

Opinion: Bad air hurts black people more

Elliott Cuff 2:46 p.m. EDT September 25, 2015



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Clean air is critical for our health and well-being. Yet, millions of black Americans are suffering disproportionately from air pollution. Non-white people breathe air that is substantially more polluted than the air that white people breathe.

(Photo: Provided)

Climate change only exacerbates poor air quality. And climate change has added impacts to the black community. Non-Hispanic blacks are 50 percent more likely to die in a heat wave than non-Hispanic whites. In every major city in the United States, blacks are more likely than whites to be exposed to higher air toxicity concentrations. Climate change is expected to increase the incidence of asthma in the general population. African Americans are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized or killed by asthma as whites.

As a black church leader in Ohio, this is disturbing news.

As Christians, we are instructed to not only care for God's creation but also to pay particular care for the "least of these." These vulnerable populations are shouldering the worst of climate change and poor air quality.

Addressing climate change is a moral imperative. And while much attention has been paid to carbon emissions, other greenhouse gases have been overlooked. When we combat climate change and poor air quality we must address methane emissions as well as carbon emissions.

Methane is a potent greenhouse gas. Curbing methane pollution is critical because it is over 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide in the first 20 years after its release, and is already responsible for a quarter of man-made warming.

When methane is released into the air, so too are harmful pollutants that have significant public health consequences. This includes toxic chemicals like benzene, which are linked to cancer, and other smog-forming pollutants that can trigger asthma.

Methane pollution is wasteful, wrecks havoc on the climate, and hurts the most vulnerable among us. Preventing methane leaks from the oil and gas industry, which is the nation's largest industrial

source of methane, the main component of natural gas, would limit emissions of the pollutants that make the air hard to breathe.

As a leader in the faith community, I value not only stewardship of God's good creation but protection of vulnerable populations: low-income communities, communities of color, and children. I call on the Obama administration and the Environmental Protection Agency to issue a strong regulation to limit methane pollution from the oil and gas sector.