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Warren County (NC), 1982: Churches as Actors of Environmental Justice

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Abstract The 1982 protests against a PCB landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, often seen as the symbolic origin of the Environmental Justice Movement, underscore the pivotal role of African American Protestant churches. These churches served as hubs of organization, mobilizing through Civil Rights networks and collaborating with national organizations for nonviolent resistance. Driven by both theological principles and opposition to systemic racial and socio-economic marginalization, the protests highlight the convergence of race, religion, and activism in shaping African American Christianity and advancing broader justice movements.

Keywords Environmental Justice. UCC-CRJ. United Church of Christ. Civil Rights Movement. Racism.

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1 Introduction

In September 1982, Warren County, North Carolina, became the epicenter of significant protests against the construction of a landfill intended to house soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Over the course of six weeks, the protests, largely led by local Protestant churches, received critical support from organizations such as the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ)[1] and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The prevailing narrative suggests that the State of North Carolina selected this site for the landfill because it was predominantly inhabited by African Americans, who subsequently mobilized to resist the project. Although ultimately unsuccessful in halting the landfill's construction, these protests are widely regarded as the symbolic inception of the Environmental Justice Movement.[2] This article examines the role of churches as actors of Environmental Justice within the context of the 1982 PCB protests, challenging the dominant narrative regarding these events. While the churches' involvement has often been framed as theologically motivated, this analysis reveals that their role extended beyond religious principles: in fact, they served as critical intermediaries, connecting local protesters with broader Civil Rights organizations.[3] By providing organizational structures, mobilizing communities, and facilitating external support, Protestant churches were instrumental in sustaining the movement and enhancing its impact, functioning simultaneously as religious and organizational-political actors without a clear distinction between the two. Furthermore, this study situates the 1982 protests within the broader history of African American Christianity, highlighting how the Civil Rights Movement shaped the identity of these churches. Their engagement with social justice causes, initially focused on racial equality, evolved to include environmental concerns as an extension of their mission to address systemic inequities. This continuity underscores the churches' enduring role as agents of collective action, adapting to the expanding dimensions of justice struggles. By exploring the intersection of Christianity with environmental and social issues, this article contributes to understanding how the 1982 protests catalyzed the Environmental Justice Movement by linking environmental degradation to systemic social inequalities.

1 UCC-CRJ was an organization affiliated to the United Church of Christ that promotes racial justice and the elimination of racism. It was particularly active during the Civil Rights Movement. Cf. Payne, Newman, *The Palgrave Environmental Reader*, 259-64.

2 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 33-4.

3 This will become evident in the second chapter, which provides a detailed reconstruction of the protest events, a step that is essential for understanding the objectives of this article.

Analyzing the churches' role in these protests offers valuable insights into the evolution of Environmental Justice and demonstrates how faith-based institutions have historically embodied and advanced the fight for justice, blending spiritual mission with social activism.

1.1 Literature Review and Methodology

To contextualize this article, it is essential to explain the concepts of ecotheology and environmental justice. The Environmental Justice Movement in the United States emerged within a context already shaped by Conservationism, a proto-environmentalist movement originating in the nineteenth century as a response to the Industrial Revolution. Conservationism had Christian roots, particularly within the Calvinist traditions of Puritanism and Presbyterianism, which viewed the 'stewardship of the Earth' as a moral obligation.[4] Key figures such as John Muir advocated for nature conservation, though their approach was elitist, often disregarding indigenous populations and reflecting bourgeois interests.[5] However, early environmental movements largely failed to address the ways in which ecological degradation disproportionately affected marginalized communities. By the mid-twentieth century, critiques of this exclusionary approach emerged, particularly within African American churches, where environmental concerns were framed as inseparable from broader struggles for social and racial justice.[6] This perspective challenged the prevailing conservationist discourse, shifting the focus toward the impacts of pollution, land use, and economic exploitation on vulnerable populations. Within Christian communities this oversight began to shift with the rise of ecotheology, a theological framework that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century to integrate faith and environmental concerns, in part as a response to criticism of Christianity's anthropocentric view of nature.[7] Biblical interpretations of stewardship evolved to emphasize the interconnectedness of creation, human responsibility, and ecological justice. Concepts such as the 'integrity of creation' reinforced the idea that environmental care was theological mandated in Genesis 2:15.[8]

This theological shift also intersected with broader environmental activism. Most of the U.S. mainline Protestant denominations adopted the model of Environmental Justice as their view of ecotheology,

4 Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature*, 5.

5 Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*.

6 Stoll, "Religion and African American".

7 White, "The Historical Roots".

8 Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*.

linking environmental concerns with social justice. In doing so, they became some of the earliest institutions to adopt Environmental Justice as a theological perspective.[9] While some denominations, such as the United Church of Christ (UCC), framed Environmental Justice as an extension of civil rights activism, others, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, emphasized a conservationist approach, focusing on the theological concept of stewardship.[10] However, it was the Black Protestant churches who played a foundational role in intertwining environmental struggles with the broader pursuit of racial justice. These congregations cultivated a distinctive environmental consciousness, one that was deeply informed by their historical experiences of racial oppression and land dispossession.[11] Black churches not only provided theological guidance but also offered vital organizational support for environmental activism, thus playing a central role in shaping the early trajectory of the Environmental Justice Movement.[12] Environmental Justice refers to:

