

Father God, Mother Earth:  
Environmental Advocacy in the White American Assemblies of God Church

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## INTRODUCTION

The Assemblies of God (AG) Church, one of the largest church assemblies in the United States, has consistently failed to systematically address the concerns of climate change in the United States and across the globe. Natalie Myers, an AG Church member turned non-denominational pastor in Vancouver, Washington recently stated in a personal interview on the reality of climate change that “growing up, [she] didn’t hear anything about environmentalism in church. It would feel more like, you know, the earth’s going to burn up one day and I’m not too worried about it.” Myers grew up attending a mostly White AG church and AG university. During her time studying psychology and pastoral ministries, she never learned about climate change or the environment except through hearing what her peers said about it. In her AG church, the environment was never talked about except for an occasional sermon about the creation of the world as told in the book of Genesis. If it was talked about, the sermon would typically be more about the end-times, centered on how the earth will not last forever and there is no need to worry about preserving it.

Pointedly, many American AG churches do not believe in climate change or do not accept that it could be man-made. This allows AG churches to deny any personal responsibility to support environmentalism—defined simply here as the “growing concern about the destruction of nature and [humanity’s] failure to steward [and care for] creation” (Cromartie 19). The Bible tells Christians that they are to love their neighbors and that doing so is honoring to God (Mat. 22:37-40). With help from the media, climate change has become a partisan political issue. Instead of asking, “how can we help?” many AG church members have begun to ask, “how do we know this is true?” Some see news about climate change as activism and a vital effort to protect the Earth. Others see it as an act of propaganda and deny the information given to them,

making the issue purely political. Skepticism can be good because it is important to stay informed and determine the truth, but it is not nearly as important as empathy. One can collect all the facts in the world to justify a lack of compassion, but the reality is that humanity will never find peace without considering and valuing the perspectives of others. The pursuit of truth and justice should start there.

The Assemblies of God is an evangelical denomination which differs from mainline denominations in a few areas. These include a belief that the Bible is inerrant and to be interpreted literally, belief in the necessity of personal and individual acceptance of Jesus in order to receive salvation, and an increased emphasis on evangelism (Green). The AG Church in America plays a vital role in community leadership. In 2013 the U.S. Assemblies of God Church had 3.2 million adherents, with 67 million worldwide (Rodgers). One of the largest and most influential AG churches today is Hillsong Church, which has campuses in 30 countries on six continents and services in multiple languages. Hillsong also has several successful music groups, including *Hillsong United* which boasts over four million monthly listeners on Spotify alone and worldwide tours and conferences (Stetzer). The church also has connections with high-profile political leaders and celebrities, proving their influence as an AG group holds power across various nations, political parties, and social groups (“Politics Goes to Church”).

Between 1960 and 2011, most mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. experienced declines in membership, including the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. At the same time, the AG Church in America grew significantly. The ethnic breakdown of the American AG Church membership includes mostly White (60%), about 10% Black, 22% Hispanic, 4.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.4% Native American. The AG Church is also the fourth largest international Christian group of

denominations (Rodgers). Based on the demographics of the American AG Church, as well as my own informed experience attending a mostly white AG church and AG university, the primary context for my research is on the White American Assemblies of God, which I will also refer to as WAAG.

To effectively care for and love its community members in a way that emulates the example of Jesus Christ, the WAAG Church must be actively involved in the practice and promotion of environmentalism. Because the WAAG Church takes seriously the commands and lessons of the Bible as the Word of God, it must also accept and encourage the practice of stewardship of land and resources as commanded in the Bible. This paper will examine the relationship between the WAAG, climate change, and politics, eventually looking at modern examples of environmental justice in action and a proposed framework for beginning the process of reconciliation. In order to live according to its beliefs and love its neighbors as the Bible commands, the WAAG Church must actively recognize climate change as real, combat racism which perpetuates the negative impacts of climate change, and support and practice environmentalism as a way to love and care for their communities.

## FIELD RESEARCH

My fieldwork was done in partnership with Circlewood, a Washington-based nonprofit rooted in the Christian tradition with the mission to support and develop communities that live life focused on treating creation well and living sustainably (“Who We Are”). Through working with Circlewood, I was able to do qualitative research and learn about concepts such as permaculture and stewardship, as well as make connections with people in the Seattle area who are working in the environmental field. More details about their work are shared as an example in a later section about practical action. When conducting interviews, I primarily used open-

ended questions so that I was not only gathering data, but also establishing connections and listening to stories (Merriam and Tisdell 18).

## THE CHURCH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

### **The Christian Context**

The primary context for this research is within the Evangelical Christian community in America, with a focus specifically on the Assemblies of God denomination. I grew up in a Christian home attending an Assemblies of God church, so I have strong personal ties to and understanding of the beliefs of this community. The basis for my research begins in my own experience having grown up in the WAAG Church, as well as having earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology at one of the largest AG universities on the west coast. During my time studying for this degree at a Christian Assemblies of God university, I learned about the environment and social justice matters including climate change, environmental degradation, how to read and interpret research studies, and much more. However, outside of the science department, some of these topics were rarely discussed and often missing altogether.

While the many denominations of Christianity vary, the core beliefs of evangelicalism remain the same: a declaration of Jesus as savior and a commitment to follow the teachings of the Bible. There are many exceptions of churches within the Evangelical denominations that are eco-aware and recognize environmental justice as an important issue. Additionally, the conclusions made in this paper can be applicable to a wide range of churches in America, not just one denomination. To make a case in a specific context, the focus here is primarily on the WAAG Church.

It is also important to distinguish between the terms “Church” and “church” when used as a general term apart from a formal name, with the former referring to a larger community of

people and the latter referring to a specific, established church group or location. Additionally, the term “evangelical” will be used through this paper as well, referring theologically to “one who claims a personal relationship with Jesus based upon a ‘born again’ experience, accepts the authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice, and spreads the gospel through evangelism” (Utter and Storey xii). Furthermore, a “fundamentalist” is a Christian who believes in the inerrancy and literal interpretation of the Bible (Utter and True 2). Evangelical Christians are fundamentalists, but not all fundamentalists emphasize the importance of saving and converting others to the extent that evangelicals do.

While many Evangelical Christians and WAAG members are stereotypically aligned with the political right, it is, in reality, a diverse group of people including both conservative and liberal political affiliations as well as many different church denominations. The number of Americans who identify as religious has been declining for many years (Jones, 2019). According to several Gallup polls, U.S. church membership has fluctuated from around 70% or higher in the 1970s, to 68% through the 1990s, dropping as low as 47% in 2020 (Jones, 2021). Another study showed that from 1990 to 2000, “evangelical denominations increased in size while mainline denominations lost members.” The AG denomination grew by 18.5% in the same time period (Utter and True 23). Fewer Americans claim membership with a specific house of worship, but the U.S. remains a relatively religious nation.

The Assemblies of God Church follows 16 core doctrines that serve as fundamental truths and pillars of the faith. Those that are most relevant here include 1) a recognition of Scripture from The Bible as inspired by God; 2) belief in one true God; 3) belief in the fall of man due to sin; 4) the salvation of man through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross; 5) a new heaven and earth in eternity; and, 6) the Church is the body of Christ with a mission to “seek and

save that which is lost” and “demonstrate [God’s] love and compassion for all the world” (“Assemblies of God”). A cornerstone of the Christian faith is revealed in the biblical story in which Jesus is asked by religious teachers to state the most important commandment, to which he replies, “You shall love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (*English Standard Version*, Mat. 22:37-40). These two commandments help establish that the most important aspect of Christianity is not a strict list of rights and wrongs, but rather the building of relationships in emulation of the loving character of God. While the command seems clear, the question of who the “neighbor” is and what it means to love them remains a gray area for some Christians.

### **Environmentalism in Christian Leadership**

Rodney Howard-Browne is an example of an influential AG leader that does not take seriously the threat of climate change. Howard-Browne is an evangelist and former Assemblies of God pastor with his own non-denominational church in Tampa, Florida. He founded Revival Ministries International and The River at Tampa Bay Church. The church does not publish its actual attendance or membership numbers, but its Facebook page has more than 53,000 followers (The River). At Revival Ministries, members pray for a great awakening and revival in America, believing that “true ministry comes from His (Agape) love, without which we have no right to claim ourselves a Christian” (“What We Believe”). Howard-Browne and his wife have been involved in nationwide events including speaking at the Daughters of the Revolution Constitution Hall and visiting the White House in 2017, where he was asked to pray over President Trump, after which he launched a 24/7 prayer initiative for the President (“About Us”).



Later that same year, Hurricane Irma moved westward from the coast of Africa, eventually hitting Florida in mid-September causing significant flooding and damage. Irma also caused 21 new tornadoes in the state of Florida and 6 million people to evacuate the coastal areas. Howard-Browne remarked in a broadcast that the damage reports were blown out of proportion by the media. He believed that because the hurricane had weakened over Florida from its original strength, it was neutralized and “became a nothingburger other than, you know, a big Florida storm, which we normally have during the summer times.” While he did acknowledge the more severe impact the storm had on other areas, Howard-Browne contributed the lesser impact in Tampa solely to the power of prayer (Gaffey). Overall, Irma caused 47 direct deaths and 77 indirect deaths in Florida, and hundreds of injuries worldwide (Cangialosi, et al. 13).

