I have been to the mountaintop, but it wasn’t there:

Christian Responses to Mountaintop Removal
Coal Mining in Appalachia

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This paper is dedicated to the residents of Appalachia who fight daily to save their homes from mountaintop removal coal mining. Blessings to all of you - may you all have cause for celebration in the near future.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“Unions, communities, people, everybody's going to have to learn to accept that in the United States you have a capitalist society, and that capitalism, from a business viewpoint, is survival of the most productive.”
--Don Blankenship, C.E.O. of Massey Energy

Carmelita and Ernie Brown live in Rawl, West Virginia, downstream from a mountaintop removal site operated by Massey Energy, the biggest coal company in the state. Ernie Brown is a former coal miner, following in the footsteps of his ancestors. Carmelita and Ernie have been drinking, cooking with, and bathing in their well water for as long as they can remember. Over the past decade, however, Carmelita and Ernie have noticed a drastic change. They and their neighbors began contracting mysterious illnesses, rashes, and cancers. Carmelita started to suffer from kidney stones and other ailments. The community’s health as a whole rapidly deteriorated. No one could account for why the people of Rawl, WV had such an abnormally high rate of sickness; that is, until they began testing the water.

Independent scientists who conducted tests on Rawl residents’ water were horrified at what they found: arsenic, manganese, lead, barium, selenium, aluminum, and trace amounts of many other toxins. This testing occurred several years ago; since then, the water has gotten even worse. Until Carmelita and Ernie won a recent legal battle to receive water from the city line, their tap water would emerge from the faucet a deep, murky brown, with a sickening sulfurous stench. Put a tablet of Pepto-Bismol in the water, and it turned solid black. The Browns realized that they were being poisoned

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3 In the case of Pepto-Bismol, black discoloration is typically a response to high levels of bacteria in water.
from the toxins in their water, and they could easily trace the pollutants uphill to the massive mountaintop removal site above their house.

Mountaintop removal is an extremely destructive form of surface mining that involves blasting the tops off of mountains to extract the coal seams beneath. Coal companies began experimenting with mountaintop removal mining in the 1970’s in their search for the cheapest, easiest way of extracting coal. A highly mechanized activity, mountaintop removal eliminates the need for the hundreds of workers that deep mines typically employ, leading coal companies to embrace the practice as economical and practical. Ironically, most proponents of mountaintop removal cite the need for employment in Appalachia and criticize mountaintop removal opponents for prioritizing the environment over people’s jobs. Yet the advent of mountaintop removal has precipitated a sharp decrease in the number of coal mining jobs available throughout Appalachia, demonstrating that the practice is beneficial only to the industry, not to the local people.

Demand for fossil fuels has driven the expansion of mountaintop removal mining across Appalachia. The Appalachian Mountains, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, are being systematically eliminated by the coal industry in favor of cheap extraction of dirty coal. Mountaintop removal has completely decimated southern West Virginia, as well as parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, and southwest Virginia. [See Appendix A for a map of the region where mountaintop removal is taking place]. Currently, almost five hundred mountains (more than one million acres) in Appalachia have been destroyed in this process, and many more are endangered.\footnote{Alliance for Appalachia, “Mountaintop Removal Facts” Booklet.}
Mountaintop removal mining represents an environmental, social, spiritual, and public health disaster in every step of the process. First, thousands of acres of native hardwood forests that cover the tops of the mountains are stripped away in giant clear-cutting operations. These trees are often burned or dumped illegally into the valleys, rather than being used for viable lumber, since coal companies want to access the coal as quickly as possible.\(^5\) Next comes the blasting: mountains can be flattened by up to one thousand feet, eliminating entire ridgelines. Three million pounds of explosives are used every day in West Virginia alone; this is the explosive equivalent of a Hiroshima-sized atomic bomb being detonated every single week in Appalachia.\(^6\) Blasting is allowed to occur within three hundred feet of people’s homes, and many Appalachian residents have suffered cracked foundations, broken windows, horrific noise pollution, and plummeting property values. They breathe air thick with dust and particulate matter and live in constant fear of fly-rock and dislodged boulders raining down from the mountaintop removal site. The waste from the top of the mountain, which exposes heavy metals once hidden underground, is pushed off the edge of the mountain and dumped into the adjacent valley. These “valley fills” have completely buried thousands of miles of streams across Appalachia and have severely harmed wildlife species across the region.\(^7\)

Once the coal is exposed, the companies scrape out the seam across the ridgeline, then blast more to get at the next layer of coal. They treat and purify the coal in

\(^6\) Bill Moyers, “Is God Green?”
\(^7\) The Appalachian Mountains are considered one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots. Home to dozens of rare bird and invertebrate species, the region is defined by the rich presence of wildlife. Mountaintop removal mining has completely eliminated the habitat for many fragile species throughout the region, leading to forest fragmentation, water pollution, and a sharp decline in populations of aquatic insects, birds, and mammals. [Shirley Stewart Burns, *Bringing Down the Mountains* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007), 128-135.]
processing facilities before shipping it out of Appalachia. The water left behind from this treatment is called coal slurry or coal sludge, and it contains toxins like arsenic, mercury, lead, and selenium.\(^8\) The sludge is stored in enormous, open pools known as impoundments atop the flattened mountains. These pools of liquid coal waste are held up by unstable earthen dams constructed with the rubble from the mountaintop. Impoundments have been known to collapse, leading to catastrophic floods of millions of gallons of toxic sludge that destroy entire towns, communities, and ecosystems.

Appalachia will bear the scars of mountaintop removal forever. Appalachian culture is celebrated as having a deep relationship with the local landscape; the Appalachian Mountains have provided their residents with food and medicine for centuries.\(^9\) Now, however, people find that the places where they used to go to forage wild leeks or to harvest ginseng have been replaced by giant expanses of empty, barren moonscapes punctuated only by ponds of toxic sludge. Mining companies have tried to “reclaim” mountaintop removal sites by planting exotic species of grasses, but almost nothing else can grow. It takes over one hundred years to rebuild just one inch of topsoil, making the long term ecological effects of mountaintop removal mining drastic and in many cases irreversible.\(^10\)

Mountaintop removal mining has also devastated the towns and people of Appalachia. Residents have been sickened and driven away by blasting, flooding,

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\(^9\) See the popular Foxfire books for accounts of the meaningful interaction between Appalachian culture and the surrounding landscape. The Foxfire series documents how the landscape has contributed to every aspect of Appalachian culture and helped to shape the lives and values of the Appalachian people. [Inc. Foxfire Fund, The Foxfire 40th Anniversary Book: Faith, Family, and the Land (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).]

poisoned water, polluted air, and economic depression. The region has suffered serious “brain drain,” as all of the youth and educated citizens have fled the area in search of employment. People tout coal as the backbone of the Appalachian economy, but coal extraction contributes heavily to the impoverishment of the local people. West Virginia’s McDowell County, for instance, is one of the leading coal producing counties in the entire United States, yet the county has a poverty rate of over thirty-seven percent.  

Since the onset of mountaintop removal mining, the number of coal mining jobs in West Virginia has fallen by more than eighty-seven percent.

People like Ernie and Carmelita Brown are left with no jobs and no future, fighting the enormously powerful coal industry just for the right to drink clean water. The Browns’ home lies in the shadow of the mansion belonging to Don Blankenship, C.E.O. of Massey Energy. Carmelita comments, “It’s ironic that I can stand and do my dishes in black water and then, look out my window and see his house up on a hill that everyone can see. To me, it’s like he made a statement. You know? He’s God. God on the mountain. But, he’s as close to God as he’s going to get up on that mountain.”

**Arriving at this Topic**

Ernie and Carmelita Brown were featured in Bill Moyers’ 2006 documentary, “Is God Green?,” which follows the recent upsurge in Christian involvement in the national environmental movement. Their story is certainly powerful (although not unique, as I

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12 *Mountain Mourning* DVD, directed by BJ Gudmundsson (2006; Lewisburg, WV: Christians for the Mountains).

13 Bill Moyers, “Is God Green?”
found upon my visit to Appalachia) and Moyers’ section on Christian participation in the
fight against mountaintop removal is what first piqued my interest in this topic. Having
followed the growth of Christian interest in environmental issues, and the burgeoning
eamples of the intersection of religion and environmental activism, I was drawn to the
topic of Christian responses to mountaintop removal for several reasons. First, it provided
an opportunity to study a phenomenon that is both current and frighteningly urgent;
mountains in Appalachia are being blasted every single day, to the deaf ears of most
Americans. I wanted to add my voice to the growing number of citizens who are
seriously concerned about the impacts of mountaintop removal mining on our planet and
on the people of Appalachia.

Second, the Christian movement against mountaintop removal builds on a long
history of religious involvement in social issues, a history that has helped shape my
understanding of how faith can be used as a positive motivating force for citizens to take
action against injustice. The civil rights movement exists as one of the most powerful
examples of the energy and impetus that religion, and specifically Christianity, can
provide in the struggle for a certain cause. Many pastors and laypeople turned to the
support of the churches to aid them in their fight during this era, and the civil rights
movement was strengthened tremendously by the spiritual force of Christian language,
ideals and values.14 Similarly, Christians speaking out against mountaintop removal have
bolstered and reshaped the movement’s goals, adding the forceful element of morality to

14 See Charles Marsh’s book God’s Long Summer for a specific account on how faith and Christianity
influenced various aspects of the civil rights movement. It is important to recognize, as well, that even the
civil rights movement drew on a long history of Christian involvement in social justice movements.
Christianity has played an integral role in this arena throughout our country’s history, from the Social
Gospel movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the first waves of feminism and
an issue that was originally fought on primarily environmental and social grounds. The voice of Christianity is helping Appalachians to identify mountaintop removal as a moral and spiritual crisis, one that demands immediate attention, just as pastors and churches once helped to demonstrate the moral urgency of civil rights legislation through the lens of their faith.

Christian opposition to mountaintop removal is also a fascinating phenomenon to study because of its direct parallels to the larger religious environmental movement. Several decades ago, environmental values were rarely discussed as a central component of Christian faith. Now, however, Christians are becoming active in the environmental movement at all levels, from “greening” their local churches to pushing for bold global treaties on climate change. The growing awareness of how religion can influence environmental values has sparked an exciting outburst of campaigns and initiatives across the country and across the world.\(^{15}\) The Christian movement against mountaintop removal represents a small but integral component of the ever-growing religious response to the environmental crises of our time. It resembles the larger movements in its application of Christian theology to environmental values and activism, its emphasis on prayer, and its grassroots penetration of local churches. It strays from some of these larger movements, however, in its merging of environmental and social justice themes and in its existence as a localized issue that is inseparable from Appalachian culture and tradition.

Lastly, I was drawn to the topic of Christianity and mountaintop removal simply because it is overwhelmingly and personally gripping: emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It is impossible to witness mountaintop removal mining firsthand without feeling a powerful sense of shame over how humans have treated our planet and our fellow citizens. I may have first been drawn to this topic for primarily academic interests, but I soon became completely entrenched in the struggles of the movement and the reality of life in the coalfields of Appalachia. Mountaintop removal mining is systematically destroying an entire landscape, people, and culture; the voices of the people fighting this practice must be heard.

**Methodology**

My journey into this topic began with researching the many different groups that have been involved in the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. I read all of the literature that Christians have published about mountaintop removal, explored the websites of the different organizations that have been formed, and tracked events and actions against mountaintop removal organized by Christians. I was also able to gather a great deal of information from interviews with several members of various Christian organizations in Appalachia. Chapters Two, Three, and Four describe the major examples of Christian organizing against mountaintop removal, as well as the theological motivations that drive Christians in this movement.

Chapter Two presents an overview of the grassroots responses to mountaintop removal in Appalachia, both on the individual and the organizational level. In this chapter, I document all of the different coalitions formed and actions undertaken by
Christian organizations in opposition to mountaintop removal. I introduce some of the central themes that appear throughout this movement and identify key leaders and important events that have taken place. Christian grassroots organizing has certainly been the most critical part of this movement; however, the higher echelons of the church have also become involved. Several different Christian denominations have issued official statements against mountaintop removal at the national, denominational level.

I discuss the content of these statements, as well as their role in the overall Christian movement against mountaintop removal, in Chapter Three. This chapter illustrates how opposition to mountaintop removal is put forth not only by individual Christian activists and organizations, but also by whole Christian denominations. The chapter features the six different denominations that have issued statements against mountaintop removal. After providing an overview of their content, I attempt to analyze the efficacy of these statements as part of my larger exploration of the relationship between belief and actual action. In addition to showing how Christians have used official outlets to voice their opposition to mountaintop removal, the chapter demonstrates what religious scholars frequently argue: Christianity is not a monolithic tradition, but instead is a dynamic faith that is viewed differently by various denominations and the people within those denominations. The statements’ contents serve as an introduction into some of the religious theologies being used to fight mountaintop removal.

Chapter Four builds on the theologies used in the official statements against mountaintop removal to more thoroughly examine the many different aspects of Christian thought, history, and practice that direct Christians to stand in opposition to mountaintop
removal. I focus mainly on Christian ideals of environmental stewardship and social justice, which are the two most commonly cited aspects of Christianity that motivate Christian dissent from the ideology and practice of the coal industry. Christianity holds great potential as a force for positive change (as illustrated by Christian involvement in the civil rights movement, for instance), and I try to cover the many different aspects of Christian tradition, doctrine, practice, and scripture that are utilized in the fight against mountaintop removal. I also discuss briefly how proponents of mountaintop removal are also introducing Christian values into the debate, demonstrating how Christianity and religion in general can be interpreted in vastly different ways by groups with opposite agendas.

I researched each of these three aforementioned chapters as extensively as I could from my position outside of Appalachia. Websites, literature, and interviews provided me with a solid body of reference material to follow the Christian movement against mountaintop removal and to draw conclusions from what I found. The most important part of my research, however, occurred during my journey through Appalachia in March, 2009. During this time, I spent two weeks in the coalfields, visiting churches and talking to preachers, laypeople, and Christian and secular activists. My trip to Appalachia radically changed my perception of the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. As a remote researcher, I had been actively seeking out Christian responses to mountaintop removal, and so found hope in the considerable number of organizations and individuals I encountered who embraced Christianity as a powerful and politically effective motivator to fight this alarmingly harmful practice. My focus on their efforts led me to believe that mountaintop removal was a central topic of discussion for Christians
across the whole of Appalachia. Yet my journey through the region proved otherwise, a realization I will discuss in depth in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five focuses on my personal observations of the situation in Appalachia and also provides a detailed account of the most informative conversations that I engaged in during my time there. My experiences in Appalachia led me to see firsthand the dominance of the coal companies over every aspect of life and culture in Appalachia. Within this context I began to understand the formidable obstacles that both Christians and secular activists face in trying to fight against this powerful industry. I interpret the tactics and impact of these forces against mountaintop removal protestors through much of Chapter Five. Lastly, I provide my own insights into the shape and direction of the Christian movement against mountaintop removal, and my hope for its success in the future. Christians are faced with enormously daunting challenges ahead of them in convincing priests and laypeople to speak out against mountaintop removal from within the church structure. However, the groundwork for further action is rapidly being built: certain organizations and individuals have already made significant strides in introducing mountaintop removal to churches as a practice incongruous with the Christian faith. Christians are using their religion to point out that a faithful life is not one that revolves around “survival of the most productive” (the stated philosophy of Massey Energy’s C.E.O. Don Blankenship), but rather a life centered on good intention, good works, and the adoption of responsibility towards humanity and the rest of the planet.\footnote{Bill Moyers, “Is God Green?”}
Chapter Two: Grassroots Christian Opposition to Mountaintop Removal

“The environmental movement for the past quarter of a century has made no more profound error than to misunderstand the mission of religion and the churches in preserving the Creation….We acted as if we could save future generations, and yet unnamed and unknown species, without the engagement of the institutions through which we save ourselves.”

-- Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club (1997)

The Christian movement to end mountaintop removal takes many different forms, from national denominational statements to family-led prayer vigils. One of the most visible and effective forms of protest has been the establishment of official Christian organizations dedicated to fighting mountaintop removal. These organizations have elevated the debate over mountaintop removal to a moral and spiritual level, helping Christians in Appalachia understand why current environmental and social justice issues demand Christian attention. They have provided a network of support for Christians to make their voices heard on the topic of mountaintop removal and have recruited participation from Christians initially reluctant to take sides on this controversial matter. With the events they have organized, the information they have disseminated, and the encouragement they have given, these organizations have instigated the beginnings of a collective Christian cry against mountaintop removal. In this chapter, I outline the history of the main organizations involved in fighting mountaintop removal, providing background on their formation and highlighting some of their main achievements. I begin with the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, the oldest of these organizations by several decades.

Commission on Religion in Appalachia

The Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA) stands as one of the first religious organizations to become involved in mountaintop removal issues. CORA was formed in 1965 to address poverty and other social justice issues, although its scope grew wider as it addressed rapidly growing social and economic problems. Its mission was “to express God’s love in the empowerment of the people of Appalachia by working for justice.” CORA acted as a crucial training and support structure for community activists and consistently touted grassroots civic engagement as the key to healthy, functional communities. By 1970, concerns about mountaintop removal had become forceful enough in West Virginia to motivate CORA to take part in the debate between coal companies and environmental groups. West Virginians in southern coalfield counties united to protest strip mining from an antipoverty angle in 1967, adding fuel to a fire already burning in the legislative arena over the merits of a strip mining control act. Still, even though West Virginia residents spoke out, mountaintop removal did not become a widespread issue, visible at the national scale, until the passage of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) in 1977, which mandated certain regulations for strip mining (such as banning coal companies from dumping waste products into rivers). CORA demonstrated progressive foresight by getting involved early in the struggle. Given its primary focus on antipoverty initiatives, CORA likely became involved due to the established link between mountaintop removal, poverty, and job loss, rather than over the specific environmental implications of strip mining.

18 Shirley Stewart Burns, Bringing Down the Mountains, 15.
20 Shirley Stewart Burns, Bringing Down the Mountains, 15.
While coal companies claim that their practices create jobs in an income-starved region, many workers in Appalachia have fought to refute the promises of economic prosperity through coal mining. In 1967, a group of antipoverty workers mobilized fellow citizens in coalfield counties to speak out against mountaintop removal. They explained how the machine-dominated practice of mountaintop removal actually puts miners out of work, especially because most machines are operated by out-of-state employees. In fact, it is estimated today that deep mining requires at least twice as many employees as mountaintop removal to extract the same amount of coal. The focus on the economic hardships caused by surface mining paved the way for CORA to become directly involved. Instead of immediately assuming a partisan position, CORA initially set up a “Dialogue Focuser” on the issue of mountaintop removal, a document intended to allow opposing sides to share their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of mountaintop removal.

In this document, the coal companies emphasized the increasing energy demands of the United States and stated that the enormous coal reserves buried in the mountains could not be extracted through traditional mining methods. Revealingly, opponents of mountaintop removal argued that Appalachian coal could be extracted without resorting to explosives. These early activists did not disapprove of coal as an energy source in general; instead, they opposed only the specific methods used to extract it. Interestingly, this approach to protesting mountaintop removal is still dominant within the Christian community today. Concerns over global warming and fossil fuel dependence motivate most secular environmentalists to attack coal from all angles, identifying mountaintop

21 Ibid.
removal as a particularly destructive practice but stressing the overall deficiencies of coal as an energy source. The reluctance of many Christian organizations to denounce coal in general can be traced to three possible sources: the strain of political conservatism present in the Appalachian Christian community, churches’ fear of appearing to prioritize the environment over jobs, and the monopolizing grip of the coal industry over Appalachian culture. All are themes that CORA was forced to confront, and which will be visited again in the discussion of other Christian groups’ efforts to end mountaintop removal.

Coinciding with its entry into the debate on mountaintop removal, CORA began to expand its focus to include all labor issues, civil rights, and environmental protection. The organization drew their inspiration from the biblical testament of the prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters.” (Amos 5:23-24) Translating their religious values into progressive stances on social and environmental issues, CORA members worked to create a grassroots movement to end the injustices plaguing Appalachia. Chris Kromm, executive director of The Institute of Southern Studies, writes, “[CORA] rooted and nurtured the connection between their faith and political beliefs not through abstract ‘values debates,’ but in the day-to-day work of addressing the concerns of ordinary people, from failing schools to mountaintop removal and dangerous working conditions.”

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23 Dave Cooper, Mountaintop Removal Roadshow, November 19, 2008.
24 All biblical citations used in this paper will refer to the New Revised Standard Version of the *Holy Bible*. The choice of this passage from Amos is an example of the profound influence of philosophies and principles utilized during the civil rights movement resurfacing for other issues like mountaintop removal. Notably, Martin Luther King, Jr. used this same quotation from Amos to illustrate the urgency of the need for reform. [*Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989).]
removal, CORA helped to set an important precedent for religious citizens to use faith-based arguments to engage in activism.

Although CORA never organized any specific direct actions relating to mountaintop removal, its members worked to educate people about the harmful elements of the process, and the group published a resolution in 1998 that called on politicians “to require that mountaintop removal-valley strip mining be stopped and not be resumed until scientific study of its long term effect on human life and the natural environment has been accomplished.” At the time of the issued statement, CORA represented nineteen different Christian denominations and became the first religious organization to assume an official stance on mountaintop removal.

After forty years of service, CORA disbanded in 2006 due to lack of funding. As a symbol of their parting, members left a “Last Will and Testament” that stated CORA’s mission and outlined all of the projects they had undertaken to support this mission and to uphold Amos’ mandate to “Let justice roll down like waters.” Citing these efforts to end mountaintop removal, the “Last Will” attested: “COR Activity and achievements have extended to battles with the mountain-top-removers and the coal companies who abuse the worker digging deep into the mountains.” The testament, in addition to summarizing CORA’s notable accomplishments, issued a public prayer that the mission of CORA would be continued through the various denominations and

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27 Some of CORA’s supporters claim that CORA’s demise was actually rooted in its success. CORA worked closely with various denominations to address issues like poverty; its members were so influential in conveying the need for social action that many denominations developed their own ministries to address these issues and redirected their funding to their own projects rather than to CORA. [WV Council of Churches, “40 Year-old Ecumenical Anti-Poverty Organization Closes.”]

congregations with which CORA built strong relationships over its many years of action. The testament stated, “In CORA’s ending, we know that the God of justice is ultimately in charge of the spirit of hope and justice in Appalachia. As faithful stewards we pray for and will the rebirth of the mission of CORA to the region as a new sojourn. For we can already see rising from the valley a fertile spark.”\textsuperscript{29} As if in response to that prayer, many organizations, such as the West Virginia Council of Churches (WVCC), commemorated the service of CORA and reaffirmed their own commitment to fostering social justice in Appalachia. The WVCC wrote, “To the lives impacted, [CORA] has served a forty-year sojourn lighting the way to justice...as people of faithful conscience, CORA saw a need to act.”\textsuperscript{30} Reflections like this one, written by other organizations dedicated to similar work, demonstrate the appreciation that many activists held for CORA. As the first religious organization to get involved in mountaintop removal, CORA set the stage for many successful coalitions that are continuing its critical work.

**Christians for the Mountains**

Christians for the Mountains (CFTM) has been one of the most active organizations to expand upon CORA’s initial work. CFTM, like CORA, educates people about mountaintop removal and its devastating effects. It also effectively organizes grassroots actions dedicated to halting the mining method. In an attempt to honor a diverse array of Christian attitudes and voices, CFTM is non-denominational, but it relies heavily on creation care theology and biblical references to proper stewardship of the planet to support its cause. Creation care theology is a philosophy that has grown out of

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} WV Council of Churches, “40 Year-old Ecumenical Anti-Poverty Organization Closes.”
the last few decades’ debates over whether the Judeo-Christian tradition mandates a responsible environmental ethic. Some have argued that Christianity is at fault for enforcing a hierarchy of humans over nature that leads to a culture of exploitation and recklessness, which I will discuss in more depth later in the chapter. However, a growing number of “eco-theologians” have found a different message in Christianity, one that fosters a loving relationship with all of God’s creation rather than just with other humans. Creation care theology is rapidly becoming a commonly cited Christian tenet in both academic circles and in actual church communities. Theologians like Sally McFague, Calvin DeWitt, and Thomas Berry have helped frame Christianity as a religion closely connected with the health of our planet. McFague comments, “human beings are in a covenantal relationship with God to protect nature even as they should care for other human beings.” Using this new framework, churches across the country have relied on creation care theology to assume stances on important environmental issues, ranging from local pollution to global climate change.

CFTM draws on creation care theology to act on mountaintop removal, an issue significant at both the local and the national level. CFTM emphasizes the importance of justice and responsibility as moral imperatives that all Christians are called to acknowledge seriously. Although CFTM focuses on the atrocities committed by coal companies in Appalachia, the group frames its goals in a positive way, highlighting gratefulness for all of the wonderful gifts that God has granted. This marks a major difference in tone from traditional environmentalism, which has been criticized for using threats and “scare” tactics to goad citizens into action. Many prominent environmental

organizations depict a grim vision of our potential future if serious changes are not made, rather than emphasizing our opportunity to create a just, sustainable world from the ground up. CFTM, on the other hand, offers a more hopeful message. CFTM members note that Christians should love all that God has created, without exception. Additionally, the organization points out that humans were created with the intention that they would act as caretakers over all of God’s creation. For Christians working against surface mining, it can be seen as both a duty and a privilege to protect the majesty of God’s creation. This notion of responsibility does not clash with the biblical hierarchy that places humans above nature; most Christians do not argue, as some environmentalists do, that humans should be equal or subordinate to the environment. Instead, Christians in groups like CFTM interpret humans’ role as one of stewardship that includes a commitment to protecting the rest of God’s creation.

CFTM focuses more on the affirmative aspects of why Christians play important roles in spreading love for God’s created order on this earth, but it does not shy away from assuming a more militant tone in the struggle against mountaintop removal. In addition to using faith as motivation for engaging in positive action against coal mining, CFTM has condemned the work of coal companies in explicitly religious language. CFTM states forcefully, “We deplore the pillaging of God’s earth by forces of greed, ignorance, and apathy.” Exposing the coal companies as sinful, CFTM emphasizes that the corrupt companies who practice mountaintop removal value profit far more than they value human lives, economic and social justice, and the landscape carved by God’s hand. Drawing upon the deep-rooted Christian desire to champion justice over the sin of greed,

CFTM effectively influences hundreds of Christians across Appalachia to add their voices to the growing movement against mountaintop removal. By doing so, CFTM aligns itself with the many Christian coalitions that use the language of justice to pursue a quick end to mountaintop removal. CFTM, however, focuses equally on environmental and social impacts of mountaintop removal, whereas certain other groups, such as CORA, place significantly more weight on the social justice angle.

