“NOT IN MY BACKYARD” TO “NOT IN ANYONE’S BACKYARD”
THE BLACK CHURCH AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

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Black churches have always been extremely politically active. Political scientist Robert Booth Fowler describes black churches as “the most activist sector of American religion.” Known for their strong tradition of church-based activism and clerical community leadership, the church remains at the “communal heart” of the African-American community. Beginning in the 1980s, a movement for environmental justice emerged from within the African-American community. Led by black religious leaders, including officials from the various historically black denominations that comprise the Black Church and black officials affiliated with the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice, this movement began to link issues of racism with the effect of environmental damage on minority communities. The Black Church-led movement popularly known as the Environmental Justice Movement has with some success combined both environmental and economic concerns to create a social justice-oriented form of environmentalism that is distinct from the environmentalism practiced by the mostly white-led modern environmental movement. This paper examines the Black Church’s involvement in the Environmental Justice Movement and highlights the emerging shift in approach of Black environmentalism from a “Not In My Backyard” mentality to a “Not In Anyone’s Backyard” mindset.

Environmental Justice Movement: Intro and Early Years

The national Environmental Justice Movement was birthed in 1982 when hundreds of mostly black protestors applied the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience and attempted to prevent the dumping of more than 6,000 truckloads of soil contaminated with a toxic chemical popularly known as PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) at a landfill in Warren County, North Carolina. According to sociologist Robert Bullard, Warren County was “vulnerable to a quadruple whammy of being mostly black, poor, rural, and politically powerless.”
Americans comprised more than 84 percent of the community where the Warren County PCB landfill was located. This fact alone led a local North Carolina chapter of the NAACP and prominent black church leaders to organize daily protests against the toxic dump.viii

Every day for six consecutive weeks these protestors met at the Coley Springs Baptist Church and marched to the dump in order to block the delivery trucks. Local residents were joined by national civil rights leaders, church leaders, black elected officials and environmental activists. Two weeks after the marches had begun, 414 protesters had been arrested including Rev. Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Rev. Walter Fauntroy of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Rev. Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ.ix Ultimately more than 500 protesters were arrested and Warren County was thrust into the national limelight and serious attention was given to the relationship between pollution and minority communities.x The Warren County protests, though unsuccessful, “gave a human face to environmental injustice and put environmental racism on the map,” according to Robert Bullard.xi

In response to these protests, the Congressional Black Caucus requested that the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the racial demographics of hazardous waste sites.xii In its 1983 report, the GAO found that commercial hazardous waste facilities located in the Southeast United States were more likely to be found in predominantly African-American communities.xiii

The massive protests in Warren County also led the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ) to investigate the connection between race and pollution. After five years of research, the Commission published the first comprehensive national study to analyze the relationship between race and the location of hazardous waste facilities.xiv This 1987
study found that the racial composition of a community was the single variable best able to predict the location or placement of commercial hazardous waste facilities.\textsuperscript{xv} The report found that communities with the greatest number of commercial hazardous waste facilities had the highest composition of racial and ethnic residents. In communities with two or more facilities or one of the nation’s five largest landfills, the average minority percentage of the population was more than three times that of communities without facilities. The study stressed that while socio-economic status appeared to play an important role in the location of these facilities, race still proved to be a more significant variable. Furthermore, the report concluded that it was “virtually impossible” that these hazardous waste facilities were distributed by chance.\textsuperscript{xvi}

During the 1980s, Benjamin Chavis, who served as the Executive-Director of the Commission for Racial Justice, coined the term “environmental racism” to describe the intentional and unintentional disproportionate imposition of environmental hazards on minorities. Chavis defined environmental racism as:

Racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of colour communities for the placement of toxic and hazardous waste facilities and the official sanctioning of the life threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in minority communities.\textsuperscript{xvii}

This new concept known as “environmental racism” would remain central to the Environmental Justice Movement throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Known by many as the “father of environmental justice,” sociologist Robert Bullard elaborated on the concept of “environmental racism” in his book, \textit{Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality}. Published in 1990, this first book on environmental racism documented discriminatory policies and practices which permitted polluting hazardous waste facilities to be concentrated in predominantly African-American communities.\textsuperscript{xviii} Bullard argued that the Environmental Justicement Movement was actually an extension of the civil
rights movement. According to Bullard, the struggles of the African-American community against “environmental injustice” are “…not unlike the civil rights battles waged to dismantle the legacy of Jim Crow in Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham.” Thus, Bullard contended that the Environmental Justice Movement held no historic connection to the modern environmental movement launched in the 1960s.