> The just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, […] in agency decision-making […] that affect human health and the environment so that people are fully protected from disproportionate and adverse human health and environmental effects (including risks) and hazards, […] the cumulative impacts of environmental and other burdens, and the legacy of racism or other structural or systemic barriers; and have equitable access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment in which to live.[13]

This concept emphasizes the distribution of environmental risks and benefits and has generated debate over whether these risks are disproportionally affecting low-income or ethnic minorities neighborhoods – often overlapping demographics – due to their lack of political and economic power to resist such developments. Consequently, industries may pursue the 'path of least resistance' to develop these sites.[14] These protests catalyzed research that exposed the disproportionate environmental risk faced by low-income ethnic minorities communities. Landmark studies, such as *Siting of Hazardous Waste*

9 Kearns, "The Context of Ecotheology", 478.

10 Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant*.

11 Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 233-9.

12 Stoll, "Religion and African American".

13 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Learn About Environmental Justice*, https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice#definitions (2025-01-07).

14 Powell, *Political Difficulties Facing Waste*, 11-18.

Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities (1983) and *Toxic Waste and Race in The United States: A National report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (1987),[15] highlighted these disparities. In the field of Environmental Justice, African American sociologists adopted an intersectional approach to explore this issue. Robert Bullard, widely regarded as the 'father' of the academic study of Environmental Justice, presented a pivotal analysis in *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality* (1990).[16] In this work, he offers a different explanation, arguing that ethnic minorities communities are frequently chosen as sites for toxic waste landfills due to their limited political and economic power, a practice that perpetuates socio-economic inequalities between these communities and white ones. Bullard conceptualizes this practice as 'environmental racism', framing Environmental Justice protests within the broader trajectory of a 'long' Civil Rights Movement.[17]

The 1982 PCB protest in North Carolina contributed to shape this framework. However, despite its historical prominence, the bibliography on these specific events remains relatively limited. The principal study is Eileen McGurty's *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* which expands on her article, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement",[18] whereas a photographic documentation of the protests is provided in *A Road to Walk: A Struggle for Environmental Justice*.[19] Starting from it, this paper employs a historical-analytical approach to examine the 1982 PCB protests in Warren County, integrating oral history with diverse materials, such as newspapers,[20] case law,[21] and governmental documents.[22]

15 General Accounting Office, *Siting of Hazardous Waste*. UCC-CRJ, *Toxic Waste and Race*.

16 Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*.

17 Bullard expanded upon these ideas in further works, *Unequal Protection* and *The Quest for Environmental Justice*. Other notable contributions to the field include *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards* by Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai and *Toxic Communities* by Dorceta Taylor.

18 McGurty, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights".

19 Labalme, *A Road to Walk*.

20 "Council Oks Purchase", 9. "Fauntroy, 113 More Charged", 14. "Hearing Scheduled Aug. 4 3. "PCB burial Plans Outlined", 24. "PCB Protesters Arrested", 15. "PCB spills posed few", 23. "Suit Filed Against PCB", 22. Lee, "PCB Landfill Pact Rapped", 1. Oleck, "Way clear for PCB", 26. Siceloff, "PCB burial proposal wins", 31. Siceloff, "PCB plan up", 19.

21 *United States v. Ward*, 618 F. Supp. 884 (E.D.N.C. 1985). *United States v. Ward*, 676 F.2d 94 (4th Cir. 1982).

22 Department of Crime Control and Public Safety of North Carolina, *Final Environmental Impact Statement*. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) Disposal".

The semi-structured interviews,[23] carried out with key figures involved in the protests, explored participants' roles, the influence of churches, particularly the UCC, explicit references to Environmental Justice and environmental racism, and connections to the Civil Rights Movement, enabling the reconstruction of a layered narrative, capturing the complexity and occasional polarization in interpretations of the protests.

Recurring themes identified include the initial reliance on scientific arguments to organize resistance, the subsequent shift toward framing the issue as systemic racism by the State of North Carolina, and the overarching emphasis on justice throughout the protests. Participants offered varying perspectives, with some recalling the protests as a multiethnic, non-denominational effort, while others situated them within the African American Protestant tradition and the broader Civil Rights Movement. The analysis also underscores an often-overlooked aspect: the churches' role was primarily organizational rather than theological. African American churches, deeply connected to the Civil Rights Movement, utilized their national networks to mobilize resources and support.[24] These connections, which overlapped with campaigns for voter registration in North Carolina, amplified the protests by aligning them with broader goals of social and political empowerment beyond environmental concerns.

This approach, by integrating diverse perspectives and highlighting the interplay of race, politics, and environmental activism, challenges oversimplified narratives. It underscores the multifaceted dynamics of the movement, revealing how African American churches and their networks served as essential drivers of the protests, not solely for theological reasons but as centers of organization and social mobilization within the fight for justice.

23 All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. Due to space constraints, full transcripts are not included but remain securely archived by the author. Interviewees, selected based on their direct involvement in the 1982 Warren County protests, provided informed consent prior to participation. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, addressing key themes such as the role of churches in the protests, the intersection of religion and politics, and the emergence of concepts like environmental justice and environmental racism. All direct quotations are derived from these transcriptions. Brooks Berndt, interview with the author, 31/01/2024. Dollie Burwell, interview with the author, 13/02/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview with the author, 26/03/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview with the author, 04/04/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview with the author, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview with the author, 04/04/2024. Jenny Labalme, interview with the author, written responses, 28/01/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview with the author, 04/04/2024.

