“Mark! Do you want these asparagus? If you don’t take them, they’ll go bad,” says Tina Johnson. “Sure,” I reply, knowing that the asparagus had already endured a final round of weekly sales activity and, without refrigeration, probably wouldn’t last another week.

It was a year ago, and the end of my Saturday morning volunteer shift as a cashier at the Community Grocery Co-op, a market in Chester, Pa., a downtrodden post-industrial city of 35,000 people. The Co-op is an experiment in food democracy and sustainable living. Tina Johnson, its director, purchases wholesale fruit and vegetables—much of it locally grown—and, at that time, retailed her goods twice weekly in a jazz club in downtown Chester. It’s the only grocery store in Chester open on a daily basis because the supermarket chains have redlined the city as too great a financial risk.

In poor, minority communities awash in chronic environmental and health problems, services like the Co-op are a lifeline for residents where fresh, affordable food is not easily found. In these settings, food security—ready access to reasonably priced and nutritious food for healthy living—is a form of environmental justice. Chesterites like Tina Johnson, a longtime community activist, partner with local farmers to support regional food production without relying on the fuel-intensive and land-depleting agriculture that underpins the globalized food economy.

The Co-op also increases Chester’s social capital by uniting the city around good eating, but it lacks the financial capital to fully support its mission. Without a steady source of income, the Co-op must purchase foodstuffs one week with the proceeds from what it sold the week before. A year ago, it could not afford the basic trappings of most grocery stores: shelving, signage, carts, even refrigeration. And without refrigeration, a lot of the produce quickly spoiled. So on that spring morning, after a good day of strong sales, I was happy to take home some leftover asparagus at the end of my shift—but also sad that an enterprise so vital to the health of the community is so marginal that it can’t afford to bind over week-to-week its principal product, fresh produce.

The lack of access to good food in many inner-city communities is an environmental justice problem embedded within a host of other social and economic issues. Only a holistic analysis of the systemic forces that tie together seemingly disconnected social pathologies can make sense of—and provide solutions for—the eco-crisis in urban communities today. The quest for eco-justice and sustainable living in blighted communities is inextricably linked, for example, to the need for good schools and workforce development. Chester has become a poster child for small U.S. cities that have all the problems of big city life with few of the resources to tackle them. The quest for sustainable eco-justice in Chester—and other inner-city communities—only makes sense in relation to a deeper understanding of the historic, economic, and political forces that have fueled the crisis.

In Chester, the “American Dream” has failed struggling individuals and families mired in failing schools; dangerous environmental conditions; and low-paying, dead-end jobs—or no jobs at all. But I and others live in hope that the city’s dire conditions will change.

HOPE AMIDST DESPAIR
In 2003, I forged a covenant relationship among clergy and activists in Chester and nearby Swarthmore. I’d heard about some of Chester’s urban prophets, and I wanted to be part of the transformation and hope that these agents for change were bringing to the city. Chester is a gritty urban community. Swarthmore is a leafy green college town. My Chester colleagues and I have crossed racial and cultural divisions in order to make our collaboration work. This has not been easy.
Mistakes have been made and misunderstandings have arisen. The central message of the Christian gospel is straightforward: Follow Jesus by committing oneself to radical personal and social transformation. St. Paul writes in Philippians: “Have the mind of Christ, who was in the form of God, but emptied himself, became a servant, and suffered death on a cross—and therefore, God raised him up” (2:5-9). The Christian way is to follow Jesus through self-emptying and resurrection hope. Self-emptying means abandoning self-gratification in order to serve the interests of others. Resurrection hope is the confidence that God is able to raise up everyday people to revolutionize systemically distorted structures, no matter how hopeless and entrenched these structures might appear to be. I cannot work in Chester without such hope. For me, the dysfunction is too deeply entrenched, the pain and suffering too long-standing to be overcome without it.

Yet tragically, Christians are notorious for translating the language of hope into vapid pie-in-the-sky foolishness. Antebellum white ministers infamously told African slaves that the object of Christian hope is not changed conditions in this world but blissful existence in the world beyond. Today as well, many clergy counsel the faithful to avoid large-scale justice movements in favor of personal salvation and morality. But this type of politically indifferent, otherworldly religion has nothing to do with the message of Jesus. At the inauguration of his public ministry in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus quotes the Book of Isaiah, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set free all of those who are oppressed” (4:18-19). Remembering Paul's mandate to have the mind of Christ, the real Christian message is clear: be like Jesus through solidarity with the poor, the incarcerated, the disabled, and all others who are oppressed in any way. This revolutionary social theme is the essential thread that ties together the whole Bible.

