**HYDRAULIC FRACTURING TASK FORCE**

**UPPER SUSQUEHANNA SYNOD, ELCA**

**Biblical and Theological Approaches to Hydraulic Fracturing**

**Workshop Bible Study Materials**

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**INTRODUCTION**

There are a number of texts from Scripture which are pertinent to the conversation about hydraulic fracturing that we can consider. Of course, none of these texts specifically refers to the practice itself, but these texts do raise questions and concerns Christians and all people of faith can rightly discuss more generally. Specifically, these texts touch on issues of stewardship, resource conservation, and social justice.

In Part One, on the Old Testament, the texts are all taken from the Book of Genesis. In Part Two, the texts come from the New Testament. Part Three discusses relevant Lutheran theological themes and the Social Statement on Care of Creation.

**PART ONE: OLD TESTAMENT**

**GENESIS 1:24-31**

This text is the account of the sixth day of creation. On this day, God calls into being all forms of terrestrial life: cattle (understood as all domesticated livestock (not simply cows and bulls), creeping things, and all wild animals. It is also the day when God creates human beings, and gives them charge of everything God has made. God’s command is explicitly stated in vss. 28-30:

*And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. 25God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.*

*26 Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’   
27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;  
   male and female he created them.*

*28God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ 29God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. 31God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

Consider:

What is God’s plan for creation?

What role(s) does/do human beings play in God’s plan?

How is the Creation intended by God to be sustained?

What implications can we draw out of the text that apply to hydraulic fracturing?

**GENESIS 9:1-7**

Following the Great Flood, God calls Noah and his family out of the ark, blesses them, and renews the charge originally entrusted to human beings in chapter one. This time, however, the charge is modified, in part to reflect a new reality on earth. The charge is longer and more detailed than the original commands given in Chapter One. The text follows:

*God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. 2The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. 3Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. 4Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. 5For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.   
6 Whoever sheds the blood of a human,  
   by a human shall that person’s blood be shed;  
for in his own image  
   God made humankind.   
7And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.’ (Genesis 9:1-7)*

Consider:

How is the charge to Noah and his family different from the original charge given to human beings?

How can/do you account for the changes?

God still provides for sustaining Creation. How has human responsibility changed?

Which account provides human beings with greater latitude/discretion as they strive to fulfill God’s command?

Are there new implications we can derive from this text that are pertinent

to the questions related to hydraulic fracturing?

**GENESIS 2:15**

Starting with the second half of verse four in Genesis 2, a second story of creation begins. This account is very different from the events described in Genesis 1, and the order in which creation occurs highlights a different emphasis. This account begins with the creation of the first man, formed “from the dust of the ground.” Then, the LORD God plants a garden “in Eden, in the east;” God causes the growth of lush vegetation in the garden, and the origin of four great rivers to water the earth. After instructing the man how to find food in the garden, God forms all the animals and birds in his efforts to make the man “a helper as his partner.” This effort is finally realized in the creation of woman, who fulfills God’s intent as “a helper as his partner.” Almost exactly in the middle of this story, we are given a significant insight into God’s plan for his creation:

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)*

Consider:

What activity/activities does God intend human beings to fulfill in the garden?

What does the phrase, “to till it and keep it” mean in the context of the story?

What does the phrase, “to till it and keep it” mean in today’s context?

How has our understanding of this biblical mandate changed as human society

has evolved and developed?

How do we apply this biblical mandate to the questions related to the process

of hydraulic fracturing?

**GENESIS 21:22-34**

The story of Abraham is pertinent to our discussion in a particularly significant way. This account shows Abraham negotiating with Abimelech, a Philistine king, about land use and water rights. Although the land is not Abraham’s (even though God had promised Abraham that it eventually would be), the two men come to an agreement and establish a covenant between them:

*22 At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, ‘God is with you in all that you do; 23now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien.’ 24And Abraham said, ‘I swear it.’*

*25 When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized, 26Abimelech said, ‘I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.’ 27So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. 28Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs of the flock.29And Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?’ 30He said, ‘These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well.’ 31Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath. 32When they had made a covenant at Beer-sheba, Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, left and returned to the land of the Philistines. 33Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. 34And Abraham resided as an alien for many days in the land of the Philistines.* *(Genesis 21:22-34)*

Consider:

What actions prompted this conversation and an eventual covenantal relationship between these two men?

Why did Abraham take the course of action that he did?

What was Abimelech’s response?

Who gains the advantage in the final agreement?

Why is that advantage significant?

What implications can we derive from this text that are pertinent to our current focus on hydraulic fracturing?

