

***THE ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE YOUNG ADULT
TEAM***

**RACIAL JUSTICE MINISTRY TEAM
JUSTICE & WITNESS MINISTRIES
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

A report on a training and immersion experience, August, 2004, California, USA and
Baja California, Mexico.



October, 2004

I don't know anything more important than having our young adults immersed in the justice work of the church. It is important for helping to guide their faith journeys and helping them to understand Jesus' radical call for a world of justice and wholeness. It is important for the life of the church because we need the energy, enthusiasm and vitality of our young people if we are to thrive. For many young adults, it is the justice work which will keep them connected to the life of our denomination.

This group of UCC young adults was transformed by their experience on the border. They saw first-hand the injustices of this world and, I hope, will be forever changed by that experience.

I commend this report to you. Read it and re-commit yourself to doing justice, seeking peace and building community.

Shalom,

Bernice Powell Jackson



COLLEGIUM OF OFFICERS

John H. Thomas
GENERAL MINISTER AND PRESIDENT

Edith A. Guffey
ASSOCIATE GENERAL MINISTER

Bernice Powell Jackson
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

Jose A. Malayang
LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRIES

Olivia Masih White
WIDER CHURCH MINISTRIES

God is still speaking, 

Contents:

Executive Minister's Word

Acknowledgements

Introduction to the Team

What is "Environmental Justice?"

Young Adults Getting Involved

Why the San Diego/Tijuana Area for an Immersion Experience?

Strengths of the Model

Reflections

What next?

Acknowledgments:

The Team would like to say "THANK YOU AND GOD BLESS" to all of those who helped make the project a success, including (but not limited to):

Christian Fellowship Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ; The Community of Chilpancingo; Hiram Sarabia and Paula Stigler; The LaJolla and Pala Bands of the Mission Indians (Luiseño); The Puerto Rico Conference of the United Church of Christ; San Diego BayKeepers Foundation–Tijuana Office; The Southern California/Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ

This project was, in part, made possible by support from the *Neighbors in Need* offering!

Excited...Expert...Enraged...Emboldened!

The terms above only begin to describe the Environmental Justice Young Adult Team which gathered August 5-11, 2004, in San Diego, California, USA and Tijuana, Baja California, México. Eight young people, ranging in age from 18-25, were gathered from the Puerto Rico Conference and the Southern California/Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. The purpose of the gathering was to give the young people an intensive training and immersion experience on the issue of environmental racism—and how we, as a people of faith, can combat such and work for environmental justice. The goal of bringing four participants from Puerto Rico was to give them an opportunity to examine environmental racism issues in a comparative manner, subsequently using that knowledge to work for environmental justice in the Caribbean context. Likewise, the goal of bringing four participants from SoCA/NV was to afford them an opportunity to examine environmental racism in their own region, in order to work for environmental justice in that area. The group was multiracial/multiethnic, which added to the learning experience.

What is Environmental Justice?

The "Environmental Justice" movement seeks to combat, and bring an end to, environmental racism—the discrimination observable in matters related to unsustainable development and the implementation of policies, regulations and laws that affect the quality of our environment. Environmental racism is vulgarly observable in the

deliberate selection of communities of color for use as garbage dumps of toxic waste, or as preferred places for the establishment of contaminating industries. These communities of color are commonly excluded by traditional environmentalist groups, by gatherings in charge of environmental decision-making, and by regulatory commissions and bodies.

The history of the United States confirms the intimate relationship that exists between the exploitation of land and the exploitation of people. The environmental justice movement defines "environment" as the place where we live, work, play and relax. The movement sees the ecosystem as the base for human life and well-being; it is made up of the interrelation of the natural, social, cultural and spiritual spheres. [Taken from the booklet *Almost Everything You Need to Know About Environmental Justice*, by Rev. Dr. Carlos Correa; available from Justice & Witness Ministries, UCC]

Why the San Diego/Tijuana Area for an Immersion Experience?

