



Fossil Fuel Divestment—What Are the Stakes? A Discussion Exercise for United Methodists

This is a discussion exercise to help participants consider multiple perspectives on the implications of divesting from fossil fuels—in other words, selling fossil fuel company stocks. Please read the scenario below and then follow the directions for discussion. The exercise will take 25-40 minutes and is suitable for groups with between 6 and 36 participants.

Some United Methodists are urging the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits (GBOPHB) of The United Methodist Church to change its socially responsible investment guidelines to include fossil fuels among screened investments. (Current investments that are screened out include companies that sell tobacco, alcohol, and firearms, and those that facilitate gambling and manage private prisons.)

The GBOPHB seeks to invest in ways that are consistent with the denomination's guiding principles, which emphasize care for creation. Creation care leaders within The United Methodist Church say that the church should not profit from the destruction of creation, and that divestment is a way to take a public, moral stand against the continued use of fossil fuels. But some clergy have voiced concern about the impact that divestment will have on their pensions, while others are worried about the obligation to donors to maximize returns on investments.

Divide participants into groups representing the following interests:

- General Board of Pension and Health Benefits leaders
- Clergy
- Church members
- Church creation care leaders
- Fossil fuel industry leaders
- God

Each group should discuss its position on this decision for 10 minutes. The leader should invite one person representing each interest group to summarize his/her group's position on whether or not the denomination should divest and why. After this conversation, the group as a whole should discuss the following questions:

1. Which perspectives caused you to think in new ways about divestment?
2. How does your understanding of Christianity inform your perspective on divestment?
3. How can the values of The United Methodist Church inform your perspective on divestment?
4. If the GBOPHB were considering divestment, what would you want it to do?



Divestment Role Play Identities

GBOPHB leaders

GBOPHB leaders must attend to their fiduciary duty to achieve returns for their shareholders while respecting the values expressed through the Book of Discipline and the Book of Resolutions. Leaders have been engaged in shareholder activism for more than 20 years in the hopes that they can change the way that fossil fuel companies do business. Spokespersons for these leaders are concerned that divestment from fossil fuels will result in a loss of financial returns.

Clergy

Many clergy have limited incomes and limited retirement savings. They rely on the church to manage their retirement funds. Some are concerned that screening fossil fuels from their portfolios will lower returns. Others worry that fossil fuel stocks will become “stranded assets” because their value is tied to current reserves that cannot be fully exploited. Some clergy feel it is important to bring their understandings of Christian ethics to bear in making investment decisions. Spokespersons for clergy should decide what position they would like to take.

Members of the church

Many church members make donations to their church. They want to ensure that their gifts are being used wisely. They want investments made with their gifts to be both financially sound and ethical. Like clergy, some are concerned that screening fossil fuels from their portfolios will lower their returns, while others worry that fossil fuel stocks will become “stranded assets” because their value is tied to current reserves that cannot be fully exploited. Spokespersons for church members should decide what position they would like to take.

Church creation care leaders

These people may lead a green team or other creation care group within their congregation or conference. Spokespersons for this group believe that it is wrong for churches to profit from the wrecking of the planet, and that they must take a public, moral stand against it. They argue that shareholder activism will never be effective in convincing fossil fuel companies to stop selling fossil fuels.

Sustainable energy industry leaders

These people represent clean technology and renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power. They argue that they need government support to develop technology and build infrastructure, much as the fossil fuel industry receives tax breaks and subsidies. They say that divestment will create the political space needed to level the playing field between the sustainable energy and fossil fuel industries.

God

For some people, presuming to speak for God can be uncomfortable or seem sacrilegious. Yet trying to describe God’s perspective on this situation can be an important experience. Spokespersons for this position should reflect God’s care for vulnerable communities and people, and for environmental justice and stewardship.