



**The United Church  
of Canada  
General Council**

# **GC29 Energy and the Church**

True Document Date: October 31, 1982

## **Excerpts of Report**

### **2. c) Theological commentary**

The National Energy Sub—Unit and the church have a wider mandate in approaching energy and environmental concerns. It derives from the unlimited sovereignty of God over creation, and our human vocation of stewardship within that creation.

The world is fascinated with power and entranced by the interplay of the power—seekers. Between the polar idolatries of mastery over the world and abandonment of the world, there is a caring role for Christian communities to play, an important, creative and necessary role.

Because the control of energy resources is integral to the functioning of power, because such resources are limited, and because their marshalling and utilization necessarily gives preference to certain interests and social options at the expense of others, caring about energy policy is part of caring about power, about the world, and about our vocation as stewards. Our energy choices affect inflation, employment, the environment, health, leisure, mobility, the cost of goods, services, information and involvement. Energy choices affect the options that remain open to us in the future. The first consideration of a wider mandate for raising energy questions is stewardship under God.

Our wider mandate is dictated secondly by our involvement in the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the holy catholic church. The World Council of Churches, at its Conference on Faith, Science and the Future, in July 1979, pointed to energy concerns as of vital importance for the global community. It placed these concerns within the framework of justice, participation and sustainability, three dimensions of assessment and accountability for Christian thought and witness.

In solidarity with Christians here and elsewhere, in seeking to express the gospel in the fundamental decisions which face our society, we must place these concerns at the heart of our evaluation of those decisions and options. Justice requires a fair distribution of energy between rich and poor, the marginalized and the powerful, within countries and between them. Participation demands justice in the process of decision-making, review, access to necessary information, comprehensiveness of viewpoints solicited, and empowerment of the formerly marginalized. Sustainability demands our consideration for future generations, and measures our sense of maintaining a trust.

## Energy Policy

2. **"Justice:** In a just society everyone would have access to the energy necessary to meet their basic needs. People must learn to limit their demands rather than endlessly extend them.

Justice would also require fairer distribution of energy between rich and poor, within countries as well as between countries. This applies not only to the main energy resources, but also to the technologies related to energy use; it is necessary to find 'inequality—reducing technologies'."

We believe that justice requires the development of more self-reliant national policies which place emphasis on the needs of local areas. This means finding patterns of energy use and modes of supply designed to overcome economic and technological dependence, and avoid the creation of further exploitative dependencies.

3. **Participation:** Both ends and means are important in the move towards a just, participatory and sustainable society. We consider participation as both an end and a means in the search for energy decisions informed by the norms of justice and sustainability.

The focus on participation could be strengthened by recalling the historic ecumenical concept of the responsible society, in which those who exercise power are held accountable to God and to those who are affected by it. (The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, August 1948, stated that churches should work for the

"...responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it.")

In a society based on participation, the basic choices cannot be made by a small body of experts, planners or entrepreneurs alone. Despite the complicated nature of some of the problems to be solved, democracy must not yield its place to technocracy.

This means, in particular, that access to essential information must not be restricted, nor evaluation and control procedures be kept secret. It also means that total energy use patterns and supply sources must be discussed as widely and frankly as possible, with particular attention to the full range of risks and benefits of each option.

4. Sustainability: A society which is sustainable and considerate of the future must resolutely combat the wastage of the earth's riches and make the development of renewable energy a top priority. This will mean a search for higher levels of efficiency and sober, careful use of non-renewable fuels. A sustainable society must attach prime importance to all the risks and injuries caused to both human beings and to nature by its activities and consumption of energy. Energy choices should be carefully evaluated in terms of their implications for the world's long-term ecological sustainability, and for the existence of other species on the earth. Energy politics must be designed to reduce international tensions and contribute towards the solution of other global problems, including the establishment of a new international economic order.

Reference: "Energy for the Future," the report of Section VI of the Conference on Faith, Science and the Future, of the World Council of Churches, July 1979.

## **2. d) Theology and Practice**

In Canada, many Christians have discovered that energy decision-making remains in the hands of the few. Even when large segments of the population make their feelings known to government and industry, there is no guarantee that those considerations—even if heard—will be respected over the long haul. Hopes raised by the Berger Inquiry have been dashed by national decisions embodied in the Norman Wells pipeline and Bill C—48. Deeply-rooted concerns regarding uranium mining have been inadequately dealt with in public inquiry processes set up by the Saskatchewan government. In some cases, church representatives in public review panels have felt that their participation was merely a product of the desire of

government to co-opt the church constituency, rather than a sincere desire to hear and consider our frame of reference and concerns.

Church members have experienced a real sense of progress in the challenging of energy decisions through value analysis and ethical review, as for example, in the role of the BC Conference as major intervenor in the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Uranium Mining. But more frequently their experience is that basic questions about growth assumptions, about the inclusions of ethical insight in evaluation of plans are rule out of order or marginalized. The results for many Christians has been a sense of being manipulated or being made powerless.