24 In this historical and geographical context, predominantly local African American Protestant churches joined the protests out of urgent necessity rather than prior theological reflection on environmental issues. Their involvement later found theological grounding in Resolution 13 of the 1983 UCC's General Synod, which affirmed a commitment to environmental justice through the UCC-CRJ. General Synod, *Minutes Fourteen General Synod*, 48-88.

2 Environmental Justice, Churches and Historical Context

2.1 Warren County and the Socio-political Context of 1982 PCB Protests

During the 1970s and 1980s, the United States faced a period of significant economic and political turbulence, marked by oil crises and international tensions that triggered high inflation, widespread unemployment, and repeated recessions. Even though North Carolina was still experiencing significant economic development, by the 1970s and 1980s the State faced an economic crisis marked by high unemployment. Industrial policies advanced by Democratic administrations prioritized economic growth, often at the expense of workers' rights and environmental protections, thereby intensifying socio-environmental inequities.[25] Economic recovery only began under the administration of Ronald Reagan (1980-88), whose policies were characterized by tax cuts and reductions in welfare programs – though this came at the cost of exacerbating social inequalities.[26] Reagan's election to the presidency signified the apex of what has been termed a 'conservative revolution'.[27]

Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which officially ended racial segregation, many conservative Democratic politicians migrated to the Republican Party, perceiving it as more attuned to their ideological positions. This political realignment gradually eroded the Democratic Party's historic dominance in the 'Solid South', transforming the region into a Republican stronghold.[28] Another piece of legislation that helped this shift was the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, which outlawed racial discrimination in voting for federal elections under the Fifteenth Amendment and empowered the Department of Justice (DoJ) to oversee elections in areas with a history of discriminatory practices, such as the South. In 1982, the VRA was amended to expand to include state and local elections in the DoJ monitoring.[29] The campaign to secure these amendments was spearheaded by civil rights organizations, however this effort encountered staunch resistance from conservative lawmakers, including Senator Jesse Helms (1982) from North Carolina who framed it as a "slap in the face to the South" His opposition spurred

25 Luebke, *Tar Heel Politics*. Wood, *Southern Capitalism*.

26 Piketty Saez, "Income inequality in United States".

27 Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*.

28 Brown, "Nixon's 'Southern Strategy'".

29 Roper, "The Voting Rights Extension".

civil rights leaders to redouble their efforts, particularly by intensifying voter registration campaigns among African Americans in North Carolina. To bolster their influence, civil rights activists forged strategic alliances with the Democratic Party, opposing the Reagan administration's welfare cuts and working to shape the debate around the VRA amendments to further strengthen protections for minority voting rights.[30] North Carolina, a key part of this Solid South, exemplified policies underpinned by racial discrimination.

The State played a central role in the Civil Rights Movement, most notably through the well-known Greensboro sit-ins. In 1960, four African American students sat at a whites-only lunch counter in a Woolworth store, refusing to leave. This peaceful protest gained national attention and inspired similar actions across the country. Initially, the students received limited support from established civil rights organizations but found a crucial ally in Floyd McKissick, a prominent attorney and civil rights activist. McKissick mobilized a network of African American churches and universities, creating an alternative infrastructure of support that linked politically active congregations with student activists.[31]

Warren County – historically reliant on an agricultural economy and one of the poorest counties in the state – suffered severe economic decline during the stagflation of the 1970s. By 1982, unemployment in the county had soared to 13.3%, while per capita income was 39% below the national average, ranking Warren County 93rd out of North Carolina's 100 counties in terms of poverty. Despite these struggles, Warren County failed to benefit from the broader industrial development of the state, forcing many residents to seek employment elsewhere.

The proposal to construct a landfill for toxic waste in Warren County raised alarm about its potential environmental and economic consequences for an already vulnerable community.[32] These fears were further compounded by the failure of the Soul City project, an initiative conceived in 1969 by Floyd McKissick. Designed as an economic development hub for African Americans, Soul City secured $18 million in federal funding, thanks in part to McKissick's alignment with the Republican Party and support from President Nixon. However, the project faced staunch opposition from North Carolina's newly elected Republican senator, Jesse Helms, whose racially prejudiced agenda led him to demand a GAO investigation. Although the investigation found no evidence of wrongdoing, the reputational damage was substantial, deterring private investment and ultimately

30 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 88-91.

