



Pennsylvania Interfaith Power and Light

Opening Plenary Remarks by Jacqui Patterson

In my work throughout the country, I see circumstances of compounded structural challenges, particularly for communities of color and low income communities. The drivers and impacts of the climate crisis are in the context of the drivers and the impacts of a broad set of social, political, economic inequities largely driven by the same systemic aim to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a privileged few.

Three weeks ago, I was in St. Louis to give a talk on place based inequities in the context of the murder of Michael Brown. As part of a tour, I drove through Ferguson in the middle of a downpour and noted how poor the drainage system was, as water pooled in the street making hydroplaning inevitable. On top of the context of why I was there, this observation made me reflect on the multiplicity of challenges many communities face.

The extent to which race plays a role in what happened to Michael Brown is a key point of reflection. When we see folks who are African American living on one side of a majority

African American town in blight, and we see someone, who is also African American, gunned down in the street with his hands up, by a white person who is part of a majority white police force in a town with a white mayor and a majority white city council, one asks some critical questions about representation, democracy, race relations, and the impact on people's lives.

I grew up on the Southside of Chicago in the midst of gang violence in a part of town where one was more likely to find a check cashing shop or a liquor store than a supermarket much less a farmer's market. What I didn't know growing up was that I was living 5 miles away from a landfill and between two coal plants within 10 miles of my house that, with every breath I took, might be stealing precious moments off of my life span with the toxins being ingested into my body.

When I was little, every few months, for a period of one-two weeks, I would refuse to drink the water because I said it "tasted funny". No one else in the house tasted anything amiss in the water and I remember them being dismissive. But I also still remember exactly what that taste was and I wonder what we were taking into our bodies that my taste buds happened to have the heightened sensitivity to detect. We buried my Mom last year and my father the year before.... and I question how

much longer we might have had them if we had grown up living somewhere else?

In Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana in 2005 communities were hit hard by Hurricane Katrina. When I first visited the community in 2010, they were still recovering from Katrina and had just been re-assaulted as they were inundated by the BP Oil Drilling Disaster. In addition to the 11 workers from the region who lost their lives, many of the community members had lost their livelihoods as oystermen and with that, lost their way of life.

Then, in 2012, I found the same communities under siege again by Hurricane Isaac as the levees were overtaken by the storm surge and the communities were completely overtaken by flooding. When Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana was asked by CNN why the levees hadn't been fortified in the extensive efforts to rehabilitate the levees across the Gulf, she replied that she asked the Army Corps of Engineers the same question. The reply she received was that the Army Corps used a formula to decide where to prioritize levee fortification. With this formula, they assigned points to various areas based on economic impact. And the places with the highest points were prioritized. With these measures of "value" it will always be the most marginalized communities who will always be on the losing end of the climate adaptation equation.

I've visited Navajo reservations in New Mexico and Arizona and met with multiple families living in the shadow of coal plants within a 50 mile radius communities like Shiprock, NM. The electricity from these plants power Las Vegas and Los Angeles, while 70% of those living on the Navajo reservation have no electricity or running water, like. Yet, many of the men in the families have to live in another state in order to work, even after these plants were built on the promises of bringing new jobs to the area. Coal plants are the #1 contributor to carbon dioxide emissions which is the leading cause of climate change. They also emit mercury, arsenic, lead, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide. While this family doesn't have the basic necessities of life, what they do have are respiratory illnesses from ingesting pollution-laden air from these coal plants, every hour, of every day, of every week, of every month, of every year.

Then, right here in Eastwick, we got a call last year about flooding in that community. Like so many communities I've visited from Tunica, MS to Irvington, NJ, a developer sold a swath of homes in a flood plain to low income families of color who, within weeks in some cases and months in others, found themselves inundated by flooding. Exacerbated by climate change, flooding from stormwater management issues and from the frequent overtaking of Cobbs Creeks' banks, cause chronic problems for the folks in Eastwick. Yet they have yet to

be able to negotiate a comprehensive flood management plan with the powers that be.

In my work with environment and climate, I've seen how these issues are directly linked to other issues such as voting rights and political representation. Whether it's zoning boards, public utilities commissions, or city councils these are key offices and officers who make decisions about where toxic facilities are sited; the extent to which our utilities are actively pursuing advancement of energy efficiency lowering rates, and transitioning to clean energy; and these are also the bodies that decide on permitting of large scale development projects.

Again, bringing us back to race, though 68% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal fired power plant, African Americans are grossly under-represented on Public Utilities Commissions that make decisions about energy. For example, in Mississippi, which has a population that is 48% African American, in the 80 year history of the Public Utilities Commission, there has never been an African American commissioner.

As an illustration of both the economic realities and the connected decision making in the area of energy infrastructure, the American Association of Blacks in Energy found that in 2009, African Americans spent \$41 B on energy but held only 1.1% of energy jobs and only gained less than 1% of revenue

from the energy sector. This belies the argument around loss jobs. Besides the fact that thousands of new jobs are being created through energy efficiency and clean energy sector, the current jobs and revenue are often not being held by the communities that host and are detrimentally impacted by fossil fuel based energy production facilities.

A journalist colleague and I are soon coming out with an article on the link between pollution and the school to prison pipeline. There are multiple toxins in the air breathed by low income communities, from roadway air pollution, coal plants, refineries, and other facilities. Lead and manganese exposure leads to attention issues and cognitive challenges. Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide exacerbates asthma, a condition which is responsible for many lost days of school. Bringing back the race analysis, African Americans are three times more likely to be hospitalized due to asthma attacks and twice as likely to die from asthma attacks. Beyond asthma, the morbidity burden in these communities is greater, which leads to overall family stress, which interferes with school performance. Also from an economic standpoint, if one lives next to a toxic facility one's property value is on average 15% lower. And what finances our school systems? Property values. So on top of challenges with being out of school or having difficulty learning while in school, these students are challenged by substandard teacher quality and facilities. And studies show that if one isn't on grade level

by the third grade, one is more likely to enter into the criminal justice system.

The intersections of the multitude of issues that besiege communities, from political disenfranchisement to economic blight, to the burden of compounded health challenges, to poor school systems, all weigh on communities, families, and children in ways that make it a miracle that so many folks emerge from these circumstances and not only survive, but are resilient enough to subsequently thrive. The question is should they have to, and I think we would all say, the answer is no.

For me, the institutionalization of these systemic inequities is why, in my work, advancing solutions is about system change by shifting power and resources from the privileged few to “the people”.

- In addition to working with EPA on regulations, my work is about voting rights and campaign finance reform.
- In addition to making sure that good permitting decisions are made and that ratepayers are favored in rate cases, we are making sure we have representative and accountable people in the zoning boards, the Public Utilities Commissions, and the City Councils.
- In addition to connecting people to “green jobs” we are working with communities across the country to build local economies where instead of big industry

control, we have community owned solar, community owned food, community recycled waste, community initiated green schools, community organized equitable transportation systems, etc.

- While we are blocking that pipeline, coal plant, or refinery, we are also apart of groups like Interfaith Moral Action on Climate Change with our Move Our Money/Protect Our Planet campaign which divests funding from fossil fuel companies and says we need to remove fossil fuel subsidies which, in effect, means that we are currently subsidizing the ruination of our planet. Our view is that we need to instead invest in earth and life affirming practices like energy efficiency and clean energy!

As a Christian, there is no more apt of a model than Jesus in the temple with the money changers as the example I follow in my work around ensuring that profiteering does not continue to be the dominant force that trumps human, civil and earth rights as it pervasively does now. Otherwise my work is undergirded by my faith tenets of justice, mercy, altruism, and stewardship.
Thank you!