



A role-play on fossil fuel disinvestment

This role-play exercise is an entertaining, thought-provoking way to engage with the issue of fossil fuel disinvestment in a faith community. Read through the story below, and then assign 'parts' to each of the participants. 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 or firearms.) The institution is considering disinvesting its pension fund and other investment funds from fossil fuels in order to be consistent with its guiding moral principles, which emphasise care for creation. But some clergy have voiced concern about the impact that disinvestment will have on their pensions, while others are worried about the obligation to donors and to the religious institution to maximise returns on investments.

Divide participants into groups representing the following interests:

- Institutional financial managers and pension fund directors
- Clergy
- Lay church members
- Creation care leaders from within the institution
- Fossil fuel industry leaders

Each group should discuss its position on this decision. The leader should invite one person representing each interest group to summarise their group's position on whether or not the institution should disinvest and why. After this conversation, the group as a whole should discuss the following questions:

1. Should the investment decisions of Churches be based not only on maximising financial returns but also on ethical criteria?
2. Which, if any, of the perspectives in this exercise caused you to think in new ways about disinvestment?
3. How do your faith and values inform your perspective on investing generally, and on disinvestment in particular?
4. If your Church were considering disinvestment, what would you want it to do?

Disinvestment 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 and investor engagement with companies rather than through disinvestment. They are concerned that disinvestment from fossil fuels will result in a loss of returns.

Clergy

Clergy are responsible for teaching and living out the values of their faith. 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 the Church to manage their retirement funds well. Some believe that ensuring retirement income for clergy is a justice issue. Those representing the clergy should decide what position they would like to take.

Lay church members

Many church members make regular financial contributions to their church. They want to ensure that their gifts are being used wisely. Spokespersons for them 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

These people may lead a green team or other creation care group within their church. They believe that religious groups are morally obliged 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 disinvestment 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.

Revd Jenny Phillips adapted this exercise from the SPLENDOR curriculum written for GreenFaith.