



**A STUDY GUIDE  
FOR FAITH  
COMMUNITIES**

# FLINT

The Poisoning of an American City

## Story Productions



Story Productions is a ministry of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance that exists to connect, engage, and equip communities through the medium of narrative. This study guide is available to anyone who wishes to organize a screenings and host and dive deeper into the themes that *Flint* explores. For many information about PDA or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) please visit [PCUSA.ORG](http://PCUSA.ORG).

## Why Flint?

*“Films like the one you are going to see tonight are so important because they won’t let people forget what is still happening in Flint. Films like this one keep Flint’s story alive and underscore that what happened in Flint isn’t an isolated tragedy. It’s happening all over our country to people who don’t have the influence and the political power to fight back. But we will fight back, and we will not stop until every single American’s right to clean drinking water is safe and secure.” - **Former U.S. Congressman Elijah Cummings, October 7, 2019***

In 2014, 100,000 people were exposed to lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan. This film gives voice to the on-going struggle of city residents and follows the environmental history of the river and how its abuse, the neglect of city infrastructure, and a disregard for environmental regulations led to life-long health conditions and risks for its residents. In the film we explore the critical question of how this could happen in America, and demonstrate why this event should serve as a warning for the rest of the country. A 2016 report found that 5,300 American cities were found to be in violation of federal lead rules, and research published in USA Today described excessive lead in nearly 2,000 public water systems across all 50 states. This documentary educates but also inspires action, and seeks to radically change how we view and value water. Let this resource serve as a companion to you as you reflect internally and turn outwardly to consider ways to end environmental racism and to support water justice efforts at the local, regional, and national level.

## Discussion Layout



The questions in this study guide move through the film sequentially and encourage dialogue between its protagonists' stories and the viewers own experiences.

The prompts are crafted with a wide audience in mind and suggest that the facilitator to pick and choose questions that seem most relevant for the group or individual viewer's context.

For those who are using this study guide within a church setting, there are suggested scripture readings at the end of each chapter that may be used to aid discussion and complement the film's chapters.

## Leading with Care

It's worth noting that for many people, narrative brings the impacts of trauma into fuller consciousness. Some parts of *Flint* may be difficult to watch if you have trauma history or you are sensitive to the listening to the traumatic experiences of others.

Facilitators are encouraged to start each chapter with a check in. This may seem trivial but it often goes a long way in terms of preparing yourself or your group to engage emotionally and remain present.

- If you would benefit from specific guidance on facilitating a trauma-informed screening, please see pages 11-12 in the
- [Flint Grassroots Screening Kit](#).

## Fabric of Life



1. The history of Flint is similar to many other towns and cities in the United States. Do you have a personal connection to a similar city?

*“Many, many of my colleagues’ goal was to graduate from high school and get a job at Buick or get a job at Chevrolet, or AC Spark Plug so they could raise their family the way their father and mother raised them. Most of the people who came here to work came from smaller towns. You could come to Flint and you knew there would be a home built for you.” -- David Smith, Flint Resident*

2. How does the film describe the city of Flint becoming a center of hope for women and for Black communities?

3. Is there anything that would lead you to leave the place you call home?

4. Knowing what has happened in the past 100 years, was it worth it for the folks who moved to Flint?

*“They took pride in owning a house, every yard was manicured, people kept their homes up. The best place to live at one point in time, and this was the richest city in the country, and the best place to get your kid educated”-- Gordon Strozier - Flint Resident*  
*“When women became part of the industrial organization, Buick was the leader in equality progress.” -- David Smith, Flint Resident*

*“This town was one of the premiere cities in the nation.” -- Fran Holmes, Flint Resident*

5. What do you think made Flint the premiere city in the 1970s? What makes a city the premiere city nowadays? Did Flint have those characteristics?

