



“For I Was Thirsty...”

A Resource for World Water Day

For the Christian community, water is symbolic of our relationship with God, carrying the image of renewal, promise, and hope. It is through water that we are baptized into the community of the church. Furthermore, water is essential to all life on Earth, and it links human life to the rest of God’s Creation. Creation begins with the God calling life out of the water (Genesis 1:2). The human body, in fact, is made of mostly water. We can go for weeks without food, but only a few days without water. It is through water that all of Creation is gifted with life, and life, in all of its forms, is not possible without water.

The protection of water for use by the rest of Creation, especially future generations and those living in poverty, is the responsibility of all of God’s people. As a gift from God, our response is to share the gift of water with all. In this involved caring for neighbor and for all of life we ensure that, as a matter of justice, nobody is denied water. More than 1 billion people in the world still lack clean drinking water, and 2.6 billion lack access to adequate sanitation. Unsafe water, poor sanitation and hygiene cause 80 percent of the sickness in developing countries and the deaths of 5,000 children a day.¹

We recognize clean water as a priceless gift of God, but too often we don’t realize the global water crisis is ours to reconcile.

THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS

No body or source of water is left untouched by this crisis. From the pollution of the oceans to the drying of the rivers of the world, the effects are felt throughout Creation.

Marine Ecosystems

Throughout the world, bodies of water that support extensive systems of biodiversity are being threatened by coastal development, pollution, overfishing, and tourism. In Belize, some of the most well known coral reefs in the world are threatened by spear fishing, deforestation, and sewage discharge.² Off the coast of the West-

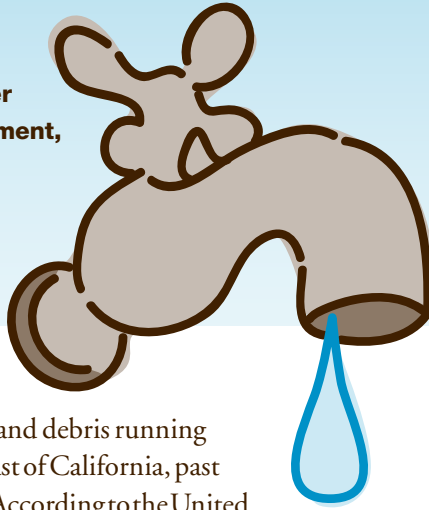
¹http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap/facts_figures/basic_needs.shtml

²http://www.motherjones.com/news/special_reports/coral_reef/belize.html

CHRISTIANS FROM PACIFIC ISLANDS CALL FOR ACTION

Addressing a diverse group of more than 100 representatives from churches and organizations from around the world, Rev. Asora Amosa, a Samoan-born pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, underscored that it is time to take action together: “We have criticized the industrialized nations for failing to take courageous action, but we realize also that the time for according blame has gone.” Rev. Baranite Kirata from Kiribati, one of the three Pacific island states which will lose their territory to the rising sea level in the foreseeable future, explained what it means to know that not only will his people become refugees but that the place they call home will disappear under the rising waters.

For the Pacific churches, the issue is not only political and economic, but deeply theological, ethical, and spiritual. Churches in the Pacific have developed action plans and conservation activities. Pacific islanders also cooperate with partners in the other countries to raise awareness. For example, during a Stop Coal Event, a small boat full of “climate refugees,” including two Pacific islanders in traditional attire floated on the River Spree in front of the German parliament, giving visibility to the issue.¹²



ern United States, there is a river of trash and debris running through the Pacific Ocean—from the coast of California, past Hawaii, and running all the way to Japan. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, plastic debris causes the deaths of more than a million seabirds every year, as well as more than 100,000 marine mammals.³

Privatization

Much of the world lives without access to clean water. Privatization of water, promoted as a means to bring business efficiency into water service management, has instead led to reduced access for people in poverty around the world as prices for these essential services have risen. In the United States, this has become an issue in the Great Lakes with the Great Lakes Compact, which allows for water to be transferred out and sold in small bottles. The concern is that international conglomerates will open in the region and drain away all the water for bottled water.⁴ In India, Coca-Cola has drawn criticism for mining water for which they have rights. Coca Cola’s bottling plant was set up in 1999 in the middle of fertile agricultural land, with proximity to a number of reservoirs and irrigation canals.