It is necessary to understand the byproduct of the high density of people and increased industrialization of the US-Mexico border region since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]. The border region is experiencing today an even greater burden on inadequate infrastructure and environmental resources. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that many of the communities in which the *maquiladoras* (factories, often using sweatshop labor) are operating in Mexico could be categorized as "economically distressed." These border region communities, like Tijuana, do not possess the resources needed to address environmental concerns such as: (1) rapid growth and lack of adequate infrastructure; (2) air pollution from open burning, vehicle emissions, and industrial operations; (3) contamination of surface and ground water from open sewers and industrial waste; (4) overuse of aquifers and surface streams; (5) transportation and illegal dumping of hazardous wastes and the destruction of natural resources. Native American reservation communities in the area, such as those of the LaJolla and Pala Bands of Luiseño (Mission) Indians, face similar challenges of water loss, dumping, etc.

Our commitment to environmental justice calls us, as a people of faith, to work for:

- ❑ *The Right to Know* -- Everyone has the right to know what toxins are being used in their neighborhood and workplace so they can effectively protect their health and the environment.
- ❑ *The Amendment of NAFTA* - The North American Free Trade Agreement has been a boon for business but a bane for workers and the environment because nearly all of its provisions for protecting workers and the environment are unenforceable and weak. NAFTA must be amended so that health and safety assurances are an integral part of the pact.
- ❑ *The Right to Participate* - Every community has the right to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating projects that affect their quality of life, public health and overall environment. We demand that governments and corporations establish a process which requires public participation in

- decisions affecting everyone.
- ❑ *Toxic Cleanup* - The economic boom along the border has left a hazardous mess in need of restoration. Progress cannot be claimed when heavy metals, acids, solvents and many other toxins pollute the ground, poison the water and contaminate the air in many communities. We demand these sites be cleaned up in health protective ways that restore environmental quality.

Young Adults Getting Involved

The young people brought varying levels of expertise in environmental issues, and a uniform excitement about the opportunity to engage in the project. As Rev. Carlos Correa and Min. Ken Brown led sessions in justice advocacy (including its spiritual foundations), environmental justice, the interrelation of justice issues, etc., increasingly evident became the critical analysis of the group, and the enthusiasm to learn more about speaking truth to power.

The group then visited the Chilpancingo area of Tijuana, examining the poor health conditions caused, in large part, by toxic waste from the *maquiladoras*—the factories, often using sweatshop labor—surrounding the neighborhood. The team also went to the coastline near the MX/USA border, and was able to see the pollution and dumping that made the MX beach areas hazardous. A visit to the LaJolla and Pala Native American reservations in San Diego county allowed the team to see the effects of water diversion (away from the reservations and into the cities) and a legal battle over landfill dumping.

These site visits enhanced the learning experience of the group; indeed, the team members were hurt to see the poverty and unsafe conditions of oppression of people based on their race/ethnicity and class, and enraged at the complicity of governments and multinational corporations in such. The process and planning session that ensued demonstrated that young adults had become emboldened to lead the fight against environmental racism!

Strengths of the Model

The EJ Young Adult Team has several strengths which make it, we believe, a viable model for the development of youth/young adult justice advocates:

- ❑ *Training/discussion on a particular issue area.* Instead of a brief sampling of a wide variety of justice issues in a short amount of time (a method that still can be beneficial but may sometimes be under-effective), a training on a specific issue affords participants a more thorough knowledge base with which to engage in advocacy.
- ❑ *Immersion.* It's one thing to tell someone about a situation of injustice; it's another to *show* someone, to allow her/him to sense it and—even for a brief moment—come a bit closer to experiencing it. The energy and the

commitment to justice of youth/young adults are catalyzed by visits to areas which show the effects of injustice, demonstrating how oppression works.

- ❑ *Small size.* Through working with a small group as opposed to a larger assembly, training can be more focused, dialogue and processing more feasible, immersion more possible and budgets more controllable.
- ❑ *Young people taking leadership on a particular issue.* By undergoing a training/immersion on a given topic, young people are better empowered to be active and take leadership on the given issue, in community, ecclesiastical/interfaith, academic and professional settings.
- ❑ *Cross-setting/Cross-Conference.* In the context of the United Church of Christ, such a model produces cross-setting collaboration. The EJ Young Adult project, which originated in the national setting, was supported by conferences in terms of participants and fiscal contributions, and by the local setting with in-kind support. This type of cooperation makes projects more effective and monetarily feasible. Likewise, it affords an opportunity for conferences to work together and walk together in the struggle for justice.

Reflections from the Young Adult Team Members

The voice and spirit of the participants will be strong and clear in the following reflections. May we read, learn and act accordingly...