Christians for the Mountains was officially formed only three years ago, in 2005, but it has accomplished an impressive amount since its inception. Today, the CFTM database includes more than five hundred members.33 The organization began as an idea formulated at a retreat co-hosted by Appalachian Voices and the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation in 2003. This meeting brought together many Christians from different denominations, most of whom were from the Appalachian region, and was held in the height of autumn at the Lost Cove/Harper Creek Wilderness Area in North Carolina. The retreat was built upon the goals of the Opening the Book of Nature (OBN) ministry, an organization founded by Fred Krueger in 2001 to “articulate the spiritual values of wilderness.”34 Krueger, the co-chair of the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation, had developed a weekend retreat itinerary through OBN that highlighted the “Christian tradition of learning spiritual lessons through nature.”35 The Lost Cove retreat was modeled upon OBN examples of successful religious environmental retreats, and culminated in a written statement that linked religion and environmental philosophy, similar to previous OBN retreats.

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33 Rebekah Epling, personal communication, March 16, 2009.
35 Ibid. Krueger uses the story of Jesus heading to the wilderness to begin his teachings as an example of Christian tradition of nature teaching humanity.
Through prayer and discussion, participants in the Lost Cove retreat reflected on the spiritual implications of the landscape around them and asked for guidance on how to ensure that the area gained federal protection from outside companies threatening its destruction. The retreat united representatives from over ten different Christian denominations, including Baptist, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalian, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutheran. Yet despite the wide range of religious backgrounds, participants came to a unanimous agreement about the sacredness of the Lost Cove wilderness and the need for committed action to protect it. The advisory statement issued by the group discusses the real potential for spiritual revival and renewal in the wilderness, and personifies wilderness as a teacher, healer, and a prophet. The statement asserts, “When visitors to wilderness feel the presence of pines and plants, streams and rivers, earth and soil, sunlight and shadows, they connect to an aspect of the cosmos that elicits wonder, admiration and ultimately humility before the great work of our Creator-God.”

In addition to providing invaluable lessons to those who visit, the forested landscape is painted as a “geography of hope, even a beacon for the possibility of purity.” The retreat emphasized that through the wilderness, Christians can learn obedience and patience, renew their spirits and refresh their reverence for all things sacred, soothe the mental tensions imposed by modern culture, and experience the divine power of God.

Despite their struggle to fully grasp the grand nature of wilderness’s capabilities, the participants in the retreat recognized that God’s creation cannot survive alone in its

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37 Ibid.
fight against those who come to destroy it. This assertion bears resemblance to an emerging Christian theology of humans as “co-creators,” which looks to God’s special appointment of humans, as well as our recent influence over the lives of other species, as indicative of humans playing a shared role with God as Creators. Participants in the Lost Cove retreat noted that wilderness needs love and conscious intention on the part of humans to save it from being obliterated. As part of the advisory statement, the Lost Cove attendees issued a plan for action to preserve wilderness as a sacred place that Christians should visit often. The plan included five recommendations for the Christians of Appalachia. In addition to urging Christians to visit Lost Cove with the intention of searching for signs of God, the recommendations included remembering and educating others about the biblical legacy of Jesus heading to the wilderness to learn more about spirituality, participating in political action to protect wilderness areas in North Carolina, engaging churches and clergy in a discussion about the spiritual elements of wilderness, and reflecting on humans’ responsibility to future generations. The shared ideas and community of support built at the Lost Cove sanctuary undoubtedly served as inspiration to those Christians who left the retreat committed to continuing that which a diverse group of Christians had begun.

Three notable characters emerged from the Lost Cove retreat ready to leap into the fight against mountaintop removal: Matt Wasson from Appalachian Voices, Fred Krueger from the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation and OBN, and Allen Johnson, West Virginia resident and activist. These men took it upon themselves to

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38 Mary Evelyn Tucker is one of the dominant academic voices on the notion of humans as co-creators; she is also a leading theologian on the topic of creation care theology. [Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Religion and Ecology: Survey of the Field,” in The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology, by Roger Gottlieb, 398-418 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).]

brainstorm a regional network that could draw on principles of faith to inspire Christians to take action to save their mountains. Allen Johnson teamed up with Bob Marshall, another West Virginia resident, to organize a planning conference for May 2005. They held the conference in Charleston, WV, and invited a number of Christians who had been publicly active in creation care issues. The conference revolved around the central theme of “The Earth is the Lord’s,” from Psalm 24, and the intention was both to gauge the community’s interest in a possible Christian organization dedicated to fighting mountaintop removal and to initiate the first steps in this organization’s creation. Over twenty Catholic and Protestant Christians attended, many of whom were active members of local and national secular environmental groups.

The Charleston conference provided these activists with the opportunity to speak openly about their faith, which has not always been welcome in environmental circles, in part due to the widespread distrust of the Judeo-Christian tradition incited by Lynn White’s 1967 article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” In this paper, White asserts that the adoption of monotheism and the shift towards a transcendent God eliminated the sense of connection with nature that pantheistic religions had cultivated. White argues that the Genesis passage about dominion initiated a deep-seeded tendency towards anthropocentrism, encouraging an indifference towards the natural world. White’s interpretation of Christianity has been widely criticized by theologians in the years since he first published his controversial paper, and the existence of the “Earth is

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40 This distrust is still felt by some religious environmental activists today. At the 2009 Powershift Conference, Robert Sage Russo led a workshop in Christian theology and commented that “[We Christians] might look a bit unpopular with our environmental friends when we say that we stand with God.” However, as religion becomes more common as a motivating force to fight for the preservation of the earth, religious activists are beginning to find a warmer reception among the typical secular environmentalist crowd. [Robert Sage Russo, Powershift 2009: Stop a Bulldozer and Hug a Tree for Jesus: A Radical Christian Perspective on Organizing. February 28, 2009.]

the Lord’s” conference is an example of how Christians have worked to debunk White’s allegation, highlighting instead Christianity’s potential for fostering a peaceful and symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature.\textsuperscript{42}

One of the highlights of the conference was a tour of Kayford Mountain, the site of a massive mountaintop removal operation. Here, it became clear that religion could serve as an obvious motivation for environmental action for many citizens, even if others did not yet realize it. Larry Gibson, the outspoken owner of a property on Kayford Mountain that was quickly being destroyed, asked the Christians in attendance, “I’m so glad you’re here, but what took you so long?”\textsuperscript{43} Clearly, Christianity has a precedent for taking a moral stance on corruption and injustice, and certain residents of West Virginia, like Larry Gibson, had been waiting for Christians to honor this tradition and join them in an effort to end mountaintop removal.

The sight of Kayford Mountain being blown apart left an indelible image imprinted on those who witnessed it firsthand. I, too, visited Kayford Mountain during my visit to Appalachia, and I will never forget the deadened moonscape that stretched out in front of me. Seeing a thousand pictures of the damage caused by mountaintop removal could not have prepared me for the massive scope of the operation and the painful contrast between the pristine mountain ridges to the east and the massacred pit in front of me. [Appendix B] The Christians attending this first CFTM conference were similarly moved. Upon returning from the mountain, the conference attendees immediately drafted


a Letter of Declaration that explained why Christians must stand united against mountaintop removal. They heralded the birth of a new Christian coalition that would address this practice in an active way. The Declaration is extremely concise, beginning with the assumption that stewardship is an integral component of the Christian tradition without addressing the potential criticism that this interpretation might draw. It moves fluidly from affirming creation care theology in a general fashion to engaging mountaintop removal specifically: “As people of faith who believe that all things were made in and through Christ, we are called to treat with reverence all that Christ has ransomed from the power of sin and death. This includes His created world. Therefore, as Christians we must stand in opposition to the massive and irresponsible destruction resulting from the mining method of mountaintop removal.”44 To construct a coalition that could serve as the backbone of this oppositional movement, conference attendees formed a five person steering committee. The steering committee, which included Allen Johnson and Bob Marshall, was the first step in establishing the group that became Christians for the Mountains.

Just two weeks later, some of those responsible for the inception of Christians for the Mountains contributed to a momentous direct action. Several of these original CFTM members attended a rally protesting the Massey coal storage facility that towers over an elementary school in Sundial, WV, threatening the health of the children in the area. [Appendix C] Just a quarter mile above Marsh Fork Elementary School lies a dammed pond filled with 2.8 billion gallons of toxic sludge, containing substances like arsenic,

mercury, and cadmium. As if the overflow of this dam down the steep hillside were not enough of a threat to the students of the school, Massey intended to build a new coal preparation plant less than two hundred feet from the school (unfortunately, they eventually succeeded in this goal). Quite fittingly, CFTM’s first significant action would be held in response to child welfare and social justice, two firm tenets of Christian theology.

At the rally, Allen Johnson led an opening prayer, followed by the whole group singing a rousing round of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” a song that has been used by Christians for many prominent social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement. The hymn has also played an integral role in several of the more recent actions against mountaintop removal, which I will mention later in this chapter. Members of CFTM view participation in the rally as a response to a biblical plea to speak forcefully and audibly in response to sin: “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and declare unto my people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins.” (Isaiah 58:1)

The presence of CFTM at the rally attracted the attention of people of faith who were interested in protecting their community’s health and landscape. Beyond CFTM supporters, the 150 rally attendees included members of local environmental groups like the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, an early introduction to CFTM’s collaboration with secular groups. The Massey rally was a chance for local citizens, all of whom were deeply and personally affected by mountaintop removal practices, to join together in one

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45 Sludge Safety Project, “What is a Coal Sludge Impoundment?”
voice. Through its participation, CFTM connected with residents who genuinely cared about environmental and social justice issues and began to gain support rapidly at the regional level.

Their successful reception at the rally encouraged CFTM members to plan their first official conference in an attempt to garner more support and attention from residents of Appalachia. Over forty people from six different states attended the conference, which was held at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Charleston, West Virginia. The conference attendees represented a diverse group of individuals, many of whom were active in prominent regional and national secular environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, and Coal River Mountain Watch. The presence of these individuals illustrates the importance of religion in even the most dominant of secular environmental groups, like the Sierra Club. Although the Sierra Club itself does not have any religious affiliations, many of its members do, and it is likely that these members feel called by their faith to participate in the environmental activism that the group promotes. The growing number of groups emphasizing religion as motivation for environmental action is perhaps just as much a reflection of religion becoming more acceptable to speak openly about within the environmental community as it is a signifier of the expanding number of Christians getting involved in the movement.

At the Charleston Conference, Denise Giardina, author of Storming Heaven and the Unquiet Earth, two novels about the havoc wreaked by mountaintop removal practices, delivered the keynote address. Giardina is an ordained Episcopal deacon and drew heavily on a wide variety of Christian themes in her speech, encouraging Christians to take home three central messages. First, Giardina stressed the importance of praying
for the enemy, a featured tactic from prominent religious leaders of historic social movements such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Giardina distinguished between those who run the machines, neighbors who are likely financially stressed and in desperate need of a job, and those who run the actual companies, whom she points to as the true enemy. She expressed this in dramatically religious language: “Their lives are bent upon destruction...They are cut off from God...We must pray that these people find their way out of hell and stop mountaintop removal.” By framing coal companies as a sinful enemy, Giardina created a real force that Christians could feel compelled to fight against for religious purposes while remembering to “love their enemy” according to Christ’s vision.

Giardina’s approach of reviling the coal industry executives at first seems markedly different from the approach of many of the Christians I spoke with in Appalachia. Most people that I interviewed stressed the importance of avoiding severe polarization, the “us versus them” mentality. Rather, several of the priests I spoke with emphasized that everyone in Appalachia is caught in the same system, and that a successful movement will be brought about by unity, not division. However, Giardina’s message can exert a resounding influence on Christians; it is similar to the way many Christians view their fight against the coal industry as a fight against evil. The importance here is identifying the difference between the coal executives, who profit from the impoverishment of others, and the local coal miners, who are caught in an unjust

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system with little chance of escaping. Giardina recognized this distinction while
maintaining a powerful frame of good versus evil that resonates with many Christians.

Secondly, Giardina worked to debunk the theory sometimes touted by
conservative “Rapture Ready” evangelicals, that environmental protection is useless since
the Second Coming of the Lord will only occur after the total destruction of the planet.
Giardina pointed out there are real consequences for ourselves and for our children if we
engage in harmful environmental practices. Yet however dire the consequences may be,
Giardina stressed that we must never give up in trying to amend the wrongs perpetrated
on our mountains and our planet. Her third point rested in the consolation that Christians
live in a world of hope, and that they have the power to protect God’s kingdom here on
earth. By firmly identifying mountaintop removal as an issue of faith, Giardina’s
comments clarified why the Christian sense of responsibility mandates a concern for the
environment and for the local people of Appalachia. Her assertions seemed to be
extremely well received at the conference; CFTM reports that conference attendees
“expressed that they were rejuvenated and motivated participating in the gathering.”

Clearly, Christians at the conference shared similar opinions on how faith should
influence environmental advocacy.

In another important address at the conference, Dr. Howard Snyder chastised
churches for neglecting the doctrine of creation. Dr. Snyder, an evangelical scholar and
professor at Kentucky’s Asbury Theological Seminary, indicated that Christians who
ignore their responsibility for creation care are guilty of prioritizing material goods and
individualism over the good of the whole community. Snyder was drawing from a recent


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paper he had published, which pointed out the flaws in conservative, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, where physical reality is of no importance compared to the spiritual realm. Snyder writes, “Nowhere does Scripture grant the absolute right to exploit creation for profit; to turn the whole earth into a commodity...Commodification is not the biblical worldview; it is an exploitive distortion and a dangerous delusion.”\textsuperscript{51} In both his speech and his paper, Snyder called for churches to stand up against the commodification of God’s creation; mountaintop removal serves as a perfect example of humans valuing a monetarily valuable material like coal over a spiritually valuable landscape like a mountain.

The conference took participants on flyovers of mountaintop removal sites, allowing them to see firsthand what could happen when creation care is not taken seriously. A major strategizing session then took place, in which conference participants pledged to work on outreach, advocacy, and education in the area of mountaintop removal. Some of the specific tactics agreed upon at the conference included compiling petitions signed by congregation members to send to coal and power companies, holding house parties to educate others about the issue and provide a space for more strategizing, campaigning for corporate shareholder divestment from coal companies that practice mountaintop removal, talking to religious leaders about the impacts of mountaintop removal, distributing informational packets within churches, publishing prayer books that address mountaintop removal, hosting concerts and speeches to increase public attention,

changing personal habits to conserve energy use, and publicizing an anti-mountaintop removal message through the uses of yard signs, tee-shirts, and other visible mediums.\textsuperscript{52}

The diverse array of potential strategies to be implemented brainstormed by the conference attendees demonstrates the creativity utilized in the attempt to stop mountaintop removal. The absence of more aggressive strategies, such as blockading mountaintop removal sites, is another indication of Christian groups’ tendency to avoid blatantly controversial measures. However, the long list of feasible tactics shows that even without direct action, Christians have a wide variety of tools to draw from in their fight against mountaintop removal. Attendees left the conference with a fuller understanding of the dangers that mountaintop removal causes and a sense of hope that Christians could unite in order to address the issue.

Following the conference, new members of Christians for the Mountains decided that publicizing the atrocities committed by coal companies in Appalachia would be the next step for their campaign. Although the reality of mountaintop removal is painfully obvious for many who live in Appalachia, much of the rest of the country is altogether ignorant of its existence. Coal companies have a vested interest in keeping the practice below the radar of the general public, and they have been remarkably successful in doing so. Using their close ties to the federal government, coal companies often appeal their case directly to government officials, avoiding public scrutiny.\textsuperscript{53} Additionally, coal companies advertise their position as one of alliance with blue collar workers, framing their existence as a friend to Appalachia, rather than an enemy.

\textsuperscript{52} Christians for the Mountains, “The Earth is the Lord’s Conference Report.”
\textsuperscript{53} Chad Montrie, \textit{To Save the Land and People: a History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 158.
Coal companies rarely publicize their participation in mountaintop removal; the main website for Massey Energy, the largest producer of Central Appalachian coal, buries its admittance of strip mining in a list of the other three mining methods it utilizes. Their website has not recently been updated with new figures, but Massey claims that in 2003 it “produced 41 million tons of coal using four distinct mining methods: underground room and pillar, underground longwall, surface and highwall mining.” One would have to be equipped with significant background knowledge of what surface mining means to actually understand the true implications of Massey’s practices. Most people are outraged when they realize that coal companies are using dynamite to obliterate mountains in Appalachia, especially when they learn of the life-threatening dangers imposed on the people who live near mountaintop removal sites. CFTM members knew that most of the American public would support their fight against coal companies if they could only expose the truth behind coal companies’ practices and convey the magnitude of the harm caused by mountaintop removal.

Mountain Mourning

CFTM began its educational initiative with the production of a DVD directed by BJ Gudmundsson. The DVD, called Mountain Mourning, combines actual footage of the violence of mountaintop removal and the horrifying repercussions on surrounding towns with stories of people standing up to fight the coal companies. Weaving together environment, culture, and religion as various angles from which mountaintop removal can be criticized, the film effectively conveys the magnitude of the situation and the dire

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urgency of the problem. In the environmental realm, the film draws on specific figures that illustrate the scope of mountaintop removal practices. It notes that over half of America’s electricity is derived from coal, suggesting that the situation in Appalachia demands national attention. It informs viewers that it takes 120 years to rebuild one inch of topsoil on mine sites, showing that Appalachia will bear the scars of mountaintop removal for centuries to come.

The film articulates the environmental disasters caused by mountaintop removal: streams buried under valley fills, toxic sludge deposits, floods of slurry water. It informs viewers of a disaster in Martin County in 2000, when a slurry pond broke and flooded communities with hundreds of millions of gallons of toxic water. The EPA deemed the event the worst catastrophe to ever befall the southeast United States. The film indicates that the spill released twenty thousand times more toxic fluid than the infamous Exxon Valdez oil spill, yet received very little coverage in national press. More recently, in December 2008, a slurry impoundment in Tennessee broke, releasing 5.4 million cubic yards of toxic slurry into rivers and communities (enough to flood 3,000 acres over one foot deep). The slurry contained heavy metals linked to nervous and reproductive system disorders, yet despite the havoc this wreaked, the spill was not nearly as widely reported in the media as one might expect. These examples highlight the struggle Appalachian residents have endured to make their voices heard.

*Mountain Mourning* also focuses on the rich culture of Appalachia, and the broken communities caused by mountaintop removal. It includes a soundtrack of songs protesting mountaintop removal, sung in the traditional, lilting Appalachian tone that

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55 *Mountain Mourning* DVD, directed by BJ Gudmundsson.
helps to distinguish the area as a place alive with a complex and valuable history. The film discusses how strip mining has destroyed the traditional Appalachian practice of herb collection by eliminating plant habitat, and even notes that the logging industry has lost over three hundred thousand acres to mountaintop removal. In another example of stressing social concerns over environmental concerns, the film identifies the loss of coal mining jobs as a repercussion of mountaintop removal. In 1960, coal mines employed 120,000 Appalachian residents. Now, only 15,000 work in the coal industry. Mining jobs, despite being dangerous and toxic to employees, represent a significant historical era for Appalachia that binds together the fabric of its culture. The tendency to deplore the loss of mining jobs caused by mountaintop removal is another example of Christian reluctance to denounce all aspects of coal. However, one part of the film does speak specifically to the evils of coal, a significant shift in tactics. A character in the film states, “Coal takes away everything and restores nothing. It corrupts and never purifies.” This blanket rebuke of coal is indicative of a small but growing acceptance of the notion that Appalachia’s future cannot be built on extraction of coal, a significant shift in people’s mindsets.

From a religious angle, Mountain Mourning points to both the destruction of God’s creation and the social injustices perpetrated on His followers as essential reasons for why Christians need to take action against mountaintop removal. The film is interspersed with biblical messages that highlight the importance of creation care theology. After noting that Appalachia is home to a deeply religious population, for instance, a quotation about God’s intention for man’s interaction with the earth appears:

57 Mountain Mourning DVD, directed by BJ Gudmundsson.
58 Ibid.
“And the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to dress it and keep it.” At the rallies depicted in the film, Christians hold signs announcing that the mountains are sacred, and many of the characters interviewed in the film trace their concern back to religious values. Maria Gunnoe, for instance, a resident at the foot of a mountaintop removal site, discusses how God planned for coal to stay buried. She expresses anger that Appalachian schools’ history books claim that surface mining leaves land better than it was before, since this implies that strip mining improves God’s handiwork. Religion is also expressed in the music throughout the film; many of the songs are based on traditional Christian spirituals. The first part of the film ends with a song that uses a “Hallelujah” refrain to bless various aspects of the Appalachian landscape. Over the course of the unfolded story, the film makes an extremely convincing argument for why Christians (or anyone, for that matter) should join the fight against mountaintop removal.

*Mountain Mourning* was debuted at the next major conference that CFTM helped to sponsor, the Healing Mountains conference in May 2006. This conference brought over three hundred activists to West Virginia to participate in workshops and panels about preventing the spread of mountaintop removal practices. The conference is a positive example of successful collaboration efforts among different groups; both Heartwood (a regional group dedicated to protecting the native forest in the central hardwood region) and the Ohio Valley Environmental Council were scheduled to have annual summits, and they combined their efforts and urged all of their members to attend the Healing Mountains conference instead. This is a unique and significant gesture in the

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid. As a very exciting side note, Maria Gunnoe was awarded the 2009 Goldman Environmental Prize for North America, one of the most prestigious environmental awards in the world, for her work fighting mountaintop removal in her hometown.
61 Ibid.
world of nonprofit politics; in my experiences working with the climate movement, organizations are sometimes reluctant to give up their personal priorities to work selflessly with other groups. The joint efforts of CFTM, Heartwood, and OVEC symbolize a truly generous readiness for collaboration among groups concerned about mountaintop removal.62

At the conference held by these three groups, people whose homes had been affected by mountaintop removal shared their stories, and the attendees (who represented four generations) promised to work together to build a strong network of activists. Although Christians for the Mountains helped with the organization of the conference, it was but one of many various groups in attendance. Its members were able to work alongside secular environmentalists, with all conference attendees sharing a common goal of striving to address mountaintop removal at the community, state, and national level in an effort to preserve the Appalachian landscape and culture.63

Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal

In a further collaborative effort, CFTM joined the wilderness campaign initiated by the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition. As part of the campaign, CFTM produced a booklet and a film entitled “God’s Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land,” which emphasized the sanctity of West Virginia’s rapidly disappearing wilderness. In May

62 Indeed, the unity among the many Appalachian groups (both religious and secular) working to fight mountaintop removal is one of the most successful examples of collaboration among grassroots organizations that I have ever encountered. The Alliance for Appalachia is a coalition of thirteen different organizations from five states, all united in ending mountaintop removal. The Alliance represents over thirteen thousand community members and is remarkably effective in organizing actions and events, despite the diverse goals of the different groups who are a part of it. The strength of this group is a reflection of the strong bond of place and pride that Appalachians share in their region and in their culture; additionally, it illustrates the understood urgency of halting mountaintop removal mining.

2007, CFTM joined with other faith groups from across Appalachia to partake in the Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal, held by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and the Catholic Commission of Appalachia. The tour was organized by Father John Rausch, a Catholic priest, and included twenty-one leaders from many different Christian denominations and one Baha’i practitioner.

The Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal was featured in the groundbreaking film “Renewal,” a documentary that showcases the efforts of eight different religious groups fighting for environmental causes. The section about mountaintop removal is entitled “A Crime Against Creation” and speaks directly to the heart of the problem and about the initial efforts of Christians to forge a solution. Beginning with Appalachian religious music in the background, this section of the film provides clips with messages from prominent religious leaders who came on the tour to reflect on what mountaintop removal practices meant in the context of their individual theologies. The Christians interviewed in the film spoke passionately about the incongruity of mountaintop removal with the values of their faith. All connected what they saw to different aspects of Christian theology.

When Matthew Sleeth, for instance, first witnessed the destruction, he commented, “As a Christian and a doctor, the first word that comes to mind is rape.” Sleeth has become famous among evangelical communities for his popular book Serve God, Save the Planet; his influence symbolizes the growing evangelical consciousness of environmental issues and the importance of stewardship. Allen Johnson, founder of

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64 “A Crime Against Creation,” Renewal, produced by Marty Ostrow and Terry Kay Rockefeller, 2007. Sleeth’s comment was affirmed by an Episcopalian priest I spoke with, Rev. Jim Lewis, who argued vehemently that mountaintop removal, in addition to all of its other implications, is a feminist issue, involving issues of rape and exploitation that go far beyond simple environmental degradation. [Rev. Jim Lewis, personal communication, March 22, 2009.]
CFTM, condemned mountaintop removal with equal fervor: “This is greed; this is arrogance; this is injustice; those are all biblically understood as sin and idolatry!” He continued by pointing out that Jesus urges Christians to repent, expanding on Jesus’ message to argue that “we, as Christians, have to see how complicit we are.” Allen’s message brings home the fact that even Christians who live far away from mountaintop removal contribute to the destruction; every time they flick on a light switch, the electricity provided is likely derived in part from Appalachian coal.

Peter Illyn, founder and executive of Restoring Eden, a national Christian environmental organization, framed the issue of Christian environmental action simply: “If we love the creator, we should take care of creation.” In the film, Peter also referenced Proverbs 31:8, which commands, “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.” The destitution of Appalachia is inescapable for those who experience it, and the religious leaders on the Tour were powerfully struck by what they witnessed. One clip from the film shows everyone on the Tour circled on top of Kayford Mountain, singing Amazing Grace. The hymn is punctuated by the explosions of the mountains in the background, a heart-wrenching contrast between religious faith in the restoration of the earth and the systematic desecration of the land by the coal industry.

The leaders who attended the Tour were moved to publish an “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal,” which attracted a great deal of publicity. The group’s use of the term “interfaith” lies somewhat outside the boundaries of what some might consider to be a coalition of different religions. From my perspective in the climate

65 “A Crime Against Creation,” Renewal.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Proverbs 31:8
movement, the term “interfaith” is usually used to identify the participation of several different major religions. For instance, Interfaith Power and Light, a global warming action group, includes Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist members, among others. At the Religious Leaders’ tour, however, only different Christian denominations were represented, with the exception of the Baha’i faith (which emphasizes unity of all religions to begin with). The group’s choice of the term “interfaith” suggests a recognition that various denominations of Christianity are different enough in philosophy and practice that followers of one strain of Christianity may approach certain issues (like activism) very differently from followers of a different form of Christianity.

The “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal” uses Christian language and concepts to frame mountaintop removal as a deeply religious issue. Since nearly all religious leaders present were Christian, it was markedly easier for the group to find common ground for building a convincing argument of why mountaintop removal must be considered an issue of faith. The statement emphasizes that caring for creation is a spiritual act that allows humans to connect with God by acting as stewards for all that He made, which is a reflection of His beauty. The statement uses Genesis and the symbolism of the Garden of Eden to point out that God created this world in a certain way: “We remember that God finished the work of creation and ‘found it very good.’ (Gen. 1:31.) God put humanity in the Garden of Eden, a symbol of the whole world, ‘to cultivate and

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69 Historically, Protestantism and Catholicism have promoted such different theologies, with each defining the other as heretical, that some might consider any effort on the joint behalf of these two denominations to be “interfaith.” However, some current theologians argue that the rift between these denominations has been diminishing over the last few decades, which might mean that collaboration between them should not be considered an interfaith endeavor. Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, Is the Reformation Over?: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
The statement makes clear that by being complicit in mountaintop removal practices we are not only vandalizing God’s property but failing miserably in our responsibility to be stewards of God’s creation.