THE SHREDDED FABRIC OF CHESTER
As in many blighted, drug-infested areas, the social and economic fabric of Chester has been shredded by three equally powerful forces: a school-to-prison educational system, ecological violence, and poverty pimping—profiting from the misfortunes of others by appearing to act on their behalf. Chester’s schools are among the worst in Pennsylvania. City residents have the lowest literacy rate in the state, and the school district is consistently ranked 499th or last among the 500 school systems in Pennsylvania according to standardized test scores. During the past two decades, the school district has been managed by a for-profit “education” vendor that propelled the schools’ downward slide and then later by a politically appointed part-time overseer with a track record of financial misconduct and political cronyism. The result is that most students from grades one through 12 cannot read at grade level, the high school dropout rate is 50 percent, and almost as many high school students commit crimes and become incarcerated as graduate and go to college (about five to six percent in both cases).

But there is hope amidst the despair. Both the for-profit school manager and the corrupt overseer were thrown out in favor of a new state-appointed oversight board. The community worked tirelessly to bring down the previous manager and overseer and is guardedly optimistic that the new school board will move away from the “plantation” management style of the past to fully incorporating the voices and interests of teachers, parents, and children in the decision-making process.

Chester’s environmental crisis is a twofold problem that stems from chronic poverty. On one hand, food security looms large in impoverished neighborhoods where groceries must be bought on the cheap. On the other, the degradation of Chester’s physical environment is now firmly established because its economy is partially dependent upon

At dawn on a summer morning, the Chester Co-op lights up the street with hope. This year, the organization moved from borrowed space in a local jazz club to a new facility with proper shelving and refrigeration to remain open six days a week.

Many clergy counsel the faithful to avoid large-scale justice movements in favor of personal salvation and morality. But this type of politically indifferent, otherworldly religion has nothing to do with the message of Jesus.
the management of toxic wastes within the city. In economically distressed communities, the waste industry’s assurances of a stabilized tax base and jobs for unemployed residents are impossible to resist. But what is the real cost of such promises? Four waste-treatment facilities now make Chester their home—a sewage treatment plant, a metal-recycling plant, a regional incinerator, and a medical-waste autoclave (currently not operating). The clustering of waste industries only a few yards from residential areas has brought about an infestation of rodents, noxious odors, hundreds of trucks a day at all hours, and toxic air emissions.

Resurrection hope propels me and other area residents to resist the imposition of environmental hazards on Chester. We march in the streets, meet with community officials, and attend regulatory hearings to fight against toxic racism. In recent years, at the urging of local citizens, the state did not approve the siting of a soil treatment plant, a local paper mill was not allowed to burn tires for fuel, a biotech firm that would have increased overall pollution in the area was kept out, and the sewage treatment plant was successfully sued by nearby residents for violating federal and state air and water pollution laws.

Finally, Chester boasts a spectacular waterfront along the Delaware River—once home to shipbuilding and manufacturing jobs. But the industrial base collapsed two generations ago, rendering the riverfront a wasteland of empty factories and crumbling infrastructure. Recently, the waterfront has been designated an economic development zone, attracting, among other industries, a Harrah’s casino and major league soccer stadium—which promised to make lots of tax-free money for its developers, since new businesses in development zones have been exempted from property taxes until 2013. Instead of being required to make measurable commitments to workforce development as a prerequisite for setting up shop, the casino, stadium, and other developers are grabbing up valuable riverfront real estate and offering little to local workers in exchange.

Community activists and clergy formed the Fair Deal Coalition to pressure city government and new developers (e.g., Harrah’s) to finance the workforce and skills development necessary for Chester’s poor
to compete in the economic boom the new waterfront growth promises. But in light of the city’s broken schools, the economic benefits of the casino and stadium will not flow toward residents without a focused effort to train and employ its underserved population. Unless city officials can be persuaded to fund sustainable economic development for disadvantaged residents, Chester’s new economic order will be built on the backs of low-income, minority residents.

A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM

In recent years, a new environmental problem has confronted communities such as Chester: epidemic levels of obesity and diabetes among both adults and children. At one time, poor diets in urban areas led to underweight residents. Today, poverty and food insecurity mean more Americans are becoming overweight—and suffering from obesity-related diseases—by relying on added high-fat and high-sugar diets. The alarming rise in obesity rates is evident in body mass measurement data since the 1960s. By the year 2000, 65 percent of the U.S. adult population was overweight, and the climb in obesity among children has been even more alarming.

Since the 1960s, the rate of obesity among children and adolescents has more than tripled, and the current rate of overweight and obese children is roughly 30 percent. Of even greater concern, 15 percent of preschoolers aged 2 to 5 are overweight. Overweight children can experience low self-esteem, poor body image, and isolation from their peers. And medically, serious lifelong disabilities such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease can be caused by obesity. Indeed, the surge in cases among children and teens of type-2 diabetes is particularly alarming, because type-2 used to be considered primarily an adult-onset disease. This form of diabetes is not a congenital condition and is entirely preventable by eating a healthy diet and getting regular exercise.