31 Morris, *Origins Civil Rights Movement*, 197-9.

32 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 66-8.

dooming the project to failure.[33] Faced with the prospect of a hazardous waste treatment facility in their community, Warren County residents confronted profound economic threats, fearing that such a development would further discourage businesses from establishing operations near a toxic landfill.[34]

2.2 Roots of the Protests

In 1978, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) banned the use of PCBs due to their severe toxicity and environmental persistence.[35] This posed a significant challenge for the electrical transformer industry, which had relied heavily on PCBs. Among those affected was Robert E. Ward, Jr., owner of the Ward Transformer Company (WTC), based in Raleigh, North Carolina. Faced with the need to dispose of 12,850 gallons of PCB-contaminated liquids, Ward enlisted his business associate, Robert Burns, to manage the disposal.[36] During the summer of 1978, Burns illegally discharged PCB-laden liquids along 210 miles of North Carolina roadways surrounding Raleigh. By June of that year, authorities began detecting signs of contamination, prompting the collection of soil samples that confirmed the presence of PCBs.[37] On August 4, 1978, the EPA and local authorities were formally alerted to the issue. In the following days, a press conference was held to inform the public about the contamination and its potential implications.[38]

To address local resistance, the EPA and the State organized a public hearing in Warrenton, Warren County on January 4, 1979, to gather citizens' opinions regarding the establishment of a landfill in Afton for PCB-contaminated soil. However, the decision appeared to be a foregone conclusion, as the State had already purchased a piece of land in Afton the previous September.[39] Announced only two weeks in advance, the hearing nonetheless allowed Warren County residents to mobilize *en masse*.

A crucial role in this mobilization was played by word-of-mouth within local churches following Sunday services, facilitated by the

33 Will Schultz, s.v. "Soul City". *North Carolina History Project*. https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/soul-city/.

34 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 68-70.

35 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) Disposal and Marking".

36 *United States v. Ward*, 676 F.2d 94 (4th Cir. 1982).

37 *United States v. Ward*, 618 F. Supp. 884 (E.D.N.C. 1985).

38 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 41-2.

39 Department of Crime Control and Public Safety of North Carolina, *Final Environmental Impact Statement*.

Warren County Citizens Concerned (WCCC), a group formed to oppose the landfill. Among the WCCC's founders were Kenneth and Deborah Ferruccio, both teachers and prominent leaders of the protests, and Reverend Willie T. Ramey of Ridgeway Missionary Baptist Church, who was also the principal of the local school and the only African American among the group's founding members.[40] In the days leading up to the hearing, Ferruccio publicly articulated what would become the WCCC's guiding principle in the years ahead: "Due process first, and then civil disobedience". This statement underscored the gravity of the situation while echoing the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement. To ensure robust attendance at the public meeting, local pastors were asked to encourage their congregations to participate.[41] Predominantly white churches, typically less politically active, reluctantly allowed WCCC representatives to make announcements, whereas African American churches – historically hubs of community gathering and political discourse – were far more receptive. Reverend Ramey, in particular, played a crucial role as a mediator and advocate for Ferruccio, fostering the engagement of African American communities and offering a Christian perspective on potential involvement in the movement.[42] From the outset, the WCCC rooted its demands not merely in ethical arguments or general appeals for rights but in a foundation of rigorous scientific evidence. This strategy rendered their claims more difficult to refute and highlighted the extent to which the Hunt administration and the EPA were acting with full awareness of the potential consequences.[43]

The January 4, 1979, meeting in Warrenton drew significant attendance, with approximately one thousand individuals, both white and African American, gathering at the National Guard Armory.[44] This venue quickly became central to the movement, serving as a neutral meeting ground. However, as protests intensified, the organizational hub shifted to Coley Spring Missionary Baptist Church, located near the proposed landfill site.[45] The hearing was led by John C. White, the EPA's regional administrator, who acknowledged the economic risks associated with the waste facility and admitted that no one would willingly live near such a site. Nevertheless, he argued that the issue needed to be addressed. Locals voiced their primary concerns about potential groundwater contamination and

40 Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

41 Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

42 Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

43 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

44 Siceloff, "PCB burial proposal wins".

45 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

the long-term impacts on future generations.[46] During the meeting, Reverend Ramey called for an ecumenical coalition against the landfill, declaring that county residents were prepared to mobilize, even if it meant physically obstructing trucks and bulldozers with their bodies.[47] The only voice in favor of the project came from Eva Clayton, an ally of Governor Hunt and an employee of the department that had designated the county as the landfill site.[48] This unified and vocal opposition caught the Hunt administration off guard, as they had anticipated persuading at least a portion of the community to support the plan.[49]

Locals felt stripped of their agency over the land they inhabited, a sentiment encapsulated by a reported statement from David Kelly, the State's hazardous waste program manager. According to interviews and secondary sources, Kelly allegedly remarked that the landfill would be placed in Warren County "regardless of public sentiment". While no reliable bibliographic evidence confirms this comment, it encapsulates the community's perception of being victimized by a preordained decision imposed by the State.

This perception of disenfranchisement fueled the WCCC's opposition.[50] Kenneth and Deborah Ferruccio identify this hearing as the genesis of the Environmental Justice Movement. It marked the first instance of a multi-ethnic coalition standing against a government treating their community as expendable, asserting instead their dignity and significance. On January 19, 1979, several members of the WCCC traveled to Raleigh to meet with Governor Hunt. Although the governor attempted to reassure them about the landfill's safety, his efforts proved unsuccessful. Among the delegates was Reverend Ramey, who invoked the possibility of civil disobedience while wearing his clerical collar – a deliberate nod to the Civil Rights Movement, historically led by clergy. The threat of civil disobedience proved to be a powerful tool, as the possibility of unrest in a predominantly African American community was both credible and seen as something to be avoided.[51]

On August 7, 1979, the North Carolina Council of State approved the purchase of the land for the landfill.[52] In response, Warren County filed a lawsuit to halt the project. After a series of legal appeals, on November 25, 1981, Judge W. Earl Britt ruled in favor of the state,