Cokes mining of more than 1 million liters of ground water of ground water per day has parched the lands of some 2000 people within 1.2 miles of the factory.⁵

Freshwater Availability

The world is running out of fresh water. Humanity is polluting, diverting, and depleting the wellspring of life at a startling rate. With every passing day, our demand for fresh water outpaces its availability and thousands more people are put at risk.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most impoverished areas in the world, access to water is one of the most pressing needs. Only 58 percent of the population today has access to improved water resources. Water supplies from rivers, lakes, and rainfall are characterized by their unequal natural geographical distribution and accessibility. Unsustainable water use and climate change will only exacerbate this problem. By 2025, more than 460 million people could be at risk because of water stress—and this estimate does not account for climate change impacts.⁶

In the United States, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, 218 million Americans live within ten miles of a polluted lake, stream, or coastal area, while 40 percent of the country’s waters are unsafe for fishing, swimming, or supporting aquatic life.⁷

These impacts reflect the way we exist in relationship with God and God’s Creation—it paints a picture of how we are using the Creation God made for our own purposes, rather than living with and caring for it.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND WATER

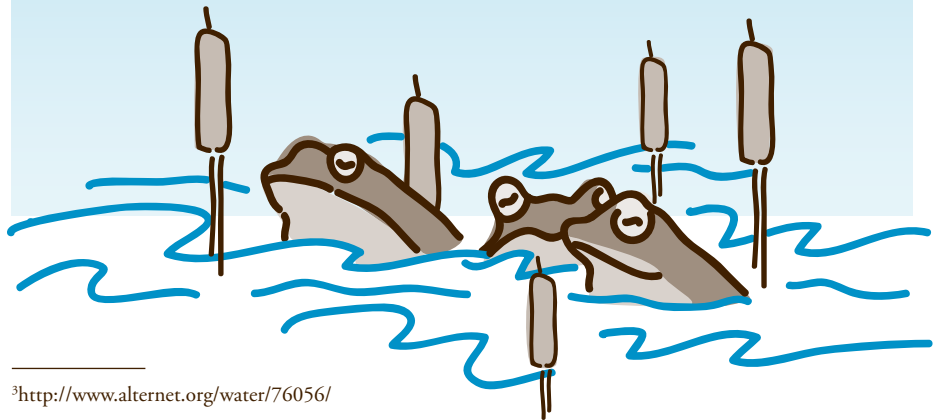
A report from the United States Department of Agriculture notes that all of life is reliant on water, and all sources of water are sensitive to the impacts of climate change.⁸ Furthermore, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes that climate change will increase the likelihood of flooding and drought, result in the decline of water supplies stored in glaciers and snow cover, affect water quality and pollution, and affect food availability, stability, access, and utilization.⁹ In fact, the report states, “Climate warming observed over the past several decades is consistently associated with [...] changing precipitation patterns, intensity and extremes; widespread melting of snow and ice; increasing atmospheric water vapor; increasing evaporation; and changes in soil moisture and runoff.”

Those living in poverty will be disproportionately affected. Lake Chad, a water source for five countries and 20 million people in Africa, is drying up because of droughts. In 1960, Lake Chad covered more than 26,000 square kilometers. By 2000, it was down to 1,500 square kilometers.¹⁰ When the climate changes the weather pattern in Africa, crops fail and people go hungry. In the Pacific Islands, rising oceans are threatening to wipe entire communities off the map—communities without the resources to properly adapt.¹¹ Our call to care for the least of these adds to the urgency brought upon people of faith by the global water crisis.

THREAT LOOMING IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

The second major drought of the last decade is a wake-up call for the Southeast United States, showing the region’s vulnerability because of its reliance on scarce supplies of fresh water. The region has been operating under the best-case water availability for the last 50 years, during which drought conditions were relatively rare. But, the region has historically experienced regular droughts. Global warming is the future wildcard, potentially causing increases in both extremely dry periods and heavy rainfall events. At the same time, warming-induced sea-level rise will increase the risk of saltwater intrusion into important groundwater aquifers in the Southeast.

