



Living in God's amazing grace

Issue Brief: Water

ELCA Policy Base

“We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are deeply concerned about the environment, locally and globally, as members of this church and as members of society. Even as we join the political, economic and scientific discussion, we know care for the earth to be a profoundly spiritual matter.” *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice (1993)*

The *Caring for Creation* social statement recognizes that “living creatures, and the air, soil and water that support them, face unprecedented threats. Many threats are global; most stem directly from human activity. Our current practices may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner we know.” The social statement affirms the ELCA’s support for proposals and actions to protect and restore “water, especially drinking water, groundwater, polluted runoff, and industrial and municipal waste.”

Background

“When the poor and needy seek water,
I will open rivers on the bare heights,
And fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
And the dry land springs of water.”

—Isaiah 41:17-18

Water is life. Our bodies are largely made of water, as is much of the food we eat. Without water, we could not exist. Water is also a critical part of our spiritual life as Christians—it welcomes us into our life as Christians through baptism, and it forms a powerful metaphoric thread throughout the scriptures, symbolizing life, faith and the love of God.

Water scarcity is a growing problem around the world: if present withdrawal and consumption rates for water continue, two of every three

people on Earth will live in water-stressed conditions by 2025. In the western United States, water scarcity has been an issue for many years. However, high rates of water consumption by agricultural and urban users threaten to deplete aquifers in areas of the country where supply has traditionally been plentiful, such as the upper Midwest.

Global warming will only exacerbate this problem: as the earth’s climate gets warmer, droughts will grow more frequent and more severe in many parts of the globe, particularly in areas that are already water-stressed.

In addition to our using more water than is returned in rain, we are also polluting the water we have. Most of the pesticides and fertilizers used in agriculture, sewer overflows, and the oil and grease from roads, eventually run off into the water systems. Other sources of excess nutrients include lawn fertilizers, pet and farm animal waste, decaying plant material, failing septic tanks, and inefficient sewage treatment plants. Industrial plants and municipal wastewater treatment plants can also contribute to the amount of toxic substances entering streams and rivers and ultimately lakes, estuaries, and coastal waters.

More than one billion people around the globe lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation services. In developing countries, 80 percent of illnesses relate to poor water quality: someone dies of a water-related illness every 14 seconds. In the United States we seldom worry about the quality of our drinking water, but forty percent of our rivers and lakes are too polluted to be safe for fishing and swimming. In early 2006, the Environmental Protection Agency released a study indicating that 42 percent of our nation’s small streams are in “poor” condition.