Living in San Diego, I am a half a tank of gas away from the environmental justice sites that the EJ team visited. Like so many others, I live my life in a personal bubble. During the academic week, I barely leave a three-mile radius of San Diego State — I work on campus until late at night, live nearby and school fills in the rest. I never have to see injustice unless I make a conscious decision to look.

Even when choosing to look, it's difficult. Seeing a five-year-old kid prepare for work washing car windows downtown is shocking, but watching him do it next to a heavily polluted creek just adds another dimension to the poverty. Poverty permeates into every aspect of a person's life.

The "environment" gets limited to forests and oceans in people's minds, but few people recognize their home, their water supply, the air they breathe, their immediate surrounding as the environment. Environmental protections that middle class and affluent people view as standard, poorer people often do without. And because their immediate environment is taken for granted, they have difficulty seeing how immense their protections and regulations are.

In Tijuana, stray animals are every where, and dog attacks are a very real threat. The affluent don't see animal control as an environmental measure. Again, in TJ, trash is everywhere. For many years in East St. Louis there was no trash pick-up — rats, bonfires and fumes confounded an already severe environmental problem. Sanitation is another big government expense taken for granted. The creek near the young child in Tijuana was contaminated with sewage. Privileged people forget what kind of infrastructure goes into sewage treatment, and how much government work goes into assuring companies don't contaminate their water supply.

This is before you even get into the element of air quality, which disproportionately effects the lower class and people of color. Industry chooses sites next to communities that pose the least opposition. Because of their under-representation and limited resources, this typically means communities of color. The Pala Indian reservation situation was a perfect example of an industry, which had safer landfill sites near wealthier communities, actively pursuing a site near a reservation and (at the time) poorer community because it carried the least threat of resistance. Indian gaming turned the tables, and Pala now has the resources to fight the proposed landfill and bring forth Proposition B.

My week with the EJ team taught me the power of the environment, and the sacredness of the earth, and what it is like to confront injustice. But my week with the EJ team was also a truly spiritual event. The camaraderie between my UCC brothers and sisters, and seeing their compassion and commitment to strangers facing adversity, explicated the Holy Spirit — the connectivity between all people and the earth.

Joe Zarro
Community Church of Manhattan Beach
Southern California/Nevada Conference

One of the main reasons why I became interested in, and motivated for, this project is the fact that history indicates to us that we have the tendency think about our environment last. This unfortunate way of thinking is noticeable even among government agencies, the same agencies that are supposed to protect our natural resources and quality of life. Our border experience was, at least in my mind, the beginning of a ministry that will facilitate the implementation of an educational program, enhancing our understanding of what environmental justice is all about. It is also exciting to be part of this project as a UCC church member. There is no other group in our society as significant and powerful as the church. To have the opportunity to integrate our faith and our environmental justice responsibility is the right thing to do.

Our youth is our strength. We can impact our communities, society and churches. We are a group of young adults with many ideas and visions for our land and people. While in San Diego, our desire to be part of a larger movement helped us move beyond our

language limitations and to unite in the establishment of an exciting approach to issues related to environmental racism and environmental justice.

As a result of my experience in the San Diego/Tijuana project, I learned much more about how “racism” still is the most critical aspect of all the problems we are facing. The racism we face in our communities is the cause for mistreatment against many communities of color. When we talk about environmental racism, we must look at Tijuana, where poverty is a rampant reality. In Tijuana we noticed the toxic combination of government bureaucracy and corporate greed, abusing communities defined as poor, under-represented and uneducated. In the Native American areas, we noticed a type of abuse that is more systematic and progressive. This type of abuse uses even the government mechanisms that are supposed to be in place to protect those that have been targeted by big corporations. Nevertheless--for a better understanding of the why and how--Tijuana is, for me, the place with the urgency.

When I think about environmental challenges I think about the problems we face on a daily basis with the solid waste each of us produces. In Puerto Rico, we need to seriously consider the implementation of a credible and aggressive plan toward the recycling of solid waste. Our current environmental problem is one of procrastination, without realizing the larger problem we are creating through our lack of activity.