In 2018 *The Guardian* produced a short documentary titled “The Climate and the Cross” which explored battling perspectives on climate change among AG and evangelical Christians in the U.S. Featured in the film was a climate scientist who denied global warming, a staunch Trump supporter who traveled the country to promote solar power, and several pastors who covered all sides of the issue. One Florida preacher (denomination unknown) commented that he was grateful for the flooding from Hurricane Irma of his church and home because it was a sign of the presence of God and allowed him to move out into a nicer and safer living area (The Climate and the Cross). He claimed that disasters like Hurricane Irma were not related to climate change, but rather a sign of God’s divine presence.

Conversations about the environment may be stirring within various Christian communities, but it is uncommon to hear these conversations among AG and evangelical Christian leadership. According to Pastor Brian McCormack of Reach Church—a non-denominational church in Kirkland, Washington—caring for creation is a “theological

mandate...and it is one that has largely been disregarded by American evangelicals for the last two generations.” Not only is environmentalism absent from most Sunday services, it also is highly debated within parts of the Christian community. It is imaginably complex to address a topic “where one group feels like something is life or death important, and the other group isn’t sure if it’s real or not” (McCormack). A 2019 research study involving 1,000 Protestant pastors found that 53% agreed that global warming is real and man-made, the first time that a majority of pastors felt that way (Banks). In previous studies of similar size, pastors appeared more skeptical with only 43% agreeing that global warming was real. Of all the denominations surveyed, Pentecostal Christians had the lowest percent agreeing with 32% (Banks). A previous iteration of the same study in 2012 reported that self-identified mainline pastors were more likely than evangelical and AG pastors to agree that global warming is real and man-made, as well as pastors in large cities and those living in the Northeast and West. About a quarter of Protestant pastors in 2012 said they spoke about the environment in their churches several times a year, and 15% said they never spoke about the environment (“Majority”).

Because African Americans are statistically shown to be more highly affected by climate change, as explained in the following sections, it makes sense that a higher percentage of African American pastors recognize it as a reality. It is notable that “the latest research [in 2019] showed striking demographic differences in views about climate change. For example, African Americans were most likely—more than three-quarters of them—to agree global warming is a reality” (Banks). Unfortunately, it appears that seeing others experience the negative effects of climate change is not enough to convince disbelieving pastors that it is indeed real.

It can be hard for those in leadership to know how to address the topic of environmentalism without a thorough education on the topic, especially when it feels like no

other pastors are doing it. But as atmospheric scientist Katharine Hayhoe plainly stated, “if you don’t talk about something, why would you care about it? And if you don’t care, why would you act, or encourage others to, or advocate for the system-wide change we ultimately need?” (xviii). Perhaps that is the key starting place for a shift in the way churches in the Western world address climate change and the environment. As pastors of one of the fastest-growing Christian denominations, leaders in the WAAG *must* care. They must invest themselves personally in these issues that are deeply impacting people all around the globe so that it compels them to say something—to say *anything*.

Julie Clawson is a Christian author who frequently writes on the topics of faith, justice, and culture. In fact, her book *Everyday Justice* is one of the very things that inspired me to join the master’s program for which I have written this thesis. In this book, Clawson challenged Christians to make their beliefs personal, stating, “our God cares deeply for all the people of the world and challenges us to commit our lives to being a part of that transformation, which means committing ourselves to justice and creation care as a way of life, not just as a theology we salute” (9). Similar to Howard-Browne’s *The River at Tampa Bay*, a common focus for many in the WAAG Church is to pray for spiritual revival in America. Christians and the WAAG Church must also pray for an awakening to the problems of others and a revival of empathy, selflessness, and wisdom. To be a Christian is to seek “not only the redemption of individuals but also the reformation of society” (Gasaway 7). Guided by the Scriptures and the mission to demonstrate love and compassion for the world, leaders in the WAAG Church have an opportunity to put their faith into action by caring for creation and calling for an end to systems and lifestyles that negatively contribute to climate change.

## A Global Call to Care

The responsibility for caring and acting about climate change does not rest solely on the shoulders of Christians and the AG Church. It is a responsibility of every human to care for one another and be accountable for one's own actions. Wendell Berry—Christian novelist, environmental activist, and farmer—proclaims, “humans do not own the world or any part of it: ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein’” (307). If humans do not own the world, then they have a responsibility to use it with care. Earth care is critical in multiple faiths. As explained by Kevin O’Brien, author and professor of Christian ethics at Pacific Lutheran University:

The Western monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share strong doctrines of creation, asserting that God made the world and declared it good. In light of such teaching, the careless and unintentional altering of climatic balance is disrespectful at best and blasphemous at worst. The Eastern traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism are less likely to emphasize creation, but they share a sense that everything is interconnected and any harm done to any part of the world has negative consequences for all. (28)

John Mark Comer is a Christian author and pastor of Bridgetown Church, a non-denominational, evangelical church based in the mostly White city of Portland, OR. In his book *Garden City*, Comer dissects the language used in the Bible in Genesis when talking about creation of the world and man's role in caring for it. It was written in Genesis 2:15 that “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it *and keep it*” (emphasis added). The original Hebrew word used for “keep” is *shamar*, which means “to watch over, protect, guard, police, and stand up for the creation” (Comer 58). Comer even went as far to suggest that “the first human

was an environmentalist. We should be too” (58). Another verse that benefits from further interpretation is Genesis 1:28: “And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Comer explained that:

Human[s] [are] created to rule—to continue the project that God started... But that doesn’t mean trash the environment, pollute the atmosphere, stockpile nuclear weapons, strip-mine for ore, farm away the topsoil, or any other stupid thing we’ve done in the name of ‘the Bible says.’ No, there is a very specific *kind* of world we are to make. It’s called Eden. (56)

The idea of “ruling” over the earth has been interpreted by some to mean humans can do whatever they want with it because they are in charge and the earth is theirs to subdue. Additional parts of Scripture emphasize to Christians and WAAG members that their ultimate home is in Heaven, leading many to believe that it does not matter what happens to Earth (2 Cor. 5:1-6). However, the true intention behind these biblical passages is that people would be good stewards of the earth’s resources, using them to flourish and create culture, not to exploit, deplete, or hoard. In Psalm 19:1 it was written, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Caring for creation—both human and non-human—is important because creation reveals God and points to his power. The Scriptures emphasized this again in Romans 1:20, writing, “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” It is a common saying for people to believe that they feel closest to God when in nature. If the Spirit of God is found in creation, then it should be respected as a holy and sacred place.

## **The False Idol of Freedom**

The idea of being a Christian and WAAG member has become synonymous for some with being an American. For example, many WAAG members believe that freedom and liberty are at the heart of their identity as Americans. Therefore, if being American is having freedom, and being American is being Christian (since some would say it was founded as a Christian nation), then being a Christian must mean that freedom is valued above all else. Of course, as people living in a democratic nation, it is natural for Americans to value freedom and liberty and to advocate for others in the world to have freedom as well. But for Christians, the freedom to live life however one wishes is not something that is promised in the Bible to its readers. If anything, the opposite is true. In the Bible, Jesus encourages his followers saying, “in the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Dr. Art Lindsley—author and Vice President of Theological Initiatives at the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics—supplied an analysis of the implications of the biblical view of freedom. One of those implications is that “freedom is not autonomy or doing what you feel like doing without any constraints. In fact, following Christ’s commands frees you to be more of the person God created you to be” (Lindsley). White American Assemblies of God Christians must find the balance between embracing freedom to do as they wish and respecting the land and the rights of others.

Another point about what freedom means for Christians is that “freedom is within the context of Law. [Christians] are not under the obedience to the Law as a condition of salvation, but the moral Law and Christ’s commands give us a guide to know how to live and to love” (Lindsley). Whether the laws are for pollution from big businesses or labor laws in clothing factories, there is no excuse to violate these rules—in the name of money or in the name of God. WAAG

Christians must be careful not to assume all American values to be Christian values. Some of these values, which are not exclusively American, might include the pursuit of power or wealth, or being in the political majority. The author of 1 John 2:15-17 instructed Christians:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

To “love the world” is to buy into everything that American culture says is important. This biblical passage instructs Christians and WAAG members to align their priorities with that of their faith, not secular or worldly culture.