The statement goes one step further, stating that Christians should be held accountable not only for ignoring the stewardship creed with which God has graciously entrusted them, but also for ignoring the fundamental causes of mountaintop removal: our insatiable greed and demand for cheap energy. Our lifestyles and reliance on fossil fuels has led to both the death of the beautiful Appalachian Mountains and the impoverishment of the surrounding people. The statement highlights the plain contrast between the wealth of the coal companies and the severe poverty of those whose land is exploited by the companies, and even of those who work for the coal companies, who suffer high health hazards and low pay. The statement asserts, “The rich beauty of creation stands next to the stark destruction of mountaintop removal. The wealth of coal companies stands beside the utter poverty of the people who have worked to make these companies successful and whose land contains these riches. We confess the role our own demand for cheap energy from coal has played in the destruction of creation and the impoverishment of the people of Central Appalachia.”

By making this connection, the statement urges all people of faith, especially Christians, to fight to end not only mountaintop removal, but the whole corrupt system of fossil fuel exploitation and over-consumption that gave birth to the practice.

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71 Ibid.
The statement ends with the affirmation of four actions that each religious leader committed to seeing through. First, each leader promised to examine his or her personal habits and lifestyle in order to identify practices that were contributing to the exploitation of the globe’s resources (a commitment that reflects the influence of Allen Johnson’s urging that Christians must accept personal responsibility for the destruction of Appalachia). Religious leaders recognized that change comes from within, and knew that they could never address the larger issue of mountaintop removal if they did not first understand how certain daily practices feed into the corporate coal economy. In the words of the religious leaders attending the tour, the interfaith statement reads, “Our unexamined and often frivolous consumption has blinded us to the consequences of those demands on creation and the people of the coalfields.”\footnote{Ibid.} By assuming personal responsibility for mountaintop removal and the larger fossil fuel economy as a whole, religious leaders took an important first step in addressing collective complacency and the pervasive ignorance of the repercussions of our daily actions (or perhaps simply our refusal to accept the consequences), two of the largest obstacles to environmental progress.

The second goal the statement established was to include mountaintop removal in the burgeoning discussion of global warming that has recently sparked the interest of so many different religious leaders.\footnote{Religious interest in global warming has grown immensely over the last decade. In the Christian community, people at all levels, from individuals to the Pope, have taken action to reduce carbon emissions and to raise the cry for better care of God’s creation. Churches have participated in grassroots actions such as reducing energy consumption and “greening” their buildings, holding Bible study sessions that frame global warming as a religious issue, writing letters to politicians to demand progressive legislation that addresses global warming, holding rallies and marches, and many more. For more information on this exciting new religious movement, read about the National Religious Partnership for the Earth at http://www.nrpe.org/ or the Regeneration Project at http://www.theregenerationproject.org/. Rebecca Gould} By incorporating mountaintop removal into a problem
that has national and global significance, the religious leaders hoped to gain attention beyond Appalachian communities in order to establish a solid support base for their future actions. Thirdly, authors of the interfaith statement pledged to speak out against mountaintop removal, through any medium available. The religious leaders present wanted to ensure that mountaintop removal would be a topic commonly brought up in sermons, in conversations with church members, in publications, and in any other public setting. In addition to speaking with their voices, they pledged to speak with their votes, committing to pressuring elected officials to impose a ban on mountaintop removal mining.

The church’s involvement with politics is one that has long been opposed by secular organizations, both because of the founding principle of the separation of church and state that is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution and, more recently, because of Christian biblical literalists’ reputation of allying themselves with the political far right on the basis of family values. In theory, churches are supposed to avoid preaching about politics, but it is clear that in the environmental movement, as in others (such as the Civil Rights movement), churches recognize the potential of linking religious commitment with political action. Recently, for instance, evangelical Christians have become very active in the political process on the issue of global warming, voting to protect God’s creation. In 2002, the Evangelical Environmental Network launched their “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign, which featured a Prius road trip to urge

evangelicals to reduce their fossil fuel use and take creation care seriously.\textsuperscript{75} Four years later, eighty-six prominent evangelical leaders signed the Evangelical Climate Initiative, a document that thrust evangelicals into a new political spotlight. The Initiative acknowledged traditional evangelical involvement in politics (mainly their outspoken condemnation of abortion) and heralded a new direction for their participation by asserting that global warming would be considered a priority concern in evangelical Christian politics. The statement opens, “As American Evangelical Christian leaders, we recognize both our opportunity and our responsibility to offer a biblically based moral witness that can help shape public policy in the most powerful nation on earth, and therefore contribute to the well-being of the entire world. Whether we will enter the public square and offer our witness there is no longer an open question. We are in that square, and we will not withdraw.”\textsuperscript{76} The Initiative represents an enormous risk that many evangelical leaders took in breaking with traditional political involvement to address an issue that was not yet considered a Christian priority.

While the interfaith statement on mountaintop removal did not mention whether mountaintop removal should be considered a priority over other moral issues when Christians are casting their votes, the willingness of the statement’s authors to speak out in the political arena is reminiscent of the Evangelical Climate Initiative and the recent divides that differing agendas and political priorities have caused within the evangelical community. Indeed, the statement against mountaintop removal could represent an enormous step forward for many Appalachian churches, if congregations were to promote

the statement in local churches. Allen Johnson mentioned to me that many of the churches in Appalachia are so focused on their singular community that even traditionally conservative issues have a hard time penetrating the walls of a congregation. He commented that “bedroom issues,” such as abortion and gay marriage, were once slow to gain fervor throughout churches in Appalachia, due to churches’ small sizes and their purposeful distance from politics. These issues are now beginning to make their way into Appalachian churches, but Allen credits this stretch into the realm of social consequence to the influence of conservative talk radio rather than to the influence of pastors.

The fact that even politically conservative issues have been so slow to come to Appalachian churches demonstrates the difficulty in discussing environmental issues within Appalachian churches, since environmentalism still bears a stigma of association with liberal politics. It also symbolizes how important the Interfaith Statement Against Mountaintop Removal was in establishing a role for the church on the topic of mountaintop removal. With any luck, the Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal will prove to be just as influential within the Appalachian religious sphere as the Evangelical Climate Initiative was in the evangelical Christian community.

Moving from public action to internal reflection, the fourth pledge that religious leaders signed onto in the “Interfaith Statement On Mountaintop Removal” was to incorporate the issue of mountaintop removal into their spirituality, and to urge other members of their congregation to do the same. Part of this pledge includes explaining to other Christians why the spiritual implications of mountaintop removal make it a moral issue, and leading Christians in prayer to ask for an end to the process altogether. The

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existence of this last goal suggests that many religious leaders were not initially drawn to protesting mountaintop removal as an issue of faith; it was only through conversations with others that they began to see how speaking out against mountaintop removal and following a strong Christian theology go hand in hand. The emphasis on spirituality as the concluding part of the Interfaith Statement reflects the religious community’s efforts to ground their actions in belief; it may also be an indication of an attempt to reduce the potential controversy of the previous commitment to political action, since spirituality is obviously widely accepted and celebrated in Appalachian churches.

While the four pledges included in the statement overtly address certain aspects of the many issues surrounding mountaintop removal, a close reading of the statement brings up another point that is mentioned but not explicitly explained. The statement refers to the spectrum touted by certain capitalists with environmental action at one end and employment opportunities at the other as a “false dichotomy.” This claim implicitly alludes to the long historical struggle between coal miners and environmentalists, which has a reputation of being extremely bitter and even violent. Those who are employed by the coal companies, although most of them are themselves being exploited by the giant corporations, sometimes view environmentalists as “the enemy,” largely because they perceive that a ban on coal mining would mean unemployment for miners. However, the coal industry has been moving farther and farther away from manual labor, especially in the case of mountaintop removal, and now relies much more on machinery to extract coal from the ground.

Yet in Appalachia, the economy and the environment are two concepts that are still often viewed as diametrically opposed. It is easy to imagine that Christians may have

a difficult dilemma if they were forced to decide between caring for God’s creation or caring for their neighbor’s livelihood. Without addressing this issue directly, the Interfaith Statement manages to effectively avoid this argument. Rather than falling into the trap of debating whether jobs or the environment is more important, the statement speaks to this concern by acknowledging that coal companies abuse their employees’ rights and deny them a safe and healthy work environment: “Society must reject the false dichotomy of jobs versus the environment and creatively find ways of preserving God’s creation while allowing workers of mountain communities to earn their livelihoods.”

This statement makes it possible for Christians to move forward in mountaintop removal protest as a positive aspect of their faith, freeing them from the struggle of determining whether opposing surface mining is detrimental to their neighbor’s livelihood.

The “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal” was signed by twenty religious leaders, including prominent Christians who have been involved in other faith-based environmental movements, such as the fight against global warming. In addition to attracting media attention, the statement helped to solidify a partnership among Christian practitioners and theologians that can be used in future collaborative initiatives. Since participating in the religious leaders’ tour, CFTM has been focusing on national outreach to spread awareness about the atrocities committed by mountaintop removal mining companies. They are active through holding meetings and giving presentations at conferences, college campuses, and in churches, always striving to illuminate the deep connection between Christian ideals and environmental and social values.

Will Samson, an evangelical professor who has studied CFTM in depth, writes, “In framing Christian opposition to mountaintop removal coal mining as an instance of

79 Ibid, 1.
Biblically mandated ‘creation care,’ CFTM activists, like their counterparts nationally in the evangelical climate initiative, are attempting to transform American religious culture by challenging the antithesis between evangelical religion and environmentalism."80 Indeed, CFTM consistently challenges the constructed divide between Christian values and environmental activism. This summer, CFTM is opening two volunteer houses in Ansted, WV, with the intent of hosting Christian students to aid the residents of Appalachia through water quality testing and other volunteer service efforts. CFTM advertises, “The work will be hard, but rewarding. There are many seemingly overwhelming struggles throughout the area, but we will pray together, lift each other up and support each other in fellowship, always leaning on the everlasting arms of Jesus Christ.”81 The addition of these volunteer houses will likely recruit many Christian youth from all over the country to take action on mountaintop removal, broadening the Christian presence against mountaintop removal in an area that has been devastated by blasted mountains and a failing economy.

**Lindquist-Environmental Appalachian Fellowship**

CFTM has made enormous strides in educating Christians across Appalachia and across the country about the effects of mountaintop removal. Another Appalachian Christian group that links Christianity directly to the issue of mountaintop removal is the Lindquist-Environmental Appalachian Fellowship (LEAF). LEAF is unique among Christian mountaintop removal opposition groups for two reasons: first, it focuses its

efforts only on Tennessee, in the three counties where mountaintop removal mining takes place. Second, LEAF promotes political, legislative action as one of the most important strategies for Christians in the fight against mountaintop removal. Many of the other Christian groups and individuals working to stop mountaintop removal shy away from broaching the topic of politics, since churches’ involvement in politics has long been a contentious issue in the United States. LEAF, however, is extremely active in advocating for progressive legislation that puts a stop to mountaintop removal once and for all.

LEAF uses the message of stewardship to explain why Christians of all denominations need to be concerned about mountaintop removal practices. The group distinguishes themselves from the misanthropic stereotype of environmentalism by clarifying that resources should be *used* by humans, but not abused. LEAF writes, “As gifts of God, our Creator, mountains inspire wonder, awe, and gratitude. Christians are called to stewardship of this Creation. Stewardship doesn’t mean the land shouldn’t be used. It does mean, however, that land should be used wisely, and in ways that allow for future uses and continued employment for future generations.”

LEAF emphasizes a nonpartisan approach to stewardship, stressing that care for God’s creation unites people from all political backgrounds. Its members proclaim, “Concern for God’s Creation is not a matter of being liberal or conservative, a Republican or a Democrat. We believe people of faith can look beyond such distinctions and do the Lord’s work together.” One of LEAF’s most significant contributions towards stopping mountaintop removal is its sponsorship of the bipartisan Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act.

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This act is made up of two main components. Its first aim is to make valley fills illegal, thus severely inconveniencing mountaintop removal companies by forcing them to properly dispose of mining waste. Second, the Act calls for a ban on any ridge-line altering mining at elevations over two thousand feet (essentially prohibiting any form of mountaintop removal coal mining). LEAF campaigned aggressively to get this bill passed in the TN legislature, but unfortunately, it did not receive enough votes to get through the Environment sub-committee, so it was taken off the agenda (although there is still hope that it could be re-introduced in the remainder of 2009’s legislative session). Despite this recent setback, LEAF is continuing to rally Christians to fight against mountaintop removal. The group offers educational materials, sermon suggestions, and other avenues by which Christians can join the movement. Some of the main ways that LEAF encourages Christians to get involved are in lobbying for the Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act, in reducing personal consumption of energy and electricity, in distributing resources for Christians about how faith and environmentalism are connected (these resources include CFTM’s *Mountain Mourning* DVD and evangelical Matthew Sleeth’s popular book *Serve God, Save the Planet*), and in praying for a safe future for our planet. Since most of my research focused on mountaintop removal in West Virginia and Kentucky, I did not study LEAF in great detail, but the group’s efforts to combat mountaintop removal should definitely be acknowledged. Its direct involvement in the local political process, especially, represents an alternative way that more outspoken Christians can be involved in the movement to end mountaintop removal.

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84 Ibid.
Catholic Committee of Appalachia

While CFTM at the national level and LEAF at the local level have had success reaching across denominations to cultivate a sense of responsibility towards the planet among Christians of all types, other organizations have focused their efforts on a single denomination in order to make the spiritual significance even more directly relevant to a certain religious tradition. The Catholic Committee of Appalachia is one of these organizations, reaching out to Catholic Appalachian residents and drawing on religious avenues specific to Catholicism, such as the leadership of the Pope, to connect the Christian faith with environmental values. The Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) was founded by a group of Appalachian bishops, clergy, and laity in 1970 to “serve Appalachia, her poor, and the entire web of creation.” Like many churches and Christian coalitions in the United States, the CCA has developed its environmental message over time; the environment was not an original focus of the group. I spoke with Carol Warren, a Catholic resident of West Virginia who has worked closely with the CCA, and she told me that in some of the initial CCA meetings, when members tried to introduce environmental themes, the original reaction from many other members was, “What does the environment have to do with faith?” Carol reflected that over the years, however, the members of the CCA have begun to make the connection between religion and environmental values. This burgeoning realization echoes the parallel growth of Christian involvement in the national and global environmental movements over the last few decades that I mentioned several times in this chapter.

Today, the CCA considers fighting mountaintop removal its top priority among a wide range of other issues that include prison reform, racism, poverty, education, clean water, and sustainable lifestyles. Similar to CORA and other Appalachian organizations, the CCA chooses to foster open dialogue and networking among a variety of groups in Appalachia rather than singularly advancing their individual mission. The CCA has distributed two important publications in the form of pastoral letters that address mountaintop removal and other environmental issues in Appalachia directly. Pastoral letters are written by bishops to the clergy or laity of their dioceses, and can contain instructions, encouragement on a particular issue, or consolation. The Catholic Church issues pastoral letters on a regular basis at certain times in the Christian calendar as a form of regular communication between church hierarchies. The practice of regional bishops addressing social justice issues in pastoral letters is fairly common; in the past, pastoral letters have commented on issues like the Iraq War, immigration, and economic justice. The successful inclusion of the subject of mountaintop removal in pastoral letters demonstrates Appalachian Christians’ growing concern over the practice and their increasing acceptance of protests against mountaintop removal as an issue of faith. By issuing two pastoral letters that specifically condemn mountaintop removal, Appalachian bishops display their willingness to use traditional avenues of church education and activism to elevate mountaintop removal to a position of high priority for Christians.

The first pastoral letter distributed by the CCA, “This Land Is Home to Me,” focuses on powerlessness in Appalachia, and was signed by a group of twenty-five

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Catholic bishops in the Appalachian region. The pastoral letter notes that despite increased development in Appalachia, “the powerlessness of the people continues. Mountaintop removal, dubbed strip mining on steroids, steals the serenity and security of local folks subjected to blasts that take down mountains while giant earth movers bury streams in the valleys below. The process means home foundations crack from vibrations, water supplies run orange with acid and flood waters threaten whole communities.”  

The letter urges Catholics to consider mountaintop removal and its associated problems a serious spiritual matter and to create a united front of opposition to what they see as the moral evils that confront Appalachia. The bishops pronounce the plight of the mountains as a chance to bring God more fully into one’s heart and mind: “The dream of the mountains’ struggle, and the dream of simplicity and of justice, like so many other repressed visions is, we believe, the voice of the Lord among us.”  

The bishops are drawing on a particular strain of Christianity here; their personification of the mountains’ struggle and ability to feel pain is not foreign to Christian language, but it is not a representation of mainstream Christian theology.

The bishops’ assertion that God’s voice can be found in nature is an example of a growing strain of the theology of immanence, a particular aspect of Christianity purported by theologians like Sally McFague and Calvin DeWitt. The notion of immanence eliminates the strict dualistic boundaries that some Christians have drawn between heaven and earth, spiritual and material. Instead, a theology of immanence suggests the presence of God here on this earth, in everything that He has created. McFague uses Jesus as an example of how God can express Himself on earth: “...the

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89 Ibid, 3.
direction of these Christologies is toward immanentalism, overcoming the traditional emphasis in Christianity on divine transcendence—often God-world dualism...While a narrow incarnational Christology—Jesus alone as embodying divine presence—is anthropocentric, a wider incarnational interpretation is very hospitable to ecological concerns: God is in nature as well as in Jesus.”90 The bishops who signed “This Land Is Home To Me” are building upon this immanent theology, acknowledging that God can exist here on earth as well as in the divine realm.

The pastoral implores Christian citizens across Appalachia to engage pastors and preachers in their local parishes on current issues, spreading the scope of Christian activism across the region. The letter closes with a hope: by shouldering and helping to alleviate the burdens of our world, “the Church might once again be known as a center of the Spirit...where in a wilderness of idolatrous destruction the great voice of God still cries out for life.”91 The bishops who signed the pastoral acknowledged that the church, which has long been a central part of Appalachian culture, has the power to revitalize ailing communities through direct service and action on the part of its members.

The CCA distributed its second publication, another pastoral letter, in 1995, as part of a twenty year commemoration of the work it had undertaken since publishing “This Land is Home to Me.” This pastoral, entitled “At Home in the Web of Life,” briefly chronicles the achievements of the CCA since the publication of the first pastoral. Some of these accomplishments include welcoming the many Catholics from out of state who came to Appalachia to answer the call of the people there, helping to close a coal mine in rural Virginia, and establishing libraries and training programs in some of the

91 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 39.
poorest counties of the region. The pastoral then moves quickly to identifying the enormous challenges still ahead, in particular the challenge of creating “sustainable communities” throughout Appalachia, “communities where people and the rest of nature can live together in harmony and not rob future generations.”92 This statement illustrates an important assumption that “At Home in the Web of Life” bases its argument on, the assumption that man is part of nature, and not separate. This marks a radical break from the biblical hierarchy of humans over nature. Rather than choosing to emphasize humanity’s role as stewards over nature, the second pastoral eliminates any boundaries present between the two groups, including humans in the web of life that all other life forms and landscapes are a part of.

“At Home in the Web of Life” uses various levels of the church hierarchy that Catholics can look to for guidance in order to supports the credibility of its message. The pastoral is signed by bishops, for instance, and also dwells on the messages of the Pope, a critical religious and moral role model unique to Catholicism. “At Home in the Web of Life” directly uses Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical, where he criticizes Western society for developing a “culture of death,”93 as a springboard for leaping into a discussion of Christian ecological principles that are much more radical in nature. The pastoral pushes far beyond the more conservative Christian reason for advocating environmental protection, that God created the earth and charged humans with its protection, and that we should care for God’s creation due to our devotion to Him.

Instead, the pastoral implies that the earth itself is sacred, a sharp break from a comfortable and safe argument for Christian environmental action. The pastoral states, “Empty mines are sacred wombs of Earth, opening pathways to underground rivers and to life-giving aquifers...needing to be kept pure and clean as God’s Holy waters.”94 The pastoral pitches environmental degradation as a moral and spiritual crisis, one that needs to be addressed by Christians in Appalachia and all over the world. Similarly, another rather radical portion of “At Home in the Web of Life” is prominently displayed on the CCA’s main website: “In this magnificent work of God’s creation, / misty mountain haze is holy incense, / tall tree trunks are temple pillars, / sun-splashed leaves are stained glass, / and song-birds are angelic choirs.”95 For the CCA, the physical environmental is not only God’s Creation but is a temple in its own glory, a metaphor reminiscent of John Muir’s famous comparison of wilderness to a cathedral.

The notion of the earth as sacred, stated so clearly in the pastoral, is one that has not historically resonated with more conservative Christians, and represents the shifting of Christian consciousness to a more widely accepted association between Christianity and environmental activism. Previously, eco-theologians who touted creation care theology as a central aspect of Christianity were seen as stretching the boundaries of traditional Christianity, introducing a sometimes radically new perspective. At present, however, denominations and Christian organizations across the country are using the Christian responsibility for stewardship of this earth as a strong starting point for encouraging specific types of political and social action on certain issues like climate change and mountaintop removal. Many of the statements against mountaintop removal

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written by Christian denominations assume that most Christians already have a full understanding of their responsibility as stewards; this is a building block that no longer needs to be convincingly argued.

The emergence of creation care theology into mainstream Christian tradition is quite recent. Pope John Paul II helped to advance Catholic environmental engagement by publicly interpreting certain sections of the Bible differently than some Christians have in the past, but even he felt the need to tie environmentalism to other issues with a stronger history of Christian involvement. For instance, in his speech on World Peace Day in 1990, Pope John Paul II addressed ecological principles through the framework of peace: “world peace is threatened...by lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life...a new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge, which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programs and initiatives.”96 With this speech, the Pope encouraged Christians to engage in environmental action for the cause of peace, an ideal most Christians already acknowledged as central to their theology. Father John Rausch, director of the CCA, marks this speech as the first time that the Catholic Church became involved in environmental issues; ever since then, creation care has grown to become an important aspect of Catholic philosophy and action.97

Furthermore, Pope John Paul II was instrumental in reinterpreting certain Biblical statements to support a stronger Christian environmental ethic. The infamous Genesis section that gives humanity “dominion” over all other creatures has been used repeatedly

97 Father John Rausch, personal communication, March 25, 2009.
by Christians to argue that humans were given free reign over the environment to treat it
according to pleasure and whim. The wording of the section, indeed, evokes permission
of a certain kind of violence: “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the
fish of the sea and over the birds of the air.”\(^98\) However, Pope John Paul II took this
section of the Bible and reframed it to convey a message of wise use. In a 2000 speech,
the Pope stated, “...an irresponsible culture of “dominion” has been reinforced with
devastating ecological consequences; this certainly does not correspond to God’s
plan...these famous words of Genesis entrust the earth to man’s uses, not abuse. They do
not make man the absolute arbiter of the earth’s governance but the Creator's "co-
worker": a stupendous mission, but one which is also marked by precise boundaries that
can never be transgressed with impunity.”\(^99\) While the CCA has not used this speech
directly to support its emphasis on creation care, the Pope’s words reveal his identity as
an outspoken advocate of environmental protection. Catholics across Appalachia were
able to use his encyclicals and speeches to support their advocacy, and the CCA takes
Pope John Paul II’s approach to heart in their attempt to foster a Christian culture of
ecological responsibility.

\(^{98}\) Genesis 1:28.
\(^{99}\) Catholic Community Forum, “Pope John Paul II - Earth is Entrusted to Man’s Uses, Not Abuse,”
The notion of “dominion,” one of the terms which Lynn White blamed as a central aspect of the Judo-
Christian tradition that frames the natural world as a hierarchy with humans at the top, is one that is
discussed often in Appalachia. Promoters of mountaintop removal mining use “dominion” to argue that
humans have the right to use resources any way they see fit; there is even a mountaintop removal coal
company in southwestern Virginia named “Dominion,” which speaks to the prevalence of religious
language on both sides of the debate. Those who are fighting mountaintop removal, on the other hand,
interpret dominion in a different way, more reminiscent of Pope John Paul’s definition of the term. One
evangelical student whom I spoke with commented that “dominion means ruling so that creation
flourishes.” This seems to be the dominant interpretation of that particular passage of Genesis among most
Christian activists fighting mountaintop removal. [Brian Schaap, personal communication, March 17,
2009).
While the publication of the two pastorals is extremely heartening and suggests that Christians across Appalachia have made enormous strides in connecting their faith with environmental values, the pastorals’ content may not reflect the reality of most Christians’ interpretation of their faith. I asked Father John Rausch about the reception of “At Home In the Web of Life” in particular, expecting him to remark that it infuriated theologically and socially conservative Christians for being so progressive in its environmental message. However, Father Rausch answered that among most congregants, the pastoral caused almost no stir, probably because most people did not understand it. On the other hand, he did note that coal companies were extremely angry about the publication of the pastoral, which shows that the industry recognized the significance of Christian promotion of environmental values. While the people of Appalachia may not have fully understood “At Home in the Web of Life,” the CCA at least alerted the coal industry that the religious implications of mountaintop removal could not be ignored.

The CCA is active well beyond publishing pastorals. Another of its main achievements has been organizing educational conferences and spiritual retreats dedicated to raising awareness about mountaintop removal and other social and environmental issues in Appalachia. It has organized a yearly autumn tour called “Pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Appalachia,” which exposes participants to the coalfields that scar the Appalachian Mountains. Father John Rausch writes, “Tour participants see firsthand ways that forest is being assaulted, an assault caused by America’s insatiable demand for cheap energy—regardless of the ecological costs.”

CCA’s commitment to ecological principles is ongoing; their annual conference of 2008 was entitled “Kiss the Earth: A Spirituality of the Land.”¹⁰¹ CCA is also constantly working on strengthening ecumenical and interfaith relationships. A conference to be held in spring 2009 features an introduction to the spirituality of the Cherokee people, and the next conference for bishops is focused on building an ecumenical community in Appalachia.