46 Siceloff, "PCB burial proposal wins", 31.
47 Siceloff, "PCB plan up", 19.
48 "PCB burial Plans Outlined", 24.
49 Siceloff, "PCB plan", 19.
50 McGurty, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights".
51 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.
52 "Council Oks Purchase", 9.

authorizing the landfill's construction. The county attempted a final appeal but abandoned it after the state received $3 million in federal funding for the cleanup of PCB-contaminated soil, accompanied by a revision of the landfill project.[53] This decision, made without consulting the local population, further eroded residents' trust in the county board, which they increasingly viewed as complicit with state authorities.[54] On June 8, 1982, the WCCC convened a public meeting, during which it was decided to file another lawsuit. This legal action was particularly significant, as it explicitly argued for the first time that the decision to locate the landfill in Warren County was driven by the predominantly African American population, suggesting racial discrimination.[55] The lawsuit named Anne Gorsuch, EPA Administrator, and Herman Clark, Secretary of the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety, as defendants, accusing them of bypassing state laws with discriminatory intent to ensure the landfill was built in Warren County. Additionally, the suit highlighted the lack of a proper economic impact assessment. The state government claimed the landfill would have a positive economic impact on the local community, yet property values were likely to plummet, and the area faced the risk of depopulation.[56]

In preparation for the trial, Joyce Lubbers, a WCCC member, emphasized the ethical and religious dimensions of the PCB issue, calling for an hour of prayer on Sunday, August 1, at 3pm. The prayer meeting was held at Coley Spring Missionary Baptist Church in Afton, the closest and predominantly African American church near the landfill site.[57] Despite these efforts, the trial did not yield the desired outcome. On August 11, Judge W. Earl Britt rejected the residents' request to halt the landfill's construction, stating that no evidence supported allegations of racial intent. Instead, he concluded that the county's low population density was the primary factor in its selection, arguing that the interests of thousands of North Carolina citizens living near contaminated roads outweighed the objections of a relatively small number of residents concerned about property devaluation.[58] Undeterred by this setback, county residents remained resolute, vowing to oppose the landfill's construction by any means necessary. With all legal avenues exhausted, the WCCC decided to exercise their right to assembly through direct, non-violent actions.[59]

53 *United States v. Ward*, 618 F. Supp. 884 (E.D.N.C. 1985).

54 "Suit Filed Against PCB", 22.

55 Lee, "PCB Landfill Pact Rapped", 1.

56 "Suit Filed Against PCB", 22.

57 "Hearing Scheduled Aug. 4", 3.

58 Oleck, "Way clear for PCB", 26.

59 Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 04/04/2024.

After yet another defeat, Kenneth and Deborah Ferruccio, key leaders in the movement against the landfill's construction, reached out to Reverend Ramey to establish contact with Reverend Luther Brown, pastor of Coley Spring Missionary Baptist Church. Reverend Brown had been relatively apolitical, preferring to focus on his ministry and believing that active political engagement was not an appropriate role for a church. However, the issue of the PCB landfill prompted a change of heart, as he came to see it as transcending partisan politics.[60] Ultimately, he agreed to meet with the Ferruccios. Despite Reverend Brown's limited political involvement, he understood that a movement led exclusively by white activists in a predominantly African American county was unlikely to succeed. Therefore, the inclusion of an African American leader was essential.

Reverend Leon White of Oak Level UCC, a key figure in the movement, was familiar with Reverend Brown. Among White's parishioners was Dollie Burwell, who gained prominence as a civil rights leader and subsequently as an environmental activist. Often referred to as one of the 'mothers' of Environmental Justice, Burwell played a decisive role in the protest movement. She was also a member of both the UCC-CRJ and the SCLC. Although Reverend White was politically active, his direct experience in organizing protests was limited. However, his position within the UCC-CRJ gave him access to a network of civil rights leaders, enabling him to act as a bridge between the WCCC and the broader civil rights leadership. Reverend White quickly emerged as a co-leader of the movement, facilitating connections and amplifying its reach. Through White's mediation, the Ferruccios met with him at the school in Afton. He immediately endorsed Kenneth Ferruccio's proposal, first articulated during the January 4, 1979, public hearing: "due process first, then civil disobedience". Together, they began planning strategies to obstruct the landfill's construction, while White reached out to Joseph Lowery, president of the SCLC, for organizational support. Many protest participants mistakenly believed that the UCC-CRJ had initially approached the WCCC, but this was not the case. This misconception distorted the public perception of the movement, overstating the UCC-CRJ's centrality in 1982 and undervaluing the foundational groundwork laid by the WCCC. Before the UCC-CRJ became involved, its focus in Warren County had been on voter registration campaigns rather than directly opposing the landfill.[61] Dollie Burwell stated that she had attempted from the outset to involve African American

60 Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

61 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 04/04/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 04/04/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

church pastors in organizing the opposition, though accounts on this matter vary.[62] Nonetheless, the UCC-CRJ brought invaluable strategic expertise and mobilization capabilities, honed through years of civil rights advocacy. These strengths complemented the efforts of the local movement, which was predominantly composed of white members unfamiliar with protest tactics and significantly bolstered the campaign against the landfill.[63]

