

# **OVERTURE to the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly**

## **Sustainable Development: The Precautionary Principle**

**The Presbytery of Yukon concurs with the Presbytery of Heartland and, with them, overtures the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly to affirm the vital importance of sustainable development and the Precautionary Principle. It is the basis for a responsible, moral and ethical means of working and being. It affirms the Sacred in societal and Creation care, protecting Earth for future generations. Additionally, we ask that the PC(USA) commission a study group to review this principle and prepare a study paper for use by congregations throughout the denomination, enabling congregations to advocate for reform.**

### **Rationale:**

#### ***The Word of the Lord***

*“The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it....The LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to farm the fertile land from which he was taken.”* (Genesis 2:15; Genesis 3:23)

God intends for human beings to care for the land where God has placed us. The Hebrew term, “*le’abdah*”, which the Common English Bible translates as “to farm,” goes deeper in its Hebrew meaning. Specifically, “*le’abdah*” bears the connotation of service rather than exploitation or any definition of dominion that does not mean “*caring for (something) in the service of God.*” According to this passage, Adam is to be a “servant” of the fertile land, helping it to be productive (Rev. Britton Johnston).

#### ***The Precautionary Principle and Sustainable Development***

The Precautionary Principle is defined as “the precept that an action should not be taken if the consequences are uncertain and potentially dangerous” (World English Dictionary). The Principle follows the theory that an action should be taken when a problem or threat occurs, not after harm has been inflicted” (UN Conference on the Environment, 1988). It is derived from a French word meaning “fore-caring”.

If introduced into American law, the precautionary principle would fundamentally shift the

burden of proof regarding the safety of products and processes for the public. The presumptions that flow from the scientific uncertainty surrounding so many new technologies would no longer automatically operate in industry's favor. Scientific uncertainty would no longer argue for freedom of action but for precaution and alternatives.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) report defines the Precautionary Principle as follows: When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm. Morally unacceptable harm refers to harm to humans or the environment that is

- threatening to human life or health, or
- serious and effectively irreversible, or
- inequitable to present or future generations, or
- imposed without adequate consideration of the human rights of those affected...

(www.Precautionary Principle.eu.)

COMEST states that the "Precautionary Principle is often seen as an integral principle of sustainable development [defined as] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their needs. By safeguarding against serious and, particularly, irreversible harm to the natural resource base that might jeopardize the capacity of future generations to provide for their own needs, it builds on ethical notions of intra- and inter-generational equity."

"When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and affect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the precautionary principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action." (**Wingspread Statement** on the Precautionary Principle, Jan. 1998)

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a long history in being proactive in Ecological Concerns. Although many more examples could be cited, two particularly relevant examples include the 202<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly policy statement on "Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice" and the 1996 "Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Development" from the 208<sup>th</sup> General Assembly.

### ***Threats to Human and Environmental Health and Well-Being:***

#### ***Example: Toxic Chemicals***

Toxic chemicals threaten human and environmental health. The Presbytery of Yukon notes that toxic chemicals, both deposited by specific human agents and accumulated from general

pollution through wind and sea currents, have put many Alaskans at risk. Further, the Presbyterians for Earth Care, in a letter to membership on May 16, 2013 stated,

”Tens of thousands of chemicals remain in everyday products, such as cleaners, food containers, furniture and even children's products without being tested for safety. Under current law, the EPA can call for safety testing only after evidence surfaces demonstrating a chemical is dangerous. As a result, the EPA has only been able to require testing for roughly 200 of more than 84,000 chemicals currently registered in the United States.

As people of faith, we are called to care about God's creation. These chemicals may be harmful to the earth, and to humans, we do not know. What we do know is that the CDC has found more than 212 industrial chemicals in American's bodies, and that babies are born with chemicals already present in their bodies. Paul says the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. American's bodies are temples of chemicals.” (PEC, May 16, 2013.)

Greenfaith, an interfaith coalition for the environment, with whom PC(USA) Environmental Ministries has an affiliation, has written an “Interfaith Statement for Chemical Policy Reform” which was formulated with two other faith-based organizations –the National Council of Churches USA , and the Union for Reform Judaism.

This statement notes, ‘While all people are at risk, some are more vulnerable. Communities of color and low-income communities suffer disproportionately from pollution caused by current and past industrial activity, waste disposal, heavily-traveled transportation routes, and consumer products containing toxic chemicals. Researchers also warn that toxic chemicals negatively impact children, expectant mothers, and workers.

‘Chemical workers suffer from exposures because of the lack of public data on chemicals they use, unsafe workplaces, and lax enforcement of regulations. As religious leaders and people of faith and conscience from diverse traditions, we affirm that reforming current chemical policies is vital to protecting people and life on God’s Earth...

Government policy on chemicals can and should protect people and all life on Earth. Chemical legislation should:

(1) Protect People and All Life on Earth

- Remove the most dangerous chemicals, such as chemicals that persist, bioaccumulate, or are acutely toxic (PBTs), from use except when no safe alternative is available.
- Hold companies accountable for demonstrating that chemicals are safe.

(2) Protect Vulnerable Populations

- Reduce the disproportionate burden of chemical exposure placed on workers, low-income people, people of color, indigenous communities, pregnant women, and children, and other vulnerable groups.
- Expand government bio-monitoring, particularly in at-risk communities, to measure people's toxic exposure.
- Invest in research to understand and protect children's health from chemical harm.
- Provide chemical health and safety information to workers and the public.

(3) Promote a Sustainable, Healthy Economy

- Fund “green” chemistry and engineering research to create safer chemicals and industrial processes.
- Promote a “green” economy that will allow all life to flourish and bring green jobs to low-income communities and communities of color.