



Faith Climate Action Week

Brought to you by Interfaith Power & Light

Preaching on Fossil Fuel Divestment – An Introduction

Rev. Fletcher Harper, Executive Director, GreenFaith (www.greenfaith.org)

Over the past year, a growing number of faith communities have begun to debate divesting from fossil fuel companies as a response to climate change. Divestment is a challenging but important topic for sermons. Here are some suggestions about how to approach the issue.

WHAT IS DIVESTMENT?

Divestment happens when an institution – a house of worship, denomination, school, or other institution – sells its investment holdings in a certain industry or company because the institution feels that profiting economically from the activity of the industry or company violates their core values. For example, many religious groups have chosen to divest from holdings in the tobacco industry. And in the 1980's, there was vigorous debate among faith communities on divesting from certain companies doing business in South Africa because of the abhorrence of the apartheid regime.

Divestment has a long history in religious communities. Over the past century, various Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist groups have divested from industries including tobacco, alcohol, weapons manufacturing, prison construction and management, gambling, financial service firms, pharmaceuticals, adult entertainment, and more.

So, the question for clergy is not whether divestment itself is a justifiable approach, but rather whether a strong moral, theological case can be made for it in relation to fossil fuels.

WHY HAVE RELIGIOUS GROUPS DIVESTED?

Faith groups consistently cite three reasons.

1. Religious groups have divested if companies regularly undertake activities that injure or kill large numbers of people. They've divested because they come to believe that investing in the offending industries violates the essence of their identity. When a company, industry or government behaves in this way, divestment has represented a refusal to profit from activities irreconcilable with a fundamental religious mission and purpose.
2. Industry's sustained, intractable refusal to change is a second reason that faith communities divest. Experts agree that divestment is a last resort, to be undertaken only after multiple change efforts, including legislative, regulatory and shareholder advocacy, have failed. However, not all corporations are responsive to calls for change. And in the face of

pressure, some companies or industries seek to discredit scientific research through disreputable means, and have lobbied against related legislation and regulation. In the face of stubborn industry resistance, faith groups have often divested.

3. A final reason religious groups divest is that they view divestment, and the public engagement it involves, as a way to redefine society's moral code. From this perspective, divestment isn't just for religious institutions to maintain their own integrity or to respond to intractable stubbornness. It is to delegitimize and de-normalize divestment's target and to demonstrate the repugnance of certain industries or governments. This is a fundamental part of the process of social change. Very few social changes of significance happen without a meaningful level of public disgust being attached to the status quo.

WHY FOSSIL FUEL DIVESTMENT IS MORALLY RIGHT

Fossil fuel divestment meets all three criteria listed above. The suffering and harm caused by climate change will be greater than the harm caused by the targets of all previous religious divestment campaigns combined. The industry's entrenched resistance to change, expressed through intentionally deceptive public relations and extensive lobbying against climate legislation, has been extensively documented. A rapid shift away from a carbon-intensive future, urgently needed, won't occur without intense, sustained public pressure.

Because of these factors, divestment is uniquely suited for our moment. Almost no other approach offers as clear an opportunity to raise awareness of the devastation embodied by the status quo. Few other steps represent as firm a repudiation of the unsustainable destructiveness of our current energy regime. Few other approaches hold the promise of creating enough new cultural and political space to make meaningful policy change possible.

Environmental and religious leaders have tried a wide range of approaches in pursuit of reduced greenhouse gas emissions for over 20 years - engaging corporate management, shareholder resolutions, advocacy, and lobbying. We have little to show for our efforts. Given the entrenched power and stubbornness of industry, it is irresponsible to suggest that further shareholder engagement or legislative advocacy will yield results of any significance – unless they are supported by an additional, powerful call for change and a principled repudiation of the status quo. Divestment represents that call for change.

DON'T JUST DIVEST. REINVEST.

To maintain integrity in the face of climate change, however, religious groups cannot just divest from fossil fuel holdings. At a minimum, they must make their own facilities more energy efficient and make widespread use of renewable energy. Divestment alone isn't enough. To maintain integrity, religious groups need to re-invest, to embody a sustainable future.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND BIBLICAL PASSAGES

There are a number of Biblical passages that support the various parts of the argument in support of divestment. [Click here for Jewish teachings and Biblical passages](#)