**GENESIS 26:12-33**

Isaac’s experience among the Philistines is almost an exact parallel with his father, Abraham’s, experience among the same people. There are, however, a few distinctions: Isaac is so successful that the Philistines become jealous and try to drive him away. They are also more aggressive and assertive, claiming for

themselves water from wells which Abraham had dug. Finally, they quarrel over new wells which Isaac has dug, and try to force him off the land.

*12 Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, 13and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy. 14He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. 15(Now the Philistines had stopped up and filled with earth all the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham.) 16And Abimelech said to Isaac, ‘Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us.’*

*17 So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. 18Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. 19But when Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, 20the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herders, saying, ‘The water is ours.’ So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. 21Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. 22He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, ‘Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.’*

*23 From there he went up to Beer-sheba. 24And that very night the Lord appeared to him and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham’s sake.’ 25So he built an altar there, called on the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac’s servants dug a well.*

*26 Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army. 27Isaac said to them, ‘Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?’28They said, ‘We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you 29so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord.’ 30So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. 31In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths; and Isaac set them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. 32That same day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well that they had dug, and said to him, ‘We have found water!’ 33He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day. (Genesis 26:12-33)*

Consider:

What can you identify as the cause(s) for these renewed tensions?

Why do you think these tensions increase as Isaac digs new wells?

Why does Abimelech make a new covenant with Isaac?

What does Abimelech acknowledge about Isaac?

Is Isaac blessed, or lucky, or does he have an advanced technology?

Why had the Philistines “stopped up and filled with earth” the wells Abraham

had dug?

Why do the wells cause so much tension between Isaac and the Philistines?

Why are water rights so critical in both these stories?

What insights, if any, can you discern from these two parallel narratives?

Are there dynamics and issues in these stories which relate to our current

focus on hydraulic fracturing?

**PART TWO: NEW TESTAMENT**

**CARING FOR “THE LEAST OF THESE”**

**MATTHEW 25:37-46**

Jesus’ injunction to care for “the least of these” has ramifications for the discussion about shale oil and gas drilling:

*37Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” 40And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” 44Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?”45Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ (Matthew 25:37-46)*

Consider:

Who are “the least of these” (those most vulnerable) affected by the processes of shale gas and oil drilling?

Why has our current economic system allowed rural families and communities to fall into such financial instability that they would consider allowing an extraction process that carries so much risk?

How would you answer the argument that the oil and gas industry is, in fact, caring for the least of these by offering jobs and energy?

**WOMAN AT THE WELL**

**JOHN 4:7-15**

Another story from the Gospels that has interesting application to the process of hydraulic fracturing, particularly surrounding the question of water use, is the narrative about the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1-42. The Samaritan woman is an outcast, “the least of these,” without protection within a patriarchal system of domination. Jesus offers her “living water,” along with recognition of her personhood, dignity and reconnection with her community. Relating this story to the contemporary issue of shale gas and oil drilling, those who bear the brunt of suffering from hydraulic fracturing are often women who struggle to care for their families when their water has been compromised by the hydraulic fracturing process. As evidenced by the growing number of complaints filed and cases of water contamination, the concern is that families are offered little to no protection within the current system of governance and corporate decision-making.

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. 8(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)10Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ 11The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ 13Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ 15The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water. (John 4:7-15)*

Consider:

How can the Church offer “living water” to those who are suffering, along with recognition of their rights, dignity, and restoration of their health and community?

How can we protect the actual living water of Creation from the processes of hydraulic fracturing, including human error and/or deliberate violation?

**ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

**TIMOTHY 6:6-10, MATTHEW 6:19-21, 6:24, 6:25-34**

New Testament teachings on wealth have implications for the economic boom-and-bust cycle of shale gas and oil drilling. Paul writes to Timothy:

*Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; 7for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; 8but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 9But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.10For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Timothy 6:6-10)*

Jesus also has a number of teachings about wealth, including these three from the Gospel of Matthew:

*‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)*

*‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24)*

*‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,  29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:25-34)*

Consider:

How much does the sin of wealth-worship figure into the issue of shale oil and gas, and what is the Church’s role in raising that concern?

How might the Church discuss the ethics of individuals or corporations benefitting so handsomely while God’s Creation and others in society bear the costs?

How would you answer the argument that Jesus’ teaching is too impractical or naïve in today’s world, given ?

**JUDGING AND JUSTICE**

**MATTHEW 7:1-5**

Jesus warns against hypocritically judging others (7:1-5), especially when one’s own faults are so clearly visible. Applied to the complexity of issues surrounding shale gas and oil extraction, those who would criticize must also be aware of their own complicity in the demand for inexpensive forms of energy.

*‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 4Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye? 5You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.*

Consider:

In what ways do both “sides” of the fracking issue judge each other?

How can we “do justice” without hypocritically judging?

