



Community Summary Report #10

Location: Alberta, primarily Edmonton

Partner Name: Citizens for Public Justice / Just Faith Alberta

**Green Resilience Project
Greater Edmonton and Alberta
March 16, 2022**

Citizens for Public Justice

Contact: Kari Munn-Venn - karri@cpj.ca or Citizens for Public Justice - cpj@cpj.ca

Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) is a national organization of members, inspired by faith, to act for justice in Canadian public policy. We are based in Ottawa, but have deep roots in Alberta, particularly in the Christian Reformed Church community (composed primarily of Dutch immigrants and their families) in the Edmonton area. Experience with our Edmontonian members over the last decade or so suggest that among Albertans, they are more aware of, concerned about, and engaged in the work of addressing climate change. As Albertans, however, they are also highly attuned to the provincial political context and the place of the oil and gas sector in the local, regional, and national economy. When considering the purposes of the Green Resilience Project, we felt that it would be valuable to include an Edmonton view.

The March 16 conversation was co-hosted by Just Faith Alberta, a new, grassroots initiative of Christians in Alberta concerned with social justice issues. The facilitator expressed that for many in Christian communities in Alberta, the issues of climate change and just transition are divisive and often leave Christians feeling out of place within their faith communities as many in their communities are strong supporters of the oil and gas industries. This conversation was mainly those from the Edmonton area but expanded to encompass all of Alberta, focusing particularly on Christians interested in just transition, climate change, and income security.

The Green Resilience conversation brought together eight participants, including the local co-facilitator: five from Edmonton, one from Calgary, one from Fort McMurray, and one originally from Olds, but currently residing in Ontario. Four of the participants were over 60, four between 40-60 years old, and one between 20-40. Many of the participants had engaged with CPJ in the past and—since one of our focus areas is climate justice—had a general understanding and consensus around the necessity for change in terms of a just transition and action on climate change. Given the small size of the group, the entire event took place in plenary.

Participants expressed a variety of **reasons for choosing to attend the conversation**. As one participant put it “We’re going to hell in a handbasket environmentally and climate change-wise and we better do something.” For others, this conversation was a learning opportunity as part of a larger effort in their effort to combat climate change. “I’m always curious about how we can better live in the world and make our footprint smaller and just for everyone.” For some participants who are heavily involved with efforts to combat climate change at a systemic level, this conversation was a chance to meet like-minded folks in Alberta. And finally the last trend we saw was a desire for folks from faith communities to be able to talk about just transition, whether their own church community was involved in climate change work or not; these participants saw just transition as relevant to their faith and the way they live it out.

The conversation began with some context from the facilitator who stated that she and several other participants lived in the “Industrial Heartland,” an area outside of Edmonton in which there

are many pipelines, refineries, and diversification projects. **The oil and gas sector is the major employer and contributes significantly to the economic success of the area.** She recollected that the area was somewhere you could live “quite cheaply” as taxes were low but the recreational and municipal facilities were of a very high standard. The contributions of oil and gas companies through property taxes and other agreements have largely contributed to the standard of living in the community. The facilitator noted that in conversation with members of the community, “when you start talking about changing weather patterns, when you use the word climate change, what I always hear is, the first thing is the concerns that people have over their employment, and especially their lifestyle, their livelihood.” This was a common theme throughout this conversation. As one participant said “I moved to Fort McMurray towards the end of the last boom, in 2014. I was here for the fire and the recent floods, and of course the economic downturn. I have seen the anxiety caused by uncertainty. Like you discussed in the introduction, speaking of climate change is a non-starter when people are just worried about their jobs and the value of their homes. It makes it difficult to discuss. I find people that I talk to or hear from will complain about the extreme weather patterns but will rarely attribute it to climate change.” [Teacher 20-40 years old].

It was clear that though even those working in the oil and gas industry have acknowledged extreme weather events and changes, **the acknowledgment of climate change brings immediate concern about jobs and livelihoods that make product conversation difficult.** The facilitator-participant noted that the oil and gas industry has been cutting back on workers both because of decreased extraction but also as technologies have meant less workers are needed to do the same job. This has increased instability and concern for workers in the industry. She expanded that many of the men her husband knew growing up left high school before graduating and were able to get well paying jobs in the oil and gas industry. She described this demographic of 40-55 year old men with minimal education who relied on the industry to maintain their relatively well-off lifestyle as the most difficult to talk to about climate change. Others elaborated on this problem, of those who felt they were too old to retrain and did not have experience outside the sector; for them the threat of a changing economy so close to retirement was reported by participants as particularly worrying.

Participants also spoke about **extreme weather and the disproportionate effect it had on those with lower income.** As one participant who lived in “hail alley” recalled, hail storms have been increasing in extremity in the past 5-10 years and have caused increasing amounts of damage to buildings and homes. As those affected make claims to their insurance in order to make repairs and as these hail storms happen more consistently, insurance rates rise. This is problematic especially for those with lower income who rely on money from insurance claims to be able to repair their homes. A participant who was a farmer also spoke of the immediate difficulties he had faced living in the industrial heartland, both through the disruption as construction on projects happened but also continuously as the county now relies on people being employed in the industry. Land prices have also risen markedly and many farmers in the area have been bought out. He also spoke about the changes extreme weather has had on crops. He stated that he had been a farmer for 40 years and he had seen his two most extreme

years very recently: one very wet and one very hot and dry. Although his farm had survived the difficult growing seasons, he noted that some neighbouring farms had not.

