

## **Water: Life before Profit**

*Origin: Executive of the General Council  
Permanent Committee Programs for Mission and Ministry  
Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit-Wide Committee  
Water Issues Task Group*

### **Background**

Water is life. Without water, there is no life. When water is polluted, life is compromised. When water is too expensive or controlled by others, individuals and communities suffer.

Over one billion people in the world lack access to clean drinking water. One third of the world's population live in areas that are water stressed, and 50 percent of countries have experienced water shortages. Current predictions are that by 2050 at least one in four people are likely to live in countries affected by current or recurring shortages of fresh water. It is the poor who are most adversely affected by water shortages, pollution, privatization, and the impact of climate change on water quality and quantity.

Canadians are among the biggest water users in the world. Urban residents in Canada use more than twice as much water as their European counterparts, with significant levels of wastage and inefficiency. Groundwater is extremely important in supplying fresh water to meet the needs of Canadians. Over four million Canadians residing in urban areas rely on groundwater for their domestic water supply. In addition, bottled groundwater in small 500 mL plastic containers is being bought by many Canadians to replace drinking water that flows through their taps. Testing has shown that tap water is as clean as or cleaner than some of this water in small bottles. Further, the proliferation of the plastic bottles is contributing to landfill garbage problems. Churches in rural areas and camps face significant challenges as a result of increasingly rigorous water testing regulations. Many have few options other than using bulk bottled water or making major investments in new water treatment systems. Many Aboriginal peoples living on reserves face health threats from contaminated water.

Water, in most traditional world views, is part of the “commons”—a term referring to life-sustaining elements of creation shared by a community. For Aboriginal peoples, water is a fundamental element of sacred Mother Earth. Even in areas of chronic water scarcity or political conflict around the world, there are long traditions of generosity and water hospitality.

But now pressure is increasing to consider water a “commodity” that can be privatized and traded. This is problematic when it comes to something as essential to life as water. Privatized services require a profit to meet expectations of shareholders, which can place upward pressure on prices and neglect important long-term ecological concerns such as the sustainability of aquifers. In 1990, 51 million people got their water from private companies. In 2003, this figure was more than 300 million. The World Bank has lent \$30 billion in the past 12 years for water privatization.

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Privatization tends to undermine community control. With private control of water services, the community generally has fewer checks and balances for transparency and accountability of those responsible for the service. It is more difficult to have genuine community participation in water services if outside forces can declare water a commodity and turn water delivery systems into a source of profit. Skyrocketing water rates have generally followed takeovers of public water systems by private interests, which in turn put the poor and vulnerable at particular risk of losing access to the water they need. The push for privatization of water services is found in a wide range of trade and investment agreements and policies, whether national (federal), bilateral (between two countries), or multilateral (among multiple countries, or among countries and international financial and commercial institutions). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank often push privatization through loan conditions and the types of projects they support. Current global trade agreements negotiated through the World Trade Organization (WTO) favour the privatization of water systems. The policies of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO are largely determined by the wealthy industrialized nations that promote a “neo-liberal” economic ideology favouring unfettered markets, minimal regulation of corporations, and limited government involvement in the economy.

The global water industry is dominated by 10 corporations, two of which are titans in the field—Vivendi Universal and Suez (both based in France)—with four others not far behind—Bouygues-SAUR (France), RWE-Thames Water (Germany), Bechtel-United Utilities (U.S.), and Azurix (U.S.). The annual revenues of the water industry are currently about 40 percent of oil sector revenues and are already one third larger than revenues of the pharmaceutical sector.

The Canadian government and governments in other donor countries promote water service privatization by supporting—among other things—the worldwide push for “public-private partnerships” (PPPs), which allow private corporations a role in public services. PPPs are far less accountable to public control, and are becoming ever more widespread on every continent, despite the proven success of democratic, adequately financed public systems in delivering safe water. In fact, successful, publicly owned water services remain the norm in North America, and people around the world have gone out of their way to defend this model. In Uruguay and Bangladesh, for example, people protested privatization of their public services and succeeded in halting the plans. In Canada, Moncton, New Brunswick, and Hamilton, Ontario, have recently reasserted public control over their water management services after periods of unsatisfactory private management. Public operation of water services is not a guarantee of effective and efficient management, but community control does offer more options for participation, accountability, limiting price increases, and ensuring access for all.

The United Church of Canada has initiated a major focus on water issues in Canada and around the world. This initiative is grounded in the church’s long history of engagement in issues of economic and ecological justice, with a priority focus on the impact on the poor of policies related to such issues as foreign debt, trade, structural adjustment programs, and corporate concentration. A resolution adopted at the 38th General Council 2003—“Water! Water! Water!”—called for the church to begin an educational and advocacy process on water issues. A variety of resources have been provided and actions have been taken nationally by the United Church on the basis of that resolution, and many local congregations and individual members are involved in actions in their own contexts. Through the Mission and Service Fund, the United Church supports global partners in development programs that can include water projects. The

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United Church is an active member of the ecumenical coalition KAIROS, which is in the midst of a two-year advocacy project entitled Water: Life before Profit!

This resolution furthers the United Church's engagement and reflects a growing understanding in the church of how "empire" power concentrated in international economic institutions, governments, and corporations can have a profoundly destructive impact on people and the Earth. "Empire" is increasingly understood by the United Church as the convergence of economic, political, cultural, military, and religious powers in a system of domination that forces the flow of benefits from the vulnerable to the powerful. Empire crosses all boundaries, distorts identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states, and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities.

