

Readers' Theater:
*Using drama to understand experiences
with environmental health issues*

Faith in Things Not Seen

Written by Erin Byrd



Exchange Project

BECAUSE OUR ENVIRONMENT AFFECTS OUR HEALTH

This script is intended to be a dramatic representation of a community experience. As such, some statements by the characters may represent controversial beliefs that warrant further examination in discussion sessions. Whenever possible, to further inform the dialogue, the Exchange Project will provide additional information on the issue or links to other sources via the website: www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu

The Exchange Project is designed to increase understanding of the social, legal, and ethical implications of environmental health issues and facilitate dialogue among stakeholders from communities, government agencies, and professionals about these complex issues. The Exchange Project was established with funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and is a collaborative effort among researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, community organizations such as the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network and North Carolina Fair Share, and attorneys from the Land Loss Prevention Project.

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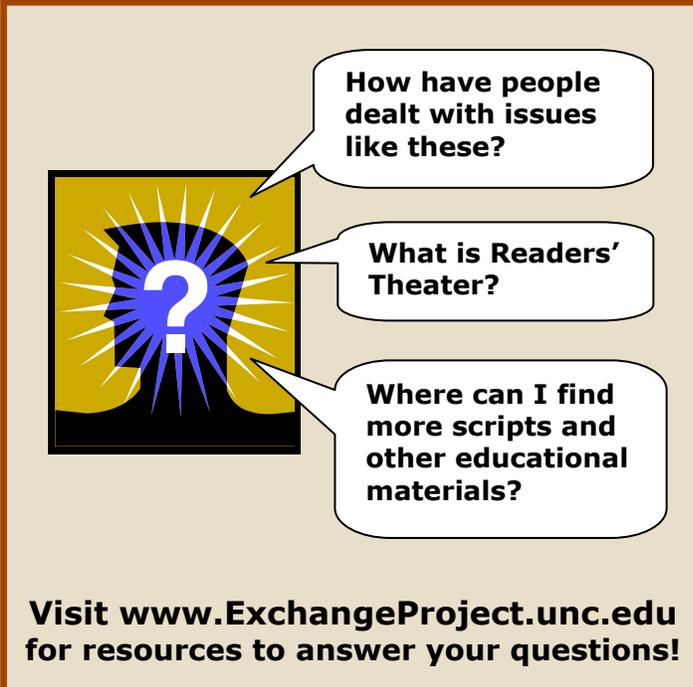
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Background

This script combines elements from several recent situations, and the issues raised by the characters are common concerns of community members and professionals who must deal with environmental hazards.

Faith in Things Not Seen tells the story of a congregation in a small town in North Carolina whose members are concerned that their health may be affected by pollution from a local industry. As the pastor, community members who attend the church, and medical professionals try to understand what is happening, tensions arise within the congregation. The group wrestles with how they know when something is harming them.

To learn how different communities in North Carolina have become aware of health effects from industrial pollutants and how they have dealt with disagreement within their communities, see the list of "Real People, Real Stories" in the Related Links page at the back of this booklet.



How have people dealt with issues like these?

What is Readers' Theater?

Where can I find more scripts and other educational materials?

Visit www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu for resources to answer your questions!

Check out the discussion questions after the script!

Take 5 minutes to get people thinking about the issue before the performance

- How would you know that something in the environment was affecting your health?
- Who would you trust to look into the matter?

FAITH IN THINGS NOT SEEN

ERIN BYRD
Exchange Project

NARRATOR

PASTOR

MRS. DAVIS – Mother to seven-year old Derrick, who has a brain tumor

DR. EDWARDS – doctor at health department

NURSE GINA – nurse at Health Department

MS. CLARK – elementary school teacher and wife of worker at Fantastic Foam and Fiber

Suggested props: Church robes, hats (like people might wear to church), doctor's white coat or other medical supplies such as stethoscope, four chairs

Scenes: Church, main office of local health department, doctor's office

NARRATOR

This story is set in Pine Grove, North Carolina. Pine Grove is a small rural community with only 5,000 residents. It's a beautiful county, but some of the residents are concerned about their air and water quality. They cite Fantastic Foam and Fiber as the responsible party.

