

# ISSUES AND ACTIONS

May 2006



## ***WATER: ESSENTIAL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE*** An Interfaith Statement to the 4<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum. March 2006

We, members of the faith community within the United States, offer this statement for consideration by Ministers and all stakeholders participating in 4<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum as solutions are sought for existing and expected water problems around the world. Of special significance to us is how the most vulnerable and voiceless will fare: future generations, low income and otherwise marginalized people, other threatened species and whole bioregions. We hope that the principles presented here will continually be raised up during the Forum as decisions are made and as the Ministerial Declaration is prepared. We believe that the observance of these principles can help people of good will reach solutions that will demonstrate justice and nurture peace throughout the world.

### **Water and Faith**

*Our physical dependence upon water and the graciousness of a loving creator is reflected in the central place that water takes in the practices and beliefs of world religions and the spirituality of indigenous people. Water, a creative force, is essential for all life. It is the common heritage of all creation, a sacred gift. Water cleanses: it washes away impurities, purifying objects for ritual use as well as making a person clean, physically and spiritually. No other substance on Earth carries so profound a spiritual meaning.*

For Judaism and Christianity, water is prominent in initiation rituals. The pouring of clean, fresh, living water symbolizing the Spirit of God makes manifest a new spiritual life. Cleansing with water consecrates the body and is understood as a preparing of oneself for a closer communion with God. The cleansing character and power of water is essential in Islam as well, as Muslims become ritually pure before approaching God, in prayer. Water also has a special place in Hinduism because of its spiritually cleansing powers as Hindus strive to attain physical and spiritual purity. For indigenous peoples, water is sacred, offering life and connecting everything in a vast unity celebrated through rituals of cleansing and gratitude. The contamination of water or the act of withholding it from anyone is an affront to the sacredness of water. Preserving and making available fresh water as a sacred legacy is a collective responsibility that includes the involvement and participation of all.



### **The Situation**

The principal difficulty today is not one of absolute scarcity of water, but rather fairness of distribution and water quality. Of special concern to us are the increased instances of the commercialization, co-modification, and contamination of water and of water services which often result in the disturbance of the natural flow of water systems disrupting ecosystems and decreasing accessibility of water for marginalized people.

## Considerations for Decision-Making

We come together to express agreement that water management and decision-making must be guided by the following principles for the common good of the people of the world and the natural systems of the planet itself.

1. Water has intrinsic value in itself independent of its utilitarian and commercial value.
2. Access to enough safe, clean and affordable water for personal and domestic use is a basic human right.
3. Water should be held in the public domain, as a common good for all people. Governance decision should not be based on profit, but should be made according to the criteria of equity and human dignity, sustainability of all life, and meaningful community participation.
4. If a government decides to shift the public responsibility for providing quality water to private entities, it should insure the interests of the public interests so that the rights of the poor and low income people are not denied, and that principles of sustainability are protected. Decision making should be characterized by openness, transparency, and strong public regulatory oversight. All local, national and international public institutions have responsibility to ensure these conditions.
5. Water must not be used as a tool of oppression. Political boundaries should not hinder access to water.
6. Water resource management should be based on the principle that water is an integral part of the ecosystem and on an understanding of the hydrologic cycle and the integrity of hydrographic basins.
7. Water is a social and cultural good. It has also become an economic good. Policies relating to the economics of water should ensure efficiency and the most beneficial uses as determined by all stakeholders. They should meet the needs of poor and vulnerable people and the goal of environmental sustainability.
8. When a community water supply becomes unsafe to drink or is in some other way interrupted, water must be provided at or below cost by public authorities.
9. Water should not be traded as commodity. The sovereign right of each country to regulate its water resources and sanitation services should be reaffirmed.
10. Each person has the right to water for a basic livelihood. Marginalized and vulnerable social sectors should be given priority in terms of access to water technologies for subsistence.

Water is a gift, inspiring in all of us a response of gratitude. A spirituality of gratitude takes us beyond the consideration of water as only a physical, economic, social or cultural good to its status as a gift of the Creator, having a unique life-giving role in creation.



T. Michael McNulty, SJ  
Justice and Peace Director  
Conference of the Major Superiors of Men

Br. David Andrews, CSC  
Executive Director  
National Catholic Rural Life Conference

Marie Lucey, OSF  
Associate Director  
Leadership Council of Women Religious

Hopi Villages, Arizona  
H2OPI Mexico City  
Run of Respect for Water and all Life

References available at [www.ncrlc.com/WaterEssentialJusticePeace.html](http://www.ncrlc.com/WaterEssentialJusticePeace.html)