6. How does a premiere city affect its citizens, their morals and aspirations? Is there a generational effect to this?

## Fabric of Life

*"I remember they would chase us across Dupont Street, and they didn't want us over on this other side of Chevrolet or Dupont..."* Gordon Strozier, Flint Resident

7. Racial prejudice was ever present everywhere in the United States, and despite its progress in employment, Flint was no exception to other forms of race-based discrimination. Can you identify subtle ways racism remains present in your own context?

*"They wouldn't even have graduated from high school and they were making 40, 50, \$60,000 a year."* -- Fran Holmes, Flint Resident

8. What are some ways the automotive industry impacted the values and cultural perspectives of its employees and other Flint citizens?

9. What was the automotive industry's role in building generational wealth for families of color throughout the 1970s and 1980s?

*"GM provided us with a good living, although no one in either of our families ever worked for GM, but this city was made on GM."* -- Fran Holmes, Flint Resident

10. What are some organizations or companies you have loyalties to? What motivates your loyalties to them?

11. What would you identify as the fabric of life for the community you are a part of? Does it affect the structure of your family, life, and work?

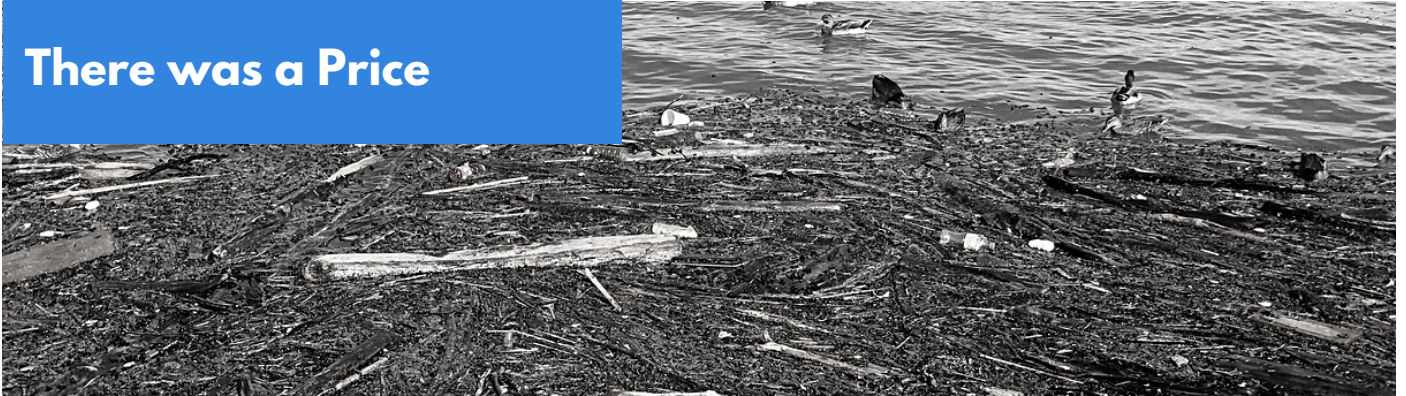
*"What happened here is now happening in other places. It could happen in any city in the United States. It did happen in the city of Flint, Michigan."* -- Narrator from the short documentary, Flint: The Great Community

12. The story told in this chapter is the story of many cities across the United States, particularly in the midwest. Do any other city stories come to mind as you reflect on the story of Flint?

### Scripture References:

- Genesis 12:1-9
- John 4:4-15

## There was a Price



1. In this deluge of environmental history of the Flint River what were some of the facts that stood out in your mind?

*“Some of the founding fathers in the automotive industry brought this community to its industry heydays, where the population grew tremendously because of the rich jobs, the booming economy, which the industry brought...”* -- Dr. Larry Kage, Osteopathic Physician and Professor

2. What were some consequences of Flint's fast population growth? What do you think the responsibilities of the stakeholders--be it the city, industry, or individuals-- who were living through the industrial boom?

