

Creation Not For Sale: The Flint Water Crisis **Rev. Monica M. Villarreal, ELCA**

In 2010, the LWF assembly affirmed the youth in their desire to make environmental sustainability a priority. The contribution of youth on this topic, specifically climate change, has strengthened the life of the communion and the importance of this topic for multiple generations. The environment: air, water, soil, etc. connects us all.

I am not a teaching theologian. I am a pastor whose theology is shaped by context and praxis. Where I serve in Flint, Michigan, we experienced the one of the largest public health crises in our nation's history. The power of the local government was taken over by the State government through a law that allows the Governor to appoint a financial manager in communities that are struggling financially. In essence, if you are poor, anything can happen to you. This is what happened in Flint.

All decisions about Flint's water supply were enacted by State appointed financial managers. To save money, Flint's water supply was changed to a river that was polluted by decades of industrial waste. When Federal and State agencies failed to instruct the city on how to properly treat the river water, the corrosive properties of the water damaged the plumbing of the entire city. As a result, nearly 100,000 people were poisoned when lead leached from water pipelines. Lead is a neuro-toxin. It damages brain development and is especially dangerous for infants, children, and immune compromised people. Exposure to lead lowers intellect and can cause emotional and behavioral problems.

For years, the people of Flint have been paying the highest water rates in the country while the government maintained that the water was safe to drink. Only after 17 months did residents learn they were paying for poisonous water. What happened in Flint is an example of social injustice and economic injustice. It is also an example of environmental racism. The City of Flint is economically depressed and primarily a community of color.

Austerity combined with disregard for the poor and vulnerable, advocated economic profit over the well-being of people and the environment. Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, in *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, speaks truth about the economic and political realities that often support policies that perpetuate poverty and environmental degradation. We cannot have social justice apart from environmental justice. Likewise, we cannot proclaim Creation Not For Sale without also acknowledging Human Beings Not for Sale and Salvation Not for Sale.

In our journey together as North America and Latin America and the Caribbean, the social and economic policies that helped to create the Flint water crisis must also lead us to view how these same types of policies are implemented globally. For example, the free-market economic system espoused by North America has been expressed as a new form of colonialism for many Latin American and Caribbean communities. Members of the global north need to hear the stories of how our economic and political policies are impacting the livelihoods of churches and

people in the global south. Only together can we begin to name the depth of the many injustices that occur when creation is viewed as a commodity to be sold for profit.

The theological symbol of water is used to represent both life and death. The story of creation reminds us that out of the waters, life was formed (Genesis 1:9-13; 20-23). The story of Noah tells us of the destructive power of water as well as the liberating promise of God's love (Genesis 7-9). The story of the Samaritan woman drawing water from the well, invites us to receive Jesus as the living water of hope and salvation which quenches all thirst (John 4:1-43; John 7:37-44). The story of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-40) reminds us that water is thicker than blood. By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Christ Jesus.

In my congregation, I cannot baptize with the water that flows out of our faucets. The water is greatly discolored and the water is not safe. Flint has been without clean, safe, and affordable water for almost three years and there is no timeline of when Flint's water will be safe again. I baptize using bottled water that is donated from all over the world. Many communities that have issues with water scarcity know that water is more than a beverage of choice; water is life.

The issue of water scarcity affects all continents. Concerns over petroleum pipelines, contaminated rivers, lakes, and streams from industry or agricultural production, global warming, climate change, and drought affect billions of people globally. Access to clean, safe, affordable drinking water has profound effects for public health, sustainable development, human rights.

While some communities like Flint rely on bottled water and water filtration systems to survive, no community should be dependent on the bottled water industry to supply safe drinking water. Creation is not for sale. As care-takers of God's many blessings and as people washed clean by the waters of holy baptism, may the Word of God empower all Churches to advocate for clean, safe and affordable drinking water for all people.

Together, as a Communion of Lutheran Churches, we can bear one another's sufferings, recognize our common humanity and connection to creation, and work towards a more just world where creation is not for sale, human beings are not for sale, and salvation is not for sale.