The Bible commands Christians and WAAG members to seek God above all else. Freedom is a privilege and a blessing and not one that should be taken for granted. True freedom for the WAAG Church is not in the ability to live autonomously and do as they please but in the fact that Jesus brought redemption and salvation for their souls. Paul, an apostle of Jesus, encouraged fellow Christians when he wrote, “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20). Identity for the WAAG Church is therefore not in freedom, but in Jesus. Freedom can be taken away, but faith remains. White AG Christians in America should not hesitate to sacrifice comfort and a degree of personal freedom in order to effectively love and care for their neighbors, both those who live in close proximity and those who they may never meet. In his book *Beautiful Resistance*, author Jon Tyson (a native Australian) explained his experience with privilege in America. Tyson wrote:

Culturally, we're encouraged to take advantage of our privilege. To protect it. To enjoy it. What else would you want to do with it? But that is not the way of Jesus. As the Son of God, he had more privilege than any of us will ever know. As the Son of Man born in a stable and laid in a manger, as the Messiah with no place to lay his head, and finally as the Lamb of God hanging on the cross, he gave up privilege to a more profound extent than anyone else could ever match. Yet in all this, he modeled for us what to do with our blessings and opportunities: use them for others. Sacrifice must resist the selfish enjoyment of privilege. (131)

This is important because recognizing and addressing injustice is often not the easiest or most convenient path. Changing habits and behaviors, or even mindsets and attitudes, requires repeated commitment and a critical eye. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, author and professor of ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, explained that "Love implies active commitment to the well-being of whom or what is loved. Where people suffer under systemic injustice, seeking their well-being entails seeking to undo that injustice" (57). A commitment to justice should serve as a backbone for everyday choices in the WAAG community.

### **Recognizing the Issue**

Because loving others is a cornerstone of the Christian faith, the WAAG Church should demonstrate that love by addressing systemic issues that affect other people. Environmental injustice is a problem that extends beyond easy fixes and into established systems. Examples of environmental injustice are found all over the world today. As explained by O'Brien, climate change is a case of structural violence because "refugees flee their homes as sea levels rise, people fight over ever-scarcer water supplies, and farmers work ever harder to feed their families, their communities, and the world. This is violence, a product of human actions that



hurts others” (O’Brien 2). This violence is significantly induced by climate change, and efforts to reconcile these issues are needed to advocate for climate justice. According to O’Brien, “Climate justice means accepting the fact that climate change is a reality but refusing to accept the mistakes that created it or the inequalities and violence it causes” (5). For anyone who is beginning their journey to learn and care about climate change, accepting its reality is a good place to start.

The Bible has many examples of how Christians are expected to act regarding the poor, the widow, the oppressed, the anyone-who-needs-help. They are to care, to empathize, to love, and to advocate for them. In the Bible, God is described as one who “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:18-19). Similarly, it is written in Proverbs 14:31 that “whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.” In addition to that, the Lord demands that his people “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Isa. 1:17). These are not suggestions implied by vague wording, but a biblical mandate to love and look out for other people.

Many around the world are forced to become refugees as a result of environmental disasters and destruction. These are circumstances that many people in America and the WAAG Church cannot even imagine. And “though not all of us have experienced the large-scale trauma of war or the violence of brutal racism, we all know brokenness and division at some level, whether through divorce, abuse, social injustice, conflict in our community or right inside our own family” (Katangole and Rice 23). Moe-Lobeda defines “justice” as what most people know as “social justice” because “it is the form most closely related to justice as a biblically informed

norm and to the biblical norm of neighbor-love” (179). WAAG Christians must care about justice because of God’s love for the world and the call to love their neighbor. This exhortation again aligns with the Assemblies of God doctrine to demonstrate God’s love and compassion to the world (“Assemblies of God”).

Americans can be found at a wide variety of places along this spectrum, from denying climate change, to accepting it but sloughing personal responsibility, all the way to advocacy and actively working on the issue. For White Christians in the American Assemblies of God, many linger among the former options and ignore the issue altogether. While some have grown “cynical and weary in the face of the deluge of apocalyptic rhetoric with which politicians, the press and all manner of special interest groups inundate us. Nevertheless, it will not do for us simply to ignore what is going on in the world around us” (Moo and White 16). Moe-Lobeda questions this, asking, “If we fail to recognize the injustice that is damaging neighbor, and hence fail to address it, are we not defying the call to love? If I am professing love for neighbor by feeding the poor and sheltering the homeless, and yet am ignoring the systemic factors that have made them hungry and homeless, am I loving neighbor?” (57). To love one’s neighbor implores not just an immediate, superficial love, but a sacrificial love that goes out of the way to help others and gets to the root of the problem.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Environmentalism can be polarizing in both religious and secular communities, so it is important to define its meaning here. The term “environmentalism” I am primarily referring to is a general concern for the earth and caring for all of creation. The modern environmentalism movement in America began around the 1960s with scientist and conservationist Rachel Carson and her advocacy against harmful pesticides such as DDT (Gish 20). Her efforts even influenced

Christian leaders when famous evangelist Billy Graham acknowledged a “connection between DDT and the industrial nations’ destructive ecological attitude in 1965” (Gish 23). The environmental justice movement has:

drawn attention to the degree to which environmental degradation and health risks, such as toxic wastes and pollution, threaten and affect mainly the poor and racial or ethnic minorities. As environmental justice advocates charge, in a society based on the domination of humans over other humans, the poor and minorities are exploited in the same way as nature is. Employing strong notions of justice and environmental racism, this discourse [of environmental justice] appears closer to the civil rights movement than to mainstream environmentalism, especially since many historically black and mainline Protestant churches have played a role in shaping it. (Gish 31)

“Environmentalism” and “environmental justice” are two similar but separate terms, both of which will be used throughout this thesis.

### **Implications of Climate Change**

A significant component of the environmental justice movement is focused on climate change and how it has affected both people and the planet. Climate change is slow building in nature, caused by an accumulation of actions over time. This leads many to doubt its severity. The problem is easy to ignore for those who are largely unaffected by its consequences. Clawson provides a brief summary, writing, “Simply put, climate change refers to the effects greenhouse gases have on our atmosphere, effects that cause the earth’s average temperature to rise. Burning fossil fuels like oil produce these greenhouse gases” (78). The idea of climate change often evokes images of ice melting in the North Pole, dramatically affecting the habitats of creatures such as the polar bear and causing sea levels to rise. In addition to affecting animal habitats,

climate change can affect weather too. Models from NASA provide the information that “changes in climate not only affect average temperature, but also extreme temperatures, increasing the likelihood of weather-related natural disasters” (“Impact of Climate Change”). As stated by O’Brien:

Climate change is not caused by any one person’s decision, and no individual can stop it. The structural nature of this problem too often makes it seem invisible, an abstraction that public discourse suggests may or may not be real, may or may not be caused by human beings and may or may not be related to the latest extreme weather events. But climate change is very real, very much caused by human beings, and very much connected to hurricanes, droughts, and floods. (2)

Climate change has real consequences affecting people all around the world. Whether these effects are broadcast on the news or suffered in silence, they are indeed real and present in many people’s lives.

### **Disaster Relief and the Role of Aid**

While much of the damage to the environment that has been done is irreversible, the suffering it has brought on others around the world cannot be accepted as inevitable or irreconcilable. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) explained that the effects of climate change are “likely to increase violent conflicts over resources, to reduce food supplies, to increase the uncertainty created by extreme weather events, to change the vectors of diseases and pests that threaten human beings, and to disrupt centuries-old agricultural traditions” (O’Brien 23). Disastrous events wreak havoc on poorer communities because they typically have less robust disaster-prevention methods and are underprepared to deal with the aftermath of recovery. This situation can become a cycle when poor communities are unable to

recover from disasters, thereby causing them to be more vulnerable to similar events in the future. Disaster relief can be helpful for recovery to provide vital resources to people in need, but many relief organizations aim to offer help without addressing the underlying systemic issues that make recovery so difficult. As stated by Andrew Collins—expert in disaster management and development logistics, “an emphasis on resilience rather than just disaster response and recovery has become a mainstream idea in disaster reduction” (103). This is helpful for development because “the strengthening of coping capacities usually builds resilience to withstand the effects of natural and human-induced hazards” (Collins 103). Disaster relief must be provided carefully and consider the complex nature of inequality, injustice, and vulnerability that exists within communities and is amplified in times of crisis.

When a disaster happens, the reactions of different groups of people will vary and reveal the social stratification of a community. In the case of Hurricane Katrina—a 2005 disaster that still affects communities in the U.S. today—research found that low-income African American families were more likely to remain in New Orleans through the disaster and were among the most affected populations. Researchers Elliot and Pais hypothesized that this may have been due to inadequate transportation, not being able to afford alternative housing (such as a hotel) or wanting to remain in the city longer to collect government checks being dispensed at the end of the month. Regardless of race, most people also underestimated the severity of the storm (Elliot and Pais 308). Those from other races or economic classes may have reacted differently and evacuated quickly because they were able to afford other accommodations and did not face the same challenges with money and housing as low-income African Americans. Income also played a role in evacuation during and after the storm because “wealthier stragglers eventually left the city under their own power,” but “poorer stragglers awaited help that was slow in coming to their

deeply flooded districts” (Elliot and Pais 309). In this way, Hurricane Katrina revealed some inequalities in the community that weren’t previously as visible. Enarson et al. explained that “social vulnerability to disaster is a social dynamic rooted in gender, class, race, culture, nationality, age, and other power relationships” (131). Those who were experiencing inequality before the disaster were more vulnerable when the disaster hit.

In addition to this, if countries that are struggling from disasters are constantly flooded with help from foreign groups, these organizations shoulder some of the responsibility that normally lies with the local government. The result is a reduction in the government’s capacity to improve its responses for future situations. This is not to say that disaster relief is unimportant or ineffective, but there are newer methods which include “an emphasis on resilience rather than just disaster response and recovery” that are more effective than traditional aid (Collins 103).