Fantastic Foam and Fiber Factory provides 800 jobs to the residents of Pine Grove. The factory produces foam cushions and the process requires the release of certain chemicals. Fantastic Foam and Fiber stores waste in canisters on site and also at the landfill. The Factory claims to have stringent policies and procedures for the storage of its waste. They maintain that they are a valuable community resident and cite their contributions to the local Boys and Girls Club as evidence of their commitment to the community and its future.

This story centers on Pine Grove Baptist Church and its members.

Scene One

[Pine Grove Baptist Church]

NARRATOR

Join us at Pine Grove Baptist Church. You're late. You've missed most of Bible Study, but luckily you'll be able to catch the last few minutes.

PASTOR

I want to raise up the sick and shut-in. You have the list in your bulletin. Please disciples the list grows week after week. In the last year several members have been coming to me to pray for themselves or their family members with illnesses.

Let us pray together.

Lord, we pray for the sick and shut-in. We pray that they will know you are with them in their time of illness. We pray that you will strengthen their bodies, their hearts and their faith in you. We pray that the headaches will ease, the cancer will go into remission, the stomachaches will subside and the rashes will disappear. We pray lord for healing. We know that all things work to the good of those that love you and follow your will. Please forgive us for our sins and we thank you for every blessing. AMEN.

NARRATOR

Mrs. Davis approaches the Pastor after Bible Study.

MRS DAVIS

Pastor, if you have a minute can I talk with you?

PASTOR

Sure, what's going on?

MRS DAVIS

Tomorrow Derrick and I will go see DR. EDWARDS. The doctor suspects that Derrick has a brain tumor. I think it could be connected to the foam factory.

PASTOR

I am really sorry to hear that. Sister Davis, we will all be praying for you. Do you mind if I share this with the congregation? Other things I have seen lately have troubled me. Did you know that over the last several years three of our elder members have had strokes? Also Sister Erickson's daughter has a cancerous tumor in her stomach. I am really concerned about this, but before we make any allegations I think we should talk to someone, maybe the health department?

MRS DAVIS

So are you saying that you trust the government to help us with this? They can't be trusted. They don't care about us.

PASTOR

I wouldn't say that. We need more information. Maybe the health department can help us to find out what's really going on here. I will make a few calls and get back to you.

MRS DAVIS

Okay, well maybe.

PASTOR

Listen, why don't you go home and get some rest. I'll let you know if I find out anything.

Scene Two

[Pine Grove local health department]

NARRATOR

We are now in the Pine Grove local health department's free clinic.

DR. EDWARDS

Gina, how are you doing today?

NURSE

Fine I guess. It's frustrating to have so many people coming in here with the same symptoms and not be able to tell them what's wrong.

DR. EDWARDS

What good do you think will come from telling them what we don't know? We're not sure ourselves what's happening to them. It's best to wait until we know something for sure. What are you going to say when they ask, "Why is this happening to me?"

NURSE

I'll tell them that we are looking into it. But there are so many of them!

DR. EDWARDS

Don't jump to conclusions. You never know. There could be a lot of reasons why this is happening. If some of them lived healthier life styles, then this might not be happening to them. You need to have faith in science. We are conducting multiple tests. We just need more time and we will get to the bottom of this.

[MS DAVIS ENTERS OFFICE]

NURSE

Good Morning, can I help you?

MS DAVIS

We have an appointment with Dr. Edwards.

NURSE

Have a seat and we'll be right with you.

DR. EDWARDS

Hello, Mrs. Davis. Why don't we step into my office?

[DR. EDWARDS and MRS DAVIS move to the office]

DR. EDWARDS

We've gotten all of the tests that we ran last week. At this point, we are pretty sure that Derrick has a brain tumor.

MRS. DAVIS

How can this be? He is only 7 years old. How could this happen?

DR. EDWARDS

It could be genetics - something that runs in your family. I can't be sure until we run a few more tests.

MRS. DAVIS

Could it be the environment? There is a factory near our house. I know that's why my baby is sick.

DR. EDWARDS

Well, we shouldn't jump to conclusions. Science is the best way to solve this mystery. We should run more tests.

MRS DAVIS

Test all you want. I know what's making my baby sick.

DR. EDWARDS

If it makes you feel better, we can ask the environmental health folks at the health department to run tests on your air and water. It's highly unlikely that the factory is making Derrick sick. I'm not sure if we'll find anything. Sometime people just get sick. You need to concentrate on what's best for Derrick. Regardless, I think we should schedule the surgery as soon as possible. I will have the nurse call you to let you know when this afternoon.