Tijuana impressed a great deal. My contact with the Native American tribes affected me, especially when I noticed how these tribes are mistreated and how basic rights and services are denied to them. At the same time, I left the tribes with a great sense of admiration. They seem to know what they want and they apparently are ready and able to keep fighting for a better quality of life for their people. I can see these tribes enjoying the fruits of the commitment to justice in the near future.

As a young adult, the environmental justice perspective of how many communities of color are affected disproportionately is not only an important subject--one that needs to be studied--but it is also a responsibility that all of us must assume. After this experience we understand that we are responsible to educate our fellow young adults. We must help our brothers and sisters develop an understanding of all the issues, along with a critical way of looking at the issues affecting so many communities of color.

Our next step should be to intentionally keep in touch with each other, with the objective of sharing ideas. We must be intentional in bringing new members to our team. Also, it will be important to set in our minds the importance of our work--to lift up our commitment to a better environment, a better quality of life for our communities and the fair treatment of all peoples.

Luis Colón Hernández
Iglesia Evangélica Unida Santa Isabel
Puerto Rico Conference

Environmentalism is one of my passions. Environmental activism became more than a hobby when I was about seven years old, when I used to walk up on piers to fishermen who had bat rays (my favorite animal at the time) in their buckets and ask if they were going to eat them. The response was always silent but poignant, returning the little rays back to the ocean with a shrug. Since that time, I have made environmental activism a way of life, founding a science club at my junior high school, beginning a Roots and Shoots club (originally founded by Jane Goodall) at my local elementary school, presiding as the president of my high school's environmental club, and now as the president of Occidental College's Environmental Action Coalition. While I have often discussed recycling, sustainable power and current environmental policy, environmental racism is a topic that is, unfortunately, quite prevalent yet somehow glossed over. As not only an environmentalist but also as a member of the United Church of Christ, Congregational, I am committed to expunging race and socioeconomic divides. The opportunity to join the Environmental Justice Team and combine my faith and my passion is amazing and beyond belief.

While the excursion itself was amazing, it was the individual members of the Environmental Justice Team that made the trip not only successful but hope-filled as well. We were a striking mix of races and socioeconomic backgrounds. The diversity of our life experiences strengthened the passion that we, as a group, resonated. It was clearest to me at 10:30 at night in the last meeting. We had a long day of driving and hiking in 100 degree temperatures. But there we were: a group of exhausted 18-25 year-olds gathered around a table in a church cafeteria, talking and thinking in different languages but dreaming as one. We dissected, until 11:00, the causes and consequences of the environmental racism we had seen.

More amazing than the group dynamic was the palpable passion of our leaders, Ken Brown and Carlos Correa. Without their unshakable commitment to the team, the trip would have fallen apart. Their wealth of knowledge was incredible, and their experience in the field was apparent, especially when one of the videos we viewed for research purposes starred the narration of Ken.

Our "home base" was a lively congregational church that supplied us with constant excellent food and even better conversation. We were welcomed to their vacation bible school and their Sunday morning service, with each of the members greeting us like family. The Reverend Art Cribbs spoke to the team about the current racism in San Diego that is literally built into the homes surrounding the predominantly African-American congregation. The prevalence of racism today is chilling, but even more terrifying in that it is largely ignored by the unaffected populace.

Our two site visits, Tijuana and two Native American reservations, were eye-opening. We visited a lead-smelting plant that had exploded, leaving the skeleton of the building,

car batteries strewn about the ground, and 6,000 tons of lead in the soil. The residents of the neighborhood who live about a quarter mile down a hill from the plant say that every morning a stream bed empties onto a street water that smells like ammonia and chlorine, often flooding houses and a preschool. This water is not rainwater. We continued our trip in Mexico by stopping by the coastal border. The beach on the San Diego side had no swimmers and there were “No Swimming, Contaminated Water” signs along the water’s edge. But just feet away from the metal fence that separates the two nations, there were children playing in this same contaminated water. There was one small sign on the rusted fence.

Our second site visit was two Native American reservations. The commonly held misconception that the individuals of all tribes receive benefits from casinos was obviously wrong, as some of the properties on the reservation were in poor condition. The case of environmental racism here was regarding a sacred mountain, behind which a company wanted to create a landfill. Not only would this be desecration, but the landfill would lie right above Oceanside’s main aquifer. Logically, it would be against the public good to store trash above drinking water, but San Diego county refused to acquiesce to the tribe’s request for a relocation of the site. The proposed site is being voted on in upcoming county elections.

