

An Energy Policy for All Americans

"Oil prices reach record highs." "Gas prices projected to increase." These types of grim headlines have earned themselves a permanent residence in news headlines over the past year. Oil supply is not keeping up with the growing demand and this shortage of available oil is being felt by nearly every American and being discussed by seemingly all politicians. Meanwhile, those in such levels of poverty that they can't afford an automobile are being disproportionately affected by air pollution and other forms of environmental hazards due to energy emissions. The United States is in the midst of an energy crisis. America is not just faced with an energy shortage but also with irreversible damage to the environment due to our current energy practices, largely in the form of global warming. Clearly, change is needed. Yet arguments over what path America should take and partisanship in politics are preventing significant progress and dividing the United States of America. The many approaches to the crisis differ in implementation costs, environmental impact, and how they aim to reduce oil consumption, but they each have their benefits and drawbacks. To decrease the United States' dependence on oil and to become a leader in fighting global warming, the Christian church needs to advocate for energy policies that reduce carbon emissions, make significant investments in the development of renewable energies, and do not disproportionately affect lower-class Americans.

The first task of the U.S. needs to be reducing its dependence on oil. This is not just for national security issues, but more importantly because energy costs are quickly rising and disproportionately affecting those on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. The people who were already struggling to make ends meet before the rise in energy costs can simply no longer afford it, sometimes causing job loss due to lack of transportation and often increasing the number of people relying on food banks to feed their families. As Earth's oil reserves begin to run out, it is necessary as a country and as individuals to not only find alternative renewable energy sources, but also to start significantly reducing the consumption of and dependence upon oil. To do this, the U.S.

needs to start raising efficiency standards for buildings and automobiles to encourage the transition to energy-saving technologies that have already been developed and proven effective. Home-owners need to be informed of ways they can save energy and tax credits need to be awarded to purchasers of fuel-efficient cars and energy-efficient home technology in order to make them more affordable.

Implementing current technologies will help, but the U.S. also needs to make significant investments in the continued development of alternative energy sources. A reasonable goal for the U.S. is to have developed the ability to power our nation solely on renewable energy sources in the next decade. As the technologies are developed, the U.S. needs to begin transforming its method of creating electricity so that electrical companies gradually convert more and more over to clean, renewable energy sources.

Many alternative energy sources exist and it will take a combination of several or all of them to replace our use of oil. Primarily though, solar power, wind power, and geothermal energy can generate the energy needed. While nuclear power is favored by some, a safe way to store the nuclear waste has yet to be found. Some politicians propose transporting all the nuclear waste and storing it at Nevada's Yucca Mountain site. However, this would pose a significant danger to citizens all over the country. Transporting the nuclear waste would involve trucking it on existing roads and bringing it within a half mile of 52 million Americans ("Why Not Yucca"), putting their health at risk because of the potential radiation leakages from accidents or equipment failure. The Yucca Mountain site contains a water table used by the Amargosa Valley farming region, which produces food products consumed all over the country, and is both in a volcanic zone and surrounded by 33 known earthquake faults ("Why Not Yucca"). Clearly, the storage of nuclear waste is a considerable obstacle in its use and development as an alternative energy source.

It is best for the U.S. to invest in converting its electricity generation to solar, wind, and geothermal power because they have little environmental impact, their sources are free and renewable, and they have the capacity to power our country. The main problem with solar and wind

power is that they are climate and weather dependent. Researchers have yet to develop an inexpensive and efficient way to store the excess power so that it may be used during times of low generation. This technology will need to be developed before solar and wind power can be fully implemented. Also, current technology requires large amounts of land—one square kilometer for every 20-60 megawatts generated (“Tapping Renewable Energy”)—for solar power and many towers, each with small generators, for wind power. However, American ingenuity must not be underestimated. With government investment in research and development, new and more efficient technologies are sure to emerge.

Geothermal energy could be used to generate a continuous base load power to supplement wind and solar power. The benefits are that it uses very little land, has low capital and environmental cost, has a historically reliability rate of over 90% (“Geothermal Power vs. Conventional”), and could be used to provide power to remote sites. However, it isn’t as efficient or concentrated as coal and there is uncertainty about how long each well will last. More research into the development of geothermal energy could help alleviate these problems though. Economically, the costs of these alternative energies will be higher at first as new factories and means of generation are established. Government investment, however, would help make them affordable to all Americans. Also, their production would create new markets and new jobs that couldn’t be shipped overseas, significantly boosting the economy and providing work for the thousands of unemployed.