MRS DAVIS

Dr. Edwards, I get the feeling that you aren't taking me very seriously. I know the factory is making my baby sick. You need to look into this. I'll wait to hear from the Nurse about the surgery. Thank you. ***[Gets up and leaves abruptly.]***

Scene Three

[Pine Grove Baptist Church]

NARRATOR

Bible Study one week later. The pastor has been in deep meditation and prayer for his congregation. He is struggling because Pine Grove is an old church, with many members who do not like change. His spirit has led him to do something different for Bible Study tonight. Let's join them.

PASTOR

God is Good

CHURCH

All the time

PASTOR

All the Time

CHURCH

God is good.

PASTOR

Good evening church. We are going to do something a little different tonight. Something has been troubling my spirit. It seems that every year more of our congregation succumbs to illness. I've had more sick visits in the last five years than in the previous twenty years of my ministry. Something is going on here and we can no longer act like we have blinders on.

Many have been coming to me to pray for themselves or their family members with illnesses. I have been praying for cancer of all types to go into remission, headaches and stomachaches to subside. I'm very concerned. I want to know what you think or what you have heard.

MRS CLARK

Pastor, aren't we going to talk about scripture?

PASTOR

Sister Davis, the Bible says in Matthew 25:40 that what you do for the least of these you do for me. We must live the scripture, not just talk about it.

MRS DAVIS

Well, I might as well tell everyone now. Dr. Edwards has confirmed that Derrick has a brain tumor.

[Everyone shows their surprise and concern]

MRS DAVIS

We're doing okay. We're doing okay. The medicine the Doctor gave Derrick for his nausea seems to be working. He has surgery on Monday.

PASTOR

Your family is in my prayers.

MRS DAVIS

I know that the factory is responsible.

MRS CLARK

What factory?

PASTOR

Several folks have come to me with concerns about Fantastic. They believe it is responsible for everyone getting sick.

MS. CLARK

We'll let's not jump to conclusions. My husband works at the factory. If it's so bad, then why isn't he getting sick?

PASTOR

I spoke with the Health Department and they are planning to do some tests on the air and water.

MRS DAVIS

It seems like if it was bad enough to study, it should be bad enough to inform folks.

PASTOR

That's the same thing I thought. Maybe they didn't want to alarm folks until they've completed their research.

MRS DAVIS

That's no excuse. That's why I don't trust them. We're getting sick and dying, and they're studying us.

NURSE

Well as you all know, I work at the health department's free clinic. We have had a lot of people come in complaining of headaches and stomach aches. Personally, I think it's just too many people for it not to be related, but you didn't hear that from me. The health department is looking into it. We just need more time.

MS CLARK

Several of my students have been absent from class in recent months with the same complaints, but you know these kids never wash their hands. It could be anything.

PASTOR

I have been hearing similar stories from other disciples. I have also been doing some research. I think many of you believe that the factory is responsible for what's happening, but we need to find out if that's true.

MS. DAVIS

Then we can prove they're making us sick and work to shut the factory down.

NURSE

Do you think that's possible?

MS DAVIS

I have been doing some research. Community organizations and other groups have been able to shut factories and other polluters down. First we need to get proof that it's the factory. Unfortunately that can take several years.

MS CLARK

We all know there aren't any jobs in this county. If we shut the factory down, my husband is out of a job. I'm not going to stand by and let that happen!

PASTOR

Well, time is on our side. If we work together, I think we can figure out what's going on and do what's best for the community. Let's talk strategy for the rest of Bible study tonight. What should our next steps be?

MS CLARK

I came to Bible Study to grow in the word and worship, not to attend a town hall meeting.

MS DAVIS

Look Sister Clark, something is going on here. Can we spend just a few minutes talking a little more? We need to work together. None of us want anyone to lose their job. Stop worrying about that and start thinking about all of the sick kids in your class.

MS CLARK

Don't tell me what I need to be thinking about.

PASTOR

[Interrupts] Sisters, lets get back to the subject at hand. We need to talk about what the next steps for the congregation will be.

