

**Overture to PCUSA General Assembly:
THE TIME IS NOW
TO
“CHERISH CREATION, CUT CARBON, AND SPEAK UP”**

The Presbytery of [*Insert Name of Your Presbytery*] overtures the 225th General Assembly (2022) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to commit ourselves as a church, a people of faith and a social organization embodying Christian values, to:

1) repent of our participation and growing complicity in the processes which have brought our planetary ecosystem to the tipping point of unsustainability for humans, and mass extinction of other species;

2) direct that all PCUSA-controlled financial investments be withdrawn from industries that contribute to the production of the two major greenhouse gasses, CO₂ and methane, accelerating the review and divestment timeline of the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment guided by the [Carbon underground 200 and those listed in the Global Industry Classification Standard \(GICS\) 101010 and 101020](#). (In addition to the direct impact of reducing the production and use of fossil fuels, decreased financing of their production will also have the added benefit of restricting the amount of source chemicals available for plastics production, adding pressure to reduce single use [plastics](#), a major environmental pollutant and increasing driver of climate change.);

3) direct the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation to increase investment in low carbon emission renewable energy, energy efficiency, and energy storage in ways that complement policies to transition workers in our present fossil fuel industry into “green” and sustainable energy sector employment;

4) encourage all PCUSA members and congregations to study the various documents produced by the General Assembly over the past 30 years, including the most recent (2022) Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) [“Investing in a Green Future: A Vision for a Renewed Creation”](#) document, scripture and other related overtures such as:

[OVT-004]: On Learning About and Starting the Process of Divestment from Fossil Fuels <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000769>

[OVT-015]: On Creating the Presbyterian Tree Fund

<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000854>

[OVT-016]: On Reducing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Carbon Imprint—From the Presbytery of Des Moines <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000855>

[OVT-027]: On Affirming the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Paris Agreement) <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000869>

[OVT-034]: On Fossil Fuel Divestment

<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000876>

5) urge our congregations and members to become the needed, faithful change we seek by being carbon neutral, net-zero, or even climate positive by 2030; encourage congregations with historic or landmark buildings to retrofit their structures to the furthest extent possible; implore all PCUSA-related educational institutions (secondary schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries [i]) and individual members to do the same with their homes and facilities;

6) advocate through our Office of Public Witness (Washington), UN and other denominational offices for national and international accountability around financial obligations and commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Paris Agreement (https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf), including the pledges made to assist economically developing and emerging countries* with carbon use mitigation and adaptation;

7) advocate through these same channels for climate justice** based in national and international commitments to assist economically developing and emerging countries with recovery from the loss and damage resulting from the industrialized countries' disproportionate impact on climate change (aka, "climate debt"), as a new and proactive stewardship of the earth;

8) advocate through all PCUSA channels the implementation of the Carbon Dividend Overture 08-12, approved by Commissioners in 2018 and encourage our government to pursue other economic strategies for incorporating "externalized" environmental costs into pricing of all goods and services; and

9) direct the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, Presbyterian Hunger Program staff and our church's Office of Public Witness (Washington office) to develop a 10 year

strategy of accompaniment and advocacy before, during and after the annual Conference of the Parties (COP)s to the UNFCCC, utilizing to the extent practicable, our deployed staff and colleagues at World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and World Council of Churches (WCC). Work cooperatively with former staff and volunteers to the extent possible to provide continuity across the years and in collaboration with voluntary organizations such as Presbyterians for Earth Care to provide updates and make recommendations consistent with our social witness policy.

Rationale:

Presbyterians have pioneered in the recognition of climate challenges and in environmental theology, going back to the 1960's and including major policy statements in 1981 (of both churches, pre-reunion), 1990, and 2008. These statements have drawn on a more faithful reading of scripture.