In contrast, where the church has been engaged, as in British Columbia, in a broadly-defined, legitimate process of public review, important insights and a certain sense of empowerment have resulted. Implicit value assumptions in public policy and scientific advice have been opened to public debate.

The cult of expertise has been unmasked and economic and scientific data rendered more approachable and put in perspective. Decision-making may have been made more lengthy and complex, but decisions may have been made more acceptable and deeply-rooted.

Thus the commitment to justice and participation draws the church, time and time again, into the political process, and where that process is inadequate, into challenging the process itself.

...

"Although the Christian church has not always been unanimous in its commitment to the causes of the powerless, the poor, and the exploited, there has always been at least one part of the church that drew its priorities and its style of life from the example of Jesus Christ: spending time with outcasts – the people who didn't count for much – and challenging the conventional wisdom whenever it was in danger of denying justice to anyone...

Wherever just relations, equity, peace and plenty were absent, there were clear indications that society had been badly set up. In fact, the Hebrew vision was absolute: where one person was left out of the common good, Shalom did not exist. That vision still inspires us, but it also forces us as a church in a wealthy country to look and discover who among us does not enjoy justice and full human rights...if native political rights can be passed over with such ease, why should the Canadian government be expected to protest the economic and political rights of other Canadians under other circumstances?"

(From the prepared evidence of the Right Reverend Lois Wilson, Moderator, before the National Energy Board in the matter of the Norman Wells Oil Pipeline.)

## **2. e) Energy and Justice**

The energy issue is becoming increasingly more complex and controversial in our society. In the past few years The United Church of Canada has focused its primary concern on nuclear energy, and has advocated a moratorium on any further expansion of the industry, and on the need for a national public inquiry. It has become clear, however, that the questions of nuclear power cannot be separated from the larger issues in energy.

It is understood that energy is the primary means by which our world is ordered, and that decisions on how it will be produced and used will determine the future shape of our society. Because energy questions are inter-related with other dimensions of social concern affecting such areas as inflation, health, employment and the environment, the energy policies adopted by our government become, in effect, a means of social engineering.

It is in this context that the Energy Sub-Unit would direct the major focus of the churches' involvement in energy issues-towards the question of justice and equity. We would argue that the energy problem is primarily a question of equitable distribution and appropriate use of finite resources, rather than the production of increasing supplies. We would take issue with policies that emphasize the production of energy without considering the service it is to provide; that encourage large, capital-intensive, non-renewable energy projects at the expense of intensive conservation programs and meaningful commitments to sustainable and long-term energy supplies.

It is the position of this committee that our present national energy policies are not in the interest of a just and equitable society; that they will result in: greater disparity in wealth and income; increased concentration of decision-making power in corporate hands; further dependence on non-renewable resources leading to even higher energy prices; and continued insecurity in our long-term energy future. We would argue that a much greater emphasis should be given to conservation, and increased concern be paid to the appropriate use to which various forms of energy are applied.

We are concerned that short-term remedies aimed at avoiding an energy shortage are dictating, by default, a long-term energy policy. While agreeing that even small interruptions in the flow of energy must be avoided, involving, in the short-term, some energy projects

which are less than ideal, we would encourage the development of a long-term energy policy committed to renewable supplies, i.e. direct solar, wind, bio-mass, ocean and geothermal energy, hydro-power and organic wastes, that are characterized by being: regionally dispersed, appropriate to uses required, environmentally safe and technologically understandable.

Only with such a commitment to a long-term solution to our energy problem will it be possible to ensure a smooth transition to a safe, humane and sustainable energy system.

Our national policies at present, however, raise serious questions concerning, not only the smooth transition to a renewable energy future, but also the very fabric of our society.

At the heart of the issue is the impact of our present energy policies on justice and equity in our society. It is indisputable that the costs of our energy production are not uniformly distributed across society, but rather focus most harshly on those least able to bear them. The poor, the elderly, those on fixed incomes suffer most from increases in the price of energy. Aboriginal peoples and settlers in the North are asked to suffer the disruption of their traditional ways of life so that southern Canadians can be assured of continued supplies of energy. Future generations are being penalized in exchange for present benefit.

Under present Canadian policies, the cost of energy will continue to rise substantially. An increasing number of individuals and families will not be able to bear the costs. The poor use considerably less energy than those who are well-off. Increasing energy bills place a considerable and growing drain on their limited household budgets.

The Sub-Unit is conscious that sound planning and careful choice of alternatives require that the costs of energy be clearly assessed. It is extremely important that the safety, environmental and sustainability costs of various energy alternatives be included in this assessment and understood by citizens.

If society chooses to use price as the chief method of encouraging conservation, it will end up rationing by price, effectively removing those least able to pay from the market, and emphasizing still further differences in wealth and power in the society. Increased energy costs affect the consumer not only directly, but indirectly through the price of most goods and services, particularly essentials like housing, food and clothing.

The importance of clearly reflecting the real costs of energy as society plans for its future, together with the urgency of the overall need for conservation, pushes those concerned with fundamental justice to press for radical changes away from income inequities in Canadian

society, in order that all maybe have a more equal share in the resources available. Further, ingenuity must be elicited in seeking alternate and more equitable methods of distribution of, or access to, vital energy sources, on principles other than rationing by price.

