What deeper reflection are we called to in our time? Why?

The Ethics of Energy

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"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."
Matthew 25:13

In Matthew 25, the foolish bridesmaids fail to plan ahead and bring enough oil to wait for a delayed bridegroom. When their wiser sisters tell them that there isn't enough of the oil that they thoughtfully brought to go around, the foolish bridesmaids must go and fetch more, and they miss the arrival of the bridegroom. Jesus warns us not to be like the foolish bridesmaids when it comes to the kingdom of God—we must be prepared for its coming, whenever that may be.

When it comes to energy, are we acting like the foolish bridesmaids who fail to plan ahead, run out of oil, and miss the main event?

Energy runs our lives—from our cars to our homes to our offices, there is little about what we do each day that doesn't depend in some way on energy. And the source of most of that energy is fossil fuels like oil, coal and natural gas, with supplies that we know are finite.

That finitude is beginning to make itself known in the form of higher prices for oil, which impacts not only prices at the pump but also the price of food and other goods that must be shipped by oil-consuming trucks, trains, ships, and planes. The finitude of energy is also present in a new reality: as we run through the easy to find and easy to extract sources of fossil fuels, we must turn to those that are more difficult to find, and more dangerous to remove from the earth. In the short term, we will need to take some of those risks

in order to keep our world running. But we need to figure out ways to minimize those risks, whether through better safety measures or through stricter rules about how and where we drill and explore for energy sources.

One example of the new energy reality is the spread of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, as a means of extracting oil and natural gas from deep rock formations. Fracking uses a high pressure stream of water, sand and chemicals to break apart underground rock formations so that natural gas or oil can flow to the surface. The technique has been fairly common for decades—what is new are technologies that allow drilling to go into deeper rock formations and allow for horizontal drilling from a single wellhead over many acres. Fracking is expanding domestic production of oil and natural gas in states such as Wyoming, Arkansas, Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania and western North Dakota. Other possible sites include New York, West Virginia, Michigan and Montana, to name a few.

The spread of fracking has greatly increased domestic supplies of natural gas and has brought jobs and economic development to rural communities that have suffered job and population losses in recent decades. However, it has also raised concerns of water contamination from fracking fluids and air pollution from smog-forming chemicals released along with natural gas. And fracking comes with some social costs: housing costs are driven up in rural areas, leaving the rural poor with few options; the influx of people and equipment necessary for fracking operations puts strains on the infrastructure of small communities, including schools, hospitals, and roads; and the "boom and bust" model of energy development may leave communities with few long term resources once fossil fuel reserves are played out.

We need energy to fuel our communities. But in the long term, as easy energy becomes rare and risky energy becomes the norm, we need to emulate the wise bridesmaids and begin to plan for the future. Those who argue that we need an "all of the above" approach to meeting our energy needs are ignoring the escalating environmental and social costs of fossil fuel-based energy, and risking our future. We may need to develop, with care, some of these energy sources, such as "fracked" natural gas, to meet short term needs, but in the long term we must invest significantly more of our time, money and attention in energy technologies such as solar, wind and other renewables that will serve us well into the future.

Learn More

On April 12th at 1 p.m. EST, the National Council of Churches

EcoJustice Program is sponsoring a webinar on hydraulic fracturing. Part of a year-long focus on the "Ethics of Energy" this webinar will outline the legislative and policy issues around hydraulic fracturing and help you to think through some of the tough issues facing our energy future. Find out more here.

And next month, the ELCA Washington office continues its *Advocating on the Road* series with a stop in Pennsylvania to hear perspectives on fracking from Lutherans in communities around that state. Follow the advocacy road trip here.

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