

Testimony of Reverend Dr. J Herbert Nelson II
Director, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

"Examining the Role of Environmental Policies on
Access to Energy and Economic Opportunity."

Hello, my name is Reverend Doctor J Herbert Nelson and I direct the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness. Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member Boxer, and Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I come to you today not only with 30 years of pastoral experience in a community that bore the harmful impacts of industrial pollution, not only as director of our denomination's national advocacy office, but as a representative of an ecumenical Christian community that understands the urgent moral imperative to act on climate change and protect God's great creation.

Scripture affirms: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers" (Ps. 24:1-2); The Christian affirmation of God's creation and love for the world means protection for all human, animal and plant life. It is apt, then, that we discuss environmental policy in tandem with economic policy, for care for *all* of creation, including our neighbors' health and economic wellbeing, is central to our concern in addressing climate change.

I served as Pastor of a poor inner city congregation in Memphis, Tennessee before coming to Washington, DC. I shared my home and my community with some of the most intense industrial pollution in the country from a chemical plant, a coal-fired power generating station, and an oil refinery. Ours was a predominantly African American community, which like so many low-income communities of color in our nation, suffered disproportionately under the health burdens of living in an industrial zone. It was widely reported at the time that Africans Americans were 79 percent more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where industrial pollution was suspected of posing the greatest health danger¹.

Memphis residents were often sick and were forced to miss school and work because of chronic asthma caused by pollutants². I recall one activist I knew, Doris

¹ Pace, David. "Minorities Suffer Most from Industrial Pollution." *Associated Press*. 12/14/2005. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/10452037/ns/us_news-environment/t/minorities-suffer-most-industrial-pollution/#.Vwqu72QrLjE

² Jia, Chunrong, Wesley James, and Satish Kedia. "Relationship of Racial Composition and Cancer Risks from Air Toxics Exposure in Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A." *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2014 Aug; 11(8): 7713-7724. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4143828/#B5-ijerph-11-07713>

Bradshaw, who lived on land contaminated by a nearby military storage facility. After her grandmother's untimely death from an aggressive cervical cancer, which doctors told her was environmentally induced, Ms. Bradshaw delved into her own investigation of the contaminants of the land and air. She was shocked to find a laundry list of chemicals that had been improperly disposed of and stored there, and those responsible for the disposal had not been held accountable³. I am certain that the CEOs and profiteers of those companies did not live in areas where the air and water made their family ill. As pastor, I conducted funerals of people who died before their time, made countless hospital visits for maladies my flock should not have had to endure, and engaged in organizing to bring justice to those afflicted by careless environmental practices. We seek an earth restored, where economic development is not paid for with the health of our most vulnerable sisters and brothers in Christ.

Presbyterians have established since 1981 that we have an ethical obligation to secure a livable planet for present and future generations. A report approved by the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) entitled *The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy And Global Warming*⁴ states emphatically that we have both a spiritual and moral responsibility to address the issues related to climate change. In order to do this in the Reformed tradition, we believe that repentance is required. Repentance in our biblical understanding calls individuals and nations to stop the actions that are contrary to God's desires for the sustainability of human life, while turning to a new way of living that promotes the John 10:10 vision of an abundant life. With God's grace, we can receive the power to change.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes that there is no greater measure of God's abundant provision than that of the energy provided by the sun and wind. As such, our denomination has called for the removal of market barriers for broad based investment in renewable energy. We have already seen prices of renewables drop below the prices of carbon based energy sources in some areas⁵, and believe it is part of our moral imperative to continue these development projects. We charge the federal government to continue to shift subsidies and financial incentives away from fossil fuel extraction and towards renewable energy infrastructure in order to protect the affordable energy prices that many low income families rely on. Our

³Freeman, Sarah Wilkerson. *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times*. University of Georgia Press, 2009. P. 415

⁴"The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming," approved by the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2008, <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/power-change-us-energy-policy-global-warming/>.