2.3 Practices of Resistance and Theological Rhetoric

Between September 15 and October 27, 1982, 7,223 truckloads of contaminated soil were deposited at the Warren County landfill.[64] During these six weeks, county residents staged protests that evolved into significant civil unrest. These demonstrations, during which 523 protesters were arrested,[65] later came to be recognized as the seminal moment of the Environmental Justice Movement. On September 15, 1982, the first trucks carrying contaminated soil arrived. At 9:15am, approximately 200 people, led by Kenneth Ferruccio, Reverend Leon White, and Reverend Donald Jarboe of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Norlina, marched toward the landfill from Coley Spring Missionary Baptist Church. The inclusion of Reverend Jarboe and his predominantly white congregation emphasized the multiracial nature of the protests, which carried significant symbolic weight. Within an hour, about 100 state troopers and a battalion of the National Guard were deployed to prevent protesters from obstructing the trucks. Coley Spring Missionary Baptist Church, located a few miles from the landfill, became the movement's nerve center, where daily gatherings of roughly 100 people were organized to march toward the landfill. Protesters would lie down on the road to block the trucks' passage.[66] The demonstrations were meticulously organized to avoid injuries and to remind participants to maintain a peaceful approach, even in the face of police presence. Many interviewees credited the churches and the spiritual atmosphere of the protests with fostering nonviolence, inspired by the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. Meeting in a church before each march was significant, as it provided a space for prayer, allowing participants to find the strength to protest and

62 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024.

63 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 84-5.

64 *United States v. Ward*, 618 F. Supp. 884 (E.D.N.C. 1985).

65 Approximately 3% of the county's population.

66 Labalme, *A Road to Walk*. McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*.

overcome their fear of arrest.[67] On the first day of demonstrations, 55 people were arrested. Although there were no reported injuries, some physical altercations occurred with police officers.[68] The following day, seven more protesters, including Floyd McKissick, were arrested for attempting to block the trucks. On September 16, news outlets reported the presence of Benjamin Chavis in Warren County. Chavis, dispatched to Afton by the UCC-CRJ, condemned the North Carolina government for targeting the "Black county of the State" with toxic waste, warning that it set a dangerous precedent for the entire nation.[69] On Sunday, September 19, the arrival of Reverend Joseph Lowery infused the protests with the spirit of the 1960s civil rights movement. Demonstrators sang Christian hymns and adapted iconic civil rights songs such as *We Shall Overcome* and *We Shall Not Be Moved* to address the landfill's construction.[70] This marked a shift in the protest's framing, emphasizing its racial dimensions alongside environmental concerns. The music underscored the leadership of African American churches in the protests, further marginalizing the role of the WCCC.[71]

Also, on September 19, telegrams were sent to Governor James Hunt and Senator Jesse Helms, urging them to halt the landfill project. The choice to contact Helms was strategic: Mary Hinton Kerr, a WCCC founder and wife of a conservative Democratic state legislator, leveraged her connections to involve Helms. Although Helms had a history of supporting racial segregation, the landfill controversy unfolded during the administrations of President Jimmy Carter and Governor James Hunt, both Democrats, who were seen as responsible for the county's selection. This prompted the WCCC to seek support from the opposition. However, many of those interviewed later disavowed this decision.[72] On Monday, September 27, 114 protesters were arrested, including Walter Fauntroy, a Democratic delegate from the District of Columbia and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus. Fauntroy was released the same evening after posting bail.[73] Despite the arrests, the police were unable to deter the demonstrators. However, the protests ultimately failed to stop the trucks from depositing the PCB-laden soil.

67 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 04/04/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

68 "PCB Protesters Arrested", 15.

69 "PCB Spills Posed Few", 23.

70 Labalme, *A Road to Walk*, 6. Jenny Labalme, interview, 28/01/2024.

71 Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

72 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 04/04/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

73 "Fauntroy, 113 More Charged", 14.

In November 1982, after the last truckload of contaminated soil had been delivered, the protests in Warren County subsided. While they did not succeed in halting the landfill's construction, the demonstrations left a lasting impact. They fostered solidarity between white and African American residents in the fight against environmental injustice, strengthening local communities. One of the most tangible outcomes was seen in the November 1982 local elections, which, for the first time, saw a majority of registered voters in the county being African American. This milestone was partly attributed to voter registration campaigns spearheaded by national organizations such as the SCLC and the UCC-CRJ. These efforts, intertwined with amendments to the VRA and the landfill protests, led to the election of the first African American-majority county board in the state, with Eva Clayton as its chairperson. Additionally, Governor James Hunt imposed a moratorium on new waste disposal facilities and pledged that no additional waste would be deposited at the site.[74] In 1983, Charles Lee of the UCC-CRJ organized an East Coast tour featuring Kenneth Ferruccio and Reverend Leon White to share their experiences from Warren County. Lee later asked Ferruccio to draft a funding proposal for the UCC, which resulted in the creation of a proposal that introduced the term 'network for environmental justice'.[75]

While the origin of the term 'Environmental Justice' remains debated, with some attributing it to Benjamin Chavis, Ferruccio and other participants maintain that it was not used during the protests.[76] This proposal became the foundation for the pivotal study *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, conducted by Charles Lee under the UCC-CRJ, which was then directed by Chavis.[77] The study highlighted the disproportionate impact of hazardous waste facilities on low-income and minority communities. It revealed that race was the primary factor in determining the location of these facilities, even more influential than income. Furthermore, the report underscored the lack of environmental protections afforded to nonwhite communities and offered recommendations to address racial disparities, strengthen regulations, and increase the involvement of affected communities.[78] The publication of this study fueled the national dialogue on Environmental Justice, culminating in the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., organized by the UCC. The summit established guiding principles for the movement, advocating for the right to a healthy environment, access to

74 Labalme, *A Road to Walk*, 27. McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*.

75 Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

76 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024.