**First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit**

In 1991 the United Church of Christ sponsored an environmental summit for minorities in Washington D.C.. Regarded by many as the most important event in the history of the Environmental Justice Movement, the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit brought together over 650 grassroots and national leaders from all fifty states. During the historic summit, African-Americans, Hispanic and Latino Americans, and Asian-Americans discussed how the destruction and pollution of water, land and air is linked to racism.

African-American religion and civil rights scholar, Anthony Pinn, has asserted that the Summit drew much of its ideological and theological underpinnings from the United Church of Christ’s 1987 report on race and toxic waste. The goal of the Summit, according to Pinn, was to “demonstrate that environmental trauma affects all communities and should be a primary concern for all Americans, regardless of color and class.” Reflecting on the Summit, organizer Benjamin Chavis stated, “We’re trying to reshape the whole notion of what the environmental movement is in America to make it more inclusive. We are witnessing a convergence of values and understanding where what would normally be a social-justice issue is also looked at as an environmental issue.” Chavis continued, “The issue of environmental justice in our communities has become an issue of life and death. This insidious form of
institutionalized racism must be challenged and must be stopped. The Summit helped to broaden the Environmental Justice Movement beyond its narrow anti-toxin focus to include other issues such as public health, worker safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation, and community empowerment.

At the end of the four-day Summit, delegates adopted seventeen “Principles of Environmental Justice.” Affirming the "sacredness of Mother Earth," these principles demanded that public policy be "based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias." This declaration asserted that environmental justice "mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things." Finally, these principles concluded by calling on individuals to challenge and reprioritize their lifestyles to insure the health of the nation and world for present and future generations.

By 1992, “Principes of Environmental Justice” had been translated into multiple languages and was being used and circulated by non-governmental organizations and environmental justice groups across the globe. Also in 1992 amidst growing public concern, the Environmental Protection Agency created the Office of Environmental Justice to integrate environmental justice into the EPA’s policies and programs. This was a special victory for Benjamin Chavis of the Commission for Racial Justice who had aggressively and boldly advocated for the creation of such an office for nearly a decade.

In May, 1992, a group of prominent scientists and religious leaders met to make a joint appeal to Congress and the American public to make saving the environment a moral issue of high national priority. A statement signed by religious leaders from across the theological spectrum and by notable scientists such as Harvard University paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould
declared, “Our own country is the leading polluter on Earth, generating more greenhouse gases – especially carbon dioxide – than any other country. Not by word alone, but by binding action, our nation has an inescapable moral duty to lead the way to effective solutions.” At this meeting, Benjamin Chavis explained, “There is a new movement taking shape in America: It’s called environmental justice. It’s the one issue that can unite blacks and whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans.” The Reverend Franklyn Richardson of the National Baptist Convention, USA emphasized that the union of science and religion represented a “new way to heal the world.” Richardson argued that a moral consciousness must be developed that “lets us understand the sacredness of the environment and the sacredness of people. If the churches can help bring about this convergence of interests, we will indeed be about the business of making the world a better place.” However, Richardson conceded that up until this joint meeting between scientists and religious leaders, he had viewed environmentalism as merely a hobby for the rich. Richardson noted, “These days have been a kind of baptism for me into what is happening with the environment in terms of poor people.”

**Black Church Environmental And Economic Justice Network**

As a direct result of the joint meeting with scientists and other religious leaders, officials from the major historically black denominations established a “Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Network.” These Black Church officials also put in motion plans for a Black Church Environmental Justice Summit to introduce the Black Church leadership and constituency to the issues of environmental and economic justice and to establish a Black Church fund to allocate small grants to congregations to help carry out the work and recommendations of the Network.
Black Church Environmental Justice Summit

Held in Washington D.C. in December 1993, 150 leaders from six historically black denominations representing over thirteen million African-American Christians met at the Black Church Environmental Justice Summit and pledged to make their denominations active in the Environmental Justice Movement. The Summit marked the first time that black denominations had collectively addressed environmental issues and explicitly linked environmentalism with civil rights and economic justice. Throughout the Summit, speakers stressed that environmental justice concerns and economic justice concerns often go hand-in-hand.

