



Connecting Faith and Life

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Session at a Glance

The recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico reminds us of the dangers of offshore oil production. What does this disaster reveal about the benefits and consequences of our energy-dependent lifestyle? How does our faith help us reclaim a sense of ownership and participation in the responsible use of our natural resources?

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Oil Spill in the Gulf

by Alex Joyner and Melissa Lauber

Disaster in the Gulf

On April 20, the *Deepwater Horizon*, an oil-drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico leased by British Petroleum (BP), exploded into flames. In the ensuing fire, eleven workers lost their lives; and two days later the rig sank.

The tragedy was compounded when it became clear that crude oil was pouring out from at least two leaks in the crumpled pipe that had carried oil to the surface. Initially estimated at a rate of 1,000 barrels per day, the leaks were later found to be much larger. Though no exact figures were available, US government officials on April 28 said that it was approximately 5,000 barrels per day, or over 200,000 gallons.

At the time of this writing, the drama of the oil spill was still unfolding. Congressional hearings unveiled a regulatory system that was far from perfect. Oil companies and contractors were debating who was responsible for the accident and the cleanup. President Barack Obama was revisiting a recent energy policy proposal made by his administration to allow more extensive offshore drilling. BP was trying to cap the leaks with a device nicknamed a “top hat.” Everyone was watching a massive oil slick that continued to grow and that threatened the wildlife and the livelihoods of residents along the Gulf Coast and perhaps the East Coast as well.

For many Christians, the incident raises a now-familiar question: How does our faith help us come to grips with the ways we are enmeshed in an oil-based economy?

Deepwater Dangers

The *Deepwater Horizon* was aptly named. The rig, owned by Transocean Ltd. and leased by BP, was on the cutting edge of oil exploration—deepwater drilling. Less than a year before, the rig was used to drill the world’s deepest oil and gas well 35,000 feet beneath water and rock. The site of the current disaster, fifty miles south of the Louisiana coast, was not nearly as deep at 5,000 feet; but it was still at a far greater depth than traditional offshore drilling operations.

Energy companies are entering the risky field of deepwater drilling because they now have the technology and the incentive to do so. New tools such as reliable remote-control vehicles enable companies to reach oil deposits that were previously thought inaccessible. Meanwhile the supplies of oil beneath more shallow water are drying up.

Oil explorers are taking greater risks, but dealing with the consequences of well failures at these depths is still a developing field. Large devices called blowout preventers (or BOPs) are supposed to cut

Core Bible Passages

Second Samuel 12:1-9 relates Nathan's confrontation with King David. The prophet's tale of injustice enraged David so much that he was ready to punish the rich man who took his neighbor's sheep. When Nathan said, "You are the man!" David recognized his own sinfulness.

How does this story sound if we imagine ourselves in David's role, railing against the sins of corporations or systems that lead to tragedies such as the Gulf oil spill? How might our own involvement be revealed?

First Kings 17:1-16 tells about the prophet Elijah traveling in the midst of a drought. After being sustained by ravens, Elijah visited a widow and her son and asked for food and drink. The woman told him she had only enough meal and oil for a last morsel. The prophet told her not to be afraid; there would be enough.

In what ways does our dependence on diminishing supplies of oil lead us to fear the future? What would an Elijah-like confidence in future provision lead us to do differently?

The type of oil being sought by the bridesmaids in Jesus' parable in **Matthew 25:1-13** is not petroleum, but the story does ask us to think about the wisdom of our actions when resources are limited. The parable seems to refer to scarce time in light of Christ's impending return, but what might we learn about "trimming our lamps" in a time of scarce oil?

off the flow of oil when catastrophic events happen. BP had one of these in place at the *Deepwater Horizon* site, but it failed to activate due to a suspected hydraulic leak. Representative Henry Waxman, heading a congressional hearing on the disaster, reported that the BOP had failed a negative pressure test only hours before the April 20 blast. Repeated attempts to get the BOP working again failed. Lamar McKay, a BP America official, compared the attempts to doing "open-heart surgery at 5,000 feet . . . in the dark with robot-controlled submarines."