CCA was one of the main participants in the Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal, which occurred in May 2007. The director of the CCA, Father John Rausch, helped to organize the tour and led many of its activities. Fr. Rausch has gained national recognition for his unwavering dedication to halting mountaintop removal. He has been called “the Catholic voice” for social justice, and was recipient of the 2007 USA Teacher of Peace award given by Pax Christi, an international Catholic organization made up of over eight hundred Catholic parishes, all dedicated to advancing the cause of global peace.¹⁰² Upon the dedication of the award, Bishop Walter Sullivan, former bishop-president of Pax Christi USA, commented, “Appalachia is beginning to look like a war zone and John Rausch has been a strong voice in organizing opposition to this type of destruction (mountaintop removal).”¹⁰³ As part of his effort to promote peace through fighting mountaintop removal, Fr. Rausch has also written about the connections between our planet’s dwindling natural resources and the potential for increased violence as nations start to compete for energy. He notes, “Turning off lights will save money

¹⁰¹ Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “Our Mission.” This conference illustrates the degree to which ecological responsibility has become an accepted part of Christian theology. A few decades ago, even the title of this conference might have proved controversial for suggesting pagan imagery in the context of Catholicism.


¹⁰³ Ibid.
while sparing the destruction of Appalachia through mountaintop removal. Walking when possible will preserve the atmosphere while adding a few steps of exercise. However, an emphasis on personal improvement tends to overlook the demands of the larger community. Violence continues to grip our society. At Virginia Tech 33 people were killed in April, 2007, and six months before, five Amish girls were murdered in Pennsylvania. The challenge: To build a culture of non-violence and reconciliation.”

Fr. Rausch articulates the importance of personal environmental resolutions but, more importantly, calls for a radical shift in American culture that prioritizes compassion for people and the planet over violence and selfishness.

In an article entitled “More Supply or Less Demand?,” Fr. Rausch calls for two main approaches to addressing the energy crisis: an enormous national investment in renewable energy on the scale of the 1970’s space race, and the promotion of a culture of efficiency that includes practical solutions like fuel efficient cars and better insulated homes. Pointing to the fact that global warming and other environmental problems will lead to an increase in refugees, disease, and border conflicts, Fr. Rausch calls on Christians to make changes in their lifestyles that reflect the limits of the earth’s resources. He acknowledges that Christians should be in an obvious position to do so: “People of faith see a simpler lifestyle and a more intentional use of resources as an essential component of peace building.”

Like Pope John Paul II, Fr. Rausch urges Christians to view environmental responsibility through the lens of peace advocacy,

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working simultaneously to heal the rifts among different populations and the planet we inhabit.

Fr. Rausch began leading people on tours of mountaintop removal in 1994, and has led over four hundred people since then in witnessing firsthand the destruction of the mountains. In 2007, Fr. Rausch led the Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal in collaboration with Christians for the Mountains. As already mentioned, the group was made up almost entirely of Christians, despite invitations having been sent to Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus in the area. However, the group was certainly an ecumenical gathering: Christians in attendance included Roman Catholics, Mennonites, Evangelicals, Methodists, Lutherans, and members of the United Church of Christ. Although Catholics represent only three percent of the total population of the greater Appalachian region, Fr. John Rausch has exerted a strong positive influence over many he has worked with and talked to, encouraging Christians across Appalachia to join the fight against mountaintop removal. His success demonstrates the potential for ecumenical collaboration around mountaintop removal in the region.

However, Fr. Rausch admits that his involvement on this issue has not left him with a particularly encouraging vision of the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. During my trip to Appalachia, I visited Fr. Rausch at his home in Kentucky, and he spoke about how institutions (and especially churches) are always lagging behind in the drive towards social progress, and how church politics prevent most pastors from

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saying anything about mountaintop removal. I will discuss this in depth in Chapter Five, but it is important to forewarn that Fr. Rausch, despite his accomplishments, harbors significant doubts that the Christian faith is going to be leading the charge in the fight against mountaintop removal.

**Restoring Eden**

“Restoring Eden” is an example of an organization that has been enjoying successes based on the ecumenical approach that Fr. Rausch has encouraged. However, Restoring Eden differs from CORA, CFTM, LEAF, and the CCA in its focus and scope. Restoring Eden is not based in Appalachia; it is a national network of Christian citizens trying to incite a grassroots movement within churches to take action on important “creation care” issues. Restoring Eden is “dedicated to encouraging faithful stewardship of the natural world as a biblical, moral, and wise value.” The group works to promote appreciation of the natural world, environmental stewardship, and public advocacy on environmental issues. Mountaintop removal is not one of the four main public policy areas that Restoring Eden focuses on, so the group is only peripherally involved with the work of other Christian Appalachian organizations. However, Restoring Eden does address mountaintop removal as a serious ethical and religious problem, and its members consistently speak out against coal through their emphasis on promoting policy to curb global warming. The group’s ecumenical approach invites a diverse population of Christians from across the country to actively take part in advocating for creation care.

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In November 2008, Restoring Eden organized a road trip through West Virginia to allow Christians to witness the terrible devastation taking place. The group emphasized that over 470 mountains in Appalachia have been destroyed as a result of strip mining, and urged people to learn everything they could about the extent of Appalachia’s suffering. The trip, called “Shoutin’ For the Mountain,” visited seven sites that bear important significance in the mountaintop removal struggle, including Kayford Mountain and Marsh Fork Elementary School. Peter Illyn, executive director of Restoring Eden, knew that witnessing the destruction would enrage students and motivate them to action. He spoke of how one of the Christian environmental movement’s goals in raising awareness is to instigate righteous anger and indignation over the situation in Appalachia (which is easy to do with a visit to the coalfields) and then to harness that righteous anger and direct it towards productive measures like letter writing and direct action.111

Restoring Eden asked participants on the Shoutin’ for the Mountains tour to think carefully about what it means to be a steward of God’s creation and to brainstorm ways of halting the obliteration of Appalachian mountains and communities.112 The group slept in West Virginian churches that opened their doors to them, a symbol of how churches in Appalachia are willing to make small gestures of support towards mountaintop removal activists, even if they refuse to assume a public stance.

I spoke to two students from Calvin College who had attended the trip, and they told me that the journey was extremely eye-opening for them. After returning from Appalachia, the students organized film screenings and discussions to raise awareness about mountaintop removal mining. In addition to alerting the students to the devastation

111 Peter Illyn, personal communication, February 28, 2009.
that mountaintop removal causes, the Shoutin’ For the Mountains trip also emphasized the importance of prayer. The students in attendance prayed together each night of the trip, and the two with whom I spoke remarked on how important it is for people who are affected by mountaintop removal to know that people are praying for them. This comment reminded me of the enormous potential for Christianity to add the element of hope to this movement. Hope is a crucial part of any social movement, but is currently hard to find in Appalachia. The Christian faith acts as a solid source of hope and inspiration to which Christians can turn for support.

Youth participation in Christian opposition to mountaintop removal is a phenomenon worth taking a moment to notice. Nearly every Christian that I spoke with in Appalachia confirmed that interest in the environment is one of the most rapidly growing focuses of the younger generation of Christians. One of the secular activists whom I stayed with, whose house is often a stopping ground for student groups who come to tour mountaintop removal sites, confirmed that Christian students are by far the best groups to pass through. Unlike many students, who witness the painful effects of mountaintop removal, are momentarily horrified, and then slip back into their lives away from Appalachia, Christian students exhibit a strong sense of purpose that motivates them to become more connected to the fight against mountaintop removal. My conversation with the students who attended the Shoutin’ for the Mountains tour confirmed my growing sense of the enormous potential for Christian youth activism in the environmental movement.

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113 Brian Schaap and Lindsey Bouna, personal communication, March 17, 2009.
Both CFTM and Restoring Eden members draw significant hope from the number of young Christians who are taking on the fight to redirect our planet from catastrophe, at the local, national, and global level. The Christian environmental movement is visible far beyond the walls of the churches. Christians are adding their voices to the burgeoning youth environmental movement across the nation. It seems that even in the last year, for instance, the Christian presence in the youth climate movement has exploded. At Powershift 2009, Sage Russo, CFTM intern, led a workshop entitled “Stop a Bulldozer and Hug a Tree for Jesus: A Radical Christian Perspective on Organizing.” Both Sage and I expected the workshop to be on the smaller side; he joked about how during the 2007 Powershift his similarly focused workshop had been held in a small, distant room that was nearly impossible to find, a symbol of the minority presence of the Christian voice at environmental conferences.

However, Sage’s 2009 workshop was absolutely packed. After every seat was filled, students continued to stream in to stand along the walls and to squeeze into corners. Participants were actually turned away due to the room’s capacity being filled beyond fire code. The workshop’s popularity shows that Christians are becoming an extremely important presence in the youth climate scene, just as they are in the youth global environmental movement at large. Restoring Eden and CFTM actively recruit young Christians to join the fight against mountaintop removal; this is one of the most critical aspects of their work, since it ensures the existence of a movement filled with the energy and passion that students and other youth can provide.

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Appalachian Voices

On a different side of the spectrum from Restoring Eden lies Appalachian Voices, one of the largest groups working to end mountaintop removal with 1700 members and fourteen full time staff. While Restoring Eden is a national religious network that comments on mountaintop removal, Appalachian Voices is a secular organization based locally, in Boone, North Carolina. Founded in 1997, the group provides funding and training for activists working in the coalfields, acting as an umbrella organization for many initiatives designed to oppose mountaintop removal. Although Appalachian Voices does not have any official Christian affiliation, it does maintain a blog dedicated to religious voices speaking against mountaintop removal. The blog’s title, “Go Tell It On the Mountain,” plays off a traditional Christian spiritual that most Christians in Appalachia would recognize. The title is another example of powerful songs and statements from the Civil Rights movement that have been resurrected for the fight against mountaintop removal. Sung by Fannie Lou Hamer, as well as many other civil rights activists, the song grew to epitomize the struggle of African Americans fighting racism and bigotry across the country. Similarly, mountaintop removal activists use the song today to illustrate the struggle of Appalachian residents who are faced with the harsh reality of mountaintop removal every day of their lives.

The blog’s banner announces, “‘God’s Country’ is a phrase you often hear to describe the rich tapestry of life God has woven in Appalachia. But the destruction of Creation and injustice toward people caused by mountaintop removal has raised the concern of people of faith across America... This page is a place for people of all faiths to

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share their prayers and prayer requests for the people and mountains of Appalachia.”

Yet while the blog encourages people of all faiths to submit prayers, nearly every single entry revolves around a Christian theme. I came across one entry that appears to be written from a Jewish perspective, although even this entry relies heavily on the teachings of Jesus to urge others to take action (but the author uses the Hebrew name Yeshua when referring to Jesus.) The blog focuses specifically on mountaintop removal, but its overall message is not unique to Christian involvement in activism.

The language of the blog is similar to rhetoric used by larger eco-Christian organizations, such as the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). The EEN, a Christian coalition at the forefront of many national environmental issues, offers a quarterly “Creation Care Magazine” as a similar medium to “Go Tell It On The Mountain.” Both the blog and the magazine are effective in disseminating messages of hope and reassuring Christians that creation care is an important part of the Christian faith. While “Go Tell It On The Mountain” operates on a much smaller scale than the EEN’s magazine, it provides a similar sense of community for Christians who wish to express their thoughts and emotions on the topic of mountaintop removal.

“Go Tell It On the Mountain” seems to have been established quite recently, as the earliest (and most frequent) posts are from 2006. Appalachian Voices began the blog with the support of many other secular Appalachian groups, such as CRMW, OVEC, and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. The blog attracts contributors from a wide variety of different Christian denominations. Prayers have been offered by an Episcopal bishop, a Presbyterian pastor, and members of the evangelical, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran

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congregations, as well as many others who do not list their specific denominations. The number of Christians contributing is a reflection of the dominance of the Christian faith in Appalachia, while the diversity of the entries demonstrates the internal pluralism present within Christianity.

While the prayers offered on “Go Tell It On the Mountain” share many similarities, I identified three common themes that seem to infuse most of the prayers. The first is an acknowledgement that the earth that God created is beautiful and sacred. For example, Reverend Mark MacDonald, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese in Alaska (whose location offers insight into the broad scope of this movement), begins his prayer: “God of countless names and infinite goodness, your living love is inscribed in every particle of your Creation.” This seems to be the premise that many of the prayers then add to; most Christians working to stop mountaintop removal, even those who pursue their work more from an angle of social justice, refer to creation care theology as an obvious component of the fight against mountaintop removal. Rev. MacDonald’s prayer is unique in its inclusiveness of all faiths through his acknowledgement that God carries many different names. His prayer illustrates that Christians are capable of maintaining a distinct voice in the struggle against mountaintop removal while celebrating other religions as an additional part of the solution.

Similar to honoring the earth as God’s creation, the second theme running through many of the prayers on the blog is the sentiment of gratefulness. In many ways, this makes perfect sense, since a large number of Christians cherish the land shaped by God’s hand. On the other hand, the positive affirmation of gratefulness is somewhat surprising.

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on a blog devoted to the terrible destruction caused by the coal industry’s greed and oppressive dominance. It is also a reflection of the influence of previous social movement leaders, such as Gandhi, who called for gratitude in the face of oppression as a type of resistance in and of itself. Gandhi stressed that fighting with love was infinitely more powerful than fighting with violence or hatred, a sentiment that many Christian activists carry through to present issues.119

Christians’ ability to give thanks even in the face of such devastating atrocities is a testament to their commitment to their faith and their trust in God to lead them safely through challenges. Mary Jane Hitt, who grew up in West Virginia but is now pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, expresses this in a poem:

“Hear our prayer of thanksgiving / for the world that we take for granted, / for your gracious gifts that we do not earn, / for the daily blessings that we do not merit; / Hear our prayer of confession / as we acknowledge our self-absorption, / our short-sightedness; / our failure to care for all creation...”120

Her prayer exemplifies the third common thread running through most of the prayers, that of a request for forgiveness. Many of the Christians in Appalachia seem to bear the burden of mountaintop removal as something in which they themselves play a part.

Looking at this tendency, I thought it bore a strong connection to one of CFTM’s goals, which Robert “Sage” Russo, an intern at CFTM, had spoken to me about. Sage works

119 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Fighting with Gandhi* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 28. Indeed, the presence of gratitude has been one of the most striking differences that I have encountered between the secular environmental movement and the faith-based environmental movement. In February, I attended a lobby week with the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care to call for bold solutions to climate change. On our first day together, everyone joined in prayer. One of the first people to speak aloud was a student at Wheaton College, and she thanked God for the presence of global warming, praying, “Lord, thank you for this global warming issue – it strengthens us and helps us learn compassion.” Her comment, although it initially startled me, demonstrates the deep sense of gratitude that imbues the work of many Christians in the larger environmental movement.

alongside Allen Johnson, founder of CFTM, and is the only paid staff member of the group. I was able to talk with him about length about the goals, strategies, and successes of CFTM, as well as how the group differs from other organizations fighting mountaintop removal. Sage noted that one of the problems with secular environmental groups is that they can pit people against each other, singling out employees of coalfields and demonizing them as the enemy (I discussed this tendency earlier in the chapter, when referring to Denise Giardina’s speech and emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between the industry executives and those employed on the actual mine sites). One of CFTM’s goals is to encourage everyone, including coalfield employees, to unite together in support of a better future modeled on sustainable energy.

The prayers offered on “Go Tell it On the Mountain” are reminiscent of this ideal. Matthew Anderson-Stembridge, a Lutheran, writes, “God of Grace – may you forgive us our devotion to greed, destruction, and selfishness so that we might be freed to truly see the other as ourselves and hold the care of creation in our hearts.” Rather than pointing to the people who operate the machinery, or even the coal company executives, as an evil force that must be punished, the Christians who have written (like Anderson-Stembridge) ask God personally for forgiveness. They acknowledge that all of us, through the lives we lead – the food we eat, the cars we drive, the decisions we make – contribute to the nation’s energy crisis and the destruction in Appalachia. No one is exempt from blame, and Christians must be in communication with God to reconcile these sins. This sentiment, again, follows the model of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., who

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cautioned their followers against tagging anyone as “the enemy,” and instead urged them to embrace those with opposing viewpoints as part of their own family.

Most of the prayers on the “Go Tell It On the Mountain” blog are fairly free-form, written as personal requests to God with an individual tone. Sage Russo identified this as a general trend in the prayer habits of mountaintop removal activists. He stated that many of the Christians he works with, especially those from CFTM, do not come from a liturgical background, so they maintain a fluid relationship with prayer and pray through their spirits. Prayer through the spirit represents a more improvised version of prayer, in which the person praying speaks, chants, or maintains silence at any given moment, according to how he or she feels moved. One prayer written on the blog, however, is a structured prayer written as a script for the lector, offered by a Roman Catholic from northern Virginia:

“Lector: For the people in the Appalachian coalfields.
May they get what they need and be treated with respect and dignity.
Congregation: We Pray To The Lord.
Lector: For the poor, the sick and the elderly there
Congregation: We Pray To The Lord
Lector: For all miners. May they have safe working conditions, and receive better pay and benefits for the hard work they are doing.
Congregation: We Pray To The Lord
Lector: For all the people who are working to end Mountaintop Removal. Give them strength, courage and wisdom
Congregation: We Pray To The Lord”

This prayer is an example of the incredible leadership that churches are beginning to demonstrate on the fight against mountaintop removal. Leading an entire congregation in a prayer about mountaintop removal, and explicitly supporting those fighting the coal industry, could be interpreted as an open declaration of a particular church’s opposition to the practice of mountaintop removal. However, the prayer also respects the work and

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lives of miners, another example of Christian intent to avoid demonizing certain people. The specific intent of the prayer, though, to frame mountaintop removal as a harmful activity, is obvious enough to garner the attention of Christians in the audience of the congregation.124

If churches were to follow the example of this prayer, communicating to congregation members the official stance of the church in a non-confrontational way, Christians might begin to gain a certain level of comfort with speaking out against mountaintop removal. At the moment, discussion of mountaintop removal has not infiltrated enough churches at the regional or national level to really be seen as a distinct Christian issue.125 The amount of space available for Christians to speak out is growing, however. Whether Christians share their voices from the altar of the church or in a blog post, all are contributing to building a network of support for fellow Christians who care deeply about mountaintop removal as an issue of faith.

“Go Tell It On the Mountain” does not seem to receive heavy traffic from viewers, but those who do visit the blog leave overwhelmingly supportive and encouraging comments. Notably, two of the comments listed under blog posts are from readers in the Philippines, who can identify with the massive deforestation that mountaintop removal causes. These two viewers expressed their thanks for the prayers offered on the blog, noting that the prayers were applicable to all activists across the

124 Growing up, I sporadically attended a Catholic church, and I remember a prayer of a similar structure being an integral part of every service, where the lector would issue a statement, followed by “We Pray to the Lord,” and we would all answer “Lord Hear Our Prayer.” As far as I can remember, while our various lectors would always include a prayer for the sick and the poor, they never addressed any sort of specific current issue. As a Catholic who responded in rote, without necessarily thinking deeply about what I was praying for, I’m confident that the inclusion of a very specific problem to pray for would have jolted me out of the routine and made me think critically about the power of my prayer.

world. One, for instance, compared mountaintop removal in Appalachia to the situation on the Philippines’ Mt. Mayapay: “This prayer is universally meaningful. It can help inspire our people to work towards saving our Mt. Mayapay. The people who’re destroying it are our very own public officials who’re landowners inside the mountain.”126 Most of the responses to blog posts are similarly positive; I could only find three comments that criticized the theologies or messages of the blog. All three comments fell into different categories of disagreement: the first indicated a religious disagreement in interpretation of scripture, the second questioned the effectiveness of the blog, and the third expressed anger at the Christian notion of loving one’s neighbor, whatever the cost.

The first comment is a response to Mary Jane Hitt’s “A Prayer for the Mountains.” The respondent, Jake Welcher, leaves no explanation for his response, listing only a passage from the Bible: “‘They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.’” (Romans 1:25)127 Welcher’s meaning is not perfectly clear, but it seems reasonable to assume that he is using this passage to condemn Christians whom he perceives as worshipping the creation over God Himself. This has long been a principle criticism of eco-theologians from biblical literalists, who sometimes claim that a philosophy of environmental action implies a prioritization of the land over the Creator. However, Welcher’s criticism of the blog’s intention stands alone amidst positive encouragement from fellow Christians.

The second note of disagreement comes as a response to a prayer submitted by Melissa Gee, an Appalachian resident. The response is written by an anonymous Appalachian State University student, and although it reflects a religious attitude, it renders prayer a useless tactic for effectively ending mountaintop removal: “...It’s sad that they are taking our mountains, but I think this site needs to be dedicated to a solution, rather than stating the obvious. Of course you can pray, but that really doesn’t do much good. Either God listens but chooses not to act, or he can’t hear you praying to him. Either way, people will continue to tear down the mountains at an ever-growing rate unless someone stops them. If you want to do something about it, DO SOMETHING, please!”

The frustration expressed by the student is reminiscent of the growing sense of urgency that haunts mountaintop removal and climate change activists, particularly ones of younger generations. However, I think the student fails to realize that many of the people posting prayers on the blog do participate in concrete actions dedicated to fighting mountaintop removal; the blog is simply a method of spreading hope and courage to other people of faith who care about the destruction of God’s creation.

The third negative comment left on the “Go Tell It On The Mountain” blog questions the Christian commitment to loving your enemies. The response is to a post by Joe Burrell, a resident of Virginia, in which Burrell describes the anger and horror he experienced upon first witnessing mountaintop removal. In his post, Burrell prays, “Lord, please give me the strength to harness these emotions to work for positive change. Help me turn hate to love, and treat those who agree with mountaintop removal with the

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As a response, blogger J McMann first notes that is touched by Burrell’s comments, but subsequently attacks Burrell’s request for help in respecting mountaintop removal advocates. McMann writes, “Ignoring your true feelings so that you can ‘respect’ someone who is raping and pillaging gives them the message that they can continue doing this... Maybe we need to recognize that some entities that live upon this Earth do NOT have loving intent, have no intention of changing their ways and need to be told clearly that we do not like what they are doing and they need to stop.”

McMann’s comment illustrates the challenge that Christians are often faced with in trying to love those who are causing them harm or suffering. Yet the philosophy of loving one’s enemy is deeply embedded in Christian tradition, as well as championed by both Gandhi and King, and I doubt others would criticize this aspect of the prayers offered by those affected by mountaintop removal.

“Go Tell It On The Mountain” is an important forum for Christians and other people of faith to share hope and encouragement. Although the site does not seem to be heavily perused, Appalachian Voices’ commitment to maintaining the website demonstrates the group’s desire to include religion in the dialogue surrounding mountaintop removal. In addition to offering space on the website, Appalachian Voices partners with organizations like CFTM in planning events and spreading publicity about all of the work that mountaintop removal activists are accomplishing.

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Individual Actions

While all of the aforementioned groups have played a crucial role in organizing actions and spreading the issue of mountaintop removal to many Christians and churches across Appalachia, individual Christians unaffiliated with larger organizations have also contributed substantially to the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. Christians have organized actions and campaigns in their local communities to bring attention to the catastrophic damage that mountaintop removal causes. Around sixty Christians from Appalachia, for instance, observed a period of fasting before an important court decision involving mountaintop removal permits in an attempt to nurture spiritual power that could guide the outcome of the court case. Other Christians have screened DVDs about mountaintop removal (quite often using CFTM’s Mountain Mourning) to educate their fellow parishioners about the effects of mountaintop removal and have published notices about mountaintop removal permit hearings in church bulletins.

One of the primary ways that individual Christians have become involved in this movement is through prayer. On December 10th, 2002, International Human Rights Day, a group of sixty laypeople and ministers (including Fr. John Rausch from the CCA) climbed to a mountaintop removal site behind the home of Reverend Steve Peake in Neon, KY, a town which had been decimated by floods from a mountaintop removal site. Standing on the destroyed land, the group of Christians prayed for an end to mountaintop removal and for the health of the people whom had suffered its effects. Fr. Rausch gave each person a handful of wildflower seeds, but instead of scattering them to the wind, as he expected the participants to do, each person planted each seed individually, with great

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intention, as a symbolic gesture of re-dedicating the land the God. One woman solemnly commented, “I’m sowing my community back.”\textsuperscript{132} Rev. Steve Peake remembers thinking that it would be impossible for the flowers to grow on the shattered landscape, devoid of topsoil, but a few months later, he returned to the site to find hundreds of daisies blooming.\textsuperscript{133} Inspired by this symbol of hope, Rev. Peake has returned several times to lead prayers on the ravaged mountain, bringing a new group of Christians each time to help broaden citizens’ understanding of how mountaintop removal affects the Christian faith.

In a similar gesture, two Episcopal priests from the New River Valley in WV, Father Stan Holmes and Father Roy Crist, have been active in leading “Blessing on the Mountain” ceremonies on Gauley Mountain, a mountain being blasted above their community. The first Blessing on the Mountain occurred in April 2007. Seventy people attended, offering their prayers for the mountain and for the people who were suffering from mountaintop removal. The success of this ceremony encouraged Fathers Holmes and Crist to hold another seven months later. This one they decided to advertise, in hopes of drawing an even larger crowd. But when they approached the mountain, they found it had been road-blocked by the landowner, and the barricade was surrounded by groups of angry coal miners. The two priests held the service anyway, just on the other side of the barrier, and Father Holmes delivered a sermon about the devastating effects of mountaintop removal.

Throughout the service, the coal miners harassed the Christians trying to pray, and the tension in the atmosphere escalated to a point where both priests feared the eruption

\textsuperscript{132} Father John Rausch, personal communication, March 25, 2009.
\textsuperscript{133} Rev. Steve Peake, personal communication, March 28, 2009.
of violence. In the middle of the heated moment, Denise Giardina, an Episcopal deacon, broke into song, leading the group in “Amazing Grace.” Fathers Holmes and Crist relate that as Christians began joining in the hymn, the tension dissipated; somehow, the song ignited an understanding between the two groups of people. This powerful recollection speaks to the positive force of prayer and song, and the significance of “Amazing Grace” as a recurring hymn in some of the most important social movements in our country’s history. Following the hymn, the Blessing on the Mountain ended peacefully, and the priests shook hands with the coal miners who were there to protest, and engaged them in discussion over why they personally felt that mountaintop removal was not in line with Christian values.

Fathers Holmes and Crist, as well as Rev. Lewis, an Episcopal priest from Charleston who was also in attendance, all emphasized the importance of dialogue in helping to bridge the gap over the divisive issue of mountaintop removal. Rev. Lewis mentioned that the aggression of the coal miners was testing every participant’s commitment to Christian ideals of turning the other cheek. However, despite the antagonism of the miners, all three priests made a concerted effort to engage the angry protesters in conversation, and to connect with them on an individual level. They all commented that this was one of the most important parts of the Blessing on the Mountain; it helped the coal miners to understand that mountaintop removal protesters did not intend to demonize coal industry employees; rather, they wanted to celebrate their shared home of Appalachia and express their concerns over this specific type of coal mining.
The priests seem to have been successful in appeasing their opponents and helping them to understand the motivation behind the ceremony, because there were no protesters at the 2008 Blessing on the Mountain ceremony. The landowner had again blockaded the road, but the Christians in attendance stood at the gate, reading scripture and singing a combination of hymns and classic social justice songs, such as “If I Had A Hammer” (another anthem of the civil rights movement). These various elements of the Blessing on the Mountain ceremony illustrate how the fight against mountaintop removal fits into a long lineage of Christian responses to social injustices, and how prayer and the power of song can unite Christians in a hopeful message to end this unjust and injurious practice.