I feel now, after witnessing firsthand just a few of the atrocities of Tijuana and the border-land reservations, that I am personally responsible for the well-being of my global brothers and sisters. I feel that if others were informed of the prevalence of environmental racism, our movement could have a tremendous impact. The Environmental Justice Team members need to take it upon themselves to inform not only their congregations but their communities as well. Personally, I am going to speak to my congregation’s youth groups, and create a slide show with the photographs that I took on the trip. I hope also to arrange a discussion on the topic of environmental racism to shed some light on this troubling issue. I knew as soon as I met the other members of the Environmental Justice Team that my life would be changed forever by this trip. Now I can see that not only will my future be altered by this remarkable group, but the future as the world as well.

*Gabrielle Meury
Claremont UCC
Southern California/Nevada Conference*

"LAUFANUA OLE MALO"

The Environmental Justice Ministry has created an affective and valuable program for promoting awareness and understanding to an ordinary individual. I, for one, am jam-packed with information, in addition to knowledge.

My name is Mavaega Lepaga Jr.--“VEGAH.” I express thanks to God on behalf of the magnificent experience that I had, and continue to carry with me. I came home filled with so much information to be expressed and shared. I am the kind of individual that, particularly in light of all the solid work and contribution and effort the team has offered, I don't like seeing information going to waste.

What I learned from the conference was so beyond my imagination. The information from the training sessions built character in all of the participants. We learned how much racism and other systems of advantage, based on class, ethnicity, etc., play a big role in the environmental issues that occur from city to city, state to state, and even in foreign countries.

Evident in Tijuana are the bad air and water quality that this community must live in. The conditions are considered hazardous. The United States plays an extremely big part in the condition of Tijuana's air and water qualities. The U.S. brought over companies who drastically fill their waters and streams with chemicals. In many parts of Tijuana one can see these badly contaminated water supplies filled with neon green chemical spills from many of these companies.

There were various key elements that impacted this training session that I have not pointed out. Overall, I am anticipating the next planning event or plans for the next project. Thanks for your time and consideration.

*Mavaega “Vegah” Lepaga Jr.
Malamalama Congregational Church
Southern California/Nevada Conference*

What I witnessed in the San Diego/Tijuana area came to me with unique importance, affecting the totality of how I look at life. As a result of my trip, I have developed a better understanding of how many of us--after having all the elements we consider necessary to maintain a good quality of life--complain unnecessarily about issues that are, often times, trivial. As a young adult, being able to visit new places and meet new people offered me a new perspective for my personal life. Every new encounter brought me to self examination and to closely observe how my values define the way I treat other human beings and what my levels of empathy and sensitivity toward people are.

My experience in San Diego and Tijuana helped me grow. As a result of my observations many questions were stimulated: Why is there greed and abuse of authority? Why does racism exist? How can we justify the contamination of communities of color? What is my role and responsibility? What's the next step I am taking? How capable am I of facing and overcoming possible challenges and frustrations?

Not only was my intellect challenged but also my faith. If God were to have a favorite subject, I'm sure it would be the environment. The environment is the perfect subject to be related with God; when we talk about the environment we are talking about everything that was created by God. There is an undeniable interconnection between everything that was created, and we are responsible for the care and nurture of that creation through proper administration, wise relationship to the planet, respect for our fellow brothers and sisters and loyalty to the Creator. It is our responsibility to make sure that the interaction between all creation is a healthy one, reflecting respect toward human dignity and toward the integrity of the animal kingdom and its habitat.

Silence is not an option while confronting the toxic realities of our communities of color. When we lift up our voices we also lift up our value and dignity as part of God's creation. To remain silent would be like offering ourselves as victims of fear without giving ourselves the opportunity to fight the good fight. When we lift up our voices we must do it with a mentality of **IMPACT, STRONG COMMITMENT AND DISRUPTION OF THE STATUS QUO**. Our voices carry a very meaningful call, emphasizing the importance of environmental justice and the objective of bringing together our brothers and sisters to unmask and arrest the environmental corruption that on so many occasions has defined our governments.