As a result of the failures, BP improvised a number of stop-gap solutions, including the "top hat," a small pollution containment chamber. At the time of this writing, the top hat seemed to be having some success. A longer-term solution is the drilling of a relief well nearby.

Environmental and Human Impact

The video images of huge oil slicks on the surface of the Gulf bring to mind large-scale spills in the past that had lasting effects. In 1969, the Santa Barbara spill off the coast of California spurred the development of environmental consciousness and contributed to the observance of the first Earth Day the following year. In 1989, the *Exxon Valdez* tanker ran aground, spilling 36,000 tons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound, with devastating consequences for wildlife and the local economy.

The ultimate impact of the current spill is yet to be determined. If it reaches landfall in the Gulf, it will hit right in the heart of one of the most productive fishing grounds in the United States. Up to one third of all the country's commercial fishing and shellfish production comes from the Gulf. Unlike the rocky coasts of Alaska, the oil would come ashore in vulnerable marshlands. More than half of all the coastal wetlands in the lower 48 states are on the Gulf of Mexico. There are also concerns that the oil might drift into the loop current that takes water from the Gulf through the Florida Keys and up the Eastern seaboard, threatening the coastline from Florida to the Carolinas.

The effects on wildlife could be widespread. Birds are particularly affected when oil coats their feathers. They lose the ability to trap air and repel water, leading to a risk of hypothermia. Large fish such as tuna, turtles, and aquatic mammals such as dolphins and whales are also likely to be affected by oil entering their Gulf habitats.

One unknown factor is the effect of the oil spill under the water. According to the Associated Press, miles-long underwater oil plumes have been found, which "could poison or suffocate sea life across the food chain, with damage that could last for a decade or more."

Residents along the Gulf Coast are also bracing for a big economic impact. Commercial fishermen are wondering if they will have any work this season. Eighty-four-year-old Doogie Robin, an oyster boat captain in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, told an AP reporter, "[Hurricane] Katrina really hit us hard. . . . And this here, I think this is going to finish us now. I think this will wipe us off the map."

The Costs of the Spill

In the wake of hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike, the Louisiana Conference has welcomed many teams of volunteers who want to help rebuild. However, cleaning up oil spills requires a different sort of response.

Anticipating the landfall of some of the oil spill, the conference recently posted guidelines for persons who would like to help with coastal cleanup efforts. Volunteers need to be aware that there are significant health dangers involved. Persons must be 18 or older and must register with the state. Special training is needed to assist injured wildlife, manage donations, work with construction teams, and staff the command center. More information is available at <http://tiny.cc/okpti>.

Doctors Thomas Webler, Seth Tuler, and Kirstin Dow, who have studied the health risks associated with cleaning up after an oil spill, identify a number of subsequent health complications, including everything from headaches to kidney failure. Working under a project funded by the Coastal Response Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, the researchers note that the urgency of getting volunteers to where they are needed sometimes leads to inadequate training.

The researchers emphasize that “oil is a hazardous material” and protective clothing is needed to handle it. In addition, workers often have to contend with other materials such as detergents and degreasers used in combating the spread of oil spills.

Benefits and Consequences

The effects of the *Deepwater Horizon* spill open up a much bigger window in the larger oil economy. While the nation laments the damage, it is a byproduct of contemporary society’s continuing dependence on oil as a primary energy source.

Though “cleaner” alternative energy sources such as wind and solar power are being developed more widely, they still make up less than ten percent of US energy production. Slightly over 37 percent of that production is oil-based; and global oil demand is expected to increase by 24 percent over the next 20 years, according to the International Energy Agency.

It has become clear that continuing dependence on oil has many downsides and is unsustainable over the long run. Besides occasional disasters such as the current oil spill, there are more chronic effects, including the contribution of burning oil to climate change.

Addressing our energy future will involve hard decisions that recognize the true cost of our dependence on oil. One proposal is a continued role for offshore drilling with a greatly increased tax on barrels produced from offshore wells. The revenue from the tax could be used for the development of clean-energy projects. Matthew Kotchen, an environmental economist at Yale University, told *Time* magazine, “Environmentalists might be willing to take that risk [on new offshore drilling] if it can become a viable source of alternative revenue.”