*“General Motors did a lot over the last 30 years to eliminate polluting the river at that point in time, but it couldn't make up for the 100 years prior”* -- Dr. Larry Kage

3. Are there ways your community is dealing with long histories of doing damage to the environment?

*“They didn't make all the upgrades they needed to treat river water because that's just the temporary source, they only wanted to make the upgrades to treat lake water.”* -- Anna Clark, author of *The Poisoned City: Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy*

4. Does bankruptcy (corporate, municipal, or personal) absolve entities from a moral obligation to care for a natural resources?

5. Can you think of a time in your life where you “didn't make all the upgrades” or didn't give it your all because it was a temporary situation? What happened?

## There was a Price

6. Minute 22:18 mentions an EPA whistleblower who came forward one year after the problems with the switch to the Flint River were made known. What do you think made this person come forward?

*"You can't trust that the water that's coming into your house is going to be clean. You have to do your own research, you have to do your own tests."* -- Brenda Finkbeiner

7. Do you trust the authorities in your community when it comes to your water sources? Why or not why not?

8. Do you know where the substances you pour down the drain go in your city? Do you feel like you've been given good information about what can be dumped into your regional water sources and what can't?

10. Have you ever gone swimming in a river or lake and gotten sick afterwards? Was it serious? What are some ways you think this could be prevented?

### Scriptural References:

- 1 Timothy 6:6-10
- Psalm 23

*"Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But 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. For 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 TIM 6:6-10 (NRSV)

## There is No Safe Level of Lead



1. Whose personal story were you the most affected by? What made you identify with that person?

2. Have you ever had any kind of disaster in your home that felt beyond your control? How did it make you feel and how did you respond?

*“My wife, her father is in the hospital now. It has directly to do with ingested water...when we went to go visit him, that whole floor was full of people that had ingested the water.” -- Mika Rashid, Flint Resident*

*“Everybody's different. Some people lose their hair, some people's skin peel, some people's skin sore up, and some people die.” -- Alicia Nicola Sears, Flint Resident*

*“Some people, their immune system is breaking down, some people, it affects their digestive system, and... the lead, it's killing brain cells.” -- Mika Rashid, Flint Resident*

3. How do you think the state government should have responded to its massive health crisis?

*“There's nothing worse than not being able to protect your child because five years, ten years down the road, you just don't know... .. Someone referred to the children as the lead people. It is a way that people are dehumanized. What will happen to them?” -- Lisa Horne, Flint Resident*

4. What are some ways we can as a community and as individuals take on the respond to a generation of people who have been harmed through no fault of their own?

*“When you have 100,000 people who are potentially impacted all at the same time by the inability to safely drink our most basic need and they're denied that, that's a disaster.” -- Todd Lamb, Flint Resident*

5. As we sit in the middle of a global pandemic, what can we do to prepare for a generation of people who will be deeply afflicted by this disaster?



## There is No Safe Level of Lead

*“Sweep it under the rug, everybody shuts up, just drink the water. You pay for it in the future. Eventually, you give up, and they're hoping everyone in Flint's going to do it, just give up and keep their mouth shut.” -- Jim Dixon, Flint Resident*

7. What are the systemic issues that are being swept under the rug in your community? What are some ways that individual people can bring these things into the light? What can you personally do about it?

*“I hear a lot of pain and suffering. I hear people with little hope. I hear people who cannot have their small questions answered. I hear that they are tired of being lied to, either it doesn't matter what gender you are, it doesn't matter what color you are, if I may say it just that simply. We're all very priceless, but the system here is telling you that you're not worth anything, you're just a guinea pig.” -- Fred Jones, Flint Resident*

8. What are some of the generational implications to the families of Flint? What do you think restitution could look like in Flint? What about in your own community regarding your own issues of injustice?

9. Systemic racism, much like the lead in the water of countless citizens of Flint, is embedded deeply into the fabric of the U.S. While it often feels like there is little we can do, what is one thing you can do today that will help give power back to communities that have been disenfranchised?

