

Church groups respond to water emergency in Flint, Michigan

by [Barb Powell](#) and [Lauren Markoe](#)

This article appears in the [February 17, 2016](#) issue.

The Michigan bodies of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) launched The Gospel in Action--Flint in January as President Obama declared a state of emergency in the city over its poisoned water.

Two congregations in Flint are central in that effort: Vermont Christian Church is a designated water distribution point, and Woodside Church UCC is providing water filters and replacement cartridges.

More than 50,000 households in Flint, which is predominantly African American, have not had clean water for almost two years.

“The powerful disenfranchised minority citizens and then made decisions without citizen input,” said S. C. Campbell Lovett, UCC conference minister in Michigan. “And nobody is being held accountable. This is . . . environmental racism.”

The water problems began in 2014 when the emergency manager of the city, who had been designated by the governor, approved drawing water from the Flint River instead of purchasing water from Lake Huron via Detroit in an effort to save the city money.

According to Kathleen Reid, a member of Woodside Church UCC’s water accessibility committee, Flint’s filtration plant was not equipped to treat the warmer, highly corrosive river water. It caused lead from aging pipes to leach into the city’s water supply, according to a report released by Marc Edwards, an engineering professor at Virginia Tech and an expert on municipal water quality, who studied the water supply.

Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at Flint’s Hurley Medical Center, did additional research on blood lead levels in area children. Lead poisoning causes neurologic damage and affects every organ system in the body, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It can cause lowered IQs, behavior difficulties, and

even death in extreme cases.

Although the water sourcing was switched back to Lake Huron in October 2015, lead levels are still high.

“The water issue will be there a long time, because the infrastructure itself has been significantly damaged,” said Muzammil Ahmed, chairman of the Michigan Muslim Community Council, which has distributed more than 120,000 bottles of clean water.

Bringing in bottled water creates a new challenge: recycling plastic bottles. The UCC and Disciples are discussing ways they can assist in recycling.

The faith-based organizations involved in the response—including Catholic Charities and the Flint Jewish Federation—are also focused on a longer-term goal: to make sure the impoverished city will not be not neglected again.

“Charity can only take one so far,” said Deb Conrad, pastor of Woodside Church UCC. “Justice is needed.” —UCNews; Religion News Service

This article was edited on February 2, 2016.