



Church of the Brethren General Board

Clean Air Principles

July 15, 2000

Members of the Church of the Brethren have long had a close relationship with God's earth. We have enjoyed its bounty, appreciated its beauty, and taken seriously our responsibility as stewards of its goodness. Importantly, we have also been committed to simplicity of lifestyle, which in today's consumption-oriented economy is itself a mark of caring for God's creation. And we have called for justice, seeking to share the earth fairly with all God's people.

These concerns position the church well to respond to the environmental crises of our time—crises which affect the very fabric of planetary life: water, soil, plants, animals, the air we breathe. Anticipating this time, the 1971 Annual Conference paper, Ecology, states: "We have hope that tomorrow's world will not confront our children with an atmosphere so polluted with automotive and industrial wastes that the support of healthy life will be difficult or impossible."

Tomorrow's world has come, and so has pollution on such a scale that our lives and the well-being of other living things are indeed imperiled.

Given the present condition of the earth's atmosphere, and with the upcoming reauthorization of the Clean Air Act, this is a timely moment to reissue a call for measures to insure clean air for all. The following Clean Air Principles offer us an opportunity to join with concerned citizens and organizations all across the country in making this call. In affirming these principles, the Church of the Brethren General Board is stating to coalition partners and to the national legislators that clean air for all is a God-given right, and that appropriate measures must be taken to preserve this right for all God's creation.

Clean Air Principles

Principle I. Breathing clean air is a basic right and necessity for all life. We must clean up and prevent air pollution, which threatens the health of our families.

Over 100 million Americans live in areas that do not meet the current health standards for ozone smog, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, lead and particulate matter. In addition, cancer-causing air toxics exceed levels considered safe in millions of neighborhoods. Those most at risk of harm from air pollution are children, the elderly, people with heart and lung diseases (like asthma and emphysema), and poor and minority communities who are often in closest proximity to pollution sources. The health effects of lung diseases are particularly troubling because they are irreversible; their effects have lifetime impacts. Although there has been significant progress in reducing air pollution over the past three decades, our air still causes sickness and early death. All people deserve to breathe clean, safe air regardless of where they live.

What we should do:

- Ensure that health-based air quality standards are based on the best, most current science to protect everyone, especially vulnerable populations.
- Establish and enforce milestones to reduce air pollution, holding states and polluting industries accountable for real pollution reductions.
- Reduce toxic air pollutants that pose a significant risk to communities, especially those that cause cancer and reproductive harm.
- Guarantee that all pollution limits are being strictly enforced.

Principle 2. We have a responsibility to future generations to protect our natural environment from the harmful effects of air pollution and leave a legacy of clean air.

Air pollution is taking its toll on the environment. Many of our lakes and streams are so acidic that they cannot support aquatic life. Others have such high nitrogen levels that algae blooms are starving out other aquatic life. In 1998, 40 states issued fish consumption advisories because mercury levels in fish made them dangerous to eat. Air pollution causes haze in our parks and cities, reducing visibility by up to 80%. A hole in the stratospheric ozone layer allows in ultraviolet light which causes cancer and other serious health problems, as well as ecosystem impacts. And carbon pollution is altering our climate, and is predicted to lead to rising ocean levels, cause even more extreme weather patterns, and cause a rise in troublesome diseases. We must make a commitment to protect our natural environment for future generations.

What we should do:

- Reduce carbon pollution by finding alternatives to combustion and fossil fuels.
- Require the virtual elimination of mercury emissions from incinerators, power plants and manufacturers.
- Continue reducing nitrogen and sulfur gases to halt the damage caused by acid rain and reduce haze that is destroying the vistas in our national parks.
- Continue to phase out chemicals that deplete the stratospheric ozone layer.
- Provide international assistance and incentives to phase out the use of persistent bioaccumulative toxins, including organochlorine compounds and mercury.
- Guarantee that no air pollution reduction efforts occur at the expense of contaminating another part of the environment, such as our water and land.

Principle 3. There is no inherent right to pollute.

We cannot hold our breath until we reach a place that is free of pollution. The decisions made by individuals, communities, businesses and government all contribute to the dangerous air we breathe daily. No one owns the nation's air shed, or has the right to do with it as they please. While we support cost-effective solutions to reduce air pollution, we cannot trade away our right to clean air. The atmosphere should not be treated as the society's disposal ground, and our children's lungs should not suffer the consequences of such actions. We must promote national policies that guarantee the air is safe to breathe for everyone.