THE END

Discussion questions

Performing the script is just the beginning! Readers' Theater scripts are designed to get the audience and performers talking about environmental health issues. For more detailed instructions on how to lead a discussion, download our free facilitation guide at www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu

We have provided two sets of questions to use after the reading. Choose whichever set seems more appropriate to your audience.

Question set 1

Spend 5 minutes "warming up" the discussion.

- What images or words from the performance stick in your memory?
- Was there anything in the performance that you don't understand or that was confusing?

Spend 15 minutes exploring the different perspectives and possible solutions.

- Who did you identify with most strongly in this story?
- How do you think Mrs. Davis felt? Ms. Clark? The pastor? Why do you think they felt the way that they did?
- How do you think Dr. Edwards felt? Why do you think he felt the way he did?
- What do you think the title means? What do you think Mrs. Davis has faith in? Dr. Edwards? Mrs. Clark?
- What is the value of science? Thinking of the conversation between Dr. Edwards and Mrs. Davis, are there any drawbacks to relying on science?

Take 10 minutes to bring the discussion to closure and look toward the future.

- What do you think the next steps for the church should be?
- What would you change about any of the characters to make this story have a different ending?
- When you reflect on this story, what does it make you want to change about your own life or work?

Take 5-10 minutes to wrap up the discussion and conduct an evaluation.

Summarize key points and action steps that arose from the discussion. Thank the readers and audience for their participation! Refer readers to additional resources and related Readers' Theater scripts that cover other aspects of how the environment affects our health. Suggest that they continue the dialogue by asking other people in their lives what they think. Finally, ask readers and observers to complete an evaluation of the event before they leave.

Question set 2

Spend 5-10 minutes on Observations & Reflection

- What one word would describe what you saw?
- What characters or issues did you feel most strongly about?

Spend 10 minutes on Interpretation

- Why do you think that Mrs. Davis felt the way that she did? How about Dr. Edwards? Ms. Clark? The Pastor?
- Why do you think that situations like this happen?

Spend 10 minutes on Decisions (Awareness → Action)

- If you could put yourself in the place of any one of the characters, what would you do differently?
- When you reflect on this story, what does it make you want to change about your own life or work?

Other related materials

Other materials available through www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu

Real People, Real Stories

How did real people deal with the issues from *Faith in Things Not Seen*?

Glenola (Randolf County): In 1997, Trinity American Corporation, Inc., a foam and fiber manufacturer was closed after community members began reporting health problems and noxious fumes. After the company closed, workers picketed the health department.

Salisbury (Rowan): Residents of Milford Hills got help from local, state, and federal officials to pressure the local asphalt industry to control odors and to examine the health effects of the industry. Research studies concluded that there were no health effects of the asphalt plan fumes, but some community members felt that these studies were not well done.

Shiloh (Wake): Residents were successful in getting the help of government to investigate water and soil contamination by chemicals from a nearby wood treatment plant and forcing the polluter to provide an alternate water supply to the community.

Aquadale (Stanly): After 12 years of investigation, litigation, and community pressure, Carolina Solite, a manufacturer of concrete blocks, was forced to stop burning hazardous waste as fuel. Local residents believe that emissions from the plant are associated with health problems they have observed; however, these suspicions have not been confirmed.

Research on industrial pollution

Learn more about research into industrial pollution and its health effects.

Facilitation guide

Need a hand planning how to lead a Readers' Theater performance and discussion? Check out our easy-to-read guide!

Links

Find links to governmental and community organizations to see what they have to say about industrial pollution, and find links to relevant news.

About the scriptwriter

Erin Byrd serves as the director of Southerners for Economic Justice (SEJ), a social justice organization committed to strengthening the voices and improving the quality of life of the most economically vulnerable persons in our state. Erin served for three years as the Director of Voters for Clean Elections, the North Carolina campaign finance reform coalition that was instrumental in the passage of the state's Judicial Public Financing reform bill. In addition to her duties at SEJ, Erin facilitates a parenting class for Prison MATCH, a program that works to strengthen bonds between incarcerated mothers and their children.

Erin is the Treasurer of the NC Black Leadership Caucus. She serves as the Board Chair of Democracy South, a regional multi-issue coalition of progressive organizations across the south. She also serves on the Southeast Raleigh Assembly, an advisory board to the Raleigh City Council. She has recently completed the Community Builders Learning Project.

A graduate of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, Erin has two sons, Hausson & Jai.