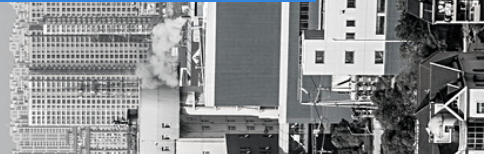
*“Fear is not the place we want to live.” --Rev. Desiree Lawson*

10. When hearing grave news or facing difficult circumstances, what are some things you or your family does to remain courageous?

### Scriptural References

- Acts 5:1-4
- Exodus 3

## This isn't Supposed to be Happening in America



1 How do you feel about living in America? Grateful, privileged, ashamed, ambivalent something else? How did hearing this sentiment about the U.S. "not being a third world country" land for you?

*"When I think about a crisis, I think about you're at a turning point. You get to a point where it's so bad that things have to change. We keep hearing about the Flint water crisis, are we in a crisis? It has become a way of life for people in Flint, and it shouldn't."* -- Rev. Desiree Lawson

2. We are currently in another crisis, a global pandemic, but it has also become a way of life. How do we remain vigilant to stay safe and healthy, while also continuing to attend to all the other functions of daily life?

*"This is a water treatment issue, this is not a leadership issue, this is not who's responsible, who can we blame, this is how do we fix a bad situation and make it better for a community that's now only about 60 miles from where I live?"* -- Darnell Earley, State Appointed Emergency Manager

*"Poison is poison, my friend, no matter how you try to mask it. How much is it going to cost the public? How much is it going to cost the politicians who initiated and allowed this to occur? Or should I say what is it going to cost? Because as you know, many are attempting to distance themselves right now."* -- Fred Jones, Flint Resident

3. When dealing with complex social and environmental issues it could be said that there isn't one, singular guilty person or entity. However, in the case of Flint do you think that some people or institutions are more responsible than others for what happened? Why or why not?

*"It's really important for people to know that an emergency manager appointed by the state and supervised by the state and accountable to the state government was in charge of Flint throughout the entirety of all the critical decisions of this water crisis."* - Anna Clark

4. In a democratic society we expect our elected leaders to protect us, what do you think should happen when leaders fail to represent our safety and interests?

## This isn't Supposed to be Happening in America

*"If you can suppress the people, you can suppress their ideas, you can suppress their freedom, you can suppress their thoughts. Unfortunately, Flint is the testing ground for this endeavor... .. These are the times that we're in, when the general population is so weakened, or should I say so intimidated that their small voices become insignificant." -- Fred Jones, Flint Resident*

5. What can we do to make sure that the voice of the citizens are not silenced and are represented in all levels of government?

*"When they first started testing, they brought the results back, someone there said, "Oh, well, it's Flint, so it's okay. We don't really have to move on it." I was like, "What does that mean? 'Oh, it's just Flint'?" - Rev. Desiree Lawson*

6. The Michigan Civil Rights Commission wrote a report on that concludes that "the ongoing effects of "systemic racism" that repeatedly led to disparate racial outcomes...and the Flint Water Crisis." While changes have been made, laws passed, and pipes changed, as of Spring 2020, there are still many homes that have not had their pipes replaced, including Jim Dixon's from the film. How did the systemic racism get so disparate in Flint? What are some ways systemic racism is playing out in your community?

*"Most of the document is redacted, but we can see that number 36 on the list, number 36 on the list, was the Flint water system...Shouldn't the children and the residents of Flint had been higher on your priority list, Mr. Governor?" -- Congressman Elijah Cummings*

7. What are the factors that make an issue rise or drop on the priority list of a governing body? What do you think are the factors that made the Flint water system #36 on the list?

### Scriptural References

Exodus 1:8-14

James 2:1-4

## Flint Is Just the Beginning



1. Can you think of a time when your community rallied together to overcome a seemingly impossible situation?
2. Do you view water wells as a public or private resources? What about rivers, lakes, and oceans? How do you think we should delineate between public and private resources?