The resolution has been endorsed by the Justice, Global, and Ecumenical Relations Unit Committee and the Executive of the General Council Permanent Committee for Programs in Mission and Ministry.

### **Theological and Ethical Principles**

Water is a fundamental gift of God. It is a prerequisite for life. But in today's world, access to water is threatened on many levels—by climate change, pollution, exploitation, and privatization.

#### **A. Water as Part of God's Good Earth**

*God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31a)*

Throughout the familiar creation story in Genesis 1, we have the repeated phrase "and God saw that it was good." This assertion of the goodness of the Earth begins a long trajectory by which the writers of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures sketch a relationship of affirmation by God of what has been created. We hear it explicitly in this first chapter of Genesis, and we read many celebrations of the beauty, majesty, and bounty of the Earth in the Psalms. Though there are times of pain and suffering reported in scripture when the Earth seems barren or when God expresses anger at human disobedience, the image that predominates is of a God who brought creation into being and sustains it out of profound love.

The context for the writing of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures was an Israelite culture that was largely rural and agrarian. The people depended on the Earth for sustenance and expressed their care of it through such processes as observing the Jubilee, which allowed the land to rest and replenish itself. They also celebrated the Earth's bounty through religious rituals tied to the cycle of the agricultural year. Acknowledging God's role in creation, worshippers presented the first and best fruits of the harvest to God.

After the scientific and industrial revolutions, humans came to consider themselves as distinct from and superior to the rest of creation. The Earth was seen as ours to use however we wished. In recent years, that perspective has started to change, particularly as a result of discoveries in the ecological sciences, wisdom of Indigenous peoples, and insights from eco-feminism—all of which point to the inter-relatedness of humans with creation and our dependence upon it. Both in

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a physical and spiritual sense, we are the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the dust out of which we are formed.

#### B. Caring for Water and the Earth for the Common Good

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. (Psalm 24:1–2)*

All of God's good creation is dependent on the seas and the rivers. There are innumerable species and elements of ecological systems that make up the full panoply of God's creation. We humans are only one among the many. As a fundamental element of creation and a prerequisite for life, water must be available to all members of the community of life—for the common good. When access to water is threatened by human activity, life and justice are at risk.

We humans do not own the Earth—it belongs to God. We are to care for the Earth with the same love with which God cares for it. We will be held responsible for how we execute those responsibilities.

In partnership with God, humans have the duty and indeed the privilege to foster the well-being of all life. We find deep wells of spiritual nourishment by being engaged in community, by seeking the welfare of others who share this fragile planet—the human family and other creatures. We are called to seek the highest quality of life for all people, especially those who have historically been deprived of it.

Striving for the common good for all is a response to God's love of creation. It invites a prioritizing of community over unrestricted individualism. It values sharing over greed. The common good invokes a commitment to solidarity with all life.

#### C. Assuring Access to Water for All

*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10)*

Water is an essential element of creation—God's gift to all creatures. Nothing should be allowed to interfere with the access of people and other creatures to this essential life-giving element.

For many in today's world, access to water exacts a heavy cost. The United Church's global partners report the following:

- “many of the families that live in the most populated neighbourhoods of San Salvadore, El Salvadore and the whole metropolitan area constantly suffer the lack of water in their homes” (Emmanuel Baptist Church, El Salvadore)
- there is an “unequal distribution of water resources between Israel and the Palestinian territories” (Middle East Council of Churches)
- “many of the rivers in the Philippines are biologically dead, due to mining, pollution from industrial and domestic waste, siltation and sedimentation due to erosion which is brought about by forest denudation” (National Council of Churches of the Philippines)

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- “water has become a commodity especially in urban and peri-urban areas, even the vulnerable people have to pay for water...water is basically sold as a commercial product in Zambia and companies make profit out of it” (Council of Churches of Zambia)

In parts of Canada, there is a cost for ensuring that American border states do not exceed their fair proportion of shared trans-boundary water systems, as illustrated by the conflict over policies for diversion projects from the Great Lakes. In coastal regions, there is a cost paid by communities devastated by depleted fish stocks. Aboriginal communities pay a cost in health from contaminated wells and rivers polluted by industrial wastes. Some communities have paid a cost in lives and livelihoods because of polluted wells and inadequate testing.

Jesus required real water from the well to live another day. The Samaritan woman, though astonished by this request that crossed cultural barriers, was prepared to give Jesus what he needed. Jesus expands the discussion to “living water” that he offers to her. It is God’s offer of water that brings new life, that sustains the life in the Spirit, that nourishes us for our relationships with our creator and the world around us. This juxtaposition of real H<sub>2</sub>O water that Jesus needed from the Samaritan woman and the “living water” that he offers to her reinforces the link of water and life, both the physical and the spiritual. It is, in a sense, an incarnated assertion that all who are thirsty should have access to water as an essential life-assuring element, just as Jesus offers water that enlivens us with the Spirit.

Working to meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable is a critical dimension of discipleship in today’s world. Indeed, it is in community that we most poignantly find God and it is in community that God seeks to find us.

We are to care for water and the Earth for the benefit and well-being of all. No person, community, company, or country has the authority to horde the Earth’s bounty or to destroy its life-giving character for selfish gain. The Earth does not belong to anyone with such rights. The Earth is the Lord’s.

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