“Good aid” is aid that meet the needs of people without inserting help where it is not needed. While it is important to step in and help with immediate needs, aid is also about increasing a community’s capacity—its ability to take care of itself. Collins summarized his thoughts on good aid, writing:

Well-targeted relief saves lives and is withdrawn once its job is done. However, relief can also create dependencies. Its impact on development is positive inasmuch as it prevents loss of life during emergency, but can have some negative effects if local systems and the means to rebuild economically are undermined by it. (117)

An important concept from this is that relief is temporary; development is long-term. Even though it has the potential to create dependency, short-term aid is still important. WAAG churches can practice their own form of “good aid” and help mitigate the need for disaster relief by caring for creation. By taking care of the earth and being advocates for the environment, the

WAAG Church can contribute to the building of resilient communities that are less vulnerable to disasters and the effects of climate change.

### **Environmental Racism**

Put simply, environmental racism is when “communities consisting primarily of people of color continue to bear a disproportionate burden of this nation’s air, water and waste problems” (Bullard 24). The reality is that those who suffer most tend to be the less wealthy, and the less wealthy often tend to be people of color. In a study about race, class, and the effects of Hurricane Katrina, researchers concluded that “minorities, particularly Black households, are disproportionately located in poor-quality housing segregated into low-value neighborhoods. This segregation creates communities of fate that can take on added salience in a disaster context” (Elliot and Pais 298). As an example, some citizens in Bangladesh living within one meter of elevation from current high tide levels face great danger should there be a rise in sea levels or natural disasters (O’Brien 24). Climate change is not only an issue of environmentalism, but also an issue of racial injustice.

In January of 2019, *The Seattle Times* published an article discussing the Washington Environmental Health Disparities Map (Figure 1), an interactive tool created by the Washington State Department of Health which displays various data categories including environmental health disparities that can be compared with social data such as income and race (Beason). *Seattle Times* author, Tyrone Beason, explains that the map offers “concrete evidence of the gap between wealthier and white census tracts and ones with more people of color, immigrants and poor or working-class households, which are often located nearer to industrial zones, polluted waterways, high-traffic roads and neglected utility infrastructure.” Environmental justice is connected to social justice. Author Peter Adewunmiju claims, “the basic truth is that poverty

falls within the areas of Christian concerns and as such the Christian church needs a... response to poverty as a basis for Christian action” (2). If the WAAG Church desires to live out its mission, then it must recognize the severities of climate change and the validity of environmental racism.

It is no secret that Native Americans are a group of people who have suffered much at the hands of the U.S. Government. In his book *The Girl in The Photograph*, Former North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan explains some startling statistics about Native Americans today. Some of these include lower high school graduation rates, suicide rates three times higher than the U.S. national average, inadequate funding for healthcare needs, and an extreme increase in the likelihood of murder for American Indian women versus other Americans (Heim). Often their sufferings are not widely covered in the media like they might be if other groups of people in the U.S. were being affected. The recent leak of the Keystone Pipeline in North Dakota is just one example of how Native Americans have been ignored in the U.S. It was discovered in 2019 that part of the Keystone 1 Pipeline had leaked over 380,000 gallons of oil in North Dakota and had been shut down because of it. According to *CNN*, “Keystone 1 refers to phase one of the Keystone Pipeline that starts in Alberta and runs through North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas and Missouri to refineries in Illinois and Oklahoma. Phase one started operating in 2011” (Johnson). This was the largest spill that had come from the Keystone Pipeline, and one of the largest onshore oil spills in the past 10 years (Associated Press). Oil spills are concerning because depending on the location, they can have negative effects on the land including water sources and wildlife. The North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality revealed that the Keystone oil leak did impact a wetland area (Johnson). This is an issue specifically for Native Americans because the Keystone Pipeline runs through Native American lands, even though they



had no voice in the decision. As a result, when spills happen, they are the ones who will suffer the consequences while those in charge of the pipelines do not.

The Keystone 1 Pipeline spill is certainly not the first of its kind. As many as 10,000 people participated in demonstrations following a 2017 spill in South Dakota which “exposed 210,000 gallons of oil” (Johnson). Many will remember the rapidly growing protests that occurred several years ago in North Dakota surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline. Protests occurred because “pipeline opponents worried that a spill from the Dakota Access Pipeline would pollute drinking water for the nearby Standing Rock Sioux reservation” (Brady). Although the permit for the pipeline was initially denied by President Obama, several months later “the Trump administration reversed that decision and approved construction” (Brady). Soon enough, the Dakota Access Pipeline did spill in 2017, releasing 84 gallons of oil in South Dakota (“Dakota Access Pipeline”). The point here is that oil pipelines are continually being constructed on Native lands that are not approved of by the Native people. According to the Native American Rights Fund, “the United States formally agreed, among other things, to keep outsiders off Lakota (Sioux) and other Tribal nation’s territories and protect tribal culture and natural resources. The 2019 pipeline approval violates both of these provisions” (Rosebud). This is an issue because the U.S. government has treated the Native American-owned land as if it is free property that can be taken advantage of. Land ownership is a complicated topic because:

historic policies opened up portions of reservations and tribal lands to non-Indian ownership. The resulting checkerboard land ownership causes a great deal of dispute over which government – tribal or state – has jurisdiction over the non-Indians’ land as well as conduct and activities of Indians and non-members on the lands. (“Protect Tribal Natural Resources”)

It is difficult for Native Americans to fight for their rights when the government does not necessarily recognize the land as belonging to them. Part of the problem is that:

For the most part, the industrialized world views nature as a resource to be exploited: a mass of animals and plants, minerals and water, whose purpose is to serve humanity. This fundamentally human-centered, or anthropocentric, perspective on nature, many theologians believe, is at the core of the crisis. It justifies thoughtless devastation of anything that gets in our way or looks like it might come in handy. (Gottlieb 22)

The WAAG needs to promote environmental advocacy, not only to protect land and wildlife, but also to protect people such as Native Americans living in the United States. Climate change is a real problem affecting real people. It is written in Psalm 9:9 that the Lord is a shelter for the oppressed and a refuge in times of trouble. As representatives and followers of Jesus, the WAAG Church should also be a shelter to the oppressed and a refuge for people in trouble. Whether those people are Native Americans, Black people in America, or people living in coastal nations such as the Philippines or Bangladesh, it is clear that the effects of climate change are widespread, disproportionately experienced, and need to be taken seriously.

## GLOBALIZATION

Mistreatment of the environment is a global issue, but the effects are disproportionately loaded onto the less wealthy, particularly affecting people of color and those within Third World countries, or the global South. While almost all parts of the world are made up of both wealthy and poor communities, on average the global North is wealthier than the global South. Many in the global North face less of the negative effects of climate change than poorer communities in the global South. One contributing factor to this is that wealthier communities can afford to pay for disposing of waste or toxic materials, much of which ends up accumulating in the seas and

shores of the global South. David Pellow—a sociology professor at the University of Minnesota—states that “a significant factor driving the globalization of hazardous waste dumping was the passage of more stringent environmental legislation in northern nations” (57). In 1989 the United States signed the Basel Convention—an international agreement intended to ban the occurrence of waste shipment from the global North to nations in the global South (Pellow 11). The majority of waste may be shipped out to other nations in the global North who are equipped to manage and treat it, but a significant amount of toxic waste still finds its way to nations in the South. Pellow explained that while most hazardous waste is generated in industrial countries, the exportation of waste causes potential risks for those who are importing the waste, who also do not share the benefits gained by creating it:

The people who share the potential risks have little, if any, practical influence on the decision to import the wastes. The export of hazardous waste and materials to nations with less stringent environmental standards is not only an example of environmental inequality and racism. It is also a clear violation of the United Nations’ Stockholm Declaration, which states in Principle 21, “States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law...the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction of control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. (33)

In addition to wealth, legislation differences make it easier for the global North to dispose of its problems, and the global South is left to deal with the consequences. Many famous photographs have gone viral depicting spots in the ocean that are filled with trash and toxic chemicals, or large amounts of discarded materials washing up onto the shores of various island nations. This waste problem has gained attention in the last decade, but a culture of consumerism is difficult to

break. All citizens of the global North need to hold themselves accountable to valuing the well-being of those who are affected by such tragedies, especially WAAG Christians who abide by the mission to love their neighbors.

Environmental justice and racism are deeply intertwined through the shared historic abuse of people of color and their environments, as well as the effects of globalization. Although globalization has been presented as a good thing for connecting people across the globe, the reality is that it has mostly benefited the environment of the global North while the global South suffers the consequences. It is less expensive to get rid of waste in the global South, so nations in the global North often make the choice to do so, therefore negatively impacting the environment of those in the global South. This is connected to racism for obvious reasons since the global South is primarily composed of people of color. Pellow also mentioned that “despite all of the talk about globalization, the continued use of nationalism and nation-state borders to reinforce ethnic, religious, and racial hierarchies, and exclusions challenges the notion that cultural fluidity is the order of the day” (40). The allure of a more connected world masks the devastation that globalization has brought upon those who live in the shadow of unfairly distributed wealth and resources.