“The fundamental mandate for creation care comes from Genesis 2:15, where God places Adam in the garden to ‘till it and keep it’ (NRSV). A better translation from the Hebrew is ‘to serve it and to preserve it.’ In Genesis 1:26-28, God blesses humankind with dominion over the earth. This acknowledgement that humanity is the most powerful species on earth does not, however, give license to dominate and exploit the planet. Indeed, the following verses affirm the right of animals to share in the bounty of the earth’s produce (Gen. 1:29-30). Human ‘dominion’ as intended in Genesis is best practiced in care for creation, in stewardship, which according to Genesis Noah fulfills best by implementing God’s first endangered species act. Moreover, the great creation psalm of the Psalter views humanity as one species among many animal species, all meant to flourish together (Psalm 104:14-23). The psalmist exclaims, ‘O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures’ (v. 24). Scripture affirms that God created the world in wisdom and out of love, and it is also out of love for the world that God gave Christ to redeem it (John 3:16). In Christ ‘all things hold together’ (Colossians 1:17), and ‘every creature under heaven’ is to receive God’s good news (v. 23). According to Revelation, God’s work in the world is to ‘make all things new’ (21:5), to bring about a new creation that does not destroy the old but transforms it, renews it. If the church is the sign of the new creation, then the church must lead the way in caring for creation.” - Quote from the [2016 Overture to the 222nd General Assembly on Amending G-1.0304, “The Ministry of Members, by Adding “Caring for God’s Creation”](#) that was approved by GA and 104 Presbyteries] contributed by Dr. William P. Brown, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary

As Presbyterians, we aspire to live into these teachings as well as the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (25:40,45) regarding our call to care for “the least of these” our brothers and sisters, in all their diversity, whose well-being is so intertwined with and dependent upon a healthy ecosystem.

Because of these values we are called to heed the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [ii] This research organization has issued six “assessment” reports over the last 33 years since its founding in 1988 focusing on the interaction of human activity and our world’s warming atmosphere and changing climate. Their most recent report since 2015, issued in August of 2021, was compiled and agreed to by 234 authors from 65 countries. It states that “it is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land.”

This “human influence” is, to a preponderant extent, due to the use of fossil fuels by the industrialized countries during the last 50+ years. In this period, “greenhouse” gas emissions have increased to their highest levels in over 2 million years, increasing global average surface temperatures almost 1.2 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. Global surface temperature has increased faster since 1970 than in any other 50-year period over at least the last 2000 years and global surface temperature is the highest in over 100,000 years. Optimistically, we are looking at a current trajectory of around a 1.8 degree increase by 2050, no matter how quickly we act[iii].

Sea level has risen faster since 1900 than over any preceding century in at least the last 3000 years and will be irreversible for millennia to come. Acidification of the oceans due to absorption of carbon dioxide over the last 50 years is unprecedented in at least 2 million years. It is virtually certain that hot extremes (including heatwaves) have become more frequent and more intense since the 1950s, while cold extremes (including cold waves) have become less frequent and less severe. These climatic changes have already caused super-sized floods, droughts, fires, hurricanes/cyclones, species loss and other effects across the U.S. and globe. Climate and agricultural zones have shifted poleward and all seasons are growing hotter. Humans are already driving the sixth mass extinction event, destroying ecosystems upon which we depend and eliminating countless species from the planet forever.

The global Paris Agreement goal is to keep global warming 'well below 2°C', and pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. To avoid going beyond 1.5°C, global emissions need to reach their peak immediately and then fall within the next decades – reaching net zero by the middle of the century at the latest. That means we need to start acting on climate change now. We must redirect our energy production and economic activities sufficiently to avoid pushing our planet beyond the point at which it will be able to sustain life as we

know it, triggering catastrophic death and destruction. To do so, the world needs to halve its current emissions by 2030 and reduce emissions to net zero by 2050; a challenge that can only be met if emissions reductions start now. The IPCC report has conclusively determined that humanity must act within ten years. This does not mean we can wait a decade before acting. Every year we delay dramatically increases the cost of transforming our energy system. The time to act is now!

Furthermore, while less-developed nations and indigenous peoples are the least responsible for creating these consequences, they are also the most endangered and least well equipped to respond to them. Efforts should be made to prevent a new "green" colonialism by seeking ways to include communities in developing nations and other indigenous groups in benefitting from green technologies rather than exploiting them for their resources.

Given their geographic as well as socio-economic positioning and lived experience, these most vulnerable among the earth's populations possess unique perspectives regarding how to care for our common heritage of ecosystem, soil, species diversity, air and water, yet they are frequently excluded from the decision-making processes regarding the changes needed to protect them.