Not Powerless but Capable

It is tempting for us to feel powerless in the face of such massive scenes of environmental degradation as the Gulf oil spill. We can bemoan the finger-pointing of multinational corporations and contractors when things go wrong. We can blame politicians and governmental agencies for a failure of oversight and regulation. We can question the acceptability of the risks taken to drill in deepwater sites. Perhaps all of these issues should be explored in the wake of the current disaster. Even Tony Hayward, the head of BP, admitted it was “probably true” that his company should have been better prepared for this eventuality.

More challenging from a faith perspective would be an acknowledgement of our own complicity in the great systems that seem to be in conflict. Christian understandings of human stewardship of the earth’s natural resources lead us to claim our responsibility for living in an oil-based economy.

Owning our role in the crisis may lead us to political action, to advocacy on behalf of God’s creatures and creation, and to personal and corporate efforts to reduce our energy consumption. God has not made us powerless but rather capable of taking part in God’s continuing creative work in the world.

Hair and Hose as Disaster Response

One innovative way that churches have responded to the Gulf oil spill is through the collection of hair and hose. A United Methodist Women's circle at First United Methodist Church in Bryant, Arkansas, is collecting hair clippings, pet fur, and pantyhose for use in creating homemade booms to soak up the oil. Since hair attracts oil, the idea is to put the hair, fur, and even waste wool into the nylons and use them to keep the oil from landing on endangered shorelines.

An ecological charity group called Matter of Trust is organizing the effort using donated warehouse space in the Gulf region. The group is also trying to mobilize hair salons, pet groomers, and fleece farmers to send their clippings to be made into booms. The effort is billed as a way to recycle tons of natural material that can be used to help in spills such as these and in 2,600 smaller spills worldwide each year.

Once the materials get to the Gulf Coast, the organization is sponsoring "Boom BQs," barbecue parties at which the booms will be stuffed. Presently, over 450,000 pounds of clippings are on the way to the Gulf. With the average hair salon producing one pound of hair waste per day, there is a lot of potential material if this method is successful. (You can see a demonstration of how the booms are used at <http://matteroftrust.org/>.)

United Methodist Perspective

In 2009, the United Methodist Council of Bishops wrote a pastoral letter intended to be read in every United Methodist congregation. "God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action" encourages a new dimension of holiness in response to widespread environmental degradation. The letter says, "We practice social and environmental holiness by caring for God's people and God's planet and by challenging those whose policies and practices neglect the poor, exploit the weak, hasten global warming, and produce more weapons."

In the foundational document supporting the letter, the bishops say, "God has inspired human beings to envision new futures and to invent the tools necessary to make them a reality: technologies to replace fossil fuels with energy from the wind and sun; new forms of transportation; 'green jobs'; and guides for cutting carbon footprints. Thousands and thousands of persons in faith-based and community-based coalitions, congregations, businesses, and farms are already acting for change in quiet, persistent, and profound ways."

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church support this vision of hope and action with the affirmation that "water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation" (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2008; ¶160.1).

Helpful Link

"God's Renewed Creation," the recent pastoral letter and foundational document from the United Methodist Council of Bishops, is accompanied by a study guide, news items, and a number of helpful links to resources. It can be accessed at <http://hopeandaction.org/main/>.

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Oil Spill in the Gulf

How does our faith
help us reclaim
a sense of ownership
and participation
in the responsible use
of our natural
resources?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your
group members and
your group time,
choose from among
the OPEN, EXPLORE,
and CLOSE activities
or from "Teaching
Alternative" to plan
the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Offer the following prayer or one of your own: God of the volcano and the searing sun, with energy and power you have created and are yet creating. You have made us in your image and called us to be co-creators with you. Where we have gone beyond our understanding and where we have disfigured the work of your hands, guide us back to your greater wisdom and your intentions. Open us to what you will say to us this day. Amen.