The WAAG must ask themselves, “Is it possible that our prayers and attitudes of gratitude for our many blessings subtly rationalize and normalize the ways of life that produced my material blessings while also generating global warming and toxic dumping?” (Moe-Lobeda 93). Global citizens can make choices in their daily lives that participate in just environmental practices and empowerment and avoid supporting exploitative practices. White American AG Christians in particular have the opportunity to put their faith into action because “it seems that there is visible convergence between Christian understanding and mission for justice,

compassion and human dignity, and the global human rights movement” (Clifford 6). In climate change, disaster relief, and land and resource use, the common thread to all these topics is that each is affected by or contributing to environmental injustice and are largely unaddressed within the WAAG community.

## POLITICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

### **How Do We Know the Truth?**

Rising political tensions in America have emphasized the role the media can play in public opinion and the need for reliable data. Controversial issues are explained in different ways by competing parties, each with a thorough explanation as to why. With so many different sources available, it can be hard to know which claims are trustworthy and what unbiased data really looks like. Many people in the WAAG have found themselves asking, “how do I know I can trust what people say about climate change?” This question is a common justification for doubt in the legitimacy of what they hear about the environment, and the answer lies not only in the data but in the science itself.

It is important to recognize is that the claims about the seriousness of climate change are based on measured data, including averages that are calculated about every 30 years by climate scientists, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (“Climate Data Monitoring”). Second, scientific claims are not made lightly or without thorough research and evidence. According to scientist and author Naomi Oreskes, the justification for trusting science is:

Not the methods by which scientists generate claims, but the methods by which those claims are *evaluated*. The common element in modern science, regardless of the specific field or the particular methods being used, is the critical scrutiny of claims...A scientific

claim is never accepted as true until it has gone through a lengthy process of examination by fellow scientists. (Oreskes)

While it could appear to some that new claims and new facts about climate change are being announced on a whim without thorough investigation, the evidence is there and has been evaluated by not only those who support climate change, but also those who may doubt its legitimacy. In fact:

It is a strength of science, not a weakness, that scientists continue to learn and to be open to new ways of thinking about old problems. The fact that we may learn new things in the future does not mean that we should throw away what hard-earned knowledge we have now. (Oreskes)

To deny evidence of environmental issues is to ignore the obvious truth. After all, “most people do not need a scientific panel to tell them that air is not supposed to be brown, that streams are not supposed to ignite and stink, that beaches are not supposed to be covered with raw sewage” (Cromartie 2). It is a common saying that “ignorance is bliss.” But in the case of environmental injustice, ignorance only dehumanizes those who are really suffering because of it by refusing to recognize the struggles they face.

The media, including both news sources and social media, has also played a role in the distribution of information, and influencing of its consumers. It can be quite difficult to know how to discern what a reputable source is when there is so much information out there from varying perspectives. Cable news outlets often lean to political extremes in their content. Their biases don't always reflect actual beliefs as news channels tend to tailor their reports to specific demographics in order to gain or maintain viewership. According to *Forbes* magazine, “social networks are about 'affirmation, not information'—and the same can be said about cable news,

especially in primetime" (Beer). As an example, two top cable news sources—*CNN* and *Fox News*—presented opposing headlines with commentary about President Biden’s climate change policies. From *CNN* the headline read, “Biden Opens Global Climate Summit: ‘This is a Moral Imperative’” (Biden). The headline from *Fox News* read, “[Former Secretary of State] Pompeo: Foreign Threats ‘Far Outweigh’ Biden’s Focus on Climate Change” (Pompeo). The same data can sometimes be interpreted differently depending on one’s political perspective and what they are inclined to believe. Even data that is inconclusive can be used as proof or disproof for certain issues such as climate change. WAAG consumers can learn to research with a healthy balance of skepticism and open mindedness. Some in the WAAG community may be hesitant to read news sources whose views are different from theirs because they don’t want to read information that tells them they are wrong. There is no need to fear being wrong because it is a tool for learning and growth. For WAAG Christians, the focus should be more on doing right than being right.

Social media can and should be used as an effective tool for education, but it can also be used manipulatively by people who may have done a significant amount of research but are not truly experts on the topic. Oreskes explained:

Just as we wouldn’t go to a plumber to fix our teeth or a dentist to fix our car, we shouldn’t go to actresses or politicians, much less industries with a vested interest or ideologically-driven think-tanks, for answers to scientific questions. If we need scientific information, we should go to the scientists who have dedicated their lives to learning about the matters at stake. On scientific matters, we should trust science. (Oreskes)

It is good to gather research from a variety of sources, especially ones with different viewpoints. But it is also good to realize that the most reliable and unbiased research on climate change and the environment is going to be from the scientists who spend their careers studying it.

## Politics in Christianity and Climate Change

In addition to the media, another contributing factor in the denial of climate change as a real concern is its politicization. Some WAAG Christians have refuted climate change because of its association with the political left, as an issue of the liberal agenda. Because a significant number of WAAG Christians identify with the conservative political right, it is possibly out of fear, distrust, or doubt that they reject climate change as a way of rejecting the liberal political agenda and avoiding personal association with it. The issue with this framework of thought is that while political parties can sit idly by and debate the severity of the issue, real people around the globe are suffering because of its consequences and the inability of the Western world to make a collective effort that is effective.

Some people in the WAAG may believe that religion and politics do not, or should not, overlap or that it is not the place of Christians to be involved in politics. While in America during the Andrew Jackson administration, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed a greater separation of church and state than in his home country in which criticism of the state was congruent with rebuking the church (Utter and Storey xiii). However:

There has never been an absolute wall between church and state in American society. Ever since the Puritans came ashore in the early 1600s, religious leaders have often sought to influence public policy on a variety of social issues, and political leaders of all persuasions have just as readily appealed to the divine... To many religious leaders, political activism in no way violates the separation of church and state, for in their view religion has a responsibility to address vital issues. Likewise, public officials have often invoked the authority of religion, hinting that a divine force directed American history. (Utter and Storey 1)



While some Americans continue to advocate for the separation of church and state, separating religion and politics completely from one another is impossible. Moe-Lobeda proposed that “Ethics should not be about determining the right view of the world and then applying it to problems; rather, it should be about wrestling with real problems in conversation with broad claims about the nature of reality” (8). Some people may get caught up in debating issues in an objective matter because it is not their everyday reality. The truth is that valuing certain political issues is not always a matter of morality but a matter of ego.

Like many other political issues, it can be easy to push aside empathy for environmental injustice in favor of logic. For example, natural disasters are not nearly as prevalent in the Pacific Northwest of the United States as they are in the Southeast. If someone from Washington State sees in the news that climate change is increasing the occurrence of weather-related disasters, it would be easy to look at their own living environment and believe the claim is wrong (“Impact of Climate Change”). It might even be tempting to say that a claim like that is exaggerated to prove a political point about climate change. However, that doesn’t mean that the claim isn’t true for other people. Dr. Randy Woodley is a Native American reverend, activist, and writer working to teach others about how to recognize their connections with the Earth and incorporate this into their faith and communities. Regarding doctrines and political rules, Woodley proclaimed that:

We tend to end up thinking that these products of the mind are more important than people’s actual lived experiences. That’s not at all how I understand Jesus. How I understand Jesus is actually condemning those who take a strict understanding of the law over the experiences in the lives of people. (“Indigenizing Our Worldview”)

It is far more important to be compassionate than it is to be right. The WAAG should evaluate the effects of climate change with empathy as their guide.

WAAG members can sometimes hold onto their political affiliations regardless of who the party's representatives may be. I have witnessed this many times growing up in this community and observed stubbornness when members are unwilling to admit that someone from another political party may be a better representative of Christian beliefs. Since the 1990s, surveys have found that "the Christian right has shifted from a propensity to support Democratic candidates toward greater support for Republican candidates" (Utter and True 117). Fundamentalist Christians are more likely to vote now than they were before, and their voting power in support of conservative candidates can be an "important factor in who gets elected" (Utter and True 147). Jim Wallis, a theologian, writer, and political activist, offers that "the best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable nor loyally partisan" (xvii). WAAG Christians should not dictate the morality of issues based on political agendas but solely on what is honorable to their faith in God. Wallis also presented the concept of "God's politics" as an alternative to the partisan politics currently experienced in the American Evangelical Church. Wallis explained:

God's politics reminds us of the people our politics always neglects – the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind. God's politics challenges narrow, national, ethnic, economic, or cultural self-interest, reminding us of a much wider world and the creative human diversity of all those made in the image of the creator. God's politics reminds us of the creation itself, a rich environment in which we are to be good stewards, not mere users, consumers, and exploiters. (xix)

Like love, compassion is a choice, not just a feeling. Americans and WAAG Christians must make the choice to put aside political preferences in favor of a desire for peace, justice, and reconciliation for all peoples. Clawson added that:

Our understanding of our world and science is always evolving, but as the data pours in, the vast majority of scientists affirm the realities and dangers of climate change. But beyond the debates, there are few who would deny the need to care for God's creation. We have scarred the earth and its people with our abuse of resources, and we should do our part to bring healing to those wounds. (77)

Politics should never get in the way of relationships and treating others with dignity and respect. WAAG members should consider the importance of caring for God's creation regardless of their political preferences.