The challenges facing our planet can seem overwhelming. As Christians we are inspired to act not out of fear, but out of love for God, love for our neighbors (near and far, present and future), and love for God's creation entrusted to our care.

Among the options before us for how best to show our love for our neighbors and the planet is extending "the polluter pays" principle, (embodied in the 1992 Rio Declaration) beyond prohibitions to incorporate "costs" to the global ecosystem into the pricing of goods and services. This will, however, entail significant shifts in our economy and behavior.

One powerful economic tool that can help achieve these shifts and behavior changes, and has strong support among economists, business leaders, scientists, a number of faith communities, and people on multiple sides of the political spectrum, is putting a price on carbon that more faithfully reflects the full environmental cost of using fossil fuels. The 223rd General Assembly (2018) affirmed this approach when it passed [08-12] "On Supporting Carbon Pricing." Supporting this tool through education and advocacy furthers needed systemic economic change, previously approved General Assembly policy, and creation care[iv].

Another of the ways many people of faith are promoting a reduction in climate changing greenhouse gasses is by calling on their congregations and denominations to disentangle their investments from the fossil fuel industry. As of today, according to Richard Brooks, Director of the Climate Finance Network Stand.Earth, 1,497 institutions including 520 faith groups/organizations, (among them, our fellow Presbyterians in the [Church of Scotland](#) and the [Presbyterian Church of Ireland](#)), are in the process of divesting a total of \$39.88 trillion from fossil fuel-related investments. This is larger than the annual GDP of the U.S. and China combined. Europe's largest pension fund in the Netherlands has announced a decision to divest within the next year and a half. (See presentations by Brooks, the Church of Sweden's Financial officer and a number of other church leaders on divestment as part of COP26 in 2021 at: [Faith Webinar: COP26, Fossil Fuel Divestment and a Just Transition for All - YouTube](#))

We wholeheartedly agree with Bishop Hugh Nelson of the Church of England who so aptly put it in his address to the COP 26 (2021 meeting in Glasgow, Scotland) in the webinar linked above, that we are called to “cherish creation, cut carbon and speak up.”

*Terminology varies as to how best to differentiate those countries and communities that are the greatest producers of greenhouse gasses from those that contribute very little; between those that are better positioned due to political power, geography and wealth to withstand the consequences of climate change and those that are not. We have chosen to follow the United Nations' terms of “Developing Countries, Emerging Economies and Industrialized Economies” as aligning generally with “least polluting, more polluting and historically most polluting” countries and to assume that the historically most polluting countries hold greater political as well as financial power to determine their own destiny and provide support for adaptation to, mitigation of and recovery from the devastating effects of climate change upon their own people. In shorthand, these nations are often called “global north”/“global south.” Marianna Liete of the ACT Alliance of church based organizations lifts up the seminal writings of Boaventura de Sousa Santos ([Boaventura de Sousa Santos - Book chapters](#)) for his discussion of these terms.)

**“Climate justice is a concept that addresses the ethical dimensions of climate change. Applied ethics, research and activism using the term approach anthropogenic climate change as an ethical, legal and political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical in nature. This is done by relating the causes and effects of climate change to concepts of justice, particularly environmental justice and social justice. Climate justice examines concepts such as equality, human rights, collective rights, and the historical responsibilities for climate change.” Wikipedia

[i] The example of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, would be an example of a comprehensive energy conservation and greening strategy; the Rocky Mountain Institute has been pioneering energy conversion strategies for many years.

[ii] (an independent research body that consolidates research from across the world and presents analysis upon which decisions are made by bodies such as the annual Conversation of Partners, or COPs, to the United Nations Climate Accords).

[iii] (if all current commitments by signatory nations are adhered to.) (The World Resources Institute provides an important breakdown of both current and historic emitters at the following links: <https://www.wri.org/insights/history-carbon-dioxide-emissions> and <https://www.wri.org/insights/interactive-chart-shows-changes-worlds-top-10-emitters>).

[iv] See <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000325> for the overture [08-12] approved in 2018, and <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/basics-carbon-fee-dividend/> for scientific and rational support for carbon pricing and dividends.