But the very social conditions that

make healthy eating and exercise part of a child’s life have rotted away in many urban settings. Adult caregivers feel pressured and distracted; healthy food options are limited and often expensive; and leisure time—especially in neighborhoods with high crime rates where children are at risk of injury—is now more devoted to sedentary indoor pursuits such as watching television or playing video games than to outdoor play and activities. These factors conspire to keep kids hooked on low-quality, high-fat diets of junk calories and fast food that create the false sensation of having one’s hunger satisfied.

At first glance, the urban food problem may not seem like an environmental issue. When we think about “environmentalism” we often think about wilderness preservation or battling big polluters in urban settings. But food insecurity, along with the concomitant health problems it spawns, is just as much an environmental problem as saving forests and wetlands or protecting city neighborhoods from polluters.

Yes, it is wrong for waste haulers to dump and process trash in disempowered cities that have been hoodwinked by the promotional pitch that the waste industry can revitalize these particular areas. But it is just as wrong for supermarket chains—the primary providers, for good or ill, of basic nutrition for most Americans—to reline a whole city by declaring it off-limits to grocery store investment. In the case of the waste industry and the food industry, the real driving force is obeisance to the god of the market. Market forces dictate what forms of development can and cannot take place in America's struggling cities.

Many believe that the government's legal apparatus should be pressed into the service of insuring education and health coverage for most citizens—especially for children. But most Americans do not think that clean ecosystems or access to good food is a natural right. For this reason, I think the

The Chester Co-op both is and is not about food. Its mission is to provide fresh nutritious food at affordable prices. But it also helps develop the community’s sense of pride and leadership.

Opposite: Co-op director Tina Johnson selects fruit at the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market. She has also developed relationships with local farms that directly supply the Co-op with meat and produce. Right: Johnson completes her purchases as Jeff Cao ’10, a Co-op intern, looks on.
eco-justice crisis today is twofold: It stems from the dangerous clustering of biohazards in communities already suffering from ill health—and it consists of the total absence, as is the case of Chester, of any viable food sources to nourish city dwellers.

The Chester Co-op both is and is not about food. On the one hand, its mission is to provide fresh nutritious produce at affordable prices to local residents by establishing good relations with local farmers to supply the store. But on the other, it helps develop the community’s sense of pride and leadership.

Obesity and diabetes haunt urban neighborhoods cut off from mainstream retail stores. Chester has not had a supermarket for more than a decade. Residents have had to travel out of town to shop and many do not have their own transportation for this purpose. The Co-op addresses the problem of food security and the health crisis with an elegantly simple business model: Members own and run the store themselves. This keeps prices low, stops the loss of inventory through theft and spoilage, and generates few administrative overhead costs because “member-owners” contribute to the venture by working in the store three hours per month.

The Co-op teaches residents how to manage a for-profit business. The store makes a direct investment in human capital, strengthening urban-rural ties to area farms as well. It develops residents’ life skills and management potential in a convivial, democratic work environment. The Co-op’s oversight board and membership meetings are run by local folk, many of whom have never held positions of responsibility. At a recent meeting, the convener began with the following: “I have never spoken before a group before and want to thank Tina and the rest of you for giving me the opportunity to lead this meeting.”

The emerging field of sustainability economics speaks about the “triple bottom line” in successful green businesses for the 21st century. Such enterprises not only produce financial capital but also develop human and environmental capital through just management-employee relations and sustainable relations with the natural world. The Chester Co-op is an eco-justice experiment that has made healthy nutrition a living option for hard-working urban dwellers.

As an eco-justice-seeking enterprise, the Chester Co-op market is an exercise in sustainable agriculture. It provides an alternative model of healthy food consumption and just relations with our human and animal neighbors. Its whole-grain bread is produced by a local bakery, its eggplants are harvested down the street through an urban garden project, its peaches and corn come from nearby farms in Pennsylvania’s Amish country. The Co-op cannot get all of its produce locally, but it continues to strive to offer shoppers positive food choices that are not dependent on the high-fat, high-sugar products the global food system delivers to low-income families, posing health risks that are now reaching epidemic proportions.

Today, the Christian gospel has been co-opted by politicians and preachers who trumpet personal morality at the expense of fighting against the structural conditions that lock down America’s underclass in depraved and dehumanizing urban environments. This is a betrayal of the Christian message. The defining feature of Jesus’ ministry was solidarity with the poor and oppressed. To be a revolutionary Christian today is to follow in Jesus’ steps and care for the marginalized and forgotten in a world hell bent on unsustainable agricultural and economic policies. When despair for the world overwhelms me, the problems of Chester and the wider planet seem impossible to overcome. But then I recall Jesus’ life of compassion and liberation, and I am empowered to live to fight another day.

Mark Wallace is professor of religion. This essay is adapted from his book Green Christianity: Five Ways to a Sustainable Future, © 2010 by Fortress Press. It is reproduced by permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers. All rights reserved.