Climate change will affect water supplies to communities and put the amazing biodiversity of the Southeast at risk. The river basins of the Southeast are globally renowned for fish, mussels, salamanders, and other freshwater species, many of which are already imperiled. Climate change—and the increasingly extreme weather patterns it brings—now poses new threats to these species. “Global warming presents new challenges for managing America’s water resources, especially in our southeastern states,” stated Dr. Staudt, Climate Scientist for National Wildlife Federation “To prevent the worst impacts of climate change and limit the impacts on communities and wildlife, we must reduce global warming pollution.”¹³



³<http://www.alternet.org/water/76056/>

⁴Miner, Barbara. “The Politics of Water”. *Milwaukee Magazine*. 3.1.2008.

⁵<http://www.stwr.org/land-energy-water/-implication-of-water-privatization-in-india.html>

⁶Kundzewicz.

⁷Harrison, Paul and Fred Pearce. 2001. AAAS Atlas of Population and Environment. www.epa.gov/water/liquidassets/execsumm.html

⁸Lettenmaier, DP, et al. “Water Resources”. *The Effects of Climate Change on Agriculture, Land Resources, Water Resources, and Biodiversity*. www.usda.gov.

⁹Kundzewicz, Zbigniew, et al. “Climate Change and Water”. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. June 2008.

¹⁰“Lake Chad”. www.wikipedia.org 20 Dec. 2007

¹¹<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/05/03/asia/pacific.php>

¹²<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1722/climate-change-it-is-too.html>

¹³<http://www.nwf.org/news/story.cfm?pageId=BA59B89A-5056-A868-A0853748FEC9AE43>

SERMON STARTERS

Water is so abundant on this planet that some believe the Earth should be called the Water planet. In the account of Eden in Genesis 2, a river flows out of Eden to water the garden. Life and water are over-flowing. God blows moist breath into the clay to bring the human to life. Water and earth are combined by God to make us humans. Throughout the stories of the Hebrew Bible water plays a key role. When Hagar and Ishmael were sent into the desert to die, the angel of the LORD finds Hagar a spring. God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees the well of water at Beer-lahai-roi (Genesis 21:19). There is enough water for all if, like Hagar, we just look.

One of the first treaties or covenants between humans in the Bible is a water-use compact. After Abraham complains to King Abimelech about access to a well, they swear an oath about access to the well's water and name the well. Beersheba. The well of the oath. (Genesis 21:25-34).

God's economy is always an economy of abundance. After the Israelites follow Moses into the desert, they doubt God's abundance and complain to Moses that they are being brought into the wilderness to die of thirst. First, they complain of bitter water at Marah (Genesis 15: 24), and then, despite God having turned the water sweet and leading them directly to Elim, a place of 12 springs, they still complain that there is no water when they come to Horeb. Moses strikes the rock with his shaft and waters flow out in both the Numbers 20 and the Exodus 17 version of the story. In the Numbers 20 version, though, Moses is punished with not seeing the Promised Land, because he did not give God the credit for bringing the water from the rock.

The abundance of Exodus and Numbers has a simple formula. Worship God above all and you will have all that you need. The bible states that we shall worship God and be blessed with bread and water. (Exodus 23:25) Numbers 24:7 promises that water shall flow from his [Israel's] buckets and his offspring shall have abundant water. Many Psalms and Proverbs remind us of God's bountiful gift of water and our need to share that gift. Proverbs reminds us that the one who gives water will get water. Proverbs 25:21 directs us to give food and drink to even our enemies: and if they are thirsty give them water to drink.