Capital-intensive energy developments, which characterize current approaches to several sources of energy, greatly restrict the capital available for the production of other goods and services needed in society. Since energy production is one of the least effective ways of providing continuing jobs, large-scale capital investment in energy production ultimately leads to greater unemployment. Furthermore, the competition for investment capital results in higher interest rates, which worsens inflationary pressure and again increases unemployment.

It is clear that the increasing cost as well as the large investment of capital in the production of energy will have a substantial and painful impact, most particularly on the poor in our society. It should also not be forgotten that although many people in our country suffer because of energy costs, there is fundamental difference in what the energy crisis means for us and what it means for the Third World. For many in those countries, the energy crisis means hunger, malnutrition and often death.

It is in these areas that the church is challenged to examine what the demands of justice are in energy production and use. It is clearly not justice for many to have much less than they need in order that some may use much more than they should. It is not just that for some the energy crisis means inconvenience, while for many others it raises the very question of survival. It is not just that some are required to bear the social and environmental costs of energy production, while others far away enjoy its use.

While it is recognized that we live in a world in which neither wealth or power is shared equally, we would argue that an energy policy which further accentuates that inequality will, as at no other time in our history, drastically affect the sustainability of our society.

## Recommendations

1. THAT the General Council affirm, as a proper framework for Christian reflection on energy and the environment, the categories of justice, participation and sustainability as initiated by the World Council of Churches;
2. THAT the General Council commit The United Church of Canada to continuing examination of energy policies in the light of these categories;

3. THAT the General Council renew the call of the 28th General Council in urging Canadian federal and provincial governments, "...for policies and funds to support an accelerating program to develop new energy resources which are consistent with a just, participatory and sustainable society," and urge a major shift towards the development of the huge, largely untapped, potential of soft energy options, including conservation;
4. THAT the General Council express its appreciation of the work done by GATT-FLY in analyzing Canada's energy options, and recommend the study Power to Choose: Canada's Energy Options, to the church for study;
5. THAT the General Council endorse the concern of the study Power to Choose. . . , regarding current energy development decisions with reference to:
  - a. the danger that large-scale projects will incur massive and frequently negative social and environmental impact;
  - b. the threat that the level of financing and indebtedness necessary for such large-scale projects will drain resources from public social expenditures, public investment in alternative energy sources, and radically increase the debt load and related tax burden on all Canadians;
  - c. the probability that current energy policies will further exacerbate inequity and injustice in the distribution of wealth and power in Canada, by offering investment opportunities, government assistance and profits from higher prices to the relatively few well-off in Canada, while distributing the cost to be shared by the average and less—than—average income sectors;
  - d. the limitations of Canadianization as presently articulated, which, while laudable to the extent that it reduces the marginalization of all Canadians from essential decisions about our energy future, further empowers and enriches a few large private and public corporations and threatens the historic claims and future participatory rights of native Canadians and others in the path of large-scale developments.
6. THAT the General Council, in recognition that there are urgent issues of debate in the energy policy, encourage the Division of Mission in Canada to promote study and action on these issues, including:
  - a. the protection and improvement of income and service support for lower-income Canadians confronted with significant and potentially regressive price increases for energy;
  - b. the development of energy—pricing policies which embody real, including environmental and social costs, at the same time avoiding further regression in



- the distribution of income and power in Canada;
- c. the assurance of effective participation by the public in major energy development decisions, including the provision of public information, holding of public hearings and availability of material resources for public interest groups, in the face of corporate or governmental pressures which tend to overwhelm or frustrate the concerned and the questioning;
  - d. the development among Christians and the community—at-large of more self—conscious and critical ethical approaches to public energy decisions, including the examination of technical and economic evidence and the power relations in such decision—making processes;
  - e. the development of church and community styles of living which encourage justice, participation and sustainability, and the support of the specific ethical, theological or faithful motivations in which such living can take root, in particular the provision of co-operative housing;
  - f. the examination of Canadian energy decisions in a critical context dominated by the needs of the economically and politically marginalized in the global community, and the development of policies and decisions which will empower and enhance their lives, rather than further limit them.
7. THAT the United Church encourage and support the membership of the church in investigating the impact of energy decisions where they live, assisting local and regional groups of concern, and contributing to the building of coalitions committed to influencing governmental and corporate energy decisions in the light of the demands of justice, participation and sustainability;
8. THAT the General Council encourage the Division of Mission in Canada to give greater priority to energy and environmental concerns, so that it may more fully assist and coordinate local and regional efforts, and give guidance to the whole church;
9. THAT this General Council send a message to Prime Minister Trudeau suggesting that the Government of Canada renew negotiations with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador on off-shore oil and gas development.

GC29 1982 ROP, pp. 175-186, 70-71

Document Type: [Social Policy](#)

General Council: [GC43 or earlier](#)

Originating Body: [Other](#)