While there was nary a peep about greenhouse gases, the ozone layer, spotted owl or other traditional concerns of environmentalists, Summit speakers drew heavily on the concept of environmental racism in their speeches. Top black denominational leaders emphasized the growing problem of lead poisoning and the disproportionate placement of toxic and hazardous waste dumps in black neighborhoods. Bishop Frederick James, President of the African Methodist Episcopal General Board, explained, “We have been living next to the train tracks, trash dumps, coal plants and insect-infested swamps for many decades….While environmental degradation affects everyone, we in the Black community have been disproportionately affected by toxic dumping, disproportionately affected by lead paint at home, disproportionately affected by dangerous chemicals in the workplace.

The Summit’s keynote speaker, Vice President Al Gore, urged the audience to return home and educate their churches about the environmental crisis and develop a plan of action for their community. Gore called on black church leaders to stand with the Clinton Administration in its effort to reshape environmental policy. The Rev. Charles G. Adams, President of the
Progressive National Baptist Convention, challenged Gore to stand with the Black Church “against the forces that are ripping the heavens and raping the Earth…in the name of progress, production, prosperity and pride.” Adams told Gore, that toxic waste “not safe enough to be dumped in the United States is not safe enough to dump in Ghana, Liberia or Somalia. If it’s not safe enough to dump in the suburbs, it’s not safe for the cities.”

At the conclusion of the Summit, participants adopted “The Black Church Declaration on Environmental and Economic Justice.” This declaration was designed to serve as the principal agenda of the newly created Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Network. In 1995, an environmental justice resource packet produced by the Network was widely distributed to black churches throughout the United States. Throughout the 1990s, the Network hosted many educational seminars at local black churches for clergy and laity. In 1998, the Network and the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group sponsored a tour for black denominational leaders of “Cancer Alley,” an area along the Mississippi River in Louisiana between Baton Rouge and New Orleans known for its numerous industrial plants and high cancer rate. The purpose of this “fact-finding mission” was to mobilize black church leaders around the issue of environmental justice.

**Black Church Environmentalism: A Current Assessment**

Despite the increased mobilization of black churches and denominations around environmental justice efforts, environmentalism continues to have a low profile in the African-American community. Since the birth of the Environmental Justice Movement in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982, environmentalists and national environmental organizations have been regarded with suspicion by people of color. Scholars note that environmentalism has long been dubbed as “a white thing” by many African-Americans. University of Michigan
environmental studies professor Bunyan Bryant explained, “To champion old growth forests or the protection of the snail darter or the habitat of spotted owls without championing clean safe urban environments or improved habitats of the homeless, does not bode well for future relations between environmentalists and people of color, and with the poor.”

During the 1980s and 1990s, local black activists often declined requests from white environmentalists to participate in various conservation efforts revealing a rift between black environmental justice activists and white environmentalists. Frederick Krupp of the Environmental Defense Fund contends that the “token representation” of racial minorities in mainstream environmental organizations is an additional reminder of the gap between the two movements. He explains, “The truth is that environmental groups have done a miserable job of reaching out to minorities.”

A popular argument among those involved in the environmental movement is that because racial minorities often struggle to financially meet basic needs, they will consequently place environmental concerns low on their totem poll of priorities. Environmental sociologist Dorceta Taylor asserts that this argument does not allow for the possibility that environmental issues could become high-priority issues for minorities by redefining environmental issues in terms of basic needs. Taylor believes that because many of the environmental problems facing minorities are immediate and life-threatening, African-Americans will become involved in environmental organizations and groups, if and when these groups deal with issues of survival and basic needs.

Always concerned more with issues that directly impact their community, African-American environmental justice activists often resemble “situation environmentalists,” according to environmental historian Mark Stoll of Texas Tech University. As “situation environmentalists,” environmental justice leaders have been motivated by “NIMBYism” (Not In
My Backyard), indifferent to environmental concerns except for those that show up in their own communities or literally in their own backyard.\textsuperscript{li}

During the Black Church Environmental Justice Summit in 1993, Charles G. Adams of the Progressive National Baptist Convention gave outside observers a glimpse into a more expansive environmental approach being adopted by leaders in the Environmental Justice Movement. As previously noted, Adams declared at the Summit that toxic waste “not safe enough to be dumped in the United States is not safe enough to dump in Ghana, Liberia or Somalia. If it’s not safe enough to dump in the suburbs, it’s not safe for the cities.”\textsuperscript{lii} This statement from a top environmental justice advocate indicates that the Not In My Backyard approach of the Environmental Justice Movement was evolving into a Not in Anyone’s Backyard approach.\textsuperscript{liii}