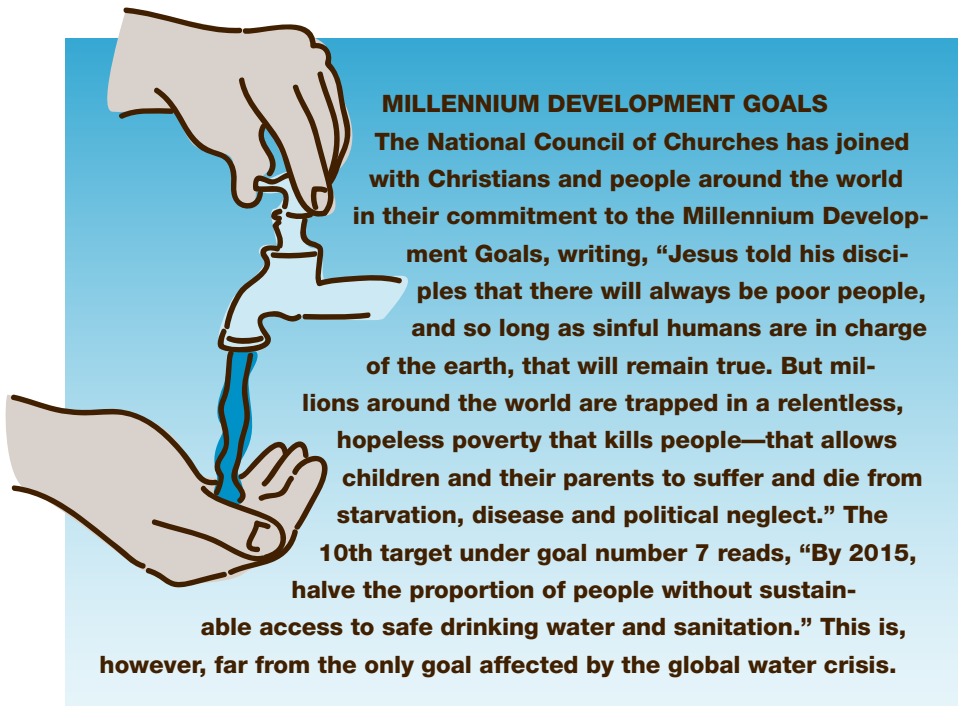
Despite the abundance of water on the Earth, we are doing a rather poor job of sharing the abundance. Today, more than 1 billion people in the world still lack clean drinking water,

and 2.6 billion lack access to adequate sanitation. Unsafe water, poor sanitation, and hygiene—cause 80 percent of the sickness in developing countries and the deaths of 5,000 children a day. According to the World Council of Churches, 80 percent of the disease in poor countries of the world is related to poor drinking water and sanitation. Six thousand children a day will contract diseases linked to unhealthy water.

But this isn't the end of the story. People of faith can make a real difference in confronting these problems. Lack of access to clean water and sanitation is one of the leading causes of illness and death among people in poverty in Vietnam, where many in rural areas suffer from waterborne disease. This is particularly true in the mountains of Pho Yen district, where more than one out of four people suffers from a water-related disease. In Pho Yen, even the health clinics lack access to clean water, thus facing the double burden of treating patients suffering from water-related diseases without having their own clean water. In response, Church World Service (CWS) is helping to construct water supply facilities and hygienic latrines for three clinics, and lay pipelines for water distribution to 150 households. Training is being provided on the operation and management of the systems, on prevention and transmission of water-related diseases, and on good hygiene practices.¹ This is an effort we can all be a part of, too. Members of the Church of the Brethren, taking part in a faith expedition in 2007, saw the situation in Ph Yen first hand. Upon returning, they worked through CWS and their Global Food Crisis Fund to directly fund a project at a local school. We can all be involved in making a difference.

In Matthew 25, Jesus elaborates on the comments made in Matthew 10 about providing a child with a cold drink of water. In the 25th Chapter of Matthew, Jesus declares that one of the ways both individuals and nations will be judged is by the water and other services we have provided to the least, the poorest, members of the human community. Those who do fulfill this command are promised eternal life. Those who turn away give themselves eternal punishment. While we give God thanks for our daily bread (and water) we share God's blessings with all. Let all who thirst, come to the water! (Isaiah 55:1).

