ecosystems. We support policies that develop alternatives to chemicals used for growing, processing, and preserving food, and we strongly urge adequate research into their effects upon God's creation prior to utilization. We urge development of international agreements concerning equitable utilization of the world's resources for human benefit so long as the integrity of the earth is maintained. We are deeply concerned about the privatization of water resources, the bottling of water to be sold as a commodity for profit, and the resources that go into packaging bottled water. We urge all municipalities and other governmental organizations to develop processes for determining sustainability of water resources and to determine the environmental, economic, and social consequences of privatization of water resources prior to the licensing and approval thereof.

### **Energy Resources Utilization**

The whole earth is God's good creation and as such has inherent value. We are aware that the current utilization of energy resources threatens this creation at its very foundation. As members of The United Methodist Church we are committed to approaching creation, energy production, and especially creation's resources in a responsible, careful and economic way. We call upon all to take measures to save energy. Everybody should adapt his or her lifestyle to the average consumption of energy that respects the limits of the planet earth. We encourage persons to limit CO2 emissions toward the goal of one ton per person annually. We strongly advocate for the priority of the development of renewable energies. The deposits of carbon, oil, and gas resources are limited and their continuous utilization

accelerates global warming. The use of nuclear power is no solution for avoiding CO2 emissions. Nuclear power plants are vulnerable, unsafe, and potential health risks. A safe, permanent storage of nuclear waste cannot be guaranteed. It is therefore not responsible to future generations to operate them. The production of agricultural fuels and the use of biomass plants rank lower than the provision of safe food supplies and the continued existence for small farming businesses.