



Climate Change, Divestment and The United Methodist Church—FAQs

At Annual Conference 2014, Pacific Northwest Conference voted for all churches to learn about fossil fuel divestment as a response to climate change. To divest from fossil fuels means to sell off investments in fossil fuel companies.

Why divest from fossil fuels?

When we invest in fossil fuel companies, our financial success becomes intertwined with the acceleration of climate change. Climate change is already undermining our ministries with the most vulnerable people among us by contributing to more extreme weather events, causing agricultural conditions that lead to higher food costs, and creating conditions for the spread of deadly diseases. Divestment creates the political space needed for systemic changes that will allow clean energy technologies to compete fairly in the marketplace and become more accessible to all of us.

What criteria do faith communities use when considering divestment?

Religious institutions tend to divest from particular industries for three reasons:

a. ***In Response to Intentional Grave, Large-Scale Harm.***

When an industry regularly and intentionally participates in activities that injure or kill large numbers of people, particularly vulnerable or marginalized people, investing in that industry violates the values central to the religious institution's identity. Divestment is a refusal to profit from activities that violate those values.

b. ***In Response to Intractable Resistance.***

Divestment is a last resort after multiple change efforts, including shareholder advocacy, have failed. Fossil fuel companies have not been responsive to calls for change. In the face of pressure, some even seek to discredit scientific research through disreputable means, and lobby against legislation and regulation. And despite 20 years of work, dialogue and shareholder advocacy are not pushing companies toward meaningful change. A huge amount of additional social pressure is needed.

c. ***Redefining Society's Moral Code.***

Divestment, and the public engagement it involves, is a way to redefine society's moral code. It delegitimizes and de-normalizes the targeted industry, and demonstrates its repugnance. Significant social changes require a meaningful level of public disgust toward the status quo.

How can I call for divestment when I use fossil fuels every day? That seems hypocritical.

The time when individual consumer choices could have stopped climate change has passed. Much larger, government-scale action is needed to slow or stop the worst impacts of climate change. What's more, individual actions like driving a car simply can't be compared to the corporate powers that manipulate and constrain consumer choices and limit individual access to affordable, sustainable energy.



Where is this movement coming from?

United Methodist Sunday School teacher Bill McKibben started the worldwide fossil fuel fossil divestment campaign. Supporters include Archbishop Desmond Tutu, World Bank Chief Jim Yong Kim, and United Nations Climate Chief Christiana Figueres. Bodies that have already committed to divestment include the World Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, the City of Seattle, Stanford University, Union Theological Seminary, and numerous foundations. Several annual conferences around the country are studying divestment this year.

Who is being asked to divest?

There are two efforts underway. One is to call the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits (which is the UMC's largest investment body), to divest from companies that derive 10% or more of their revenue from the production of fossil fuels. The other is to amend the Book of Discipline and Book of Resolutions sections on Socially Responsible Investments to include fossil fuel companies among the industries to be avoided.

If affirmed, what would this mean for my local church?

If the Socially Responsible Investments guidelines were amended, your local church would be encouraged to avoid investing in companies that produce fossil fuels, in the same way that it is encouraged to avoid other investments that are inconsistent with the Social Principles.

What is the urgency behind this movement?

Scientists say that the upper limit of carbon that can be burned for the earth's temperature to stay within livable limits is 565 gigatons. But there are 2795 gigatons of carbon in proven oil and gas reserves—five times the upper limit! Fossil fuel companies' share prices assume that all of the carbon held in reserves will be sold and burned, spelling the end of life on this planet.

According to a New York Times article on the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report:

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that decades of foot-dragging by political leaders had propelled humanity into a critical situation, with greenhouse emissions rising faster than ever. While it remains technically possible to keep planetary warming to a tolerable level, only an intensive push over the next 15 years to bring those emissions under control can achieve the goal, the committee found.¹

Fossil fuel companies pour millions of dollars into lobbying for tax loopholes and regulations that benefit their industries while hurting others. This makes it difficult for clean energy companies to gain a foothold in the energy market. The divestment movement is part of a broader effort to demonstrate the political will needed to create regulation that will level the playing field for clean energy companies to effectively compete in the marketplace.

¹ Justin Gillis, "Climate Efforts Falling Short, U.N. Panel says," New York Times, April 14, 2014.