When I think about our Environmental Justice Young Adult Team, I think about our most valuable resource--**OURSELVES**. We have been challenged to lift up the movement we have embraced. We understand environmental justice as our ministry to the planet and to those that call our planet home. We are called to work toward the development of the non-negotiable objectives we now have in mind: **SUCCESS, VICTORY and RESULTS**.

Xiomary Rodríguez Fuentes
Iglesia Evangélica Unida Santa Isabel
Puerto Rico Conference

I regret taking so long to piece together my reflection of the San Diego/Mexico E.J. group and experiences. General lethargy and worrying about college have been moderate distractions but the largest one of all was the fact that every time I approached the thought of even doing the reflection my mind was inexorably thrown into a brooding and depressive state. It is sad enough to think about the oppression of Mexicans and Native Americans but thinking about it is all the more difficult as I can thoroughly empathize with them. It may not be the oppressors' thorough intent to maltreat other people; however, the oppressors do just that and simply for a personal profit. Mexicans face the pollution of the maquiladoras, some Native Americans face diversion of their natural resources, the Pala Indians face disposal site issues, and even I constantly face much different oppressors, the heterosexists. Having knowledge and interest in the environment first sparked my interest in the project, and it is the ideal of

justice that made me so personally interested in being a part of the team.

I learned much from the discussion sessions and field observation. I have known that pollution is becoming more of a problem but I didn't realize that it is the poor and children who suffer most. Cancer Alley on the Mississippi and the slums of Tijuana each illustrate the horrible cyclic chain of oppression that ails the lower socio-economic families. Whether it is animal excrement, lead contaminant, diluted sewage, or even just sediment, it all pollutes the water that people swim in, bathe in, use for laundry, and even sometimes drink! The primary reason that corporations can pollute so easily is because the occupants of the slums do not have the money, power, or resources to challenge and defeat the bloated, greedy corporations. It isn't enough that the communities are poor and oppressed; the corporations generally deal more damage to communities of color. Sources of pollution tend to be more focused around African American and Hispanic communities, although, corporations are doing their best to increase their sense of diversity by further targeting Indians too.

Over half a century ago the city of Escondido diverted natural water flow that provided fresh water to five different Indian reservations. Escondido defends their claim to the water on the grounds that they have a historical right to it. Trying to add more insult and injury, a garbage dump is proposed to be placed in Gregory Canyon directly next to the Pala Indian tribe's land. It enrages me how thoroughly the government follows its tradition of oppression. Many years ago the federal government would pay soldiers for presenting Indian scalps and it made a thorough effort to capture, confine, and limit Indians as much as it possibly could. It's utter idiocy that inspires people to improve the quality of their own lives without contemplating the repercussions it may have on other people's lives when it is their resources that are being stolen.

What needs to happen now is an entire reform of all the institutions of society. All people need to find the enchanting grace of humility and cast aside all their dispositions that make them feel superior to anyone else. It might start with brochures, propaganda, and handouts, but it will take a stern, confident, unwavering demand for "liberty and justice for all" regardless of race or nation of all.

Robert Smith
Highland Congregational UCC
Southern California/Nevada Conference

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who, by their wickedness, suppress the truth. –Romans 1:18

The opportunity to be part of a team like this one is more than exciting and unbelievable; it's an answer to prayers, and, in my mind, is a blessing. For many years now I have been interested in scientific facts on everything that has to do with Mother

Earth, and that is the reason why I became an agronomist (agricultural scientist). Moreover, the word of God has taught me to be compassionate with my brothers and sisters all around the world, following the path of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—He who never turned anyone away, no matter what they had done or where they were from; He who always extended His loving hand to those in need and gave them the opportunity to be saved by the mercy, glory, and power given to Him by the Creator. Wanting to be what our Jesus wants us to be is what fills us up with joy, knowing that we were even considered to be part of such an awesome adventure.

I thank the Lord for the leaders whose hearts God touched to speak out and to gather more people to stand out and to tell the world what kind of injustice goes on around all of us. I'm thankful for Mr. Ken Brown and Rev. Carlos Correa, who did an awesome job of filling us with new information of what kind of stuff takes place even in our backyards and how we as young adults can empower people to make a difference. God took us to a great starting of San Diego, California—in a state known all around the world for its magnificent places and for its good economic status. It's a bit weird to have been that state and to have encountered injustice in maybe all the possible ways that we can imagine. Being able to have this experience hands-on really opened our eyes to the many wrong things that go on around us. We have been so blinded and brainwashed that we don't take the time to take a closer look and analyze the facts and the factors that cause many of the children of God to be treated with injustice every single day.