All of the groups outlined in this chapter, as well as the many individuals working alone or in smaller coalitions to end mountaintop removal, have achieved momentous successes. The consistent work of these organizations has resulted in a much stronger public awareness of the existence of creation care theology, as well as created a committed group of activists devoted to fighting mountaintop removal. Given Appalachia’s long history as the heart of coal mining country, Christian groups have made enormous strides in reframing mountaintop removal from its existence as simply another coal mining tactic (though obviously a particularly destructive one) to the way it is now perceived by many: as a moral and spiritual evil. While Christian groups working to end mountaintop removal in Appalachia still face major challenges, many of which I will outline in Chapter Five, they have made considerable progress in a region unaccustomed to grassroots environmental activism, and their achievements deserve to be honored and commended.
Chapter Three: Official Statements of the Christian Church

“As people of faith, called upon by our covenant with God and each other to safeguard and care deeply for what God has created, we cannot stand by while our mountains are being devastated.”
--West Virginia Council of Churches

The existence of grassroots organizations devoted to ending mountaintop removal is an indispensable aspect of this movement. Without the work of local groups who are actually organizing in coalfield counties, the goal to end mountaintop removal might exist only as an ideological battle, fought by citizens who identify more as environmentalists than as Christians. However, the support of a larger community, including those who live outside Appalachia, is another important component of the growing Christian movement to end mountaintop removal. Churches across America have begun to notice the injustices present in Appalachia, and whole denominations are responding in a conclusive manner. This is a relatively new phenomenon for mountaintop removal activists; Sage Russo, intern for CFTM, noted that the courage to speak out against mountaintop removal is still mostly dictated by a church by church basis.

Individual pastors will sometimes take a firm stance against the practice, but they risk a great deal in doing so, given the powerful influence of the coal industry. For a whole denomination to make an official statement on mountaintop removal is a very significant gesture, since a denominational statement can represent the views of hundreds of thousands of Christians from all across the country.

Christianity is an integral part of Appalachian culture, and coal industry employees, too, belong to church communities throughout the region. A denomination

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that issues a document criticizing mountaintop removal as a practice that is incompatible with Christian theology risks alienating all members of the church who are connected with the coal industry. In Appalachia, that could be a significant portion of the denomination. Until recently, many denominations seem to have prioritized cultivating a united religious community over risking tension within the church by addressing mountaintop removal as a moral crisis.

Despite the inherent risk in openly opposing mountaintop removal, mountaintop removal activists have been gratified to see a surge of support from the upper hierarchies of the Christian church over the last decade. To this day, six different Christian denominations have condemned mountaintop removal as a travesty against God and have expressed their concern for the people of Appalachia who suffer daily as a result of the harmful practice. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Religious Society of Friends, and the Presbyterian Church have all published official resolutions in opposition to mountaintop removal.\(^\text{136}\) The Mennonite Central Committee, additionally, has announced that mountaintop removal is environmentally and socially harmful and has committed to studying the impacts of the mining industry on Appalachia’s land and people.\(^\text{137}\)

While the six major denominational statements vary in language and intention, all share the common theme of a focus on both the negative environmental and social aspects of mountaintop removal. Most of the statements are explicitly detailed in their


condemnation of mountaintop removal, outlining the damage it causes to communities and presenting a convincing argument for why Christians should be concerned. In addition to calling for the national government to address this issue, most of the statements go beyond a general rebuke of mountaintop removal to actively urging Christians to get involved in the fight against it. Denominations encourage their members to use the political process to protest mountaintop removal, recommending contact with state and federal representatives as an effective method of making their voices heard. In addition to outlining the basic themes of each denomination’s statement below, I have included a chart that summarizes some of the similarities and differences inherent in the various statements in a more concise manner. [Appendix D]

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America was one of the first denominations to publish a resolution against mountaintop removal. At its assembly in 1999, the church adopted a new social statement called “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice.” The social statement focused on how the practice of mountaintop removal affects people, communities, and the landscape: “mountain-top removal / valley-fill strip mining wounds the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of people in nearby communities...harms the economic and social livelihood of Appalachian peoples...and injures the environment and upsets the ecological balance by polluting streams and rivers, exacerbating soil erosion and displacing plant, animal, and human life.”138 In addressing all of these different aspects of the scope of the harm caused by mountaintop removal, the

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Evangelical Lutheran Assembly acknowledges that strip mining threatens the social fabric of all of Appalachia, where the Christian Church is so deeply entrenched. This echoes the notion discussed in the prayers on the “Go Tell It On The Mountain” blog, many of which offered words of encouragement for all people of Appalachia, including miners and those fighting against mountaintop removal.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church also announced its intention to be an influence in legislative action against mountaintop removal. Its resolution stated that the church would direct its congregation members to take appropriate political action when the time was right. The statement announces, “Resolved, that the Division for Church in Society encourage regions, synods, congregations, and members to contact national and state legislators and prompt them to enact legislation that promotes deep mining rather than strip mining; develops alternative energy resources that do not require cheap coal; and requires land reclamation that renews the environment and restores ecological balance.” The Assembly members delivered their resolution to several major governmental offices, including the U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency. Even as the first Christian denomination to publicly denounce mountaintop removal, the Evangelical Lutheran Church was bold in its warning that it would play a major role in opposing the strip mining coal industry.

**Episcopal Church**

Shortly after the Evangelical Lutheran Church published its resolution, the Episcopal Church mentioned mountaintop removal in one of its denominational resolutions. However, the topic of mountaintop removal was limited to a brief reference

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139 Ibid.
in a resolution on environmental racism and environmental justice. The resolution simply stated that the main Episcopal office in Washington should continue to monitor and report news about mountaintop removal practices that “threaten the ecology and low income communities.” The official Episcopal resolution on mountaintop removal is certainly the most cautious out of the six denominations that have spoken out against the practice. The Appalachian Episcopalian priests with whom I spoke had differing opinions on the reason behind their church’s reluctance to take a strong stance against mountaintop removal. Rev. Jim Lewis attributed this phenomenon to the fundamental problems plaguing the Episcopal Church as a national community. He reflected on how the Episcopal Church is currently fighting a desperate battle just to maintain its existence; the schism over the ordainment of a gay bishop has sharply divided the Episcopal Church, with many local parishes taking adamant sides over the issue. Rev. Lewis noted that since the Episcopal Church is struggling so deeply at this point in time, the religious leaders at the top of the hierarchy are reluctant to address additional controversial issues that may split the church even further.

Fathers Roy Crist and Stan Holmes, on the other hand, speculated that the weak nature of the Episcopal statement against mountaintop removal provides a clue to the extent of the coal industry’s power over the Episcopal Church. They noted that the Episcopal Church came into Appalachia as a foreman’s church during the booming period of deep mines; it was the owners of the mines, the ones in power, who were members of the Episcopalian community. The actual miners, on the other hand,

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worshipped at Baptist churches.\textsuperscript{142} This distinction by Fathers Crist and Holmes illustrates the long history of denominational divides in Appalachia, and how closely they are linked to class and economic status. The denominational divide between the working class and the mine owners was present right from the onset of coal mining, and it has played a significant role in shaping dynamics between religion and the coal industry ever since (Fathers Crist and Holmes noted that today, most of the coal industry executives are members of the Episcopal Church).

While I would like to believe Rev. Lewis’s theory, since it points to a mere circumstantial absence of Episcopalian action on mountaintop removal due to external factors, I am more inclined to agree with Fathers Crist and Holmes, judging from the evolution of the Episcopal Church in Appalachia as the church of the wealthier classes (who have been the foremans and mine owners for most of Appalachia’s history). Father Holmes, however, expressed confidence that the Episcopal Church will take a stronger stance against mountaintop removal in the near future.\textsuperscript{143} Judging from the number of allies I found within the Episcopal Church while I was traveling through Appalachia, most of whom were actively protesting mountaintop removal, I expect that Father Holmes’ speculation is accurate. If this new statement were to be published and widely publicized, it could be a significant gesture in terms of political clout; as Father Crist pointed out, most congressional leaders in the United States belong to the Episcopal Church.\textsuperscript{144} A stronger Episcopalian condemnation of mountaintop removal could influence legislators to focus more on the moral implications of mountaintop removal

\textsuperscript{142} Fathers Roy Crist and Stan Holmes, personal communication, March 29, 2009.
\textsuperscript{143} Father Stan Holmes, personal communication, March 29, 2009.
\textsuperscript{144} Father Roy Crist, personal communication, March 29, 2009.
mining and less on the deep pockets of the coal industry, in turn leading to legislation that bans mountaintop removal altogether.

**United Methodist Church**

In a bold gesture far surpassing that of the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church issued a plea to end mountaintop removal at its General Conference in May 2000. Since United Methodists are the dominant denomination in West Virginia, their resolution against mountaintop removal is particularly significant.\(^\text{145}\) The resolution addresses in detail all of the harm caused by mountaintop removal mining practices on homes, families, and wildlife. Additionally, the statement affirms the sanctity of the landscape itself, framing mountaintop removal as a short-sighted, irreverent activity: “mountaintop removal mining, by destroying home places, is also destroying ancestral ground, sacred ground where generations after generations have lived...”\(^\text{146}\)

The United Methodist Church statement differs from other denominational statements in its espousal of the sanctity of land as a result of human history and religious tradition. Most other denominations attribute the sanctity of land to its creation by God’s hand, if they discuss the notion of a sacred landscape at all.

The United Methodist Church resolution also points out a specific biblical reference that illustrates why Christians need to participate in the banning of mountaintop removal. The Church refers to Psalm 24, which is one of the most common biblical passages used by Christian groups in the fight against mountaintop removal. Although some organizations (such as CFTM) use different versions of the psalm, the version that

\(^{145}\) Rev. Dennis Sparks, personal communication, April 29, 2009.

both the United Methodist Church and the Religious Society of Friends use in their resolutions reads, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; and the world and they that dwell within.” (Psalm 24:1)\textsuperscript{147} This passage emphasizes that ownership of the earth belongs to God, not humans, and implies that humans are therefore not entitled to destroy it as they see fit. After referring to the Psalm, the United Methodist resolution continues, “the sanctity and sacredness of human life and the natural environment should not be destroyed in the name of corporate profit.”\textsuperscript{148} In presenting the mountaintop removal debate as a struggle between greed (a sin for most Christians) and the welfare of God’s creation (a blessing given to humans by God), the United Methodist Church succeeds in illustrating to Christians the obvious choice for which side of the argument they should support.

In response to the resolution published at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Church’s General Board of Church and Society became actively involved in fighting mountaintop removal. They collaborated with other faith organizations like CORA and the Appalachian Ministry Network to educate people about the destruction caused by the practice. In 2004, John Hill, director of the economic and environmental justice segment of the United Methodist General Board, testified at a public hearing held by the Office of Surface Mining, Reclamation, and Enforcement (OSM). Hill provided a statement that reaffirmed the General Conference’s original resolution and addressed new obstacles in the paths of mountaintop removal activists.

Hill was speaking out against the new buffer zone rule that was being proposed by the OSM. This bill, which would weaken the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
Act, would make it easier for coal companies to dump toxic waste directly into Appalachian streams, and would expedite “the outrageous practice of mountaintop removal coal mining.” As Hill points out, the United Methodist Social Principles state that all substances of the earth should be valued and protected because they were created by God, not simply because they are useful to humans. Hill states, “Since Biblical times, land has been considered a covenant between humankind and God – involving a sacred commitment on our behalf to be stewards of that land.” After delineating the physical damage that mountaintop removal is responsible for, Hill puts forward two Biblical passages to illustrate how Christians should be responding to the issue, despite the complexity of God’s many expectations for human behavior. The first compares the devastation that mountaintop removal causes to the future of the planet that Isaiah prophesied: “The earth will be stripped bare and left that way...the earth is polluted because its people disobeyed the laws of God, breaking their agreement that was to last forever.” (Isaiah 24:3-5) The biblical image of the earth being stripped bare is a powerful parallel to mountaintop removal, since the practice by definition eliminates all life from the land. Hill presents a frightening, striking image of what has happened to the planet due to the negligence of Christians and all other humans.

Despite these dire predictions, Hill adds an element of hope to his testimony. He points to the possibility of repentance and God’s willingness to restore the planet back to health: “As II Chronicles 7:14 tells us, ‘if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from

150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal the land.’ God will heal the land, but we must first humble ourselves and change our ways.” Hill finishes his testimony by linking Christian involvement directly to the political process: “In order to begin down that path of repentance and healing, today we ask the Administration to withdraw the proposed buffer zone rule and to reaffirm our role as stewards and protectors of all of Creation.” Hill’s bold testimony serves as an example of the United Methodist Church’s continued commitment to fight mountaintop removal, a pledge that began with their original statement published by the General Assembly in 2000.

**Presbyterian Church of the United States of America**

In contrast to the Methodist Church’s affirmation of land as sacred, the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America published an official statement that focused overwhelmingly on mountaintop removal’s threat to human lives and communities, rather than on its effects to the land itself. The statement was published in 2006, at the Presbyterian 217th General Assembly. While the Presbyterian statement did eventually call for the cessation of mountaintop removal on the part of coal companies and legislators, most of the document was focused on justifying exactly why mountaintop removal is a matter of concern for all Christians.

The resolution decries the hundreds of lives and thousands of homes lost due to floods from mountaintop removal, the decrease in quality of life, the loss of culture and the emotional toll on the people of Appalachia, and the cycle of poverty that mountaintop removal mining perpetuates, which in turn leads to abandoned schools and high illiteracy.

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152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.
and unemployment rates. The statement declares, “...hundreds of lives have been lost and thousands of families have lost homes and property in recent floods and many of these families still live in emotional exile of their roots in temporary residence from which there seems to be no end in sight.”\textsuperscript{154} Foreshadowing its focus on humanity instead of the environment, the Presbyterian resolution opens with one of Jesus’ primary teachings: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)\textsuperscript{155} Through its use of Jesus’ example and its emphasis on responsibilities that Christians bear towards their neighbors, the statement offers a convincing argument for why Christians need to fight against mountaintop removal from a humanistic perspective.

Despite its emphasis on human lives affected by mountaintop removal coal mining, the Presbyterian statement does mention the ecological ramifications as well, and cites a passage from Numbers to assure Christians that this is also a relevant concern: “Mountaintop removal coal mining destroys both the beauty and productive capacity of the land thus eliminating future or alternative economic opportunities for the families of Appalachia WHEREAS, God instructs us to ‘...not defile the land where you live and where I dwell. (Numbers 35:34)’\textsuperscript{156} The Presbyterian General Assembly urges its members to reject sin (in the form of strip mining) and to follow the example of other Christian denominations that had spoken out against mountaintop removal. Listing the other denominations that have addressed mountaintop removal as a Christian issue, the Presbyterian Church’s statement reveals the power of ecumenical collaboration. The

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
actions of a single denomination can inspire and even pressure other Christian
denominations to take action on issues like mountaintop removal, which many churches
shy away from due to the social and political risks of addressing these issues.

Unitarian Universalist Church

The mountaintop removal statement issued by the Unitarian Universalist Church
differs substantially from the Presbyterian statement in its inherent assumption that
environmental protection is central to religious doctrine and principles. Although many
Unitarian Universalists do not identify themselves as Christians and instead embrace
congregants from many different backgrounds, the faith grew out of historically Christian
roots and still maintains certain rituals and beliefs associated with the Christian Church.
For this reason, I included the Unitarian Universalist statement in my discussion of
Christian responses to mountaintop removal. While the United Methodist Church
opposed the new buffer bill put forth in 2004, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s
2006 General Assembly urged its members to petition their representatives in support of
H.R. 2719, the Clean Water Protection Act, which intended to make it more difficult for
coal companies to bury rivers under toxic sediment.

The call to action also encouraged Unitarian Universalists to support other specific
policy objectives, such as imposing fines on mining operations, limiting mountaintop
removal blasting to daylight hours, reallocating funding to restore land damaged by
mining practices, and suspending permits for mountaintop removal operations. The
statement declares, “In order to protect the Appalachian environment and its people and
to promote environmentally aware energy consumption patterns, the delegates of the
2006 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association call upon our member congregations, our affiliate organizations, and individual Unitarian Universalists to: petition their congressional representatives to support passage of H.R. 2719, the Clean Water Protection Act; petition relevant federal and state agencies, such as the Office of Surface Mining, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the individual state permitting agencies, to suspend or refuse to issue permits for mountaintop removal coal mines...”

In fact, the Unitarian Universalist statement is confident enough in its condemnation of mountaintop removal that it devotes little room to explaining why Christians should care and instead centers its focus on what Christians can actually do to take action. The absence of a specific Christian argument for creation care may also reflect Unitarian Universalists’ disassociation with the official Christian church.

The Unitarian Universalist statement also connects mountaintop removal to the national problem of energy consumption as a whole: “the exploitation of Appalachia unjustly enriches other regions in the United States by providing cheap coal and thus electricity at the expense of Appalachia; [and] the availability of cheap coal thwarts energy conservation efforts because consumers, if required to pay the full and true costs of energy, would likely change their consumption habits...”

The efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Church to link mountaintop removal to the topic of consumption, which affects every American regardless of location, is an effective tactic that many churches are beginning to utilize, despite their initial reluctance to broach a controversial subject.


158 Ibid.
Religious Society of Friends

The sixth denomination that has openly criticized mountaintop removal, the Religious Society of Friends (or Quakers), published a letter of concern that combines elements of both the Presbyterian and the Unitarian Universalist resolutions. Beginning with the same passage from Psalm 24 that the United Methodist Church used, the letter documents the various spheres of human and ecological health that mountaintop removal harms. Drawing upon the rich history of Quaker activism against war and injustice, the Religious Society of Friends letter links the mining practice to the fragility of social peace: “Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) believes that we are called to live in right relationship with all Creation and that Creation should be respected, protected, and held in reverence. QEW believes that the human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth’s ecological integrity.” After discussing the philosophical principles behind Christian concern about mountaintop removal, the letter urges Quakers to contact state and federal legislators to push for policies that back renewable energy initiatives, limit the amount of pollutants allowed in rivers and streams, and prohibit mountaintop removal mining methods.

Most notably, the Religious Society of Friends letter lifts language from almost all of the previous denominational statements on mountaintop removal, validating its position through the words of other denominations without explicitly referring to previous churches’ commitments. For instance, the letter states that mountaintop removal has resulted in “destroyed homes, ancestral farms, and sacred ground,” which is almost

identical to the United Methodist Church’s assessment of the threat of mountaintop removal. The Friends’ statement continues, “[mountaintop removal] wounds...the physical, emotional, economic, social and spiritual well-being of people in nearby communities.” This language is very similar to the language used in the Evangelical Lutheran Church’s statement, as cited previously. As a last example, the Friends’ letter denounces mountaintop removal for “the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty that has created high unemployment, high illiteracy rates, and record number of school closings.” Compare this to the Presbyterian statement, which asserted that “mountaintop removal coal mining contributes to a cycle of poverty that has created high unemployment, high illiteracy rates, record numbers of school closings and a lack of opportunity in areas where coal is produced by mountaintop removal.” It is curious that the Religious Society of Friends would borrow so heavily from other churches’ findings without mentioning how these churches have influenced their particular statement. In contrast to the Presbyterian statement, which highlights other churches’ efforts to address mountaintop removal, the Friends’ statement is drafted to appear as if it stands alone in its judgment on mountaintop removal. This might suggest that the Friends’ letter was intended only to mobilize Quakers to fight mountaintop removal, rather than trying to speak to a wide variety of Christians. However, the letter’s striking resemblance to many other churches’ statements demonstrates the broad themes that can be used across Christian denominations to provide justification for fighting mountaintop removal.

160 Ibid.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, “217th General Assembly Commissioners’ Resolution.”
West Virginia Council of Churches

Following in the footsteps of the six Christian denominations that have made sweeping rebukes of mountaintop removal mining, the West Virginia Council of Churches (WVCC) published a statement against mountaintop removal in September 2007. The WVCC is made up of over eighteen different Christian congregations (representing twenty-five hundred parishes), ranging from the Episcopal Church to the Antiochian Orthodox Church. According to WVCC executive director Rev. Dennis Sparks, the board of the Council first met with Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, who talked about how mountaintop removal mining companies are doing their part to protect the earth. Next, however, the board visited the mountaintop removal site on Kayford Mountain. Witnessing the destruction before them, the Council unanimously agreed to draft a statement publicizing their theological opposition to mountaintop removal.\textsuperscript{164}

Drawing on quotations from Psalm 24 and two different parts of Genesis, the statement defends the beauty of the Appalachian Mountains and the bounty that they have offered people for centuries. It notes that mountaintop removal mining represents a fundamental shift in man’s relationship with God, one that does not fit with Christian teaching. The statement reads, “As people of faith, called upon by our covenant with God and each other to safeguard and care deeply for what God has created, we cannot stand by while our mountains are being devastated.”\textsuperscript{165} The statement is an example of the

\textsuperscript{164} Rev. Dennis Sparks, personal communication, April 29, 2009.
\textsuperscript{165} West Virginia Council of Churches, “Statement on Mountaintop Removal.”
presence of local churches and Christian organizations responding to mountaintop removal, a critical part of this movement. The WVCC has acted beyond its statement, as well, by speaking at permit hearings and demonstrations against mountaintop removal. The WVCC consistently highlights the harm that mountaintop removal causes to the mountains, the culture, and the workers of West Virginia.

Learning from Official Statements

The themes expressed in the national denominational statements against mountaintop removal will undoubtedly be played out in local churches in Appalachia. For instance, the contrast between the Methodist affirmation of the landscape as sacred and the Presbyterian focus on the centrality of human life and welfare to the debate over mountaintop removal is a tension that has arisen in past faith-based environmental movements, as well. Part of the recent surge in Christian involvement in the climate movement can be attributed to growing evidence over how global warming will disproportionately affect impoverished communities in developing countries. Churches now feel justified in getting involved for the stated reasons of social justice and neighborly love, where they might have previously been reluctant to risk being tagged as environmental advocates.

Similarly, it is clear that differences among various Christian denominations lead to different emphases on what Christians should deem the most alarming aspect of mountaintop removal. Official denominational statements are helpful in revealing some of the variations in focus needed to address a pluralistic faith. They also, however, show that there are a huge number of similarities in how Christians are approaching the issue of
mountaintop removal, and they serve as a hopeful beacon for the potential for ecumenical collaboration. Much of this collaboration will have to take place on the ground in Appalachia, however, rather than being voiced at the national, more distant scale.

**The Distance From Reality**

Indeed, while I was extremely heartened by the six national denominational statements against mountaintop removal, I suspected that these statements might not reflect a real unity among local churches of a certain denomination. My conversations with priests and other Christians across Appalachia confirmed my suspicions: while official denominational statements are an important symbolic gesture on the church’s part, they wield little influence over laypeople’s opinions on any type of social issue. Everyone whom I spoke with admitted that very few Appalachians are aware that their denomination has issued an official statement against mountaintop removal. Allen Johnson even commented that turning to denominational statements can *impede* wider Christian involvement in the fight against mountaintop removal, since illiterate community members sometimes feels “angry and snubbed” when presented with a document written from the top of the church hierarchy.\(^\text{166}\)

Even the WVCC statement on mountaintop removal, which I would expect to be publicized around Appalachian churches due to its direct relevance, was only advertised in certain churches (other pastors thought that the Council should “mind their own business.”)\(^\text{167}\) Rev. Sparks, executive director of the WVCC, admitted that he does not know whether or not most congregations are aware of the statement (although he did note

\(^{166}\) Allen Johnson, personal communication, February 23, 2009.

\(^{167}\) Carol Warren, personal communication, March 22, 2009.
that the WVCC statement against mountaintop removal has received significant attention from the local media.\textsuperscript{168} It is clear that there is a wide gap between the “official” theology of a whole denomination and the actual theology of local churches, a gap which renders the national denominational statements less effective.

Additionally, the six denominations that have issued statements against mountaintop removal are not the denominations that make up most of the churches in the coalfields. I did visit one Episcopal church in an area affected by mountaintop removal, but the other churches in the coalfields are predominantly Freewill Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. The Freewill Baptists have not issued any kind of official statement against mountaintop removal. This is likely due a combination of theological, social, and economic factors, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Five. Pentecostalism, on the other hand, is not in itself an official denomination, so even if Pentecostals were moved to issue some sort of official statement (which is unlikely), they would have to do so through some other wider evangelical network. The absence of Baptist and Pentecostal voices in the national movement against mountaintop removal is significant, but it should not detract from the importance of other denominations’ statements as a symbol of the growing awareness about mountaintop removal’s incongruity with Christian values. Official denominational statements are helpful in the fight against mountaintop removal, since they are meant to reflect the views of Christians all across the country. However, it is the stance of churches in Appalachia itself, those churches entrenched in the heart of coal communities, that will begin to shift residents’ perceptions on an appropriate Christian response to mountaintop removal.

\textsuperscript{168} Rev. Dennis Sparks, personal communication, April 29, 2009.
Beyond Mountaintop Removal

The growing number of denominations and ecumenical organizations that have spoken out against mountaintop removal is highly encouraging, and it seems that Christian involvement is becoming even more common as more churches throw their support behind activists working to end mountaintop removal. However, it is important to note that Christian activism around mountaintop removal is still limited to the specific practice of strip mining itself; very few Christians have challenged the morality of coal extraction in general. Christians who oppose mountaintop removal do so for its enormous ecological and social ramifications. Mountaintop removal benefits corporations and replaces manpower with machinery; it brings almost no benefits to the communities where it is practiced. For this reason, many churches feel comfortable openly opposing mountaintop removal: since it is a relatively new practice, its demise would not threaten the deep-rooted social fabric of Appalachia, which has been built upon coal mining. While some churches can unite around their opposition to mountaintop removal, they may never be able to agree on the future of coal in general. Rev. Sparks commented, “We may be divided on coal and whether it’s the best energy resource for our future, but on mountaintop removal, we have all stood together to say that the mountains belong to God.” He told me that the biggest challenge with the WVCC’s statement against mountaintop removal was clarifying to churches and coal company employees across the state that the Council is not opposed to coal extraction, but is instead simply demanding

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169 Rev. Dennis Sparks, personal communication, April 29, 2009.
that companies mine coal *responsibly* through obeying laws and protecting the environment to the best of their ability.\textsuperscript{170}

However, from a wider, national perspective, the burning of coal needs to be banned altogether in order for the U.S. to move beyond its current dirty fossil fuel consumption habit towards an economy built upon renewable, sustainable energy. The fight against mountaintop removal is critical to the preservation of the lives, culture, and environment of Appalachia, but it is only one element in the national movement towards a clean energy economy. Yet very few churches would ever oppose using coal as an energy source; it remains a vital component of the economy and culture of the Appalachian region. Father John Rausch from the CCA is one of the few Christians I encountered who actively campaigns against coal. Fr. Rausch cautions the coal industry, “You are in danger of losing your spirit if you continue to be impervious of the suffering that you are inflicting on these people and onto creation. Know that coal is ultimately a sundown industry. There is no way that you can clean coal so that children don’t get asthma and it doesn’t pollute our rivers and streams.”\textsuperscript{171} Fr. Rausch’s argument demonstrates how Christians *could* begin to use their faith to move beyond protesting mountaintop removal to protesting all types of coal extraction and combustion. Currently, however, most churches that oppose mountaintop removal are silent on the latter issue. The decision to more narrowly focus their efforts on mountaintop removal rather than on coal in general could be a tactical strategy to boost their chances of success, but it could also demonstrate the extent to which coal permeates Appalachian life and culture.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
The Christian organizations that do mention other forms of mining, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the WVCC, overtly support less destructive methods of coal extraction. As stated previously, the 1999 Evangelical Lutheran statement in opposition to mountaintop removal encourages its members to pressure their elected representatives to actually promote deep mining as an alternative to mountaintop removal. Similarly, the 2007 statement by the WVCC announces the Council’s support of traditional mining methods based on economic reasons. The statement reads, “We recognize that miners need jobs, and we support responsible mining practices. We also know that more miners are employed for longer periods when deep mining is done.”