Another common objection to environmental advocacy is that there are more important or immediate issues. If importance is determined by the majority of American people, then it is reasonable to see how some believe that to be true because it does not affect them in their day to day lives. As a middle-class American living in Washington State, I personally cannot remember the last time I felt worried about rising sea levels, desertification, or mass food shortages in my own life. But for others, these concerns constitute their everyday realities. It is true that:

Climate change is not more important than biodiversity loss, pollution, or deforestation. Rather, the reason we care about it is because it multiplies all of these other threats. From planetary boundaries that affect all living things to our entirely human challenges of poverty, hunger, disease, lack of access to basic health care and employment opportunities—climate change makes all of these worse. (Hayhoe xvi)

For example, war and conflict are immediate and dangerous threats that need to be addressed in order to prevent future violence. The African nation of Sudan has been war-torn for years and faces an increase in the chances of violent conflicts in the future due to risk of famine, which is influenced by desertification and increasingly dry conditions (O'Brien 24). War and violent

conflict appear to be the most immediate and pressing issues, but these are only exacerbated further by the effects of climate change. On top of that, refugees and asylees typically do not have the ability to worry about and invest as much in caring for the environment because they are busy just trying to survive (Martelly). Environmental stress is not always a direct reason for migration except in more extreme cases, such as exposure to hazards like flooding in Bangladesh. But environmental stress is often a contributing factor and its effects are exacerbated within power structures that lack accountability. In parts of Bangladesh, inefficient land registration systems, combined with environmental stress, “increase household vulnerability and thus the propensity for (im)mobility” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 345). Even if it is rare to see environmental disasters being the number one cause of migration and hardship, environmental stress is a constant factor for life decisions in many parts of the world.

By refusing to give in to political pressures and committing to do the work outlined by Jesus’ lived example, WAAG Christians can choose to work for “peace and justice [as] a way to answer God’s call to help souls” (Menkhaus 455). Putting aside political motivations and excuses is an important step in becoming more compassionate and justice-oriented human beings.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN ACTION

### **Permaculture as a Movement**

Permaculture serves as a practical model for Christian earth care in the WAAG. The practice of permaculture "offers a set of ethical guidelines and basic principles to keep foremost in mind as we make choices about how to design our lives" (Bloom and Boehnlein 12). The set of ethics are as follows: care for the earth, care for people, and reinvesting any surplus or profit for the purpose of the former two. Most often, permaculture is used in the design of landscapes and farms, but this system is applicable in a large variety of contexts, whether using sustainable

technologies to develop agricultural land or designing a program for urban community development. Every program, business, or facility, regardless of context, should be designed using these three principles. Not only would this make businesses and organizations more sustainable and environmentally friendly, it would also show that practicing people care could be beneficial for both the reputation of each entity and the longevity of their employees and/or volunteers.

Permaculture in its most common uses is not a perfect system. Jessi Bloom is a Washington-based ecological landscape designer, author, and teacher that I had the pleasure of meeting during my fieldwork. As we stood together stripping mugwort leaves from their stalks, Bloom shared her passions for permaculture and fighting racial injustice, as well as ways the greater permaculture community has failed to live out its own core purpose: to adhere to a certain set of ethics and act accordingly, thereby not reaching the people who could likely benefit the most from it. According to Bloom, the community has “very few people of color, so permaculture has a lot of work to do catching up with equity and being able to reach people that have diverse backgrounds and cultures” (Personal Interview). Because land can be expensive to purchase, traditional uses of permaculture in growing food and managing land are unrealistic methods for those living in poverty or without access to necessary resources. This can make permaculture appear to be an almost elitist activity to which only those with money and resources have access. However, the basic principles of permaculture are widely applicable regardless of circumstance and I believe that many of the methods involved in sustainable agriculture can be modified in scale to be beneficial in a variety of more urban contexts (Stringer 6). While some larger permaculture farms may not serve as practical models for everyday

situations, they do serve as an opportunity to teach people about the beauty in permaculture landscape and can help others to see a different vision for life (Coghlan).

In order to be used as an effective tool for community development, the practice of permaculture must address its historically white roots and lack of accessibility to less affluent communities with the goal of working towards racial reconciliation and contextualized sustainable designs. Because people of color are statistically at a greater risk to be affected by climate change, it is possible that permaculture can be used to support environmentalism as a way to care for the earth, and to recognize and confront systemic racism and care for people. A common objection to earth care for some businesses might be that using sustainable or "green" methods and technologies can be more expensive, at least in the short term. For example, O'Brien offers the possibility that "the solution is a different kind of economics-with higher taxes on polluters, higher charges for those who extract fossil fuels, and huge investments in cleaner energy" (28). But most sustainable solutions pay off in the long-term and can help build resilience in the systems they are being used. An example of this might be using sturdier and more expensive materials to build better homes and structures in areas frequently prone to earthquakes, or even using a different variety of plants on farmlands whose crops do not make as much money, so as to help preserve the soil. A practical example of permaculture in action for the WAAG might be using its principles for church property and landscape designs. Christians and the WAAG should adopt and promote the principles of permaculture when providing aid to people in need.

### **Circlewood as a Model**

Organizations like Circlewood can also be used a model of how to practically work on what they call the "greening of faith" ("Who We Are"). Circlewood offers various programs, classes, and educational opportunities for anyone who is interested in learning more about what

an ecologically conscious faith looks like. Examples of their past and present work include online seminars and courses, prayer retreats, and speaking engagements, with a specific hope in guiding Christian churches in learning about the topic. Additionally, they provide other resources including their own podcast as well as various recommendations for books, articles, curriculum, etc.

Executive Director James Amadon explains that part of their mission is to reform Christian practice from the ground up, creating communities oriented around “an integrated vision of creation that includes everything—human and nonhuman. And where those communities are at the center is the call to care for that and to nurture that” (Amadon). Whether the user is a pastor hoping to “green” their church and personal faith, or a non-Christian with curiosity about the Native American perspective on stewardship and faith, Circlewood’s goal is to help build a culture, rooted in the Christian faith, that is transformative and interconnected with all of creation. WAAG churches can embrace Circlewood’s philosophy of “greening” their faith and caring for all of creation.

## RECONCILIATION

A key theme of the Christian faith is reconciliation. When examining the life of Jesus, the heart of his story is a sacrifice of self for the purpose of reconciliation between God and humanity. The life of Jesus paints a clear picture of the example WAAG Christians are to follow. This model of behavior includes seeking reconciliation between all peoples and a persistent desire and choice to love other people, regardless of whether or not they are likeable, agreeable, or involved in one’s everyday life to some capacity. Teacher and pastor Rick Love explains:

If we follow Jesus’ teaching we will see reconciliation as an urgent priority. We will practice humility and become proactive peacemakers. We will learn to speak the truth in

love. We will go beyond our comfort zones to love our neighbors and even our enemies.

We will practice forgiveness as a way of life. (7-8)

Professor of international peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, John Lederach, states that a key to the presence of Jesus being so powerful and moving was “his capacity to *notice the humanity of others*, especially those most invisible and neglected in his day and time” (*Reconcile* 47). To take it further, WAAG Christians must not only notice the humanity in those around them but see through the boundaries of distance and notice the humanity in those across the globe. *Looking* draws attention to something, but *seeing* looks beyond and deeper, seeking insight and understanding (Lederach, *The Little Book* 9). These are neighbors that Jesus commands his followers to love, not just those living in physical proximity but every person. Special attention must be paid to those which some refuse to see, such as the poor and the suffering in communities near and far. Lederach states that “in each person [Jesus] found that of God. The single most significant starting point of reconciliation is noticing our mutual humanity” (*Reconcile* 51). Recognizing humanity matters because the issues that matter to others then become personal. Many people in the United States may not be feeling the negative effects of climate change and environmental issues, but others around the world are experiencing it as their everyday reality. Suffering as a result of environmental issues is important and becomes a personal issue that must be recognized. “Neutrality is a myth when it comes to reconciliation,” states Salter McNeil (48). Christians and WAAG members need to pay attention to the sufferings of others and recognize that:

We aren't yet fully aware of injustices and inequality in our communities, and this understanding and awareness is *absolutely* essential if we are to be God's agents of reconciliation. We cannot ignore the plight of the people around us, and as globalization



continues its relentless march onward, we cannot turn a blind eye to the world beyond our national borders either. (Salter McNeil 19)

Caring for the environment in both an immediate and broader sense is an act of reconciliation. Seth Holmes—cultural and medical anthropologist, puts it this way: “In order to work consciously to bring about the amelioration of social suffering, people must first be aware of the inequalities that cause suffering” (156). By recognizing the hardship others are facing and making choices in one’s life as a response to this hardship, the process of reconciliation begins as the gap of physical distance is now bridged by actions of solidarity.

