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Environmental activists recently gather in the southeast New Mexico region, known as the Permian Basin, to assess problems related to methane pollution by a company apparently in violation of state law. The visit was organized by the advocacy group New Mexico Interfaith Power & Light. (Courtesy of New Mexico Interfaith Power & Light)



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Editor's note: *The phrase "just transition" is part of the growing lexicon about moving from an economy based on fossil fuels to clean energy. But this phrase's meaning varies. The term can also mean the need for a just transition to new jobs for those employed in industries such as mining, and for protecting the rights of those whose lands are affected by extractive industries. Catholic sisters are involved along the spectrum of transition efforts.*

Sr. [Joan Brown](#), the executive director of the environmental advocacy group [New Mexico Interfaith Power & Light](#), is fully aware of the complexities of a "just transition."

Brown's work and that of other advocates in the Permian Basin region of New Mexico and Texas focuses on the need to both end environmental damage and health concerns caused by extractive industries, such as gas and oil, and find solutions for sustainable energy and employment.



As noted in the [introductory piece](#) of the [Just Transition](#) series by Global Sisters Report, Brown, a [Sister of St. Francis of Rochester](#), Minnesota, said the basin area is "a climate bomb right now," noting that it's one of the highest-producing oil and gas regions in the world, with resulting high levels of pollution.

The future is full of anxiety, Brown said. People have real worries about how communities in the region will be able to transition to a better place environmentally while balancing the needs for maintaining jobs and keeping communities intact. As one example, Brown noted that a third of state tax income for New Mexico public schools comes from the oil and gas industry.

"The communities feel that they're 'a sacrifice zone' and are continually 'a sacrificed zone,' " Brown said. "They're suffering from pollution now. Everybody else is using their energy. And yet with this transition, where are the jobs going to come from?"

These are challenging and daunting questions with no easy answers, and balancing respect for local needs with the demands required for the good of the entire planet will not be easy, she said.

But Brown stressed that local participation "at the table" is necessary, as is the voice of the faith community.

"The Catholic Church needs to be more forthright and strong in stepping up to work with these issues — these are issues of justice for humans and our sacred creation," Brown said. "If we're talking about a preferential option for vulnerable communities, and a preferential option for the Earth, then we need to step up in practical ways."

GSR: In your advocacy work, you've seen how difficult this process of just transition can be. Give us some idea of that.

Brown: We did an energy transition act in New Mexico that passed in 2019. That was to address the coal-fired power plants. The bill itself was to provide carbon-free energy by 50% by 2030 and 100% by 2045. In that process, the effort of a large collaboration was to move toward renewable energy while engaging communities in the transition for new jobs, training and ways to address local needs for tax revenue as we addressed climate change.



Franciscan Sr. Joan Brown (GSR file photo)

Yet one of the elements that came up was how do you really provide for this just transition for the affected communities, not just the workers, worker training and all, but for the schools, since school districts stand to lose a lot of money.

We often do not see all the implications of change to frontline communities. It's not just the worker; it's the grocery shop person, it's the education, it's the school district. Communities really need to be engaged in that. I think engaging the community is so important.

What about the need to shift to other technologies? There are complexities with that dynamic, right?

Yes. A story comes to my mind where there's been an effort to get public comment on a large transmission line through the state of New Mexico to take all of the renewables from our wind and from solar. It's going through rural areas again and through some sensitive environmental areas. Some ranchers, farmers and others in the affected rural areas are concerned. The energy is going elsewhere and they feel they are paying the price.

I think the movement towards renewable energy is important, but it is not a silver bullet. We need to be looking at other ways of adaptation and mitigation. We need to look at our lifestyles and consumption. We need to consider the best ways to care for soil to naturally sequester carbon. We need to look at biodiversity restoration and tree planting. I think really encouraging creative thinking on this is important.

Communities rightly say, "We don't want to be sacrificed again." What are some of the other dynamics of that?

Our society has become so urban-oriented, that we forget how rural communities have been affected by extractivism — they feel like they've been used, and we can't continue to let that happen. The dynamics have to shift.

And yet at the same time, we're facing this enormous worldwide climate disaster that is on the front headlines more and more, every week, every day with the fires, the floods. And that's only in this country. Our brothers and sisters are suffering from fires and heat waves in Siberia and flooding in Bangladesh and typhoons in the Philippines. All of our choices and public policies have ethical, moral implications. We must help our leaders and one another be aware of and weigh as we act for local communities and our global common home.

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Our faith doesn't say we should sacrifice the few for the many, but we need to be thinking about the common good. I'm just not sure that we even in faith communities have grappled adequately with the complexities of our time in terms of these ethical moral issues.

What are examples of those?

I've run into people who are resistant to electric cars because of the battery components of precious metals that are extracted from Indigenous lands and in places where the communities are taken advantage of. Then we have the question of toxic metals and equipment after they are used. Is waste then given back to vulnerable communities? Is this really a solution?

So there's pushback in a lot of ways because people are thinking, "Are we just repeating or making worse this disaster that we're in?"

How do you untangle the system and get to the next step? It seems very daunting, doesn't it?

We need to hold the whole picture, pray and reflect to discern action and take a piece at a time. I don't even know that it's a matter of hope anymore. It's a matter of how to keep walking in a loving manner. As the late poet Mary Oliver said, "Our work is loving the world." And so, what does loving the world mean?

What contributions do faith communities have here?

Faith traditions, religious traditions, the Catholic traditions, the mystics, have some real wisdom that we need to hold onto, both at the practical level and the spiritual level. If we're faithful to spiritual practices through prayer/meditation and living, we can begin to hear insights and direction in unexpected moments.

Insights for some might be new technical ideas we need. Insights for others might be ways to offer hope or engage people of faith in action for change. All gifts are needed.

Listening to the voices of the most vulnerable communities and cries of justice can ground us. I know that's not a simple clear-cut answer, but I think a deep spiritual foundation and practice are the most important element as we move into the future.



Environmental activists concerned about water protection following a recent prayer service of healing in the southeast New Mexico region known as the Permian Basin. The service was organized by the advocacy group New Mexico Interfaith Power & Light. (Courtesy of New Mexico Interfaith Power & Light)

Native American communities have really been affected by a lot of these bad policies through the years.

In New Mexico, we have a long history of bad policies and disregard for Indigenous wisdom and human rights. In our work at Interfaith Power and Light, we try to be present and in solidarity with the communities to address legacy issues of pollution and prevent further harm.

For example, we are part of [MASE](#), which is the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment, which addresses legacy issues of uranium mining. We show up to

Speak at hearings and write letters and educate people. We attend events planned by the communities to work on policy actions.

The history of New Mexico is also bound up with the Los Alamos labs and what happened during World War II. There's that nuclear legacy — the military industrial complex doing a lot of damage to one state.

That's another example of a "sacrifice zone." And so, with that, we have the uranium mining, we have Los Alamos, we have these labs. Pollution of water is a concern and we are part of a group called Communities for Clean Water that educates and works for accountability of the labs.

We do not have a nuclear power plant in the state, yet we are targeted for nuclear waste from the East and West coasts.

Are there people who just don't see, or don't want to see, the challenges ahead?

Many people see that there are problems. I think in our state maybe the challenge is not that people bury their heads in the sand, but they are trying to survive. We have a high rate of poverty in New Mexico.

Many people of faith — good people — say they don't have time for some of the concerns we have been discussing because they're involved in direct service and charity work. But they're not making the connection with justice and works of mercy. As challenges mount, we will not have the resources or energy for all of the works of mercy unless we focus on the larger view and systemic and structural concerns and advocacy actions.

This story appears in the [**A Just Transition, Sustainable Development Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy**](#), and [**Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities**](#) feature series.