⁵ Jacobs, Mike. "Where is Wind Energy Cheaper than Natural Gas?". *Union of Concerned Scientists*. October 18, 2013. <http://blog.ucsusa.org/mike-jacobs/where-is-wind-energy-cheaper-than-natural-gas-276>

denomination also recognizes that carbon based energy sources are artificially inexpensive, and that we would be stunned if costs to human health and reclamation of God's damaged creation were reflected in the utility bills of everyday Americans. We know not what we do.

At this time, I would like to make some specific remarks about the President's Climate Action Plan. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Evangelical institutions have commented extensively on the importance of the President's Plan, including and especially the Clean Power Plan and curbing methane waste.⁶ I will submit for the record more than two dozen statements by Catholic, Evangelical, Protestant, and Jewish leadership that express strong support for those two aspects of the Climate Action Plan. The Clean Power Plan will help communities like the one I pastored in Memphis to gather stakeholders and together, forge a path forward to make the transition to a much-needed clean energy future that will protect our community's health. In spite of the Supreme Court stay, as well as some states' decisions to stall progress, faith communities are forging ahead at the grassroots level to have the conversations on the ground about making inevitable and necessary changes in our energy economy, which will ultimately benefit all of us. We do this because we believe the only thing that will "put a stay" on climate change is swift, faithful action to heal and protect God's creation. Furthermore, because faith communities value good stewardship, we believe methane standards by EPA and BLM of new and existing methane pollution sources need to be swiftly completed. One only need visit Porter Ranch, California or any other community close to an oil and gas extraction site to see devastating impacts of careless, easily fix-able methane leaks. Currently, the methane pollution wasted by the oil and gas industry each year is enough to heat nearly 6 million homes each winter. Furthermore, millions in taxpayer money literally go up in smoke due to venting and flaring practices on our public lands. States, Tribes and federal taxpayers lose royalty revenues when natural gas is wasted – as much as \$23 million annually in royalty revenue for the Federal Government and the States that share it, according to a 2010 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report.

Our advocacy does not end at our own borders, for we know well that energy decisions made by the US are amplified the world over. People of faith came out in unprecedented numbers to advocate for global climate action in the COP 21 Paris Climate Agreement. Collectively, we delivered nearly two million petition signatures to negotiators calling for a fair, ambitious, binding climate agreement. The agreement reached is a reflection of the powerful advocacy work of communities around the world. World leaders have finally recognized that the moral imperative for ambitious climate action — now and for decades to come — is strong. Yet, although the deal is an important step forward, it is insufficient. We commend negotiators for laying a strong foundation for climate change mitigation, and recognize that we in the United States have significant work to do to make good on

⁶ National Religious Partnership for the Environment.
<http://www.nrpe.org/climate-statements.html>

existing promises, as well as achieve the level of change necessary. As we continue to build on this agreement, we call on the United States to take leadership in keeping existing climate finance commitments, as well as planning for the social, political, and financial implications of climate-related loss and damage.

It is a matter of justice that developed nations who have put the most greenhouse gasses into the air take responsibility for developing nations' ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Developing nations need access to renewable energy infrastructure, as well as the tools to address climate impacts such as severe weather, droughts, and flooding. The Paris Agreement included some basic climate finance mechanisms which our communities can build on in future years. Since its inception, faith communities have vigorously supported the Green Climate Fund. Along with my testimony, I will submit for the record a letter released on Monday, April 11, 2016 that was signed by 115 faith organizations urging Congress to invest the President's recommended \$750 million in the Green Climate Fund for Fiscal Year 2017. Along with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), some of the signers include the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Jewish Council of Public Affairs, the National Council of Churches USA, and the Evangelical Environmental Network.