Alternative energy sources have the capacity to power the country, but something will have to be done to drive people and companies to make the switch from the more convenient sources of coal and oil to renewable energies. To accomplish this, the U.S. government needs to create a carbon cap and trade system and offer industry and consumer tax incentives. A carbon cap and trade discourages the use of bad energy sources, such as oil and coal, by setting a maximum carbon emission level. Unlike a legal mandate, which would also limit carbon emissions, a carbon cap and trade accommodates industry by creating a market where the permits distributed by the government

can be traded (“Public Energy Policy”). While the U.S. has little experience with other proposed alternative energy-promoting techniques like a carbon tax, the cap and trade system has been implemented and proven successful in the U.S. with another harmful gas, sulfur dioxide. Because of the previous success of the cap and trade system and its low implementation cost, it is viewed favorably by most politicians and the public. A carbon cap and trade would force companies to reduce their use of oil and coal while exploring and converting to alternative energy sources. In addition to a carbon cap and trade, consumer and industry tax incentives would further encourage the use of alternative energies and help make them more affordable to individuals and companies.

To offset the cost of offering tax incentives and investing in alternative energy sources, the U.S. could use a “feebate” system for industries. In a feebate system, companies would be fined for not investing in alternative energies and the income from these fines would be used to pay for the tax incentives given to those that do comply. The U.S. could also raise taxes for the wealthy (those making more than \$250,000 a year) because they are the ones able to absorb increased taxes more easily. This way, middle and low income class Americans are not being unduly charged for the switch to alternative energy and are in fact only being rewarded. After 10 years, once alternative energy has become more available and affordable to all, the feebate system could be expanded to include individual consumers as well. By introducing the feebate system and raising taxes for the wealthy, the government would not only be offsetting its investments in renewable energy, but would also be making sure that the poor are not being disproportionately affected by the U.S. conversion to renewable energy.

Once the U.S. has succeeded in switching its electrical generation to renewable energy sources, the government’s focus can be redirected towards completely eliminating the use of oil as a fuel for vehicles and other machinery. While raising fuel-efficiency standards needs to be done immediately, the next step is to convert automobiles to renewable energy sources as well. Alternative fuel technologies are already being explored and developed, but government investment

along with industry/consumer tax incentives and an increased demand for alternative fuel vehicles will speed up the process. Some of the options being explored already include hydrogen fuel cell cars, biomass fuels, and electric cars. For example, Tesla Motors has already developed a plug-in, battery-powered electric sports car that can travel 250 miles on a charge (“Review: Tesla Motors). Further research and investment in alternative fuels and cars will raise energy efficiency, increase accessibility, and decrease the cost of production and purchase price. The switch of automobiles to alternative fuels, along with the conversion of electricity to renewable energy sources, will give the U.S. lasting energy security and make it a world leader in fighting global warming.

While certain approaches to energy policy and renewable energy would be more effective than others, ultimately it is most important that legislators consider the well-being of all people and the environment as well as economic effects when making policy decisions. As elected officials in our representative democracy, legislators are essentially the voice of the people and have the duty of making decisions in the best interest of the people. As part of the government of arguably the most powerful and influential country in the world, it is their duty to make sure the decisions and actions taken by the U.S. set the standard for the world, especially when it comes to fighting global warming. As oil reserves fail to keep up with demand and global warming worsens, the world is at a deciding point in history; the urgency assumed and actions taken have the potential to redefine current methods of operating and decide the future of humanity on this earth. Legislators and policy-makers certainly need to realize this and base their actions accordingly.

However, the legislators are not the only ones who need to take action. Christians need to be active, not passive, in promoting their beliefs concerning energy policy. Why should energy policy matter to Anabaptists and other denominations alike? Why does awareness need to be raised in the church? Why is it important for Christians to be advocates for energy policies that promote human health, environmental protection, economic fairness, and justice for all? The answers are simple and

found at the very nucleus of the Christian faith: the Word of God pronounced through the Bible and teachings of Jesus Christ.

References to the care of all of God's creation abound in the Bible, pinning the responsibility on God's people to be His hands and feet and to be stewards of all that is His. In the beginning, God created humans to have dominion over the earth, but also to care and tend to the rest of His creation. For Christians, it must be important that the energy policy decisions made do not harm the environment and deplete the resources that have been entrusted into their care and ultimately belong to God. However, the duties of Christians go beyond "Creation Care" as well. It is often easy for the decisions made to disproportionately affect the voiceless and the poorest. Certain methods of energy production compromise human health, unjustly hurting the poorest members of society. Their lack of money in this wealth-driven society leaves them with less of a voice to demand change and with no hope to attain a higher quality of life. Jesus calls his followers to be the voice of the unheard because they too are children of God, and to always remember, as Matthew 25:40 says, that "whatever you do unto the least of these, you have done unto me."

Christians need to promote church-wide awareness of important public policy issues and consider how their faith implores them to take action. Too much of the time it is easier for churches and believers to be complacent and accept the status quo. Yet God showed, by way of Jesus' example, how Christians ought to live. And Jesus was anything but complacent. Jesus calls his followers to take action against the injustice and wrong they see in the world. When it comes to U.S. energy policy, this means being advocates of approaches and decisions that will protect God's creation and will be just for all His people. Church-wide awareness needs to be raised about energy policy issues and action upon beliefs must be encouraged. As Thomas Jefferson once stated, "An informed democracy will act responsibly." So too, a conscientious church will act faithfully and help lead the U.S. to decisions that embody good environmental stewardship and promote social and economic justice for all of humanity.