77 Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

78 UCC-CRJ, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*.

information, decision-making participation, harm prevention, equity, respect for traditional knowledge, and sustainability. These principles laid the groundwork for the global spread of the environmental justice concept, particularly in developing countries.[79] In 1993, approximately one million gallons of water accumulated at the PCB landfill, posing a severe environmental threat and reigniting local outrage. Residents criticized the state and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for negligence. While the state proposed a $200,000 plan to filter and relocate the wastewater to other sites, citizens opposed it, arguing that it violated environmental justice principles by transferring their local problem elsewhere. A joint committee, the Citizens/State Joint Warren County PCB Landfill Working Group, was established to ensure equal decision-making power between residents and state authorities. This collaboration, supported by political advocacy, led to a $24 million remediation plan in 1997. Although only partial funding was initially secured, the site was successfully remediated in 2003.[80]

The Warren County protests, and their aftermath, were central in defining the Environmental Justice Movement, demonstrating the power of grassroots activism in addressing systemic injustices. The community's resilience and the broader national response laid the foundation for future advancements in environmental equity and justice.

3 The Debated Narratives of the Warren County Protests

The interviews conducted during this research provide a valuable perspective on the protests in Warren County, highlighting two central themes: racial discrimination and the role of churches. While the testimonies reflect personal and occasionally divergent viewpoints, a shared consensus emerges regarding the perception of the PCB landfill's selection as discriminatory. However, not all participants ascribed equal significance to this factor.

Although the terms 'environmental racism' and 'environmental justice' were not explicitly utilized during the 1982 protests, they have been retrospectively applied to analyze and interpret these events. Prominent figures such as Dollie Burwell attribute the coinage of 'environmental racism' to Benjamin Chavis, while others, like the Ferruccios, suggest the term may have already been in use during the final stages of legal disputes over the landfill.[81] Racial discrimination,

79 Brooks Berndt, "30th Anniversary". https://www.ucc.org/30th-anniversary-the-first-national-people-of-color-environmental-leadership-summit/.

80 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 154.

81 Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

however, was not the sole issue emphasized by interviewees.

Warren County's pervasive poverty, disproportionately affecting its African American community, also emerged as a significant factor in the protests, as economic hardship further compounded the challenges faced by this marginalized population. This socio-economic disadvantage likely influenced the selection of the landfill site, compounded by the county's low population density. Other participants highlighted political and economic interests, suggesting a confluence of factors, including systemic discrimination,[82] as contributing to the decision.

The protests in Warren County underscore the decisive role of African American and mainline Protestant churches in intertwining political and religious elements forged during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. These churches have historically served as primary hubs for political discourse and social cohesion within African American communities, particularly in the southern United States,[83] a role corroborated by interviewees.[84] Their involvement in environmental struggles did not signify a departure from their historical mission but rather a natural extension of their pastoral commitment to racial and social justice, now encompassing environmental concerns. Even though the Oak Level UCC was neither a large nor an influential congregation, its pastor, Leon White, served as the regional field director for the UCC-CRJ. This position enabled him to mobilize his organization's resources and seek assistance from other national civil rights organizations, such as the SCLC.[85] The UCC's historical commitment to social justice has been foundational in such efforts. From its early roots in abolitionism to its active participation in the Civil Rights Movement, the church's advocacy for racial justice and equality was already well-established. Its involvement in environmental justice, exemplified by the protests in Warren County, marks a continuation of this tradition, addressing contemporary issues through the lens of its longstanding mission for social change.[86] The Warren County experience illustrates how the fight for civil rights became integral to African American Christian identity within this specific historical and geographical context, both as an internal self-conception and as recognition by national organizations. This synthesis of theological principles and political imperatives

82 Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

83 Morris, *Origins Civil Rights Movement*, 4.

84 Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Jenny Labalme, interview, 28/01/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey, III, interview, 04/04/2024.

85 Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024.

86 Rowland Post, Dipko, *History and Program*.

reaffirmed the role of churches as agents of social transformation, adept at addressing the evolving needs of their communities while remaining grounded in the spiritual foundations of their activism.