The reluctance of denominations and Christian organizations to reject coal as a harmful substance regardless of the extraction technique used to acquire it is a major obstacle to the unity and influence of the national clean energy movement as a whole. The theology that churches draw upon to fight against mountaintop removal, which I will discuss in the next chapter, could easily be used to denounce all methods of mining and burning coal, but it seems as though most churches are not ready to take on this enormous challenge. To their credit, however, the crisis of mountaintop removal is so direly urgent that it may be more effective to churches to first focus on halting this practice before attempting to tackle the entire fossil fuel industry.

172 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Assembly Action CA99.06.30.”
Chapter Four: The Theology Behind the Activism

God 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. 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...And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

- Genesis 1:25-31

Throughout the course of my exploration into the relationship between Christians and mountaintop removal, most people I have encountered have expressed surprise over my subject of study. “What does mountaintop removal have to do with Christianity?” they ask, skeptical of any clear connection. Their confusion brings to light the existence of a stark detachment between Christian environmental activists and the rest of the U.S. population. Although Christian involvement in environmental causes is growing at a rapid rate, as can be seen by individual church efforts to green their parishes and prominent evangelical support of climate change solutions, their efforts are not yet publicized in the mainstream media. Many people, including other Christians, do not recognize how the Christian faith can be applied to the critical ecological and social crises of our time.

Residents of Appalachia, however (or at least those who belong to mainline denomination churches), understand all too well the intersection of faith and public activism. In this region, Christianity has become one of the most publicly touted rationales for protesting against mountaintop removal. With both the Christian faith and the Appalachian Mountains representing the heart of Appalachian culture, religion has proved a powerful motivating force in encouraging citizens to take action against
mountaintop removal. One activist told me that even many of the demonstrations or
events against mountaintop removal that are organized by secular organizations now
commence with a Christian prayer.\textsuperscript{174} The rich and varied history of the Christian faith
offers significant theological justification for fighting mountaintop removal. Christian
activists use many different facets of their faith to explain to others how Christianity and
mountaintop removal are deeply related, in part because the activists themselves come
from varied Christian denominations and traditions. In this chapter, I outline some of the
main theological tenets of Christianity that motivate activists to speak out against
mountaintop removal.

Looking mostly at examples from the Bible and from historical Christian
theology, I illustrate the meaningful aspects of the Christian faith that prevent citizens
from turning a blind eye to the violent practice of mountaintop removal. Towards the end
of this chapter, I mention the significance of religious language in the fight over
mountaintop removal, and briefly look at how coal advocates and mountaintop removal
enthusiasts are also attempting to frame their arguments from a Christian perspective.
Additionally, I connect the Christian movement against mountaintop removal to a larger
tradition of formal creation care theology espoused by authors and theologians.
Specifically, I examine how activists interpret the Christian faith similarly to the way that
eco-theologians like Sally McFague and Calvin DeWitt do, but stop short of promoting a
Christian nature spirituality as radical as the type theologian Thomas Berry has long
supported. Although most Christians fighting mountaintop removal are motivated by
direct principles of the Christian tradition, and not by the arguments put forth by formal
theologians, the similarities between the two lines of thought demonstrate the potential

\textsuperscript{174} Julia Sendor, personal communication, March 15, 2009.
for a Christian ethic of responsibility to heal our broken planet. The shared sentiments of activists and theologians also illustrate the existence of a powerful, sympathetic relationship between theologians and the laity, a connection that transcends hierarchical boundaries and helps to unite the Christian faith over the importance of environmental stewardship.

The Importance of the Bible

The Bible is the first, most prominent example of how Christianity and mountaintop removal are deeply intertwined. References to both the Bible and to Christian principles in general are abundant throughout the literature and speeches drafted by mountaintop removal activists. Many Christians convincingly argue the relevance of different passages in the Bible to mountaintop removal, using specific quotations to demonstrate that Christianity offers a strong impetus for speaking out against the harmful practice. Drawing from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, different groups have used an incredibly diverse array of biblical citations to illustrate the incongruity of mountaintop removal with Christian theology. After studying the different theological justifications used for fighting mountaintop removal, I identified two primary themes that Appalachian Christians return to repeatedly in their activism. The first is a land ethic, drawn mostly from the Bible, that dictates a Christian responsibility to care for God’s creation. The second revolves around social justice and

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175 This is similar to Aldo Leopold’s famously proposed land ethic that contributed greatly to the maturation of our country’s conservation movement. Leopold writes that “a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it...a land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land.” [Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 204,221 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).] The Christian land ethic offered by Christian environmentalists implies the same sense of responsibility towards other species and the land. However, the Christian land ethic is
neighborly obligations, using nearly universal Christian principles to condemn mountaintop removal coal mining. Each of these themes is supported by solid biblical evidence that Christians rely on to strengthen their message.

A Christian Land Ethic

The first theme, the existence of a Christian land ethic, builds upon decades of theological study into the environmental implications of the Jewish and Christian traditions. In response to Lynn White’s criticisms of Christianity for obliterating pantheistic, eco-centric cultures, a large number of scholars and religious leaders have countered that the Judeo-Christian tradition can foster a healthy environmental consciousness. While White focused on one Genesis passage where God gives humans “dominion” over all other creatures, eco-theologians such as McFague and DeWitt argue that a close reading of the Bible reveals hundreds of lessons related specifically to caring for our planet. I will explore the implications of the first two chapters of Genesis more closely later in this chapter, but it is important to note from the beginning that McFague, DeWitt, and other theologians draw from all sections of the Bible, including the criticized portions of Genesis, to demonstrate that God calls repeatedly for an ethic of stewardship and responsibility rather than one of reckless exploitation and dominion.

Many of the Christians fighting mountaintop removal use interpretations of the Bible that are similar to those put forth by eco-theologians like McFague and DeWitt. I found that most Christian activists against mountaintop removal view the land in one of two ways: as a gift from God to humanity, or as property belonging to God Himself.

distinctive in that it celebrates right relationship with God as the reward for fulfilling this responsibility, whereas Leopold points to ecological health as the main goal of this applied ethic.

176 Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis.”
Either interpretation logically leads to an ethic of creation care and responsible management. In the first case, Christians stress that any gift from God is sacred and must be celebrated and protected.\footnote{177} My reference in the previous chapter to the testimony of John Hill, from the United Methodist General Board, where Hill uses a passage from Isaiah to place blame on Christians who turn a blind eye to creation care issues, is an example of Christians calling attention to the fact that humans must care for God’s gift.

Similarly, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia uses a section of Deuteronomy to emphasize how the land is God’s gift in its pastoral “This Land is Home to Me”:

“Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of The Lord your God, obeying God’s voice, clinging to God; for in this your life consists, and on this depends your long stay in the land which The Lord swore to your ancestors...”

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20)\footnote{178} The pastoral comments on the power of choice inherent within this biblical passage. Just before including the passage from the Bible, the CCA writes, “The choice between the Living God and inert idols is not only a choice between justice and injustice; it is also a choice between life and death.”\footnote{179} The idols that the CCA refers to are likely the false idols of profit and power that tempt those who exploit the earth’s resources, a Christian perspective I will examine more deeply later in the chapter. Additionally, although the pastoral does not explicitly draw this connection, the reference to this particular passage of Deuteronomy links the importance of the land to the concept of ancestral heritage, both of which are crucial components of Appalachian culture and could offer a powerful incentive for Christians to take responsibility for their environment.

\footnote{177} John S. Hill, “Testimony.”
\footnote{178} Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 25.
\footnote{179} Ibid.
The second interpretation of land ownership, that the earth belongs to God, is strongly supported by the Bible. Psalm 24 is by far the most commonly used biblical passage by mountaintop removal activists: “The Earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it; the world, and all that lives upon it.” References to Psalm 24 can be found in “This Land is Home to Me,” the first CCA pastoral, in the “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal” drafted in 2007, and in literature published by CFTM, LEAF, and the United Methodist General Board. Its importance has also surfaced in my personal conversations with Appalachian Christians. The quotation is likely so widely used because its meaning, unlike other passages in the Bible, is relatively indisputable. The statement declares the earth to belong to the Lord; it is not a major stretch for Christians to follow this declaration by claiming that destroying the environment is a sin against God.

Another psalm that has been used to identify land as belonging to God is Psalm 89, which states, “O Lord...Yours are the heavens, and yours is the earth: the world and its fullness you have founded.” The bishops referenced this psalm when writing their second pastoral for the CCA, “At Home in the Web of Life.” They use the psalm to differentiate between nature as God, a concept few Christians would identify with, and nature as God’s property and the expression of his creativity. The bishops point to Psalm 89 as proof of their following assertion: “As we seek the path of sustainable community based on the oneness of land and people, it is helpful to remember that all creation is itself creative, for it reveals the creative word of God...Thus the Bible declares: [Psalm

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180 Psalm 24:1
181 Psalm 89: 6,12; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 50.
Psalms have also played a central role in influencing some major eco-
theologians: Calvin DeWitt identifies psalms as some of the first Christian messages that
taught him about the close connection between religion and environmentalism. Speaking
of his childhood, DeWitt comments, “In church we sang songs that celebrated creation, in
the Psalms we celebrated the earth and all the wonderful creatures...I realized instantly
that pollution and destruction of the earth were a violation of scripture.”

DeWitt’s insight is an example of the type of realization that Christians are attempting to spark in
more of their fellow citizens by illuminating passages from scripture that carry an
environmental message.

“At Home in the Web of Life” also includes a passage from Leviticus, in which
Jesus tells Moses, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, and you
are but aliens who have become my tenants.”

This section of Leviticus, after clarifying
that all land belongs to God, offers a lesson for land management: “When one of your
countrymen is reduced to poverty and...does not acquire sufficient means to buy back the
land...it must be released and turned back to its original owner.”

The CCA takes this
instruction from God and applies it to the situation in Appalachia today, where coal
companies are buying up family-owned land and impoverishing communities that have lived there for generations.

Another section of Leviticus that warrants particular attention is Chapter 25, in
which God lays out guidelines for working the earth only six consecutive years and
letting the ground lay fallow in the seventh. This passage of Leviticus declares a year of

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184 Leviticus 25:1; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,”68.
185 Leviticus 25; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 75.
Jubilee in the fiftieth year, a year in which no food is grown and all debts are forgiven: “You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...you shall eat only what the field itself produces.”\textsuperscript{186} In the Jewish tradition these are referred to as the schmittah laws, but the concept of the Jubilee year also exists in Christian faith. The CCA used this biblical rule in a fascinating blend of traditional ritual and applied environmental practice: in 1998, they initiated a campaign that urged all Christians to refrain from using electricity and fossil fuels on the first Friday of every month as a symbol of solidarity with those whose lives are affected by mountaintop removal mining.

Dubbing the proposed day of action “Power-Down Day,” the CCA’s plan expressed its intention clearly: “While this is a proposal to forgo simple conveniences for a day, we suggest that it also be embraced as a day of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) -- a day to lay down the bustle and allow our lives some fallow time, consciously opting for the community of creation... As a monthly Jubilee, a Power-Down Day could be a step in recovering the concept of Sabbath as a time for re-creation.”\textsuperscript{187} The day of Friday is traditionally known to be a day of sacrifice and reflection in Christian culture, and the CCA’s idea intended to reclaim the notion of Sabbath as one that could be applied directly to mountaintop removal. While this campaign did not seem to garner widespread attention or support, its impressive symbolism in blending ancient ritual with the connection between current energy consumption and the faces of those exploited by mountaintop removal deserves tremendous credit.

\textsuperscript{186} Leviticus 25:10-12.
Through actions like Power-Down Day and through the consistent use of certain biblical passages, Christian groups make a strong case for the need for environmental protection by demonstrating that many parts of the Bible express land as God’s property. This viewpoint results in a question that all Christians must ask, phrased succinctly by author and ad hoc theologian Wendell Berry: “If we believe, as so many of us profess to do, that the Earth is God’s property and is full of His glory, how can we do harm to any part of it?”\footnote{Wendell Berry, “Compromise, Hell!” in \textit{Missing Mountains}, ed. Kristin Johannsen, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, 156 (Nicholasville, KY: Wind Publications, 2005).} According to mainstream Christian theology, this question should resonate with citizens across Appalachia who witness the destruction of the mountains that God created.

Whether Christians fighting mountaintop removal believe that the land is the property of God Himself or whether they view land as a gift from God to humanity, all agree that Christianity demands a responsible interaction between humans and the rest of God’s creation.\footnote{Calvin DeWitt manages to blend these two philosophies by claiming that although the earth belongs to God, humans have been given the earth as a gift to keep. He distinguishes between original ownership and responsibility for the maintenance of earth’s systems, and argues that the latter falls on the shoulders of humans. [Calvin DeWitt, ed., \textit{The Environment and the Christian} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 7.]} The opening book of Genesis in the Bible lies at the heart of Christian belief and thought; few Christians in Appalachia dispute that God played a role in the creation of the world and all living beings. Regardless of who owns the land now, the simple fact that God created the earth with a certain plan can serve as powerful motivation to maintain the fragile balance of our planet’s ecosystems. Larry Gibson, owner of the last piece of forest on Kayford Mountain, points out, “God created these mountains. Only God should be able to take them away.”\footnote{Dianne Bady, “Churches Against Mountaintop Removal.”} Pastors in eastern Ohio, whose towns were being torn apart by mountaintop removal, fought a bitter battle in the
1970s to protect their land, claiming that mountaintop removal is a serious threat to the equilibrium designed by God. The pastors deemed strip mining “a crime against God,” and warned that ruining the land with mountaintop removal would surely result in retribution. While some activists have used threatening language like this to goad Christians into action, others turn to irony to demonstrate their cause. After witnessing mountaintop removal for the first time, Carol E. Warren wrote an article for the National Catholic Reporter commenting on the simulated “natural” look of reclaimed mountaintop removal sites: “God didn’t create it this way, and God probably had the best idea.”

Similarly, in an essay for the Christian Century, author Bill McKibben references a lawn sign displayed by a strip mining opponent in Appalachia which reads,

GOD WAS WRONG
SUPPORT MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL

While the sign is indeed humorous, its message is far from light-hearted. It takes the Genesis creation story that nearly all Christians identify with to remind Appalachians that dynamiting mountains is an appalling way to treat God’s Creation. It also serves as a reminder of the power of religion when applied to social change. The sign’s simplicity exposes the absurdity of mountaintop removal considered from a religious angle, and its existence as a lawn sign publicly displayed demonstrates how Christianity is used outside congregations and official gatherings to remind Appalachians of their religious duty to fight against strip mountaintop removal mining.

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191 Chad Montrie, To Save the Land and People: a History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia, 36.
192 Carol Warren, “Power down in solidarity with all creation.”
The approach of mindfully identifying the environment as an intentional creation of God is also used by some eco-theologians, such as Calvin DeWitt, who go so far as to argue that dissatisfaction with God’s creation in general is sinful. DeWitt reasons, “Creation’s degradation originates from human dissatisfaction with creation’s fruitfulness. Deeming creation’s processes too prolonged, people invent structures to speed them up...Creation is reshaped into a vending machine structured to gratify any human desire upon demand.” 194 By this definition of dissatisfaction, it seems that most of the conveniences of modernity would fall under DeWitt’s criticism (or, at least, the misuse of those conveniences). However, I have not heard mountaintop removal activists make any statements condemning modernity in general; most use the creation story to demonstrate that God had a specific plan for the structure of this earth, a plan which mountaintop removal directly violates. This tendency to avoid a wider critique of human culture may be partly due to the conservatism (or perhaps pragmatism) that influences many Christians to focus their fight on opposition to mountaintop removal rather than denouncing the coal industry as a whole.

Many Christians fighting mountaintop removal use Genesis as a central component of their condemnation of the practice. The CCA’s pastoral “At Home in the Web of Life” draws from the creation story of Genesis to highlight why humans should treasure God’s creation: “All creation, including ourselves, truly speaks the beauty and goodness of God...to be created in God’s own image means that we are called to care in love for our precious earth, as if Earth were God’s own garden, just as God cares in love for all creation.” 195 The “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal” similarly uses

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195 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 50.
passages of Genesis to promote responsible stewardship. The statement notes, “We remember that God finished the work of creation and ‘found it very good’ (Gen. 1:31.) God put humanity in the Garden of Eden, a symbol of the whole world, ‘to cultivate and care for it’ (Gen. 2:15.) Hence, creation reflects the beauty of God and humanity becomes a caretaker with God.”196 Sage Russo, intern for CFTM, notes that God put humanity on this earth to “till” the garden, and points out that the literal translation of “till” from the Hebrew text means “to serve.”197 The Christian philosophy that emerges here is one of an agreement between God and humans, a commitment that humans are dishonoring through our reckless exploitation of the resources God gave us.

Indeed, Genesis also specifically addresses this agreement after explaining the creation story. Genesis 9 reads, “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh…”198 This excerpt is but one small part of God’s emphasis on the covenant as an agreement between God, humans, and all life; in Genesis 9, from verses 8 to 17, God reminds humans that the covenant is with all creation no fewer than seven times. The frequency of this assertion, as well as the existence of seven as an auspicious number in Christian tradition, proves the clarity of God’s intention for humans to respect creation as part of an original agreement between God and humans.

Christians emphasize that time has not weakened the bonds of this commitment to God to care for His creation. Even (and perhaps especially) today, Christians must remember the stipulations of God’s gifts to humanity. Many Christians who speak out

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196 Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal.”
198 Genesis 9:3-5; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 65.
against mountaintop removal are fearful that mountaintop removal represents a direct insult to the beauty of God’s creation. Additionally, mountaintop removal threatens the supposed permanence of God’s words. The “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal” ends with a Psalm from the Bible: “May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord be glad in these works! (Ps. 104:31)” Ending with this note, the religious leaders who drafted the statement reaffirm their commitment to protect the earth from destructive forces. Mountaintop removal is one of the most overtly violent anti-ecological practices in existence, and Genesis, as well as the rest of the Bible, is abound with passages that entreat humans to care responsibly for the work of God.

The emphasis on the “goodness” of God’s works is one significant place wherein the motivations of Appalachian activists and prominent eco-theologians, most notably Sally McFague, overlap. In a discussion of Genesis, for instance, McFague asserts that “the message of Genesis is not domination but appreciation.” She points out that in the first two chapters of Genesis, the “goodness” of creation is repeated seven times, whereas dominion is only mentioned once. McFague argues, “Domination, which has been the primary attitude of the West toward nature, takes up less than one verse of the thirty-one verses in [Genesis]. This is scant justification for treating the oceans as burial grounds for toxic waste, the forests as so many board feet, domestic animals as simply food to be eaten or material for medical experiments, and wild animals as expendable if human beings need the land.” McFague’s interpretation of Genesis is very similar to the one being used by Christians protesting mountaintop removal in West Virginia, even if few Appalachians draw their inspiration directly from her theology.

199 Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, “Interfaith Statement on Mountaintop Removal.”
200 Sally McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 166.
201 Ibid.
Another aspect of Christian eco-theology promoted by McFague that is relevant to the movement against mountaintop removal is the notion of extension of community. McFague points out that Christians have a long history of responsibility to neighbors and those in their communities and that traditionally, this circle has been limited to human subjects. However, the community of life in which we dwell extends far wider than simply the human world. Mountaintop removal proponents who argue that strip mining is essential for the well-being of communities are limiting their vision to the alleged economic security of a very exclusive human community. Using McFague’s suggestions on the extension of this definition, mountaintop removal activists might blend the notions of both social justice and stewardship to call for an end to mountaintop removal mining. One way that Christian activists are already doing so (although they do not reference McFague’s theology specifically) is in stressing the importance of the covenant that God made with humans and with all of creation. Expanding the boundaries of this covenant to include all life forms is reminiscent of McFague’s urging to broaden the Christian notion of community.

Mountains in the Bible

Christians fighting mountaintop removal do not need to rely solely on general biblical statements about creation care such as those from the first two chapters of Genesis to raise the cry to protect their mountains. Many passages in the Bible reference mountains specifically, giving Christians a perfect opportunity to frame mountaintop removal as a practice that directly contradicts biblical values. “This Land Is Home To Me” reminds Christians that Moses heard God’s promise from the top of a mountain.

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202 Sally McFague, Super, Natural Christians.
forever cementing the significance of mountains in Christian history. In another example, author Erik Reece ends an article about mountaintop removal with Psalm 114, which personifies mountains as responding to the Lord’s news: “When Israel came out of Egypt...the mountains skipped like rams; and the little hills like lambs.” With his use of this psalm, Reece implies that spirituality is an integral part of ecology.

Similarly, Sharman Chapman-Crane, a member of the Mennonite Central Committee Appalachia, points to a passage of Isaiah that stresses the invaluable worth of mountains. She asks, “Doesn’t it say in Scripture, ‘Who can weigh a mountain, measure a basket of earth?’...Well, only God can. But now, the coal companies seem to be able to do it, too.” Chapman-Crane draws from Isaiah’s reference to the immeasurable worth of mountains to express her indignation that coal companies are acting beyond the moral and spiritual boundaries that God places on humans. Psalm 72 is another mountain-specific passage used by Christians to highlight the prominence of mountains in Christian tradition: “The mountains shall yield peace for the people, and the hills justice.” The CCA features this part of the psalm as the very first part of “At Home in the Web of Life,” allowing the psalm’s connection between mountains, peace, and justice to speak for itself as a clear reason why environmental stewardship is an integral part of the Christian faith. Taking a moment to reflect on this psalm, it becomes painfully obvious that the mountains of Appalachia are not being used in the way that God originally intended. The mountains are being robbed of their ability to provide peace and

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203 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 4.
205 Isaiah 40:12; Neela Banerjee, “Taking on a Coal Mining Practice as a Matter of Faith.”
206 Psalm 72:3; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 40.
tranquility, and instead are ripped apart to cause pollution and strife throughout the surrounding area.

The importance of mountains to Christian theology is undeniable. I discussed several biblical passages above that declare the earth to be God’s personal property. Several places in the Bible specifically render mountains God’s own territory, as well, which exacerbates the theological implications of mountaintop removal mining. Larry Gibson takes seriously the message of Psalm 95: “In [God’s] hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.” 207 Gibson marked this verse in bold paint on a rock near the top of Kayford Mountain, a lone sign of spirituality in a landscape stripped of all life and vitality.

A further example of the importance of mountains in Christian sacred text appears in Missing Mountains, a collection of essays from people directly affected by mountaintop removal mining. Missing Mountains is one of the best published sources I came across that adequately conveys the magnitude of the injustices being perpetrated on the people of Appalachia. The opening page of this book, before even the table of contents, reveals a picture of a beautiful Appalachian stream, with one simple quotation written beneath it: “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain... –Isaiah 11” 208 This hanging command of God is followed by story after story of the atrocities committed by coal companies on communities and mountains. The stark contrast between the biblical quotation and the tales of blatant disrespect for God’s creation highlight the struggle that many Christians face in reconciling their faith with the violent environmental practices that are taking place right in their backyards. The myriad biblical

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207 Dianne Bady, “Churches Against Mountaintop Removal.”
references both to stewardship in general and to the sacredness of mountains in Christian tradition offer resounding theological support for Christians fighting mountaintop removal on the basis of ecological creation care.

**Christian Roots in Social Justice**

Yet however strong the biblical foundation in creation care, the deep-seeded antagonism towards environmentalism that pervades much of politically conservative Appalachian culture renders a Christian ecological angle ineffective in some church communities. More conservative Christians are likely to be influenced more by mountaintop removal’s harmful effects on humans and neighborhoods than by the environmental destruction it causes (although these two results are of course intimately related to each other). The devastating effects of mountaintop removal on human lives has persuaded Christians to fight the mining practice on the Christian principle of social justice, a theme used in Christian participation in many movements, from the national civil rights movement to the global battle against AIDS. The Bible speaks at length about Christian obligations to the poor and oppressed, as well as about the inherent equality of all people, and Christians have used these messages to demonstrate why mountaintop removal is inexcusable from a Christian notion of justice.

Until now, I have demonstrated the similarities between activists’ and formal theologians’ interpretations of the Christian faith as they relate to mountaintop removal. At this point, however, I should mention that at least one prominent theologian would disagree with some of the activists’ tactics. Thomas Berry, a Catholic eco-theologian known for his radical cosmologically-focused vision of humans’ role within the
ecosystem, would likely dissuade Christians from relying too heavily on themes of social justice to goad other Christians into action. Berry is a Roman Catholic monk of the Passionist order whose writings have inspired a significant paradigm shift in the way theologians typically think about themselves in relationship to the earth. Some of Berry’s most famous works include *The Dream of the Earth* (1988) and an essay entitled “The Earth: A New Context for Religious Unity” (1987).

Although social equality is deeply important to Berry, he insinuates throughout his writing that a sole focus on social justice simply perpetuates the anthropocentric mindset that is to blame for our ecological crisis. He laments humans’ tendency to exalt their own species’ well-being as the ultimate measure of good, rather than the health of the earth as a whole. Berry writes, “We are extremely sensitive as regards human rights. Yet the question of Earth rights seldom enters into our conscious minds. We invade the habitat of other species on the supposition that humans have rights to habitat unlimited by the rights of other species. Our machines are built to tear the Earth apart...This will continue until we expand our democracy into a biocracy, under which humans will be sensitive to the needs of the larger Earth community.”