What we should do:

- Apply the Precautionary Principle, shifting the burden of proof to polluters to show that their emissions are safe, rather than making citizens prove that emissions pose a health threat.
- Ensure that no emissions trading occur with cancer causing or persistent bioaccumulative toxins, or with any toxic pollutant.
- Demand that large polluters, specifically power plants, refineries and chemical manufacturers, irrespective of age or fuel use, meet standards based on the least polluting processes in each industrial sector.
- Establish industry-specific pollution standards that result in the reduced use of toxic materials in manufacturing to prevent pollution, reduce the risk of chemical accidents, and provide for a safe work environment.

Principle 4. We have a right to, know whether the air we breathe is clean and free of toxic pollution.

Over 70,000 chemicals are currently being used by industry. Industry is required to report their releases of about 600 of these chemicals to the Toxic Release Inventory (TRI), many of which cause cancer, reproductive and neurological damage. While we have more information about toxic air releases than we did 10 years ago, there are still numerous gaps. The reporting thresholds are too high, especially for the most toxic contaminants, and a number of industries are still exempt from reporting to the TRI. States also must measure and report the ambient pollution levels which show the cumulative effect of all sources in an area. This information should be widely reported in “real time” so that people can take precaution to protect themselves from high pollution levels. Everyone deserves to know what is being released into the air they breathe, and participate in the decisions about toxic pollution limits.

What we should do:

- Require all sources that emit one or more of the listed pollutants to report to the TRI.
- Require better monitoring and public reporting of all air pollutants and their health effects, as well as ambient air quality.
- Lower the reporting thresholds for the most pervasive and harmful toxins.
- Consider the cumulative impacts of multiple pollution sources in an area when setting acceptable pollution limits.
- Promote more public participation and authority for communities to review and reject air permits submitted by pollution sources.

Principle 5. We must seek interstate and international cooperation to ensure that we continue to make progress in cleaning our air.

Air pollution passes freely over governmental boundaries and may well travel in excess of hundreds of miles, contributing to dirty air far from where the pollution is generated. We can only succeed in cleaning our air if we all work together to solve this problem. We need to empower more collective action to protect our common air shed through multi-state and international cooperation to clean the air have begun. At the same time, local, state, and federal governments must take responsibility to continue to make progress in cleaning the air to protect all communities and our environment.

What we should do:

- Promote national strategies to reduce pollution from all controllable sources of pollution (cars, trucks, fuels and power plants) to reduce the overall pollution levels nationwide.
- Encourage multi-state pollution planning regions, while holding states ultimately accountable for meeting clean air goals.
- Strengthen international agreements with Canada and Mexico to improve cooperation across national borders.

Principle 6. We must reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and toxic chemicals to ensure the long-term health of our communities, our ecosystems, and the global climate which sustains all life.

The average American uses six times the energy used by the average European. There are over 200 million motor vehicles registered in the U.S. that travel over 3 trillion miles each year. Coal, oil and gasoline are the mainstays of our economy and society, and the root of many of our most serious pollution problems. Every year, thousands of new chemicals are being introduced into the market with very limited testing completed. As we look to the future, we need to invest in renewable energy alternatives and energy efficiency, alternative transportation modes, and in alternatives to toxic chemical use in manufacturing. We must make smart investments to ensure that by reducing some pollution other forms of pollution are not increased (e.g., relying on diesel to reduce carbon pollution or increasing the use of nuclear power). All forms of energy have a cost to the environment and therefore we value conservation of energy first before promoting air pollution controls. Likewise, individuals also must help to reduce air pollution by demanding cleaner products and making better energy and transportation choices.

What we should do:

- Invest in alternative fuels and energy efficiency for electric generation and transportation.
- Develop economic incentives and use the tax code to encourage investments in clean technology, rewarding early and more significant emission reductions.
- Require electric utilities and other producers to publicly disclose their emissions so customers can make informed choices about where to purchase their power or products.
- Invest in urban revitalization as a means to improve urban infrastructures and reduce suburban sprawl.
- Promote high wage job growth in clean energy technologies.
- Practice and support pollution prevention. Consume less, use less toxic substances, and reduce combustion.
- Support producers that observe these practices.
- As individuals, do our part by not wasting energy and demanding cleaner energy and more transportation choices that promote nonpolluting vehicles, better mass transit and land use planning.