This is not simply a Presbyterian concern; various communions and denominations from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Alliance of Baptists to the United Methodist Church to the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelicals have joined together in the common mission to care for God's creation. Many of these Christian traditions also hold theological principles reflected in Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*. *Laudato Si'* is one of two papal encyclicals that, because its subject matter is universally relevant, is addressed to all people, rather than only to Catholics. We affirm its echo of the great St. Francis' reverence for nature. At the same time, we join the Pope in the urgency of truth-telling: we humans are largely responsible for global warming and we have to find ways to reverse track.

With our Lord, we will stand with the "least of these" (Matt. 25:40) and advocate for the poor and oppressed in present and future generations who are often the victims of environmental injustice and who are least able to mitigate the impact of global warming that [is falling] disproportionately on them. ... [W]e implore our nation to accept its moral responsibility to address global warming. I thank you for the opportunity to testify and look forward to your questions.

The Reverend Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, serves as Director of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness in Washington, DC. The Office of Public Witness is a prophetic office of the denomination and implements the social justice agenda of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through advocacy with the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. The OPW also engages in a broad range of activities with Presbyterian congregations and structures, providing constituency education materials and arranging briefings and conferences. Nelson believes that grassroots organizing within the denomination is a major key to impacting the prophetic witness and political sphere in today's globalized culture.

Dear Member of Congress,

April 11, 2016

We write to you as communities of faith to ask your support for the U.S. pledge to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the President's FY2017 budget request of \$750 million for the GCF.

We come from different faith traditions, united across theological lines by our deep concern for humanity and all of God's Creation. We are guided by principles of stewardship, compassion and justice in confronting the moral crisis of our changing climate. The Green Climate Fund represents an important step in global cooperation needed to build a more resilient world and to move us along the path toward a low carbon future.

Our scriptures and religious texts call us to care for God's creation and our most vulnerable neighbors. We believe that climate change presents an unprecedented threat to all of Creation, but particularly to those living in poverty around the world.

We already witness the impacts of climate change in rising sea levels that threaten small island states, long-term drought and other weather extremes that impact the food security and political stability of Least Developed Countries, and melting glaciers that threaten the water supplies of major cities in the Global South. All of these impacts fall hardest on those with the least means to adapt—people and communities already struggling with poverty and hunger, who are also the least responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions causing earth's climate to change.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) represents a new way forward in climate finance to build resilience and stability in the face of the unavoidable impacts of climate change. The core purpose of the GCF is to build the capability of developing nations to limit or reduce their greenhouse gas emissions through low carbon development pathways and to adapt to the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

To fulfill this purpose, the GCF is designed to be innovative, accountable, and compassionate. It is an independent entity with strong fiduciary standards. It is accountable to a board of directors with representatives from donor and recipient countries, including the United States. It includes high levels of transparency and accountability in its structure and governing principles to ensure proper use of its funds.

We are particularly heartened that half of the GCF funds are dedicated to adaptation needs, and with priority given to African nations, small island states, and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), the GCF represents a major commitment by the global community to help vulnerable nations build resilience to climate impacts. Such resilience will increase political stability and protect humble livelihoods of fishing and farming communities, with positive implications for related issues including migration and national security.

The GCF also builds on lessons learned from the World Bank's Climate Investment Funds (CIFs) and other international funds that have previously supported clean energy development and climate compatible development. Notably, the GCF's design allows for the use of innovative financial

instruments to tap the power of the private sector –including leading American companies – to help address climate change.

More than \$10 billion in funding pledges for the GCF to date have come from countries representing diverse regions and income levels. In addition to the U.S. pledge of \$3 billion, Germany, Japan, South Korea, France, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico are among the donors, demonstrating a global commitment among developed and developing countries to address climate change.

We fully support the President’s request for \$750 million for the GCF in FY2017 budget to continue efforts to build critical climate resiliency in states that are already facing eroded shorelines, super storms and longer periods of drought. The GCF’s first set of eight projects were approved in December to build climate resilience for millions of people in vulnerable states including Bangladesh, Fiji, Malawi, and Central America. As we recently witnessed the impacts of Hurricane Winston in Fiji, we are reminded of how fragile existence is in countries with fewer resources than our own.