Explore a Biblical Image of Wounded Creation

If possible, display a picture of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico on a wall of the room where you are meeting. Pictures that show an aerial or satellite view of the spill offer a striking contrast of the blue water and the brown oil.

Read Acts 2:20 aloud, noting that it is from Peter's sermon, where he quotes the prophet Joel, to the crowd at Pentecost. The verse talks about disfigurements to the sun and the moon that act as signs of a greater spiritual movement.

Ask: What spiritual issues are raised for you by the disfigurement of the waters of the Gulf? What feelings does this visual bring up for you? How do you think God must feel?

EXPLORE the Topic

Update the News of the Oil Spill

Review "Disaster in the Gulf" (page 1). If possible, supplement the section with more recent developments that have occurred since this essay was written, using news sources you have read. Ask participants to contribute what they have learned. Invite them to offer their reactions to the disaster.

Ask: What feelings have you experienced in response? When you reflect on the oil spill, what questions come to mind? Write down their feelings and questions on a large sheet of paper or a markerboard.

Consider "What If It Happened Here?"

If you live in the Gulf region, this may not be a theoretical question. Ask: What sorts of things would be affected if there were an environmental disaster in your area? What industries and workers would be most affected? Who would help with response and cleanup? How would it change your experience of where you live?

Think of Responses to the Crisis

Read "The Costs of the Spill" (page 3) and "Hair and Hose as Disaster Response" (page 4). Ask participants to suggest ways they might respond concretely to the current crisis. Ask: What needs do you feel equipped to help with?

Study Scripture

Read “Core Bible Passages” (page 2). Form three teams. Assign one of the passages to each team. Ask them to read each passage and then talk about it in their team.

Discuss: What did this passage mean to its first hearers? How can it speak to the situations we face in our day?

The questions suggested for each passage in “Core Bible Passages” may help guide discussion of the second question. After the small-group discussion, ask each team to report to the whole group on one or two new insights they gained from this exercise.

Create an Energy-Use Daychart

Give each participant a sheet of paper and access to a collection of crayons or colored pencils. Ask them to create a chart of a typical week-day listing all of their daily activities. Participants can list the activities in words, but encourage them to use simple pictures. For example, the first “activity” might be sleeping, in which case they might draw themselves in a bed. Tell them to be sure to leave space next to each activity for an additional component.

Invite participants to go back and put a symbol for each source of energy they were using during each activity. A teardrop shape might indicate oil if the activity is driving a car. A lightning bolt might indicate electricity, though if you know how your electricity is generated, you can put that energy source. Remind participants that we often use energy even when we are sleeping (examples: electricity to operate a fan, oil to heat the house).

When they have finished their daycharts, invite them to share their observations as a group. Ask: How often did oil show up on the charts? How conscious of your daily oil use are you?

Reflect on Stewardship

Review “Not Powerless but Capable” (page 3) and “United Methodist Perspective” (page 4). Ask: What power do we have to affect energy use and sources? What does it mean to be a steward of God’s creation? How might we act in quiet, persistent, and profound ways to change our energy future?

CLOSE the Session

Anticipate Change

Invite participants to write down a commitment they are willing to make and will act on in the coming week. Remind them of the promise in the bishops’ pastoral letter that God has inspired human beings to envision new futures (page 4).

Encourage participants to place their written commitment in a visible spot where they will see it during the week.

Pray Together

As a closing prayer, invite participants to close their eyes and then, if they are willing, to voice out loud the commitments they have made. After each offering, invite participants to respond with the words “God give us power to act in hope.”

Teaching Alternative

Invite participants to use magazine pictures and their own creations to create a collage that combines images of the oil spill in the Gulf with images of hope in action. Ask them to seek out God’s presence in the midst of troubling events such as the oil spill and to find or create visual representations of that presence.

Post the collages in a visible place so that members of your congregation or faith community can engage with your artwork.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Mission Trips

Summer is a time when many churches reach out to others through mission trips. What opportunities exist to become involved in this kind of ministry? How can mission trips offer positive experiences for those who serve as well as those who are served?