**CONFRONTING SYSTEMIC AND STRUCTURAL EVIL**

**EPHESIANS 6:12**

Lutheran theologian Cynthia Moe-Lobeda has observed that despite the goodness of individuals, the collection of our consumption, production and acquisition patterns exploit individuals and cause ecological degradation in what she calls “economic and ecological violence” (*Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2013). Similarly, theologian Walter Wink has argued that the “the powers” of political and societal institutions as well as multinational global corporations perpetrate injustice and are accountable to no one while holding hold humanity in thrall (*Engaging the Powers*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1992). St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians describes it this way:

*12For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Consider:

In what ways might Paul’s words provide a frame for understanding “the powers” of our capitalist society and the fossil fuel industries that drive it?

How should we heed Paul’s observations about resisting “the powers and principalities” the unseen forces with more-than-human power to influence and tempt us in negative ways?

In what ways can we confront political and societal institutions that foster injustice, recognizing the larger global corporate systems (including the shale gas and oil corporations) that have little accountability to any governmental oversight and exercise hidden levels of control over wealth and information dispersal on a global level?

**PART THREE: LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL THEMES AND THE SOCIAL STATEMENT ON CARE OF CREATION.**

Lutheran theologyalso adds to our ethical lens for interpreting the contemporary situation of shale gas and oil drilling. Martin Luther insisted that **sin and captivity** (manifest today in threats to the environment and human community), are not the last word. God addresses our predicament with gifts of “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation” (*Small Catechism*). By the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God frees us from our sin and captivity, and empowers us to be loving servants to creation.

Luther’s teaching on the **sacraments** (*Large Catechism,* Fourth and Fifth Parts*)* reminds us how important it is to preserve the sanctity of those elements of Creation, God’s Word made visible in water, bread and wine that are essential for Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. As Lutheran Christians, we are called to take this reality into consideration when addressing the complexities of any human energy extraction process that affects those basic elements.

In addition, Luther’s teaching on **law** gives us a basis for understanding how it can be applied in the modern process of shale gas and oil extraction and related industries. The *Formula of Concord* states:

*The law has been given to people for three reasons: first, that through it external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient; second, that people may be led through it to a recognition of their sins; third, after they have been reborn—since nevertheless the flesh still clings to them—that precisely because of the flesh they may have a sure guide, according to which they can orient and conduct their entire life* (Formula of Concord, VI, “Concerning the Third Use of the Law,” edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 502).

The law, then, could be said to provide for justice in relationships that leads to “honoring the integrity of creation, and striving for fairness within the human family” (*Caring for Creation,* 6*).*

With this in mind, we can invoke this teaching on the law to 1) call for all entities—individual, corporate, governmental, and community—to restrain against those practices and human laws that bring harm to God’s Creation and the human community; 2) hold a mirror up to our own economic and material concupiscence and the reality of the ways in which we (individually and communally) are “curved in upon ourselves,” thinking only of our desire for energy that harms environmental and human health, and accumulation of wealth and comfort at the expense of others and God’s Creation; and 3) guide us to make decisions within a robust context of moral deliberation about how we are to live, heat our homes, transport ourselves and our goods, and power our energy needs.

We strongly recommend a reading of the **ELCA Social Statement “Caring for Creation” (1993)** to help frame discussion about the issues surrounding shale oil and gas drilling. Here we offer just three passages that are particularly applicable to the topic:

*Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God’s command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8), a special responsibility, should reflect God’s way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns. According to Genesis 2:15, our role within creation is to serve and to keep God’s garden, the earth. “To serve,” often translated “to till,” invites us again to envision ourselves as servants, while “to keep” invites us to take care of the earth as God keeps and cares for us (Numbers 6:24-26).*

*Alienated from God and from creation, and driven to make a name for ourselves (Genesis 11:4), we become captives to demonic powers and unjust institutions (Galatians 4:9; Ephesians 6:12; Revelation 13:1-4). In our captivity, we treat the earth as a boundless warehouse and allow the powerful to exploit its bounties to their own ends (Amos 5:6-15). Our sin and captivity lie at the roots of the current crisis (3).*

Consider:

What vision of hope for the common good might we offer regarding the contentious issues surrounding shale oil and gas drilling and its related processes?

How might Lutherans continue to model productive dialogue that is respectful and forwards the conversation about justice in the midst of the need for energy and jobs?

What one action can you take to further participate in the “community of moral deliberation” (as the social statement describes it) around the issues of energy extraction, processing, distribution, and consumption, as they effect the environment, individuals, communities, state, national and international policies, houses of worship, and our collective relationship with God our Creator?

What role does prayer play in this ongoing moral deliberation about shale oil and gas drilling?

In what ways do you see God working through this process of discussion?