A few of the participants also spoke about the **changes in air quality** in recent years, this past summer and a couple of summers ago because of extreme weather events such as increasing forest fires as far away as the west coast. They also mentioned the effect this had on those who suffered from respiratory illnesses and disabilities. One participant [a man over 60] talked about the effect on his garden and local crops and stated that he didn't remember experiencing an event like the heat dome like that in the province during his lifetime. He elaborated by saying that some of the worst effects of the heat dome were psychological, calling it "mentally troubling". This psychological aspect is seen both in those who advocate for and against a green transition. There is a lot of interest in securing the future, albeit one perspective being more focused on the immediate future.

Another perspective given by a participant was that because of the way our system is built, **it is easier to look at the immediate issues than what seems like far away climate change**. He elaborated that for many of us, food, for example, comes from far away places like Ukraine and Ecuador so we don't see the effects of the climate on our local crops, we don't see the effects on our food systems until an extreme weather event means that trucks can't get to the stores. The participant went on to say "And this is why it's important for me as an Indigenous person to listen to elders, and to listen to what has come before, listen to our elderly people, and express their marveling at the changes that are happening in the environment that we haven't seen before." Our lack of connection to the world and community around us often doesn't allow many to see the big picture of the climate crisis.

This lack of connection was also expanded on as participants talked about the **increasing insecurity in the oil and gas industry**. Several participants, especially those from Edmonton, raised the issue of precarity in the sector, many jobs are fixed term contracts, sometimes even a few weeks or months and then workers often live precariously until their next contract. Another participant elaborated on the ways in which the increase of migrant workers in the sector as well has led to workers being seen as more and more expendable. As he stated "It's a different demographic, it's a different culture that's being played out. I think that part of that is that there's an expendability to the temporary worker. This has really put us at a disadvantage for long-term community-building and long-term understanding of the impacts [of workers being seen as replaceable]. So we see the way that communities formed around mining, the mining dried up, and then we see a lot of ghost towns. We never dealt with the impacts of [dying industries and dying communities], the loss of jobs, the loss of livelihood, the loss of community. We've always just moved on." The participant noted that this is where the building of community was necessary for resilience.

The combination of **increased precarity** and **expendability of workers** and a loss of community **has led to workers being even more sensitive about discussions on climate change** or a green transition. As one participant put it, "If you listen to people carefully, and it takes a lot of time...people have a lot of reasons not to respond to these things. And, a lot of

them are quite understandable”. Though different members of the group expressed different levels of frustration and understanding in having conversations with others about climate change, there was a general acknowledgment that while workers in Alberta had legitimate reasons to be afraid for their livelihood, climate change and green transition needed to be addressed head on.

When the discussion came to **ideas for a green transition** participants noted that the ideas already existed. Participants recommended income supplementation up to and including basic income, more progressive taxation, sharing of wealth, reducing income inequality, as well as retraining and bridge programs in order to allow workers to financially withstand the transition. What was more top of mind for participants, however, was grappling with issues related to the income levels (in oil and gas) and the difference between a concern for *livelihood* and *lifestyle*. Because of the high salary levels in the industry, many workers previously had “fairly expensive lifestyles.” The worry when it comes to economic transition away from oil and gas was not only of livelihoods, but as participants noted, keeping up lifestyles that relied on the relatively high income provided by the ‘boom’ periods of the industry. As one participant noted, “To go to a basic income would be to live a much more modest lifestyle. That will be hard when you live in a big house and have to downsize, you know, you can sell toys or big trucks or trainers I suppose. But you know, that’s what might be part of a just transition is making our footprint smaller.”

This is also where some participants felt this connected with **faith-based justice** for them. They saw the church as having a role in helping people divest from lifestyles that prioritized material wealth. As one participant noted “our socio-economic system is sort of rushing at high speed into growth and materialism and running havoc over the environmental reality in which God has put us. We need public policies, and civil society initiatives that help people to reorient. That involves a fundamental turnaround. It’s about what you love, and what you pursue with your life. That’s religious. That’s your deepest commitments. Many Christians are committed to material prosperity and economic growth as a solution to getting more things so that we can be happier. And that’s not the gospel. I think the churches could do a lot to say that there are other ways of being fulfilled, quality of life, being with people, relationships, reciprocity. These are all things that we need to relearn.”

Another participant who is a minister talked about **the role churches have**, as they often have access to leaders and workers in the community, saying they can be leaders in these conversations. Both in inviting people of faith to care for the environment and reorienting their priorities. In this way churches can be an important part of opening up these conversations in areas where they may be tough to have and building resilient communities for a green transition.

An overwhelming sentiment throughout this conversation was **the need for more open conversation around climate change in Alberta**. Many participants were involved in climate initiatives and felt the pressure of the climate crisis but were keenly aware of the conversations not happening within the greater Alberta context and indeed even in their own faith communities. As one participant put it “It just doesn’t get dealt with because it’s too difficult to

talk about.” And when asked for ways they can see themselves being part of the solution one participant said “I can have more of these courageous conversations with my grade 8 students.” And others confirmed that these are courageous conversations—especially in communities so reliant on oil and gas such as the one the teacher works in. She admitted that in teachers' college they were told that they could discuss climate change but they had to decide if it was “the hill we wanted to die on.”

As we move forward with addressing the climate crisis and aiming for a green transition, it is clear from this conversation that **communities throughout Alberta see a need for courageous conversations**. They also identified the need for the rebuilding of robust resilient communities, for a reorientation of priorities, stable income, and a transition that values the needs of all Albertans both those in- and outside the oil and gas sector. **A green transition can be an opportunity for a more equitable and resilient province, where all Albertans can thrive and see a future for themselves and future generations.**