Berry’s point about machines bears particular relevance to mountaintop removal, yet his philosophies are far too radical to permeate mainstream Appalachia. (Incidentally, even if his ideas would be more widely accepted, the translation of Berry’s concepts into clear actions or policies would prove challenging). Few mountaintop removal activists would ever have heard the word “biocracy,” let alone be ready to drop their fight for social justice in favor of “Earth rights.” Currently, Christian groups protesting mountaintop removal across Appalachia

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are successfully appealing to Christian compassion through their use of biblical passages that advance principles of social justice and equality, as I discuss below.

CORA’s use of the passage from Amos that declares, “Let justice roll down like waters” was one of the first biblically founded arguments against mountaintop removal that emerged.\textsuperscript{210} The quotation’s connection with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech also gives this passage particular relevance to any movement fighting injustice. Drawing from this biblical message, many Christians currently struggling against mountaintop removal refer to the Christian responsibility of assisting those who are less fortunate. In the case of mountaintop removal, the families whose health and homes are destroyed by coal mining companies are a clear example of an oppressed people whom Christians should feel obligated to protect. Rev. Duane Beachey, a minister and Appalachian resident, comments, “The environment is part of the wider social justice issue I think that as Christians we need to be concerned about. As a person of faith, I just always have felt like we need to be on the side of people who have no power and no voice. And I just think that the coal companies have particularly exploited the people and the region here.”\textsuperscript{211} With this assertion, Beachey links the environment to social justice concerns, illustrating that neither can exist exclusive of the other. In Appalachia, coal companies are so thoroughly destroying the environment that they are denying Appalachian citizens access to clean water or breathable air.

\textsuperscript{210} Amos 5:23-24; WV Council of Churches, “Last Will and Testament.”
Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

The Bible commands Christians to act respectfully towards their neighbors in the Ten Commandments, which many Christians consider the cornerstone of Christian moral and theological responsibility. This motivation to love one’s neighbor influences many Christians to speak out against mountaintop removal. Reverend Steve Peake, one of the leaders of the group prayer on the mountain in Kentucky that I mentioned in Chapter Two, frames his opinion clearly and simply: “If I have to make a living by walking on my neighbor, I won’t do it.”\(^{212}\) Peake is criticizing those who choose to work as mountaintop removal miners, implying that despite the desperate need for employment in Appalachia, citizens need to take responsibility for their actions and avoid jobs that exploit fellow human beings, regardless of how profitable those jobs may be. LEAF, the Tennessee-based Christian stewardship organization, also looks to the Christian commitment to protect one’s neighbors as part of its calling to fight against mountaintop removal. An informational pamphlet about The Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act states, “LEAF is concerned about the impact MTR has on those who live in mountain communities. Blasting noise, dust, speeding coal trucks, fly rock, and ruined wells have devastated communities in Kentucky and West Virginia. Destroying community is not ‘loving our neighbors as ourselves.’”\(^{213}\) By promoting the Scenic Vistas Protection Act, LEAF advocates for using all avenues necessary to speak out for one’s neighbor, including taking legal action.

In addition to urging care towards one’s neighbor, the Bible repeatedly demands that Christians come to the aid of anyone in need. Jesus, in one of his most famous

\(^{213}\) “Tennessee Scenic Vistas Protection Act” Pamphlet. Lindquist-Environmental Appalachian Fellowship, 2.
sermons, tells his disciples, “Whatever you did for the least of mine, you did for me.”\textsuperscript{214} I earlier referred to Psalm 72, which calls for peace from the mountains and justice from the hills. The psalm continues, “May your Anointed defend the poor of the people, save the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor.”\textsuperscript{215} Applying this message to mountaintop removal, it is clear that coal companies represent the oppressor and that Christians should aid those who suffer from their practices. The treasurer of the CCA, Franciscan Robbie Pentecost, explains, “When homes, health, water, culture, and lives are at risk, the church must stand with the vulnerable and oppressed.”\textsuperscript{216} Pentecost’s comment serves as a reminder that working for justice is an essential part of Christian tradition, one that cannot go overlooked today.

**Human Equality**

Another specific social justice angle used by activists against mountaintop removal is the Christian ideal of equality for all humans. Mountaintop removal practices are rapidly eliminating the middle class in Appalachia, leaving only people who have grown rich through exploitation and people who are impoverished as a result of their resources being stolen. This angers many Christians, and strengthens their determination to take action against the practice. In this way, they are living McFague’s notion of a Christian ethic of care, which “condemns the arrogant eye of the oppressor.”\textsuperscript{217} "This

\textsuperscript{214} Matthew 25:37  
\textsuperscript{215} Psalm 72:12-13  
\textsuperscript{217} Sally McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 171.
Land is Home to Me,” for instance, decries strip mining for widening the disparity between the poor and the powerful in Appalachia.  

Bishop Walter Sullivan, one of the attendees of the 2003 “Bishops’ Forum on Mountaintop Removal” organized by the CCA, wrote an article following the event for the Catholic Virginian, in which he condemned mountaintop removal practices for oppressing the poor. In the article Sullivan points out, “Mountaintop removal is just another example of profit taking preference over the lives of people, where the powerful wage a different kind of war against the powerless.” Framing mountaintop removal as a war against the poor, as Sullivan does, has the potential to conjure up a powerful Christian sentiment against the mining practice, given both the evils inherent in the practice of warfare and the preferential option for the poor in Christian tradition.

In fact, some of the small number of Christians who protest the fundamental philosophy of coal as an energy source, rather than limiting their persuasions to the specific practice of mountaintop removal, are motivated by the violent history of coal extraction and the implications of this violence to a Christian culture. Scott Williams, a professor of philosophy and ethics in southwestern Pennsylvania, chastises Christians for failing to connect electricity use with the evils behind coal, from the murder and oppression of unionized coal mine workers to the blasting of mountain tops. In an article for The Christian Century, Williams writes, “The mine wars, the schemes to deprive local Appalachians of the mineral rights to their lands (an injustice which has never been

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218 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 3.
220 “Preferential option for the poor” is the preferred terminology in academic circles for the concept of the poor being blessed.
put right), workplace injustice and the struggle to right it are the constitutive violences of the coal and electric power industry.”\textsuperscript{221} Williams is one of the few Christians to condemn our country’s electric system as a whole from a religious standpoint, and he calls on all fellow Christians to be nonviolent witnesses to the truth behind the coal industry.

Williams represents a more radical Christian viewpoint of the American coal industry. As I have mentioned previously, most Christians in Appalachia focus their efforts on ending mountaintop removal rather than attempting to take on the entire system of electricity. Some, perhaps, see mountaintop removal as a blatant disregard for Christian values of human justice, but do not stretch the theological connection to include other forms of mining or fossil fuel use. Others recognize the theological connection but believe it is more feasible to focus their efforts on mountaintop removal instead of attacking the whole fossil fuel industry, which has even more power and clout than the mountaintop removal industry alone. Williams’ assertions, however, signify the importance of the Christian notion of social justice as applied to current issues.

\textbf{Blessed are the Poor}

While most Christian organizations fighting mountaintop removal cite social justice and equality as central motivators for their actions, the two pastorals published by the CCA are by far the most detailed examples of Christians using almost universally accepted Christian values, such as responsibility towards the poor, and connecting them to mountaintop removal. As a foundation of their argument, both pastorals acknowledge

several common Biblical passages that exalt the poor over the rich. “At Home in the Web of Life” notes that Jesus taught that “it is the humble and poor who best understand the word of God.” 222 “This Land is Home to Me” refers to moments in the Bible when God de-throned princes to raise the lowly to power and points out that in Israel, God was revealed to those who were oppressed by bondage to Egypt. 223 “This Land is Home to Me” in particular stresses the blessedness of the poor, more so than the later published “At Home in the Web of Life” (probably became the former is more traditionally anthropocentric to begin with). The prominence of biblical messages depicting the dichotomy between the rich and the poor as referenced in “This Land is Home to Me” suggests that in their groundbreaking pastoral on mountaintop removal, the CCA bishops felt more comfortable appealing to a well-established Christian value. “This Land is Home to Me” focuses on reminding Christians of obligations they are already well aware of. It subsequently explains how mountaintop removal threatens these obligations.

“This Land is Home to Me” draws mostly from the New Testament to remind Christians of their responsibility towards the poor. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the Epistles of James and John are the most commonly cited biblical sections in the pastoral. The Gospel of Matthew sets the stage for decrying wealth by clearly exalting the spirits of the poor over the spirits of the rich. Some of the most famous passages from Matthew, recited by Christians for centuries, appear in the pastorals, such as Jesus’ proclamation, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the spirit of heaven,” or “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of

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222 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 40.
223 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 23.
Heaven.”\textsuperscript{224} The bishops utilize an effective strategy of making Christians feel comfortable with their message in the pastoral by using biblical verses that most Christians know well.

The Gospel of Luke is another biblical section that most Christians are familiar with, and “This Land is Home to Me” uses several of the messages in Luke to warn Christians of the consequences of material wealth: “The hungry have been filled with good things, the rich sent away empty...How happy are you who are poor: yours is the kingdom of God. Happy you who are hungry now: But alas for you who are rich: you are having your consolation now.”\textsuperscript{225} Passages in Luke also celebrate those who devote their lives to assisting the needy: “God has sent me to bring the good news of the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free...”\textsuperscript{226} After dwelling on the blessed nature of the poor, the pastoral points to the First Epistle of John to convey that direct action is needed on the part of Christians: “If those who were rich enough in this world’s goods saw that a sister or brother was in need, but closed their hearts, how could the love of God be living in them? My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active; only by this can we be certain that we are children of the truth...”\textsuperscript{227} The pastoral is telling Christians that these biblical messages still apply today, and is urging them to get involved in their own communities, assisting their neighbors who have been impoverished by mountaintop removal practices.

Psalm 72, which I have referenced previously, reads, “God will free the people who call out, and those who need help, God will have pity on the poor and feeble...God

\textsuperscript{224} Matthew 5:3-6, 19:24; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 69; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 33.
\textsuperscript{226} Luke 4:8-9; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 22.
\textsuperscript{227} 1 John 3; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 27.
will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage.” The CCA pastorals, as well as all of the Christian organizations who are motivated to fight mountaintop removal by the biblical cry for social justice and equity, call all of their fellow Christians to assist them in participating in God’s work. Many Appalachians realize that it is up to them to free their impoverished neighbors from “exploitation and outrage,” and they recognize that the single most effective action in carrying out this mission would be halting the destructive practice of mountaintop removal.

**Idolatry, Sin, and Truth**

While concerns about social justice and care for God’s creation are overwhelmingly the most frequently cited motivations for Christians to act out against mountaintop removal, several secondary Christian themes emerged throughout the groups I was studying. One deals with the nature of sin, specifically the sin of idolatry. Some Christian activists argue that coal companies are worshipping the power of profit instead of the power of God. Christians look at the fact that the coal industry is destroying homes and families in an effort to make more money and link this to the biblical assertion that money is the root of all evil. Allen Johnson, for instance, pointed out to me that it is impossible to serve both God and money, implying that the coal executives who are becoming wealthy from coal have lost touch with God. Sage Russo, in a workshop for

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228 Psalms 72:12-14; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 23. Notably, the tone of this biblical passage could also be used as justification for those who choose not to fight for their neighbor’s rights, due to a faith that God intended for certain trials to befall them and that He will guide them through hardship (and certainly the phrasing of this particular psalm could suggest this). Some of the Baptists and Pentecostals whom I spoke with in Appalachia believed in this fatalistic aspect of Christianity, one that has been criticized for drawing Christians into complacency in the face of injustice. I will discuss this notion more in Chapter Four.


student climate activists, stressed the importance of distinguishing between following the promises of the *prophets*, as Christians are supposed to do, and following the promises of *profits*, an evil to which coal companies succumb.\(^{231}\)

Similarly, “This Land is Home to Me” references a passage from Matthew announcing that “you cannot be the slave of both God and money.”\(^{232}\) The pastoral later reminds Christians of the primary commandment in Exodus, where God demands, “You shall have no gods except me.”\(^{233}\) The implication here is that coal companies are treating money as a false idol, glorifying profit over God’s work. Using these specific biblical verses paints a stark picture of good verses evil, pitting coal industry as the enemy. Christian groups that use language of sin and idolatry to goad others into action are challenging fellow Christians to confront evil at its source through fighting mountaintop removal.

The challenge of confronting evil leads directly into another secondary theme that I noticed, that of the Christian responsibility to seek truth. The bitter arguments over coal and mountaintop removal have grown so divisive that many residents are unsure of whom to believe: the coal industry or those fighting against it. Since nearly all of the facts point to the coal industry being shamefully irresponsible, and in some cases even malicious, many groups encourage Christians to find out the truth behind the practice. “This Land is Home to Me” cites the Gospel According to John, where it is written that “the truth will make you free.”\(^{234}\) Christians maintain that Appalachian residents should acknowledge their commitment to truth by bearing witness to the devastation occurring

\(^{232}\) Matthew 6:24; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 15.  
\(^{233}\) Exodus 20:1-3; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 24.  
\(^{234}\) John 8:32; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 6.
before their eyes in Appalachia, just as Christians are told in the Bible to bear witness to the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{235}

**Healing and Reconciliation**

One last aspect of Christian theology that many mountaintop removal activists emphasize is that of God’s promise and capacity for healing and reconciliation. This aspect of their faith brings an element of hope to a battle that can otherwise be draining and discouraging. Most Christians believe deeply in God’s ability to forgive sins and heal wounds, and activists take this trust and extend it to God’s potential to heal the land. United Methodist John Hill, in an effort to get Christians to stop standing idly by, reminds them of one of God’s promises from the Bible: “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (II Chronicles 7:14)\textsuperscript{236} Hill is implying that there is hope for Appalachia to recover from the scars of strip mining if Christians will side with justice and apologize for the sin of mountaintop removal.

“At Home in the Web of Life,” too, celebrates reconciliation as a positive aspect of Christianity that can give people faith in their fight against strip mining. The pastoral notes that God gave humanity two revelations: “the revelation of Creation, expressed in the whole universe; and the revelation of redemption, expressed in Jesus and his

\textsuperscript{235} Acts 28:23; This notion, as it relates to coal mining, is discussed in an interesting article (cited previously in this chapter) by Scott Williams, a professor of ethics and philosophy at Waynesburg College in Pennsylvania. [Scott Williams, “Mine Wars”; Dianne Bady, “Churches Against Mountaintop Removal”; Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 96.]

\textsuperscript{236} John S. Hill, “Testimony.”
By reducing God’s many gifts to these two revelations, the pastoral highlights the critical importance of the Creation and our responsibility to protect it, but also gives Christians hope that there is a chance to be forgiven for the sins perpetrated against the landscape. Using the theme of reconciliation, “At Home in the Web of Life” ties together nearly all of the biblical themes that Christian groups have used to justify their opposition to mountaintop removal. It announces,

“According to the Bible, the breaking of living communion between humans and the land is linked to the sins of idolatry and injustice, which the prophets constantly denounced. The healing of social and ecological sin, therefore, requires both our reconciliation with the land and our reconciliation with the poor. Gratefully this reconciliation is already given to us in the person of Jesus.”

This statement demonstrates how many Christians understand the inherent links that connect creation care, social justice, truth, reconciliation, and the rejection of sin. The movement against mountaintop removal incorporates all of these important elements of Christianity, and Christians can look to many different parts of the Bible for guidance in their opposition to mountaintop removal. Christians against strip mining are using very effective (and increasingly complex) arguments to demonstrate why mountaintop removal violates Christian principles, from both a stewardship and a social justice perspective.

The emphasis of biblical passages by Christian mountaintop removal activists to promote their cause is one that is also put to use by eco-theologians who argue for a stronger ethic of creation care in general. The notable exception, however, is Thomas Berry. Berry argues that Christians cannot rely on scripture to capture the sacredness of the landscape, and that only immediate experiences in nature can convey the true

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238 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “At Home in the Web of Life,” 68.
magnitude of the earth’s glory. Berry contends that “The natural world is both the
primary source of religious understanding and the primary religious community.”

 Some activists, such as the attendees of the Lost Cove/Harper Wilderness Retreat that I
mentioned in Chapter Two, who expressed the powerful sacredness of wilderness and
wrote about the importance of nature to the Christian spiritual journey, would likely agree
with Berry. Nevertheless, Berry’s call to Christians to seek God in nature rather than in
the Bible is not an angle I encountered very frequently; it is likely too radical for most of
Appalachia. The slip into pantheism, or of worshipping the Creation over the Creator, are
still real fears that many Christians in Appalachia and in the United States as a whole
painstakingly avoid.

**Historical Theology**

Despite Berry’s uncertainties about deriving inspiration mainly from the Bible,
biblical passages are the most commonly referenced aspects of Christianity that I have
encountered as justification for why Christians should be actively concerned about
mountaintop removal practices. The Bible is not the only part of the Christian tradition,
however, that directs Christians to fight against mountaintop removal. Many Christians
point to historical figures and organizations that have interpreted Christianity in a certain
way, relying on the example that these Christians have set in fostering a strong
environmental and social ethic. These examples are instances where the selective
application of historical theology of Christianity becomes important in the fight against
mountaintop removal.

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239 Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 46.
Use of historical theology to criticize mountaintop removal ranges from references to characters in very early Christian history to figures whom many Appalachian residents can remember from their own childhoods. Early Christian figures who inspire mountaintop removal activists include St. Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, and, of course, Jesus. The example of Jesus and the messages of his teachings are included in references to the Bible, so I will not discuss him specifically in this section on historical theology, but Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen, neither of whom is featured in the Bible, played important roles in contributing to Christian activism for many different causes. “At Home in the Web of Life” mentions St. Francis to remind Christians that love for animals and the landscape has long been a celebrated part of Christian history.²⁴⁰ St. Francis is known among Catholics as the patron saint of ecology; the fact that Christians have a saint to represent the earth’s systems demonstrates the relevance of environmental concerns to Christian theology (although St. Francis’s identity as an environmental hero has only recently developed in Christian thought and doctrine, which demonstrates the forward momentum of the Christian environmental movement). Notably, St. Francis is also referenced by many eco-theologians, including McFague, who uses him as an example of a Christian who actively expanded the definition of community by extending his love for others beyond humans into the natural world.²⁴¹ Even Lynn White, in the midst of his negative thesis about the Judeo-Christian tradition’s accountability for our environmental problems, holds up St. Francis as a potential positive role model for Christians who care about the natural world.

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²⁴¹ Sally McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 163.
Similarly, Hildegard of Bingen, a Benedictine abbess who predated even St. Francis by several centuries, is celebrated by Christians in part for her contribution to religious nature writing. “At Home in the Web of Life” acknowledges that Hildegard wrote at length about the beauty of God’s creation and all of His creatures, fostering an early religious awe of the natural world. Hildegard also wrote on botany and herbalism, lauding the many healing properties of medicinal herbs and plants. Her dedication to this area of research can be used by mountaintop removal activists today who protest the denuding of the Appalachian Mountains for the loss of certain plant species that play crucial roles in traditional Appalachian recipes and remedies. Hildegard, like St. Francis, has only recently been “re-discovered” by the Christian community, which reflects a growing desire among Christians to connect their faith with environmental values in any way they can.

More recent Christian leaders whose philosophies play a role in combating mountaintop removal include several of the Catholic popes and bishops from the last century. I discussed the influence of Pope John Paul II previously, and he remains a prominent figure of authority promoting Christian environmentalism. “This Land is Home to Me” refers to other popes who also worked diligently to promote peace and equality. Pope John XXIII, for instance, wrote letters entitled “Peace on Earth” and “Mother and Teacher” about the need for Christianity to promote social progress. Pope Paul, furthermore, wrote “On the Development of Peoples” and “A Call to Action” to push Christians to come to the aid of those oppressed and weakened by industrialization. Pope Paul’s message, in particular, can resonate with Appalachians.

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243 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 30.
who are being exploited by the coal industry’s adoption of machines and mechanical labor in place of the employment of local people. “This Land is Home to Me” also points to the example of a letter written by Catholic bishops in 1940 protesting how situations of injustice cause people to lose faith and turn away from religion. Clearly, figures at all levels of the Catholic hierarchy have taken on important environmental and social causes, and as a result, many Christians feel the responsibility today to do the same with mountaintop removal.

Yet Christian officials are not the only influential characters who inspire action against mountaintop removal. Throughout my study, I found many references to Martin Luther King, Jr, and the striking example he set in his fight for racial equality and social justice. Many Christians look to Martin Luther King as representative of the type of person that all Christians should strive to emulate. As a minister, a champion of human rights, and a tireless devotee to impoverished and exploited peoples, he embodies the fundamental religious principles that so many Christians hold dear. In addition to celebrating the whole of Martin Luther King’s legacy, Christians have used specific speeches of his to issue a rallying cry for the protection of mountains.

*Missing Mountains*, for instance, features a quotation from one of King’s most famous orations: “I have been to the mountaintop…I just want to do God’s will…He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land.” The use of this quotation, which specifically refers to the importance of mountains, both links King’s fight for social justice to the will of God and denotes a

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244 Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “This Land is Home to Me,” 29. Notably, the opposite seems to be true for activists fighting mountaintop removal, who are actually drawn towards Christianity as a result of their work. I will discuss this further in Chapter Six.

sense of fear for the destruction of God’s creation. The metaphoric mountains that King speaks of suddenly become the real mountains that are being blasted for coal in Appalachia. Indeed, the excerpt from the title of this paper, “I have been to the mountaintop, but it wasn’t there,” is derived from a bumper sticker published by the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, a secular group that I mentioned before for their involvement in the Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal. The sticker succinctly highlights the importance of mountains in the Christian faith, as well as relating the fight against mountaintop removal directly back to King and the civil rights movement.  

It is not surprising that mountaintop removal activists use King’s language and philosophies to support their struggle. It is possible, for instance, that the transition from talking about mountaintop removal as a social justice issue (which is widely accepted) to discussing it as an environmental disaster (which seems to be slightly less effective) makes some Christians nervous. Relying on Martin Luther King gives activists a reliable angle from which they can leverage support. Additionally, the connection between the imagery of metaphorical mountaintops that King illustrates and the literal mountaintops being destroyed in Appalachia is too obvious to overlook. Mountains are important both to God and to King, and the implications of their destruction are huge: without any mountaintops to climb, can Christians ever reach the promised land?

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246 This same image of climbing a mountain to reach the promised land is used in the wider secular environmental movement as well, a symbol of how both religion and the example of the civil rights movement are strong aspects of activism today. In the opening address at Powershift 2009, a climate conference that drew over ten thousand students from around the country, Billy Parish, founder of Energy Action, warned the audience of the two possible futures ahead of us: one scary future, and one beautiful future. He commented, “We’ve all been to the mountaintop, and have seen that brighter future.” Billy’s comment illustrates the perpetual relevance that King’s imagery still holds. In my opinion, it also accentuates the dire situation in Appalachia: without any mountaintops, there will be no bright future for Appalachia.
Denominational Social Teachings

A last example of formal historical theology at play in the struggle against mountaintop removal is the use of denominational social principles or social obligations. While many of these were written before mountaintop removal practices existed, Christians use the fundamental points of these principles to prove that mountaintop removal is not a practice that Christians can comfortably support. The two denominational examples that I came across were the United Methodist Social Principles and the tradition of Catholic social teachings. John Hill, in his testimony to the OSM, highlights the message of stewardship put forth by the United Methodist Social Principles. He references paragraph 160 of the principles, which declares, “Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect.”

Similarly, the CCA pastoral “At Home in the Web of Life” points to Catholic social teachings as a source for opposing mountaintop removal on the basis of Christianity. Even though traditional Catholic teachings make no mention of coal, the bishops who wrote the pastoral acknowledge that Catholic social teachings, which have been reinforced frequently by papal encyclicals, call for an applied theology. They write, “In [the Catholic social teaching] tradition, asking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in

\[247\text{John S. Hill, “Testimony.”}\]
dialogue with the community of faith, we try to interpret God’s word for today’s society.” The bishops recognize that even though mountaintop removal has no place in Christian historical theology due to its recent origins, it is relevant to other social teachings and principles that are more firmly established in the Christian tradition. Drawing on these accepted principles can be an effective method of garnering Christian activism against mountaintop removal.

Historical theology obviously offers a rich array of material for Christians to draw upon in their fight against mountaintop removal. To this point, I have outlined the major biblical passages and formal historical tradition, such as denominational social principles, used in this fight. It is important to note, however, that not all Christians frame their argument based on written tenets of Christianity. Some rely on a tradition of Christianity that is more directly immanent, a “lived” tradition. For instance, many of the activists against mountaintop removal have joined together at protests to sing “Amazing Grace,” a song with evocative Christian undertones. “Amazing Grace” plays a prominent role in the intertwining of religion and social justice movements in the United States. The song was used extensively by secularists and people of all different faiths throughout the civil rights movement, bringing hope and faith to citizens who bore the brunt of racial discrimination. It has resurfaced in the fight against mountaintop removal, often sung by Appalachian residents who suffer economic discrimination at the hands of coal companies. The song represents a cultural reliance on religious tradition that is theologically informal but powerful in practice.

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One other example of informal historical theology is the theology practiced by the Appalachian residents who have little use for academic theory or denominational principles. These Christians see mountaintop removal being practiced in their backyards, and they do not need scores of biblical passages to alert them to the problem. Different from many of the highly educated activists, who use the Bible and other formal outlets of religious philosophy to write eloquently about how mountaintop removal activism fits into the larger principles of Christian stewardship, these Christians have a simpler view of the matter. Lucious Thompson, for instance, a former coal miner, lives under a mountaintop removal site and has been flooded three times since the coal company began its work. Thompson’s interpretation of the Christian historical tradition is so obvious that few would argue it. He comments, “The coal companies say it’s God’s will...well, God ain’t ever run no bulldozer.”

Thompson’s argument looks at what God and Jesus have not done, in contrast to the more complex arguments of some activists, who look at Jesus’ actions and teachings to extrapolate a sense of Christian responsibility from ancient Christian history that can then be applied to mountaintop removal, an issue that has arisen so recently. Thompson’s position is an example of informal historical theology, while the latter approach represents a more formal form of constructive theology that involves the rethinking of old Christian histories, themes, and views of God to fit new circumstances (in this case, mountaintop removal mining). I have focused mainly on constructive theology rather than on informal historical theology in this chapter due to the multifarious components of constructive theology. Both types of theological frameworks, however, arrive at the same

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250 Neela Banerjee, “Taking on a Coal Mining Practice as a Matter of Faith.”

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conclusion and have proven successful in inspiring Christians to take action against mountaintop removal.