¹http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=action_what_water_examples_vietnam



MISSING THE BOAT

Water is, first and foremost, a gift from God—provided so that we and all of Creation may have life. As people of faith, we understand our responsibilities to protect the sacred gifts given by God and to heal a world torn by brokenness and human strife. Too often, we in the United States don't see our actions in connection with the broader world. The water crisis is one example of that. Developed countries, including the United States, use the vast majority of the water in the world, especially when it comes to waste disposal and industry.¹⁴ Despite this, 884 million people in the world lack access to safe drinking water.¹⁵ We are called to live in right relationship with the rest of the world and Creation, and our lives should reflect that.

By recognizing water as a gift given from God, for the well being of all the Earth, however, we can change the way we interact with it. Faithful action calls us to live in a sustainable way, including in our use of the water with which we have been blessed.

A CALL TO ACTION

We need, as people of faith, to respond to the global water crisis. There are a variety of ways we can do this:

- Integrate the issues of water scarcity and pollution as justice challenges facing people of faith through study and worship, by using this study guide to lead Sunday school classes, guide small group discussions, or plan a worship service.
- Support legislation funding water and sanitation projects and fighting climate change that includes aid to those living in poverty.
- Conserve water by repairing all leaky fixtures, paying attention to your water usage, and turning off the water in sinks, baths, and showers when you are not using them.

- Involve your church or community in funding a Church World Service water project, by visiting www.churchworldservice.org/development/water.html.

STUDY RESOURCES

For Youth—Putting it in Perspective

Note: These activities can also be used with adults.

The Global Perspective

Beforehand, set up containers of water for each region of the world: one gallon for the United States and Europe, half a gallon for Australia, and a cup for Asia, Africa, and South America. Once the group is gathered, discuss the daily water needs of people—water for drinking, cooking, and bathing. Tell the group that there are 34,000 cubic kilometers of water available on the planet—if it were evenly distributed it would meet everyone's needs. Hand out the map (found at www.ncccojustice.org/waterconserve.html) that shows access to water based on geography.

Break the youth into groups and assign each small group a selected region. Give each group their appropriate water container that you prepared ahead of time. Have each group think about what they usually do in a day that involves water (shower, brush their teeth, drink, cook food, etc.) Remind them to think about what they would do with that water and what do they normally do that they no can do. Have each small group report that back out to the larger group.

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¹⁴ http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap/wwdr/wwdr2/facts_figures/index.shtml

¹⁵ http://www.wateraid.org/international/what_we_do/statistics/default.asp

Polluting our water

Have the youth pour all their water into a central container. Distribute droppers of food coloring representing different pollutants. Visit www.ncccojustice.org/waterconserve.html to download an information sheet on the different types of pollutants, and share this with the youth. Invite each youth to add one drop of each of the different types of pollutants to the central container of water, and watch its color change.

Discuss how our lifestyle contributes to the pollutants found in water, here and around the world.

Bringing it all together

Read Genesis 1:1-15 aloud to the group. Remind the group how we in the United States waste and pollute water and how this impacts other countries. What does this say about our use of water from a faith perspective?

Adult Education

Have one or two people read Isaiah 41:17-18 and Matthew 25:34-40 aloud. Then, read the following water statistics to the group:

- **884 million people** in the world do not have access to safe water. This is roughly one in eight of the world's population.
- **2.5 billion people** in the world do not have access to adequate sanitation, this is almost two fifths of the world's population.
- **1.8 million children** die every year as a result of diseases caused by unclean water and poor sanitation. This amounts to around 5,000 deaths a day.

Break the group into small groups and have them discuss their daily water habits, making a list. Have each group report back to the larger group, and make a running list of what they use

water for every day. Divide the group back into small groups to discuss the following questions: What links the passages and the statistics? How do we value the water with which we have been blessed? How does our use of water constitute an issue of justice? Bring the small groups back together and lead a guided discussion looking at personal water habits, how we value water, and what implications the verses above have for daily living.

For more information on water issues and how you can help protect God's creation visit the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program website at www.ncccojustice.org 202-544-2350.