In recent years, a few prominent leaders of historically black denominations have applied this more expansive “Not In Anyone’s Backyard” approach to other environmental issues such as global warming. Shortly before leaving office, President Bill Clinton, was urged by the Rev. William Shaw, President of the six-million member National Baptist Convention USA to negotiate a strong international treaty that would reduce the threat of global warming by reducing pollution caused by burning fossil fuels. In the letter signed by Shaw, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol was described as an “important witness to God’s redemption of creation and to the importance of protecting God’s children and God’s creation, now and for future generations.”\textsuperscript{liv}

In May 2001, Jewish and Christian leaders from across the United States, including Dr. C. Mackey Daniels of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Bishop Paul A. Stewart Sr. of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and Rt. Rev. McKinley Young of the African Methodist Episcopal Church signed a letter which stressed that the United States “has a moral
responsibility to lead a transition to a new sustainable global energy system.” According to the letter, “Preventing climate change is a preeminent expression of faithfulness to our Creator God.”

The Progressive National Baptist Convention formally addressed the issue of climate change at their 2007 meeting in Washington D.C. by passing a resolution calling on “Progressive Baptists to recognize the urgent need to reduce global warming pollution.” The resolution asked Progressive Baptists to consider proposals to “reduce CO2 and other greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the most catastrophic effects of global warming, to foster sustainable development around the world and to promote the development of innovative technologies.” The resolution issued a strong request to government officials to “ensure an appropriate balance between care for the environment, effects on economies, and impact on the poor” when considering programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Dewitt Smith Jr., President of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, explained the denomination’s rationale for passing the resolution: “We were placed here by God to be caretakers, and therefore we are concerned about global warming and will do all that we can to help in the situation rather than hurt.”

Recent studies have found that minority and low-income communities are more likely to be hurt by global warming than other Americans. With this in mind, it has yet to be seen whether a movement led by the Black Church will emerge that seeks to frame a traditionally “white” environmental concern such as climate change in environmental justice terminology. Will the Black Church mobilize around a hot global environmental issue like climate change that ultimately effects everyone’s backyard not just their own? In an effort to transition from a Not in My Backyard ethical approach to a thoroughly Not In Anyone's Backyard approach, Black
denominations should use their recent environmental statements as a springboard to take action by mobilizing and educating their communities on these pressing environmental concerns.
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iii The United States Environmental Protection Agency has defined environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” See “Environmental Justice,” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/ (accessed March 1, 2009).

iv Different scholars have defined the phrase “Black Church” differently. For the purposes of this paper, I am defining the Black Church as the African-American churches that comprise seven of the major historically black denominations in the United States. They include the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.; National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.; African Methodist Episcopal Church; Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.; The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.


Ibid.

Stoll, 160-161. Benjamin Chavis is now a minister with the Nation of Islam.


Bullard, “25th Anniversary of the Warren County PCB Landfill Protests.”

Ibid.

three out of four of the off-site commercial hazardous waste landfills located in the Southeast United States (Region 5) were located in communities with a majority African-American population despite the fact that African-Americans comprised only twenty percent of the region’s population.


xviii Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 127-139. See also Bullard, Assuring Environmental Justice For All,” 189.

xix Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*, xiii.

xx Ibid., 127-139.

xii Pinn, 55-56.

xxii Ibid.


xxv Pinn, 55-56.


xxxi Ibid.


Pinn, 57.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Anderson, “Black churches bring ecology down to earth.”

“Black church and the environment.”

Pinn, 57-58.

“Roots in the Historical Black Churches.”

Stoll, 153.

Melosi, 125. To quash the perception that environmentalism is a “white thing,” several studies have emphasized the commitment of racial minorities to clean-air and clean-water legislation as well as the strong voting record of the Congressional Black Caucus on various environmental issues.


Stoll, 162-163.

“Black church and the environment.”

Ibid.

National Council of Churches, “Religious Leaders Call for Action on Global Warming: U.S. Faith Groups, at The Hague Urge Clinton to Finish Global Warming Treaty,” November 20, 2000, [http://www.nccusa.org/news/00news104.html](http://www.nccusa.org/news/00news104.html) (accessed February 23, 2009). The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement to commit industrialized nations to a reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases by 2010. Kyoto commits non-industrialized nations to a system of incentives to encourage sustainable development which does not produce greenhouse gases. Thus far, 181 countries have signed and ratified the Kyoto Protocol. However, the United States has refused to ratify the agreement because it feels that Kyoto is unfairly burdensome. Nonetheless, a number of large cities in the United States have chosen to become “Kyoto cities” and have voluntarily set standards for emissions reductions.
