



Divestment from Fossil Fuels—What Are the Implications? *A Role-Play for Faith Communities*

This role-play exercise is an entertaining, thought-provoking way to engage the issue of fossil fuel divestment in a faith community. Read through the story below, and then assign “parts” to each of the participants. Make sure you take time afterwards to reflect on the experience. What did you learn? What were the most important moral lessons from the exercise?

Background

A religious institution or congregation is considering changing 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 institution is considering divesting its pension fund and other investment funds from fossil fuels in order to be consistent with its guiding moral principles, which emphasize care for creation. Creation care leaders within the institution say that it 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 and to the religious institution to maximize returns on investments.

Divide participants into groups representing the following interests:

- Institutional financial managers and pension fund directors
- Clergy
- Lay members of the religious institution or denomination
- Creation care leaders from within the institution
- Fossil fuel industry leaders
- God

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

1. Should the investment decisions of religious groups be based not only on maximizing financial returns but also on ethical criteria?
2. Which of the perspectives in this exercise caused you to think in new ways about divestment?

3. How does your understanding of your religious tradition and its values inform your perspective on investing generally, and on divestment in particular?
4. If your religious institution or denomination were considering divestment, what would you want it to do?

Divestment Role Play Identities

- **Institutional financial managers and pension fund directors**

These leaders are responsible for ensuring strong financial returns within the guidelines provided by the institution. Some argue that it is better to try to effect change through shareholder activism than through divestment. Spokespersons for these directors are concerned that divestment from fossil fuels will result in a loss of returns.

- **Clergy**

Clergy are responsible for teaching and living the values of their institution. Some believe that they should not profit from the earth's destruction. But many clergy have limited incomes and limited retirement savings. They rely on their institution to manage their retirement funds well. Many institutions believe that ensuring retirement income for clergy is a justice issue. Spokespersons for clergy should decide what position they would like to take.

- **Lay members of the religious institution or denomination**

Many lay members make regular financial contributions to their religious institution. They want to ensure that their gifts are being used wisely. Spokespersons for this audience are concerned that investments made with their gifts are both financially sound and ethical. They should decide what position they would like to take.

- **Creation care leaders within the institution**

These people may lead a green team or other creation care group within their congregation or institution. They believe that religious groups are morally obligated to respond to climate change. Spokespersons for this group believe that it is wrong for churches to profit from the destruction of the planet's ecosystems, and that they must take a public stand against it.

- **Fossil fuel industry leaders**

These people are concerned with profits and returns on investment. They believe that their industry creates value for themselves and for shareholders. Some also feel that they are doing important work by ensuring a steady supply of energy. Spokespersons for the fossil fuel industry view divestment as misguided, and believe that their industry is making valuable investments in renewable energy. The loss of religious investments is unlikely to impact the industry's bottom line.

- **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.

Rev. Jenny Phillips adapted this exercise from the SPLENDOR curriculum written by Rev. Fletcher Harper and Rev. Jenny Phillips for GreenFaith. For more information on SPLENDOR, and for additional resources on faith community divestment, visit www.greenfaith.org.