Initially, the movement's political engagement was framed by environmentalist principles, primarily resonating with the county's white population.[87] However, when the protests were reframed through the lens of civil rights, African American churches – and subsequently the broader African American community – actively engaged in the movement. This shift proved transformative: the UCC and the SCLC emerged as central organizational hubs, and African American pastors associated with these groups played crucial leadership roles. These pastors, connected through social networks established during the Civil Rights Movement, exemplified how the struggle for civil rights had become a defining aspect of African American communal identity. The Warren County protests functioned as both political resistance and ritualized acts, drawing on the performative traditions of the Civil Rights Movement. Gospel hymns and freedom songs, as in civil rights-era demonstrations,[88] reinforced collective identity and spiritual resilience, transforming protests into sacred spaces where faith and activism intersected. The deliberate arrests of clergy, often accompanied by prayer, served as acts of moral witness, underscoring the movement's fusion of religious symbolism and political struggle. From an external perspective, the protests were perceived as one of the most significant civil rights demonstrations since the 1960s.[89]

In this context, the environmental struggle in Warren County was reframed as a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement, addressing issues of racial discrimination and poverty – dimensions previously overlooked by the environmentalist framework. This reframing prompted the creation of a new paradigm that acknowledged these intersecting injustices, leading to the development of the concept of environmental justice. While the Warren County protests are often considered the catalyst for the Environmental Justice Movement, they were not the only instances of marginalized communities resisting environmental hazards. Similar struggles unfolded in Texarkana, Arkansas, Diamond, Louisiana, and Augusta, Georgia, where predominantly African American communities challenged the siting

87 Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024.

88 The adaptation of gospel hymns and freedom songs to the landfill struggle underscores how the protest shifted from an environmental to a racial justice issue. This musical tradition not only signaled the growing leadership of African American churches but also reflected their displacement of the WCCC in directing the movement. Spener, *We Shall Not Be*, 62-89.

89 Fears, Brady, "'This is environmental racism' How a protest in a North Carolina farming town sparked a national movement".

of toxic waste facilities in their neighborhoods. These cases underscore the broader pattern of environmental discrimination across the United States. However, Warren County remains a landmark event due to its national visibility and its explicit linkage to the Civil Rights Movement. Unlike earlier and contemporary cases, it was framed as a continuation of the fight for racial justice, drawing in national organizations such as the SCLC and UCC-CRJ. This framing, along with its influence on subsequent legal and activist strategies, solidified its status as the foundational moment of the Environmental Justice Movement. The 1993 Environmental Justice Summit later codified many of the principles that had emerged from Warren County, marking the formalization of a movement rooted in the intersection of race, class, and environmental harm.[90]

The testimonies consistently highlight the crucial role of African American Christian churches in shaping the movement; every interviewee agreed that, without their involvement, the protests would have been markedly different or perhaps unsustainable. These churches, particularly the UCC, provided essential organizational support, enabling the protests to maintain a nonviolent ethos critical for the safety and effectiveness of the demonstrators.[91] A significant factor in this success was the extensive social networks established by African American pastors during the Civil Rights Movement, which allowed for the mobilization of resources and the active engagement of local communities. Despite the modest material resources and small size of their congregations, these networks facilitated a level of coordination and resilience that significantly bolstered the movement. However, the organizational capacity of local churches and the WCCC alone was insufficient to address the broader challenges. External support from national organizations such as the UCC-CRJ and the SCLC, along with influential leaders like Benjamin Chavis and Joseph Lowery, played a decisive role in expanding the movement into a wider campaign against systemic racial discrimination and for social justice. The presence of these prominent figures was instrumental in attracting the attention of national media outlets, including television networks and newspapers, which significantly amplified the visibility of the protests. Without the involvement of such influential personalities, it is unlikely that the events in Warren County would have garnered the same level of media interest, thereby limiting their broader impact and the historical significance attributed to the movement. However, this involvement was not entirely altruistic;

90 Taylor, *Toxic Communities*.

91 Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Jenny Labalme, interview, 28/01/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

it was also connected to national efforts to register African American voters to secure amendments to the VRA.[92]

These dynamics reveal how the struggle for justice became integral to African American Christian identity, reinforcing Protestant churches as enduring agents of resistance and adaptation amidst evolving challenges. By bridging the spiritual and the political, these churches reaffirmed their role as transformative actors in grassroots movements.

Ultimately, the testimonies highlight the intersectionality of racial, social, and environmental injustices, offering a nuanced portrayal of the forces that shaped the emergence of the Environmental Justice Movement.[93]

4 Conclusion

Since the 1960s, the Protestant churches of Warren County had established an informal social network among pastors, connecting them to national Civil Rights Movements. During the 1982 PCB protests, these churches played a pivotal role by reframing the debate around racial discrimination, contrasting with the Warren County Citizens' Coalition (WCCC), which was predominantly white and grounded its opposition in scientific evidence. Functioning as centers of socialization and dissent organization, African American churches mobilized the community and leveraged their networks to strengthen the protests and secure external support. Their involvement underscored how collaboration and adaptation to local circumstances can yield significant outcomes in the fight for environmental and social justice. Without the organizational and moral leadership of these churches, the protests would have likely been less impactful, potentially marked by greater violence. Testimonies consistently highlighted their indispensable role in shaping the success of this movement. While not exclusively driven by theological doctrines, African American Christian communities' actions reflected a commitment to justice as an expression of love, demonstrated in their capacity to organize and sustain resistance.

This study opens avenues for further research, including comparative analyses of religious institutions' involvement in Environmental Justice movements across different contexts, exploration of the protests' long-term impacts on civil rights and environmental policy, and examination of their influence on ecotheology and liberation

92 McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 84-92.

93 Dollie Burwell, interview, 13/02/2024. Deborah Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Kenneth Ferruccio, interview, 26/03/2024. Jenny Labalme, interview, 28/01/2024. Willie Thomas Ramey III, interview, 04/04/2024.

theology. Interdisciplinary approaches involving history, sociology, and theology could deepen understanding of how religious identity and teachings shape responses to environmental crises.

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