For more information about the Flint water crisis and the role of the church:

Link... (I suggest that if the video is posted somewhere with the LWF that people be directed to there...) Below is the video transcript.

FLINT WATER CRISIS VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

P = Pastor C = Congregant I= interviewer/camera V: words in video

P: This is a crisis that has touched over 99,000 people and we continue to be suffering from the effects.

C: The truck is 2 hours late and we have no water.

P: Here at Salem Lutheran Church we partner with the Food Bank to receive water every Thursday and Saturday. Each week we distribute about 100,000 pounds (45,300 kilograms) of water to the community. One of the challenges has been that our State government is not funding the resources that our city needs to ensure that citizens receive access to this clean water.

P: Welcome to Salem Lutheran Church, in the city of Flint, Michigan, as we do ministry with the Flint Water Crisis. This crisis began in 2014 when the city of Flint stopped using water from Detroit which came from Lake Huron (fresh water lake) to water from the Flint River. The Flint River was very corrosive and it damaged the water pipes in the city and homes. When this crisis began in 2014, residents protested and complained to government officials. They complained of smelly water. They complained of water that was not clear in color. They complained of hair loss and skin rashes. Children were poisoned with lead (Pb). Parents were asking many questions of the government. For nearly two years, we were told by officials in government and agencies that the water was safe to drink.

C: It's hard on us because we have to go out to different places and get water. And transportation is really difficult. If the rescue people bring water, they only bring two cases (48 bottles) and you do not have enough water to cook with. You have to use the bottled water to do many things. It has affected me very much.

C: We have been fighting this since October of 2014.

C: I cannot take a bath. I don't take a shower in it. Don't wash my hair. My hair has not been washed in months and months.

C: It's very hard. Do you know how much water you have to use to actually get your body clean?

I: How many cases of water do you use in one day?

C: Just for myself, I use at least 60-80 water bottles in one day. I use the water for normal activities in the house.

I: Like what?

C: Washing dishes, cleaning my body, brushing my teeth, and anything daily that I have to use water for.

C: The water, we can't live without it. It feels like the government officials do not care. They don't care.

C: At first the government said the water was safe to use and then it is not safe to use. And then we were told to boil the water and then don't boil the water. They said it was safe to bathe in and then it wasn't safe to bathe in. Every week we are told something different. No one is going

to trust what they say. Personally, I don't use the water at all. I use it to flush my toilet and that is it.

C: I moved into a new house in July and learned later that I had one of the highest levels of lead in the city.

C: At our house, it's like camping. We use bottled water for everything like cooking, washing the food, bathing, drinking. We have to use bottled water for the plants and bottled water for the dogs. We have bottled water everywhere.

P: Here at Salem Lutheran we are deeply involved in this crisis. We provide vital basic needs for the community. This community has over 42% of people living in poverty. Imagine not having access to clean water. Imagine the water in your kitchen is potentially poisonous. It can hurt you. It can hurt your children. The fear that our families have experienced from this disaster is seen every day at this church. We are grateful for the partnerships of many congregations, organizations, and businesses that have helped to provide access to clean water. We do this by delivering over two semi-trucks of water each week. We are grateful for the many volunteers who help. We also give water filters that remove lead. These water filters are essential for the safety of our families. But these filters are not the solution.

V: But there is hope!

V: Salem Lutheran

V: Offers Hope!

P: Prayer

C: I find hope in the Lord. I feel like he is going to make it better again.

I: Where do you find hope?

C: Places like this.

I: Tell me why.

C: Because, to me, they do more for the community than the city is doing for the community. You can come here and they give you as much water as you need. And that is a big difference.

C: Here, they will give out the water until it is all gone but they are not limiting your water and that helps.

C: You know what, it's like I have found a new life for me. It is like a door has been opened and I feel at home at the church. Yes.

V: When will Flint have safe water again?

V: No one knows...

V: Your prayers, financial support, and water collections are saving lives. Thank you!