This investment in mitigation and adaptation is our moral obligation as a major contributor to climate change. It is also a sound investment in alleviating poverty, ensuring food security and building stability now and into the future. Fulfilling our commitments to the GCF also strengthens our credibility, trust, and leadership in the international community.

Addressing the harmful impacts of climate change upon the most vulnerable peoples and the future of all God’s creation is the moral responsibility of our nation, and our sacred task as people of faith. We hope you will use your leadership role to support the U.S. pledge to the Green Climate Fund.

Sincerely,

National Organizations/Denominations:

Adorers, U.S. Region
Adventist Development and Relief Agency
Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Churches in the USA
American Jewish World Service
Bread for the World
Catholic Climate Covenant
Catholic Relief Services
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Church World Service
Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Creation Justice Ministries
Disciples Center for Public Witness
The Dominican Sisters of Hope
Ecumenical Catholic Communion

The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Environmental Network
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Green Muslims
GreenFaith
Interfaith Power & Light
Islamic Relief USA
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
The Justice & Witness Ministries of The United Church of Christ
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Lutheran World Relief
Lutherans Restoring Creation
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Church in North America
The Presbyterian Church (USA)
Rabbinical Assembly
Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association
Reformed Church in America
School Sisters of Notre Dame Cooperative Investment Fund
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Institute Justice Team
Society of St Ursula – American Region
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Methodist Caretakers of God's Creation
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Women of Reform Judaism
Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc
Young Evangelicals for Climate Action

State/Regional Organizations:

Arizona Interfaith Power & Light
Arkansas Interfaith Power & Light
Buffalo Diocese Care for Creation Committee
Charleston Jewish Federation

Colorado Interfaith Power & Light
Community Relations Committee of Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ
Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Silicon Valley
Delaware Ecumenical Council on Children and Families
Delaware Interfaith Power & Light
Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power & Light
Faith Action Network – WA State
Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions (VA)
Flint Jewish Federation
Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph
Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement
Georgia Interfaith Power & Light
Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart Earth Committee
Hoosier IPL
Illinois Interfaith Power & Light
Interfaith Climate Justice Community of Western New York
Interfaith Power & Light (DC.MD.NoVA)
Iowa Interfaith Power & Light
Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (VA, DC)
Jewish Community Relations Council of New Haven Connecticut
Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Collier County (FL)
Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte
Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines
Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia
Jewish Federation of the Bluegrass, KY
Jewish Federation of the Quad Cities (IL)
Jubilee Bay Area
Jubilee Oregon
Kentucky Interfaith Power & Light
Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania
Maine Council of Churches
Maine Interfaith Power & Light
Massachusetts Council of Churches
Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light
Michigan Interfaith Power & Light
Milwaukee Jewish Federation
Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light
Nebraska Interfaith Power & Light
New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light
New York Interfaith Power & Light
North Carolina Council of Churches
North Carolina Interfaith Power & Light

Oklahoma Interfaith Power & Light
Oregon Interfaith Power & Light
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Racine Dominicans
Rhode Island Interfaith Power & Light
Savannah Jewish Federation and Jewish Educational Alliance, Savannah GA
Sisters of Charity of New York
Sisters of O.L. of Christian Doctrine
Sisters of St. Dominic of Caldwell, NJ
SS Peter and Paul Care for Creation Committee, Hamburg, N.Y.
Sunshine State IPL
Tennessee Interfaith Power & Light
Texas Interfaith Power & Light
Tri-State Coalition for Responsible Investment
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice in the National Capital Region
Utah Interfaith Power & Light
Vermont Interfaith Power & Light
Virginia Council of Churches
Virginia Interfaith Power & Light
Wisconsin Green Muslims
Wisconsin Interfaith Power & Light