It's incredible to know that the people who originally owned the great nation of the United States of America are now being pushed to segregation and are even being denied a precious material which no single living being can live without: water, "blue gold" as we have to call it now days. For a person like me, who has been an American citizen since birth, it's impossible to comprehend how is it possible for such a thing like to still go on in the present-day USA. I was very shocked, but at the same time very pleased, to have the privilege of meeting with my Native American brothers and sisters, and being able to hear from their own mouth the way they are still being treated. I hope that one day we can all join together and beat this injustice that takes place in our own soil.

The experience which really touched my heart and made my soul sorrowful was the trip to Tijuana, Mexico, which is separated by the simple barrier of a fence, a wall—an injustice symbol, as I like to call it. It left a deep impression to see how my brothers and sisters from across the border have to live. I really identified with the Mexican people because they and I are united by the same language, and by the same family values and traditions that bring us together as the Hispanic community. To this day I can't take away from my mind all the images that my eyes were able to capture during that one single day in Tijuana. It's incredible how much injustice we were able to experience in just a couple of miles of the Mexican territory, how the government just forgets or takes for granted the condition in which their own people have to live. It still bothers me how my Mexican people are treated in the year 2004. It bothers me how my family in Christ in the Chilpancingo community have to live under awful environmental dangers

every single day of their lives without having someone to whom they can turn for help, instead having to accept their way of life because they know no other. Even if they know another one, they feel like they don't have the power to be heard and to make a difference.

I thank God for giving me the huge blessing of visiting this place and getting to know its kind, loving people. Because of this my team and I will be able to be their voices outside of their barriers. I have them all so close to my heart and they are all in every single one of my prayers. I had the privilege of speaking about my experience to my local church in Romero, Villalba; and now they are also praying partners. Every time I get the chance to talk about this experience, I can barely contain my tears because the emotion and the love that I feel for this people are so great that it's impossible to contain myself. I would love to have the power in my hands to make a quick and instant change, but that isn't the case. For now, our mission is to get people to get up from their nice comfortable church chairs and start making God's word live in our lives; it is to go out and help the needy, and then to preach them the awesome Gospel we have all had the privilege to know.

Our goal and mission isn't to do this job all by ourselves, but to teach people the importance of serving, and the importance of creating a good quality of life for everyone. We are counting on every single one of our churches to take a stand against anything that is injustice and to not be afraid to let the world know that we are all God's people, and that we won't be taken down without a struggle—without our voices being heard! May God help us all in this hard task we have ahead of us, and may God bless us all always.

Let's hope that we can start making a difference in our own territories. I know that the church in Puerto Rico will keep on speaking against anyone who tries to do something that goes against God's will. We have decided that we will be God's tools in Earth, but that the power will only come from God; if God is with us, who will come against us?

Wilson Rivera González
Iglesia Evangélica Unida de Romero
Puerto Rico Conference

It really was very interesting experience to be part of the Young Adult EJ group. Having the opportunity to expand my knowledge regarding environmental justice issues and to have the challenge to promote justice for all is something that really motivates me. After my experience in San Diego and Tijuana, I was able to comprehend that the importance of human rights goes beyond providing communities and individuals with a comfort zone; we need to seek equal rights for every person, of every race and color.

I would like to use my abilities, talents and resources to advance the movement. I would like to be useful in the spreading of a message of justice, equality and peace. I would

like to share with others a message of an inclusive theology in which the interconnection of the subjects of love, unity and preservation of our natural resources is obvious. I would like to lift up my voice to let people know that, according to our faith, we are responsible for the preservation of human dignity and for the application of a movement that preserves and stimulates environmental justice actions, and that those actions have a clear theological mandate that supports them.

The experience of working in a group setting was extreme satisfying. To have the opportunity to listen to each other, to get to know each other and, more importantly, to have an understanding of each others concerns was a heartfelt experience for me. A sense of “unity” was immediate at the moment we heard each other talking about the proposal of how we will be able to face the environmental justice challenges in our own communities. The group dynamic was a very educational experience which I really valued.