*"... in terms of complying with the current roles and not hurting the aquifer and making sure we continue to have water for other uses, it's in compliance with that." -- Former Michigan Governor, Rick Snyder*

3. In Michigan, multi-billion dollar corporation Nestle pumps and bottles Great Lakes water for \$200 a year. In contrast, the state of Alaska pays out a dividend to all of its citizens each year from oil pumped from public land. Do you think there is an argument for either of these systems being solution that benefits the community?
4. Do you believe it is important to follow the "letter", the "spirit" of the law, or some combination of the both? Are there instances in your life where you have wrestled with this question?

*"For \$200 a year, to be able to pump water out of that when you could be making profits anywhere from a million to potentially a billion, what's the game plan for later on? What's going to happen is if that resource goes dry?"-- Alicia Douglas, Founder of WaterRising Institute*

5. If natural resources are consumed for profit, who, if anyone, do you think should benefit?

*"We have 19th century water policy, we have 20th century infrastructure, and we have 21st century challenges, with respect to water." -- Dr. William Sarni, Hydrogeologist and Professor*

6. When these three histories come together, what are some of the timeless values that can guide us finding solutions to our intensifying climate crisis?

## Flint Is Just the Beginning

*“In the U.S., we flush our toilets with potable water, we water our lawns with potable water, we wash our cars with potable water. When you think about how we create that gallon of safe drinking water, that's a big investment. You don't have to treat water to drinking water standards to flush your toilet. We have to value it.” -- Dr. William Sarni*

7. Why do you think that mainstream U.S. society typically does not invest time, money, or energy to treat its water sources as a precious resource to protect?

*“Moving [water] to personhood status provides a different level of legal protection for those rivers as a natural resource, as opposed to an environmental regulation that governs how the water is used.” -- Dr. William Sarni*

8. What would it be like to extend the idea of personhood to natural resources such as water or a river? What are the positives and negatives that could come about from this idea?

*“Remembering is a very holy and helpful thing. If you can remember the devastation, the destruction, you also have to remember the rebuilding.” - Rev. Desiree Lawson*

9. How can disaster recovery build deeper roots and create a stronger community?

*“When we design public water systems in the first place, the infrastructure traces the shape of all the people who belong in our community. It's literally the outline.” -- Anna Clark*

10. In a neighborhood or community, water connections physically join neighbors knowingly and unknowingly. In what other ways have you seen natural resources bind communities together?

*“I feel as though, in years to come, that Flint is somehow going to be one that has come back.” - Rev. Desiree Lawson*

11. Reflecting on the challenges of the Flint, especially now that they have been compounded by COVID-19, do you think it's still possible for Flint to “come back?” What would it look like to come back?

### Scriptural References

- Mark 2:1-12
- Psalm 42



Photo by ACT/Shishir Kurian



Photo by Mike Fitzer



Photo by ACT/Håvard Bjelland

**Water is mentioned in the bible 722 times**, starting in Genesis and ending in Revelation. Water has been ever present in this world since creation. It is essential to every living form and we ourselves are more made up of water than anything else. Water is a gift from God intended for all people.

In the Bible it is often referenced as a source of life and a way of purification. Here are some scriptural references that may be helpful to study and reference in shaping how we think of water.

- Genesis 1:2
- Exodus 17:1-7 (6)
- Exodus 30:17-21 (20)
- Psalms 1:1-4 (3)
- Proverbs 25:21, 25
- Isaiah 55:1
- Jeremiah 22:13
- Ezekiel 36:22-32 (26)
- Ezekiel 47: 1-12 (9)
- Matthew 3:13-17
- Matthew 25:35-40
- John 4:14
- Hebrews 10:19-25 (22)
- Revelation 22:17

*"...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And 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.'*  
MATT 25:35-40 (NRSV)



# **PRESBYTERIAN DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

**OUT OF CHAOS, HOPE**

*Presbyterian Disaster Assistance  
(PDA) is the emergency and refugee  
program of the Presbyterian Church  
(U.S.A.)*

*PDA recognizes the value and  
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