Salter McNeil lays out a roadmap to reconciliation involving the following phases: realization, identification, preparation, activation, and restoration (40). Realization requires people to become aware that there is an issue. This can be as simple as seeing the map published by the *Seattle Times* and recognizing that there is a correlation between wealthier communities and healthier environments, as well as recognizing how this has created problems for the people living in the less healthy areas (Figures 1-5). As stated by Clawson, “if we are to love our neighbors around the world, we need to know what is going on in their lives” (87). A beneficial action would be to present this map to churches in Washington State and in collegiate classes about the environment, social justice, community development, ministry, and even economics. It is important to bring awareness to the issue of environmental justice, especially at the local level, and especially to groups of people that might not normally be aware of or interested in these issues. Clawson confirms that “Acting justly every day means developing awareness about the problems in the world” (14). WAAG members can develop awareness to start their efforts of reconciliation.

Those who are now aware of the issues need to personally step into them and identify with those who are affected, as well as identify the role they play in it. Salter McNeil refers to this phase as the “the beginning of shifting our cultural identity” (71). This step of identification would include hearing stories from real people. There are so many resources and documentaries out that give a voice to those who are affected that can be easily accessed. One suggestion on how churches can participate in this would be to alter the way short-term mission trips are done in the WAAG Church. This could entail a shift in focus from doing small tasks to connecting with local leaders in the visited communities and learning about real issues and the causes behind them. Short-term mission trips in the Christian and WAAG Church have been criticized because of their “make-work” nature, with examples of a “wall built on an orphanage soccer field in Brazil that had to be torn down after the visitors left” or “the church in Mexico that was painted six times during one summer by six different mission groups” (Lupton 14). One college group was criticized because “the money spent by one campus ministry to cover the costs of their Central American mission trip to repaint an orphanage would have been sufficient to hire two local painters and two new full-time teachers and purchase new uniforms for every student in the school” (Lupton 5). The WAAG Church can help its members identify with those in need by providing them with opportunities to learn while still experiencing other cultures. Participants then could take what they have learned and apply it in their own lives to understand ways they can advocate for those in need. This change in activities would shift the emphasis of mission trips from doing to learning, which has more potential for long term change than activities which are easily done by local workers in the community.

I attended a trip to Tanzania in 2017 that followed the same pattern as students had the opportunity to observe different projects going on in local communities. The students are not

typically invited to help complete tasks for them or give advice on how things could improve. They are primarily there to observe and to learn. By taking this approach instead of a traditional one more focused on ministry, students are able to observe real work being done by nonprofit organizations and experts in the field and see how it is affecting real people. Service projects can certainly be helpful, but it can be equally important and impactful to focus on developing relationships with people while learning from them and their lives.

The preparation phase “requires leaders and group members to make a conscious choice to count the cost of moving forward” (Salter McNeil 88). At this point, WAAG members who have become aware and identified with the issue must make the choice: are they in or are they out? And it is not always an easy and clear choice—sometimes it is a choice they must make over and over in small ways. In a church setting, this could be addressed at a board or council meeting where, having been presented with all of this information, the church needs to decide if this is an issue that they will collectively advocate for. As time goes on, more and more people have begun to believe that “Christians are called to restore creation and pursue justice and to be ‘peacemakers’” (Hunter III 7). Just as racial reconciliation has sprung up as a vital issue to address in the last few years in the modern Church, environmental justice must fall next in line.

Activation follows preparation when “we roll up our sleeves and actively use the talents, abilities, resources and skills God has given us for reconciliation” (Salter McNeil 107). The first step is communicating what has been learned about the issue to share the information with others, thus beginning the corporate journey towards reconciliation (Salter McNeil 97). A practical way to do this for the WAAG church, aside from sharing during Sunday morning sermons, is to use social media and websites as platforms to spread awareness and offer ways for people to get involved. As an example, Reach Church provides a section on their website with

resources about race and the gospel with links to sermons, podcasts, and book recommendations to provide education and wisdom on the issue (“The Gospel & Race”). Reach Church also provides a brief paragraph explaining their belief in the importance of stewarding and caring for creation. Topics like environmental justice or climate change are complex and it can be confusing or intimidating to learn about them. Since “language can act as a kind of filter, keeping outsiders away from understanding,” providing accessible resources is important to help everyone who is interested be included in the work (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 272). Circlewood provided another example, listing events, podcasts, and resources that cover various topics about the intersection of faith, social justice, earth care, and more. Providing a set of informative resources in this manner could be an easy way for WAAG churches to participate in spreading awareness of the issue and begin embedding its importance into their beliefs. Even if it is viewed as a peripheral focus, getting the word out about creation care and environmental justice has tremendous potential to make an impact and reach a large number of people.

Another area where action can be taken is spiritual transformation. A traditional view of man’s relationship to nature in the WAAG Church is that man reigns over nature with the freedom to use it as he wishes (Gen. 1:28). The term “dominion” has been interpreted as justification to do whatever one wants and conversely as a duty of stewardship and respect towards nature. Man’s view of nature must change from an expendable resource to be used and disposed of, to a precious gift and resource to be protected and nurtured. Former UCLA professor Lynn White explained that:

Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected

from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. (6)

This spiritual transformation is not exclusive to WAAG Christians. Every person must evaluate their own relationship with the earth and make the choice to be a good steward. Expanding on his view of religion, White writes that “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion” (3). White calls for Christians to reevaluate their perspectives on nature, taking ownership in a way that brings peace and flourishing life, not destruction and violence.

Thinking about reconciliation, Salter McNeil calls peacemakers to move beyond just creating relationships and identifying with the issues in our world. She claimed that “real reconciliation repairs the inequity in systems and structures that are deeply rooted in the historical realities that produced the divisive relationships that are still operative in our racialized society,” and that reparations to repair what is actually broken are the work of God (Salter McNeil 112). Bringing justice to those living in oppression is about the drastic transformation of lives, made possible through system-wide changes as well as small, everyday choices. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul tells the story of the Lord’s Supper, the Passover celebration that Jesus kept with his disciples prior to being crucified. He recalled Jesus’ words as they took communion, writing, “the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 11:23-25). Typically, communion in WAAG churches will be taken as modeled in these verses to remember the

sacrifice of Jesus and give thanks. Reverend Peter Chan of Georgetown University added his own commentary on how these words can be applied in life and wrote, “Jesus’ injunction ‘Do this in memory of me’ now means ‘Do this way of acting that I have shown you. Do this way of resisting evil and returning good for evil that I lived and taught. Do it even if it is hard and stirs up resistance. Do it filled with love, because you know that you are loved.’” WAAG Christians who choose to follow Jesus must have compassion for those who are oppressed because Jesus did. Clawson shared the idea that “our God cares deeply for all the people of the world and challenges us to commit our lives to being a part of that transformation, which means committing ourselves to justice and creation care as a way of life, not just as a theology we salute” (9). Because it can be overwhelming to think about the magnitude of many of the issues going on in the world, it is important to not think about solving the whole problem at once, but to make choices in our everyday lives that fight oppression and support those in need. Reconciliation is not superficial. It is healing at the root.

## CONCLUSION

The White American Assemblies of God Church must move beyond indifference and participate in efforts of reconciliation to care for other people and for the earth. Not only is earth care a biblical mandate, it is also an environmental necessity and vital to the act of loving one’s neighbors. The international effects of climate change are devastating for many people. Black communities in the United States face environmental injustice, bearing more of the burden of environmental damage than primarily White communities do. As climate change progresses, extreme weather and natural disasters increase, causing even more challenges in agriculture and pending danger for coastal residents. Environmentalism can be a polarizing topic and many in the WAAG disregard it due to its portrayal as an issue of liberal politics. When people refuse to

learn due to political loyalty, they miss out on the opportunity to grow in empathy for others. The essence of the Evangelical Christian faith is looking to Jesus Christ as a model for how to act and treat other people. Richard Foster puts it plainly: “Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life” (90). A characteristic routinely modeled by Jesus in the Bible was caring for the poor and the oppressed, and this same behavior is as vital today as it was in biblical times. If the White American Assemblies of God are to live their lives true to their beliefs, then this love for others must be demonstrated in their everyday actions and choices—not because actions are a prerequisite to salvation, but because they are evidence of it. To care for one’s neighbor is to care for all of creation.