The workshops were very clear and easy to understand. I was able to learn much more about not only how the pollution affects the environment but also how entire communities are affected by the pollution caused by factories that are more interested in profits than in human dignity and fair treatment. For them their economic interests are more important than the fair treatment of humans and the environment.

What we learned in our workshops, before crossing into Tijuana, helped me understand the environmental justice problems of those that call Tijuana their home. I was able to put in context the interconnection between the poverty they face, the profit they produce for the maquiladoras and the contamination and pollution they have to face on a daily basis—until they are let go by the maquiladoras or until they are too sick to continue working. My emotional reaction to such a painful situation was one of sadness. I was unable to understand how such inhumane living conditions can be justified by anything or anyone. Who can help them? That question is related to our need to develop a more consistent practical theology and it is also related to the main question: How can the church get more involved in doing concrete justice work instead of mere biblical interpretation and/or reflections?

The other thing I noticed was the interconnection between environmental injustices and globalization. Workers are exploited. This fact brings another human aspect to the equation as human beings, as well as natural habitat (environment), suffer together.

Then there was the experience with the Native American reservations. From a distance their way of living could be understood as a “good life”. But what I saw was that the so-called “progress” is also affecting their quality of life and as well as their environment. I only hope that, as they move forward in their progress, they will seek balance between their economic development and the preservation and protection of their natural resources (environment as a whole)—in other words, that they are more intentional about looking into sustainable development instead of just financial opportunities.

As a participant I will encourage the UCC to continue organizing experiences as the one we had. To be conscious of what is happening motivates me to look into what is my role in the work for justice.

As Christians we must be part of a movement that seeks justice. As church leaders we must develop activities that will help to educate people and to get them involved in a more intentional way of protecting God's creation and all the people that are suppose to be enjoying that creation.

Last but not least, as a community of faith we must think about how we are going to get our children involved in such movement. We must produce educational materials targeting the issue of environmental justice and facilitating the development of more justice people in our churches and in the world.

*Omayra Torres Carrión
Congregación Luquillo Pueblo
Puerto Rico Conference*

What next?

What do we do now? What makes this experience more than just a feel-good gathering of a few people, but rather a part of a movement for justice? The Environmental Justice Young Adult Team encourages you to discern how you—as an individual, congregation or other body of faith, community and/or organization—can work to end environmental racism! Here are some thoughts for discussion:

- Is your neighborhood/area a healthy one to live in? Why/why not? Compare it to other areas you have experienced or know of. What are the similarities/differences?
- Have you seen situations you would identify as examples of environmental racism? Describe. How do population, affluence and technology impact the situation?
- How do your faith journey and spiritual values affect your understanding of environmental justice?
- How can your group(s) mobilize to combat environmental racism? What learning/research will need to be done? What plans of action devised? What resources will be needed? Who will do what, with what, by when? What allies do you have in your efforts? What detractors?
- What is the role of young people in your group or community? Are they empowered to do justice? How can you, as a young person, mobilize others (both young and older) to do justice? How can you, as an older

person, empower and partner with young people in their efforts to do justice?

- ❑ More specifically, how can young people mobilize to do environmental justice, and how can you partner with them in such?
- ❑ Consider the model of training/immersion presented in this report. Would this be an effective approach for your group? What issues, be they environmental justice or other, can you focus on in your area and build a team of action on?
- ❑ How can Justice & Witness Ministries support you and partner with you in your justice efforts, on whatever issue? Moreover, how can the Environmental Justice Young Adult Team help in your efforts to combat environmental racism?

May the Creator continue to empower us to work so that justice will “flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing [uncontaminated, non-toxic, accessible to all] stream!” (Amos 5:24, with our own additions)

Peace and power...

Rev. Dr. Carlos J. Correa Bernier
Minister for Environmental Justice
Racial Justice Ministry Team
216.736.3722 correac@ucc.org
866.UCC.UCC4 ext. 3722

Mr. Kenneth R. Brown, II
Associate for Youth and Young Adult
Empowerment
Racial Justice Ministry Team
216.736.3727 brownk@ucc.org
866.UCC.UCC4 ext. 3727

Justice & Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ
700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115, USA

IT HAS TO START SOMEWHERE; IT HAS TO START SOMETIME.
WHAT BETTER PLACE THAN HERE? WHAT BETTER TIME THAN NOW!
----RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE