

Catholic groups sign on for safe water

WASHINGTON - A dozen Catholic organizations have joined other religious groups in calling for U.S. leadership to increase access to safe water for the world's people. "Water is a gift from God to be preserved and shared for the benefit of all people and the wider creation," said the Religious Working Group on Water's statement, "Water for All."

Still, "around 1.2 billion people do not have access to safe water and 2.5 billion do not have access to improved sanitation," it added. "Two million children die each year from infections spread by dirty water and lack of access to decent sanitation." On average women in developing countries walk nearly four miles each day to fetch water.

"Clean water is key to every other aspect of development - from children's education to economic growth and environmental sustainability," it said.

The Millennium Development Goals, agreed upon in September 2000 by nearly 200 heads of state, include reducing by half the number of people worldwide without clean water and adequate sanitation by the year 2015.

Among the Catholic-affiliated signatories to "Water for All" were the Africa Faith and Justice Network, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Catholic social justice lobby Network, the SHARE Foundation and the Quixote Center, an unofficial Catholic think tank. Six religious orders' peace and justice agencies also signed the statement.

Joining the Catholic groups were bodies representing the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Church of the Brethren, Quakers, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Mennonites, Presbyterian Church (USA), Unitarian Universalists and United Church of Christ, as well as Church World

Service and the National Council of Churches.

The statement quotes from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's 2003 document, "A Contribution of the Delegation of the Holy See on the Occasion of the Third World Water Forum," which said "the management of water and sanitation must address the needs of all, and particularly of persons living in poverty."

The pontifical council's document notes that inadequate access to sanitation and clean water "all too often is the cause of disease, unnecessary suffering, conflicts, poverty and even death."

The Religious Working Group on Water's statement called for U.S. action in these areas:

- A substantial increase in funding for clean drinking water and adequate sanitation "as part of an overall increase in U.S. development assistance for sustainable human development and poverty alleviation worldwide."
- Ensuring that such international financial institutions as the World Bank "respect the right of countries to democratically determine their own water policies, and reject lending conditions that pre-empt such country decisions, for example, by requiring water privatization or similar policies."
- Support for the right of people to "control their natural resources" and opposition to "irresponsible and unjust practices of extractive industries that drain scarce water resources for profit and pollute clean water sources."