Appendix

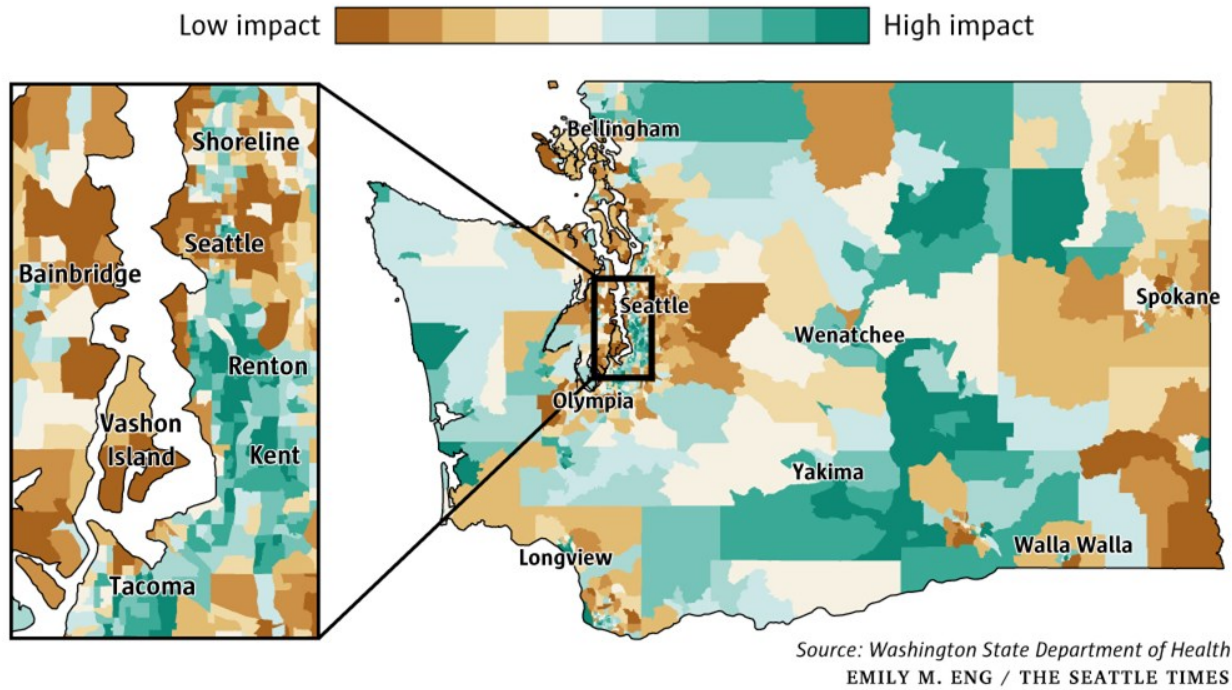


Figure 1: Washington State Department of Health Environmental-Health Disparities Map with key.

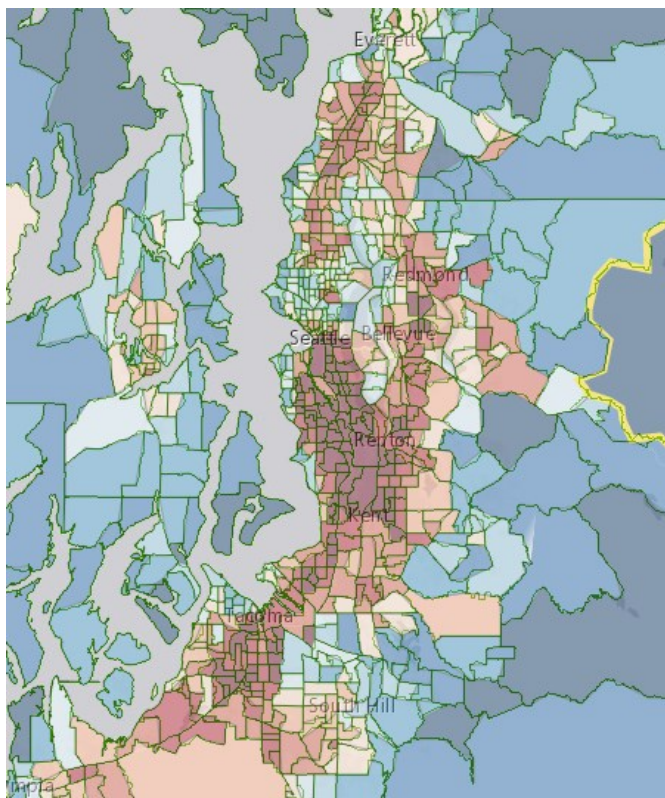


Figure 2: Map of people of color in Western Washington.

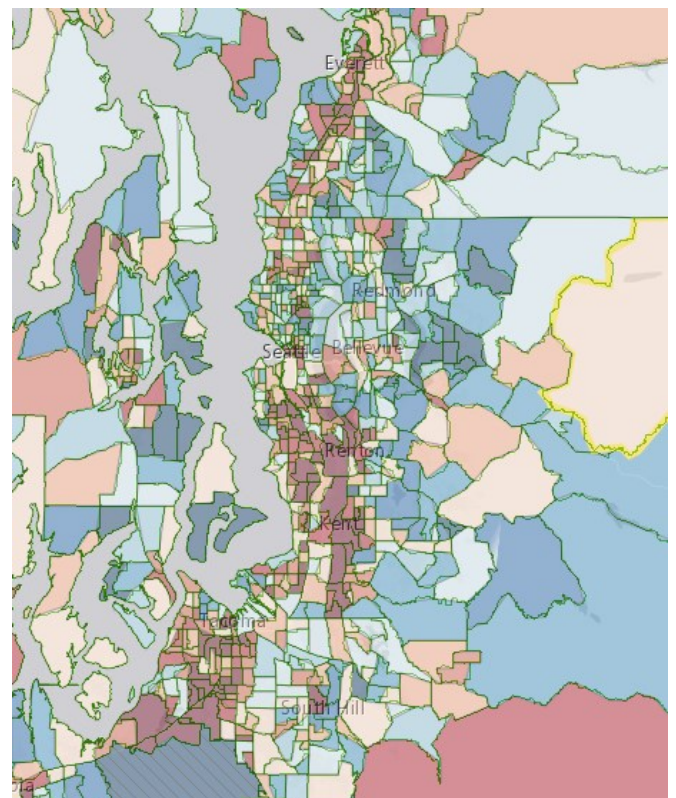


Figure 3: Map of environmental exposures.



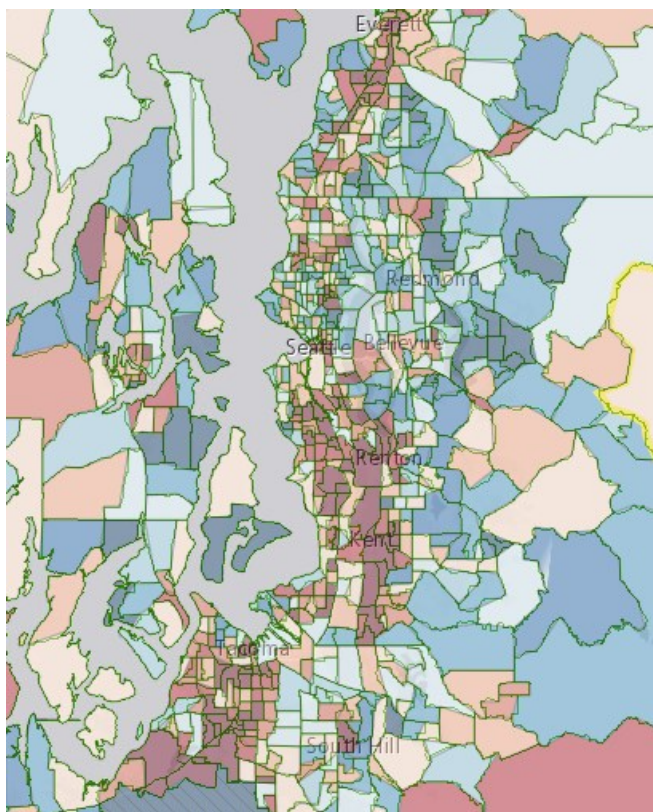


Figure 4: Map of unaffordable housing (>30% of income) in Western Washington.

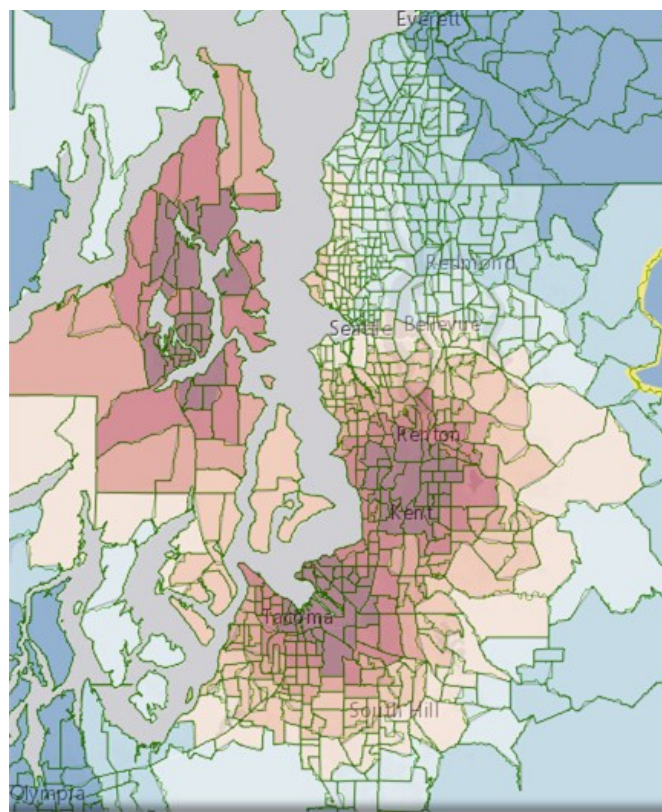


Figure 5: Map of proximity to hazardous waste treatment storage and disposal facilities.

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