**The Opposition**

Looking at the presence of informal Christian principles as justification for opposing mountaintop removal led me to discover the importance of religious language being used in the debate over mountaintop removal. Many groups use particular language that resonates with Christians to promote their position on the matter. “At Home in the Web of Life,” for instance, utilizes etymology to explain why humans have such significant responsibility to the earth. The pastoral points out that the Hebrew word for earth is “adamah,” with human being “adam,” which leads directly to the conclusion that humans are the earth’s creatures. For this reason, the pastoral argues, we must treat the planet with the respect that it is due. The pastoral also points to the identical root of the words human, humus, and humble, which illustrates that the ancient Hebrews practiced the intersection of humans, the environment, and religious principles. Religious language is common at mountaintop removal protests; some activists state their opinions in the form of commandments from God, such as “Thou Shalt Not Remove the Tops of Mountains.” Words with significant moral and religious weight, such as “evil” and “sinful” are often used to describe the destructive acts of the coal industry.

Christian language is also used by the industries themselves, however, which demonstrates the centrality of religion to Appalachian culture (the fact that people on both sides of the argument turn to Christianity to justify their position identifies religion

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as a common shared value among Appalachians). In several cases, coal company officials have represented giant coal slurry spills as “acts of God.” These spills, which have wiped out entire communities and drowned residents under thousands of tons of toxic sludge, were caused by breaches in the flimsy dams that coal companies hurriedly construct to hold the byproduct of mountaintop removal waste. Many Appalachian residents are infuriated by the companies’ claims that the devastation is caused by God; to them, the companies are attributing an act of extreme evil to the deity that they worship. Even worse, to avoid having to distribute aid or insurance to those affected by the slurry disasters, government officials have reiterated that the sludge spills are an act of God, and that no one is to blame. By using religious language, coal companies are continuously avoiding punishment for the destruction that they create.

In addition to using religious language to characterize slurry spills as the “natural” state of order intended by God, coal industry representatives and sympathizers also look to Christian theology to justify their support of mountaintop removal. Like Lucious Thompson (who pointed out that God has never operated a bulldozer), they highlight topics that are not directly addressed in the Bible in an attempt to distance Christianity from mountaintop removal. Kenny Schmidt, for instance, an employee of Natural Horizon Resources, criticized the intention of the “Bishops’ Forum on Mountaintop Removal” organized by the CCA in 2003. Schmidt stated, “When the church goes into complex societal issues, it needs to understand. There’s nothing in the Bible or the

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254 Most insurance companies do not pay for damages that were wrought by an extraordinary powerful event in nature, such as a flood or hurricane (the insurance companies deem these events “acts of God.”)
catechism on mining, and the church needs to educate itself before espousing policy...”

While Thompson argues that mountaintop removal does not fit into the history of Christianity because God never intended for that scale of destruction, Schmidt maintains that the reason Christians should not be concerned is because Christian texts do not address coal directly. What Schmidt fails to realize here is how common it is in Christian tradition to apply teachings from the Bible to current issues that could not possibly have existed in biblical times. The Bible says nothing, for instance, on the specific practice of abortion, but many Christians look at the biblical espousal of the sanctity of life to infer that abortion does not fit into their religious values. Theologians and activists today are building on this tradition to argue a similar line of thought: the Bible may not specifically mention coal or mountaintop removal, but its message of stewardship is undeniably applicable to these issues in modern Christian culture.

Other supporters of mountaintop removal, however, do look to the Bible for theology that complements their position. One of the most commonly cited biblical themes used to defend mountaintop removal practices is that of dominion, specifically the passage in Genesis that proclaims humans to have dominion over all other life. Cecil Underwood, Governor of West Virginia from 1997 to 2001, repeatedly condemned his church for speaking out against mountaintop removal. He commented, “The Bible says we are to take dominion over the earth.”

Jeff Messer, a coal industry employee in Appalachia, adds his own words to this same sentiment: “God put all the resources on this Earth for our benefit. He put us in dominion over the wildlife, the fish...this coal is

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255 Margaret Gabriel, “Appalachians tackle divisive mining issue.”
256 Dianne Bady, “Churches Against Mountaintop Removal.”
for us to survive with.” Similarly, Darrel Caudill, another coal company employee, asks, “Why did God produce coal and then put it underground?...He produced things that we need on this earth.” It is important to note that the idea of dominion, which Lynn White so famously isolated as the predominant Judeo-Christian concept responsible for our current environmental crisis, is the most common Christian principle used by mountaintop removal supporters to justify their actions on the basis of religious values. In the case of mountaintop removal advocates, White’s thesis does seem to ring true, despite the efforts of eco-theologians like McFague who attempt to de-emphasize the importance of dominion in the Bible.

Christians protesting mountaintop removal would undoubtedly side with McFague on this point; nearly all of the Christians whom I spoke with in Appalachia interpreted God’s gift of dominion over creation as a binding commitment of stewardship, not as a blank check for reckless destruction. However, coal proponents seem to be living a very different interpretation of Christianity than that of Christian environmental and social justice advocates. One of the most alarming uses of scripture to justify mountaintop removal mining is a passage from Isaiah as advertised by the Kentucky Coal Association. The Kentucky Coal Association has a special section on their website that addresses the confluence of religion and mining practices. It reads,

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257 Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, “Mountaintop Removal Mining.”
258 Neela Banerjee, “Taking on a Coal Mining Practice as a Matter of Faith.”
259 Again, Thomas Berry is a notable exception here. Unlike other eco-theologians, Berry admits that Genesis does play a significant role in contributing to an exploitive, oppressive society. He writes, “We might interpret the early chapters of Genesis as an assertion of a patriarchal heavenly deity over the earlier feminine Earth-dwelling deities. The first commandment might read, ‘Thou shalt not have an Earth Mother.’” This acknowledgement of the dangers of the message in Genesis and throughout the Bible is what leads Berry to promote a Christian theology that is derived from the natural world, rather than one rooted in scripture. [Thomas Berry, Evening Thoughts, 25; Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis”; Sally McFague, Super, Natural Christians.]
“Under most circumstances, we are of the opinion religion should not play a role in political debate. Recently, however, we’ve learned some religious leaders are railing against mountaintop mining and, as we hear it, invoking the Almighty to bring an end to the mining method... We, therefore, even though reluctant to inject them into the debate, enter this scriptural citations [sic] for reflection: ‘Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; The rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’ Isaiah 40:4-5, (New American Bible) [260]

Several of the Christian protestors against mountaintop removal whom I interviewed in Appalachia cited this reference by the Kentucky Coal Association as evidence of how the coal industry distorts the Christian faith to suit their needs. The passage from Isaiah that the Coal Association draws from is actually about social justice, as Allen Johnson pointed out to me, but instead, the industry takes the message of equality and twists it into a literal translation to claim that God intended for mountains to be leveled by man. [261] I find the use of this passage, taken out of context, to be absolutely chilling in its implications for what humans can try to justify through scripture.

In addition to the notions of dominion and use of the landscape, the other Christian argument put forth by mountaintop removal enthusiasts focuses on the irrelevance of environmental issues to the central message of Christianity, which according to many fundamental Christians is salvation and evangelism. Darrel Caudill, an evangelical, points out that “being a Christian means being saved and spreading the Gospel. There is no tension between being committed to his faith and supporting mountaintop removal.” [262] Likewise, Brian Patton, a deacon at the Calvary Baptist Church in Lexington, KY, affirms that his religious responsibilities have nothing to do with

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environmentalism. He states, “As a Christian, I’ve been taught to worry about saving souls as opposed to environmental issues.” 263 Patton also happens to serve as the president of James River Coal Company, which illustrates the complex conflicts of interest that occur in the overlaps between the coal industry and Appalachian religious culture. On the theological level, Patton’s comment proves the stark difference between the common interpretation of evangelical Christianity and the type of eco-Christianity embraced by many activists. 264 McFague defines this difference clearly: “Unlike evangelical Christianity, which focuses on human and especially individual redemption...[a Christian nature spirituality] sees human and natural salvation as inextricably linked.” 265 Christian activists against mountaintop removal, who find a message of justice and obligation much broader than that of merely personal salvation, work tirelessly for the salvation of nature as a part of their Christian faith.

While McFague, like many secular environmentalists, criticizes evangelical Christianity for advancing a narrow framework and agenda, Calvin DeWitt frames evangelicalism’s focus on salvation as an asset to the environmental movement. DeWitt points out that seeking the kingdom of God is the single goal for evangelical Christians; 266 however, while people like Darrell Caudill might interpret this as caring only for the individual self, DeWitt maintains that an active search for the kingdom of God will lead Christians to act in the best interest of the world as a whole. DeWitt writes,

264 Many evangelical Christians today, however, are at the forefront of the environmental movement. Matthew Sleeth, for instance, author of Serve God, Save the Planet, provides a strong example of how evangelical values can be reframed to celebrate a bold environmental ethic.
265 Sally McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 14.
266 Berry, on the other hand, believes that the primary goal of Christians is to preserve the integrity of Earth’s fragile ecosystems; his interpretation of primary Christian responsibilities is obviously quite different than that of most of Appalachian Christians.
“In the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament the kingdom of God is the central symbol for the new vision of life in its fullness; it involves personal, social, earthly, and cosmic dimensions of salvation; its earthly and cosmic dimensions of restoration lead directly to an ethic of care for the creation.” Yet until people like Caudill share this interpretation of evangelicalism, the reaction of many fundamentalist evangelical Christians to mountaintop removal in Appalachia will likely be one more of indifference than of devoted care.

I found that most supporters of mountaintop removal who mention Christianity as a significant part of their belief structure are either coal company employees or have been influenced some other way, such as through industry contributions (at least, this is the information I gathered from my interviews in Appalachia). Additionally, nearly all of these supporters only mention religion as a response to activists who protest mountaintop removal on Christian grounds. Supporters cite energy, the economy, and jobs as the primary reasons they are in favor of mountaintop removal. Religious beliefs seem to be secondary, and only when mountaintop removal advocates are put on the defensive.

For instance, in a newspaper article about the Kentucky Prayer on a Mountain mentioned in Chapter Two, journalist Alan Maimon reported, “In a telephone interview, Bill Caylor, president of the Kentucky Coal Association, said he resented people bringing religion into the debate on mountaintop removal. ‘I disagree when people try to justify their actions with quotes from the Bible, Caylor said.’” The Kentucky Coal Association “reluctantly” publicized the passage from Isaiah that I mentioned previously, in response to Christian voices using scripture to condemn mountaintop removal. In

contrast, many of the Christians who oppose mountaintop removal do so for distinctively religious reasons. This divide suggests that the Christian tradition may hold a stronger argument for the importance of stewardship and social justice than it does for the need for humans to prove their dominion over the earth. It must be acknowledged, however, that Christians on both sides of the debates are adept at scrutinizing the Bible and drawing out scriptural support to justify their actions.

As this chapter demonstrates, the Christian faith offers a great deal to the movement against mountaintop removal. The Bible promotes powerful messages of the importance of stewardship, social justice, truth, and reconciliation, all of which motivate Christians to take part in the fight to end strip mining. Prominent religious principles and Christian leaders that have emerged in the many centuries since the birth of Christianity form a rich tradition of activism on which mountaintop removal activists are building, adding their own specific cause to the long struggle for justice that characterizes human history. One theme that seems to tie all of the activists together is their sense of an applied faith, responding to a God who lives here on earth, in our hearts and in our land, as well as above us. Eco-theologians champion this concept as an essential component of Christianity that lends itself to environmental and social care. Theologians refer to it as “immanence,” the embodied divine, meaning that Christians are beginning to deconstruct the boundary between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm. Appalachian activists, although perhaps unaware of the formal theological term for this concept, recognize that God and his kingdom are present everywhere, and are called by their faith to take part in a growing grassroots movement against injustice and environmental destruction. Through writings, songs, and conversations, Christians have heeded their faith’s call to action to
fight against mountaintop removal. Their path, however, has not been entirely smooth. In
the next chapter, I discuss the many challenges that Christian activists face in their work
to end mountaintop removal. Drawing from my own experiences in West Virginia, I hope
to convey the magnitude of the Christian devotion to this cause, as well as the sacrifices
Christians have made to build a strong and effective religious campaign against
mountaintop removal.
Chapter Five: On the Ground in Appalachia

“There are only three types of people left in Appalachia: the people who benefit from a coal economy, people who are either apathetic or too poor to leave, and the activists fighting mountaintop removal.”

--Will Samson, Kentucky resident

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After spending many months researching Christian involvement in mountaintop removal coal mining from afar, I received the opportunity to travel to the coalfields and experience the situation there firsthand. This trip was by far the most powerful part of my exploration into the relationship between religion and mountaintop removal. It completely transformed my understanding of the reality of life in Appalachia, and I experienced tremendous difficulty in pulling myself away from the area in an effort to articulate my thoughts and observations. My visit was at once wonderfully inspiring and painfully heart-wrenching; I encountered the enthusiasm of dedicated activists fighting new mountaintop removal permits alongside the helpless despair of victims who had lost a gallbladder, kidney, or liver as a result of drinking water poisoned with industrial toxins. All of the people I spoke with helped inform my understanding of how dire the situation is in the coalfields of Appalachia; as I write this, the land, people, and culture of Appalachia are being sacrificed for the production of coal, being replaced by naked, barren plateaus that once stood as some of the oldest mountains in the world.

Traveling through Appalachia filled my research with a much deeper and more genuine understanding of the extent of Christian activism in the fight against mountaintop removal and the challenges that Appalachian residents face in organizing against the coal companies. It became all too clear how Christians’ hands are tied when it comes to opposing mountaintop removal, and illuminated the enormous risks associated with

openly speaking out against the process. In this chapter, I plan to provide a brief narrative of my journey through the coalfields, dwelling mostly on the many conversations I had with preachers and priests of several different denominations, Christian laypeople, and both secular and religious activists. Each of these discussions helped to broaden my understanding of the efficacy of a Christian message in the fight against mountaintop removal. The two weeks I spent in Appalachia helped me to realize three pivotal (though disappointing) aspects of this movement that I could not have fully garnered simply from interviews: the extent of the coal industry’s pervasive ownership of the land and people of Appalachia, the silent refusal of most Christians to confront mountaintop removal, and the sharp divide between the Christian denominations of the coalfields and denominations in the regions that are not affected directly by mountaintop removal.

First, I discovered the unbelievable magnitude of the stranglehold that the coal industry exerts over the Appalachian people and culture. The coal monopoly is almost the sole source of income for much of the region; coal companies practically own the businesses, the schools, the houses, some of the police stations, the media, and even the government (perhaps especially the government). Author and West Virginia resident Bud Fultz informed me that in purely geographical statistics, a full fifty percent of land in West Virginia is owned by the coal industry. One of the women I stayed with, who is a teacher in Mingo County, WV, told me that teachers across the state preach the benefits of mountaintop removal mining to their students; her grandson’s school takes a field trip each year on Earth Day to a reclaimed mine site to celebrate how humans can improve the existing landscape. Allen Johnson informed me that the Charleston Gazette, one of

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the state’s main newspapers, refuses to publish op-eds criticizing mountaintop removal mining. He added that the schools, the economy, and the people of Appalachia all bow to the coal industry. Allen summed up the situation in Appalachia in a chilling but painfully accurate manner: “Coal is beyond an industry. It has a supernatural hold over the entire region.” Allen’s comment speaks to the importance of the religious voice in this debate; Christianity might be the only force powerful enough to wrest the culture of Appalachia out of the pockets of the coal industry.

Secondly, even though Christians have begun to raise their voices against the atrocities committed by mining companies, the vast majority of Christians are still deathly silent on the issue of mountaintop removal. Whether theologically disinterested in issues of social consequence or deterred by a deep-seeded fear of the power of the coal industry, many Christians simply look the other way when it comes to mountaintop removal mining. Even most of the priests who do oppose mountaintop removal do so away from the pulpit. Most Appalachians seem very reluctant to marry religion and activism in the public way that is needed to break the iron grip of coal. This unwillingness to act is especially prevalent among the churches in the coalfields, which is the last major issue I will discuss: denominations in Appalachia are sharply divided between the mainline denominations like Episcopalism and Methodism (which are centered in the wealthier, more urban areas) and fundamentalist evangelical denominations like Baptist and Pentecostal (which are most common in the hollows of the coalfields). A major theological, social, and cultural wall obstructs communication

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273 Ibid.
274 I use “fundamentalist” in this chapter to mean those denominations and individuals that follow a literal interpretation of the Bible. These denominations and churches do not necessarily ally themselves with the
between these two groups, a wall that prevents any sort of activism from transcending denominational boundaries to unite the voices of Christians on mountaintop removal or any other issue.

Yet despite these three major obstacles, I could still sense a mounting restlessness with the irresponsible practices of mining companies, a discomfort that for many stem from Christian ideals of stewardship and good faith. The Christian movement against mountaintop removal is indeed growing. As I will discuss in this chapter, I came across many activists who protest mountaintop removal as being diametrically opposed to the values of Christian faith. I still truly believe that Christians in Appalachia have the ability to use their faith to occupy the moral high ground in this fight. At this point, a strong ethical stance may be the only way to break the influence of coal and expose mining companies for their morally reprehensible practices. However, Christians have many tough battles to fight before they can exert the power of their moral voice over the coal industry’s control of Appalachia.

**Christianity and Politics**

One of the major ways that Christians are vocalizing their moral stance on mountaintop removal is through politics, at both the local and the national level. My journey to Appalachia began with a stop in Washington, D.C., at the End Mountaintop Removal Lobby Week, a week of action hosted by the Alliance for Appalachia. There were over 150 citizens in attendance, many of whom had grown up in the coalfields and could contribute powerful stories about how their families and their communities have
been affected by mountaintop removal mining. Bob Marshall and Allen Johnson, founders of Christians for the Mountains, as well as Sage Russo and Rebekah Epling, CFTM’s interns, all participated and introduced me to a number of other Christians at the lobby week. As I began to meet more and more people, it became clear to me that many (if not most) of the lobbyists had some background in the Christian faith, especially the people of older generations. While most of the participants did not explicitly tout Christianity as motivation for fighting mountaintop removal, they clearly connected their faith with the importance of stewardship and social justice. Indeed, nearly everyone I spoke with emphasized the importance of a Christian angle in helping legislators and everyone else understand why mountaintop removal mining is immoral.

Lobbying alongside Christians from many different denominations to end mountaintop removal reinforced my notion of a Christian movement that transcends political boundaries and typical party-line issues. Peter Illyn of Restoring Eden speaks of a contemporary shift in Christian theology on the national scale that moves from a focus on compartmentalized interests to a wider, more integrated application of faith (this is very different from a shift that moves from conservatism to liberalism). I believe is an accurate and powerful way of framing the growing Christian environmental movement.275 Many of the citizens I lobbied alongside would be considered politically and socially conservative, influenced by conservative Christian doctrine to take strong stances against issues like abortion and gay marriage. I went to several meetings with a devout Catholic from New Jersey, who knew one of the Republican New Jersey representatives on a personal basis. When asked how she had met him, she answered that she had been to lobby the representative multiple times for pro-life issues (specifically on

legislation to ban abortion). The same Christian ideals that motivated her to fight abortion called her to fight mountaintop removal practices with equal fervor. Meeting her, and other politically conservative Christians at the lobby week, really cemented for me the point that mountaintop removal mining is not necessarily a partisan issue, and that there is enormous potential for Christians to reach across traditional party lines in an integrated application of their faith.

As I mentioned above, the majority of people I spoke with in Washington agreed that Christianity and churches need to play a significant role in the fight against mountaintop removal. However, Russell Oliver, a coalfield resident of Hazard, Kentucky, cautioned against counting on the church to lead the opposition. He noted that there are a number of churches in Kentucky that have publicly stood against mountaintop removal, including Methodist, Catholic, Unitarian, and Baptist Churches. He praised the Franciscan order in Hazard, KY for the work they have done to oppose mountaintop removal, commenting that the fundamental environmental message of St. Francis serves as a strong impetus for Franciscans to stand opposed to the practice.

However, Russell seemed skeptical of the ability of churches to organize successfully against mountaintop removal. He pointed out that the churches in the region where he lives are extremely fragile, shaken by economic recession, unemployment, and out-migration. Many of the churches in his area deal with the immediate needs of parishioners, such as cooking meals for the hungry and helping with rent payments for the unemployed. Russell stressed that these social services provided by the church are

276 This duty of the church has often impeded churches’ adoption of initiatives or campaigns throughout the wider environmental movement as well, especially in poorer communities. Since the coalfields of Appalachia is one of the most impoverished regions of the country, it makes sense that churches would be very busy attending to parishioners’ immediate needs. However, Christians can argue that clean water and
of tremendous importance in an area torn by poverty, and that the churches are strained
enough trying to attend to people’s survival needs. Russell fears that trying to organize
through churches, all of which are home to both supporters and opponents of
mountaintop removal mining, could upset the delicate balance of the congregations and
ruin the churches’ efforts at providing help for those in need. Russell noted that
organizing through civic clubs or other established organizations poses less risk and
greater benefits than trying to get churches involved in opposition to mountaintop
removal.\footnote{Russell Oliver, personal communication, March 16, 2009.}

Russell’s insights are certainly legitimate; it does seem as though churches that
have taken an active stance against mountaintop removal have alienated some of their
members. The division of the church could in turn lead to the demise of certain important
social projects that congregations have been pursuing. I have not encountered any
evidence of this happening in Appalachia, however, and most Christians I talked to
seemed to think that the churches should play more of a role in directly organizing, or at
least in spreading awareness around the dangers of mountaintop removal mining. Some
reasoned that as the center of the community, many churches wield unique influence over
the actions of their members, and can serve as a powerful organizing tool to mobilize
people to fight mountaintop removal. Additionally, others stressed that the theology that
unites Christians in the fight against mountaintop removal provides an opportunity to use
values common among Christians to demonstrate the inherent evil of mountaintop
removal. People looked to both the infrastructure and the theology of the church as
crucial reasons why churches and Christians are critical in the movement against

\footnote{air would be considered immediate needs in the pursuit to get their churches to condemn mountaintop
removal.}
mountaintop removal. Everyone whom I spoke with, however, acknowledged the extreme challenges facing Christians who wish to voice their opinions on mountaintop removal within the church setting. Despite this vocal caution, it took me a trip to Appalachia to fully understand how pervasive the coal economy is in mountain towns, and the extent of the powerful control it exerts over the people of the region.

Life in Appalachia

During my two weeks in Appalachia, I traveled through West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwestern Virginia, all regions that have been devastated by the effects of mountaintop removal mining. Appendix A, again, provides a map of the area that mountaintop removal mining has destroyed (including where it is currently taking place). To help convey the scale of the devastation, Appendix E is a map of one destroyed mountain, superimposed over the geographic boundaries of Washington, D.C.. To this day, nearly five hundred mountains have been obliterated; the magnitude of the damage is unbelievable. Yet not even maps or pictures could prepare me for witnessing mountaintop removal firsthand. To live in coal country is to live in a war zone: I spoke with a photographer who has devoted her efforts to documenting the disappearing mountains, and she noted that life in Appalachia is eerily similar to the life she led in Afghanistan while photographing the people of that region. Both populations are mountain people struggling to survive in an area torn apart by violence and feudal strife.\textsuperscript{278} In the coalfields of West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwest Virginia, it

\textsuperscript{278} Antrim Caskey, personal communication, March 20, 2009. While land ownership in Appalachia would certainly not be considered a feudal system, the dominance that the coal companies have over the local people and their ability to buy out whole neighborhoods and force residents to leave is reminiscent of the feudal power of lords over their subjects.
is impossible to escape the influence of coal. I travelled to a new town almost every day
while I was down there, but was unable to flee the shadow of coal country. It haunts all
aspects of rural life in Appalachia.

In Rock Creek, WV, a group of mountaintop removal protestors graciously
offered me a spot in their home while I was conducting research. Even though the house
received water from the municipal line, we were cautioned to filter it before drinking it,
since heavy metals even in municipal water sources sometimes go overlooked. At 4:00
p.m. every day, the air would rumble and shake with the sounds of exploding mountains
from all directions. I lived just a few miles from Marsh Fork Elementary School, famous
for igniting outrage over a coal processing facility built within two hundred and fifty feet
of the school (in Chapter Two, I mentioned the rally that Christians participated in to
protest this facility). Now, a silo holding thousands of pounds of slurry looms over the
school, casting a sinister shadow on the children’s playground. [see Appendix C, again] Rock Creek lies just at the base of Coal River Mountain, one of the newest targets that
mining companies are determined to destroy. It is also just down the road from Kayford
Mountain, one of the sites that has become a poster child for the horrors of mountaintop
removal mining.

I was able to visit Kayford Mt on a day when the miners were busy at work. Larry
Gibson, who has devoted his life to decrying the effects of mountaintop removal, showed
me around with a group of students from Virginia Tech University. Larry owns the last
piece of forested land on Kayford Mountain and has refused to sell it, much to the
chagrin of the coal companies. Walking from the site where his family used to live, Larry
takes visitors to “Hell’s Gate”, the division between life and death (obviously, the gate’s
name imparts a particularly significant meaning for Christian onlookers). [Appendix F] Before the gate, trees and cabins dot the top of the mountain, and you are surrounded by a vista of forested mountain ridgeline. Beyond the gate, where the mountain used to climb even higher, visitors are left standing on a cliff’s edge overlooking an unfathomably enormous pit of boulders, dust, and machinery. [Appendix B] Trucks the size of small, fortified buildings scrape away at the coal seams and kick enormous amounts of harmful dust into the air, which coats the eyes, nose, and throat. Kayford Mountain has been transformed into a complete moonscape. No signs of life remain, except the tiny truck drivers lost within the bowels of the enormous machinery. It is not surprising that Larry would compare the strip mine on top of Kayford Mountain to the Christian concept of hell.

The mining process has completely drained the water table on Larry’s last remaining spot of land and forced him to move away, and he does not hide the fact that he considers mountaintop removal a moral and spiritual evil. Allen Johnson mentioned to me that when they finally organized the Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal, Larry Gibson had one question for the Christians in attendance: “What took you so long?”279 I asked Larry about this comment of his, and he reflected on his frustration with religious groups for being so slow to take up the issue of mountaintop removal. Larry noted that most churches in Appalachia take money from the coal industry, whether directly (through donations) or indirectly (through the support of congregation members). He pointed out the irony inherent in this situation: churches are receiving money to build a place of worship when the worshippers are all dying from the effects of the industry providing the money. Larry stressed the immorality of the

mountaintop removal mining industry, and the lack of effective punishment for coal companies. He pointed out that killing someone with a gun is an obvious moral evil to most people. Yet according to Larry, who was referencing a recent study of mortality in Appalachia, three to four hundred non-miners every year die in West Virginia as a result of coal-related toxins. Larry asked, “Now you tell me, what’s the difference between killing someone fast and killing them slow?” Larry, like many others, strongly believes that the coal industry should be held accountable for the deaths it causes, and many Christians agree with him on this point.

It is impossible to visit Kayford Mountain without feeling a deep sense of responsibility to fight the destruction of mountaintop removal. To Larry, of course, the process is painfully personal; it has stripped away his land, blown apart his family cemetery, and displaced his heritage. In giving tours, Larry hopes to make the issue personal to visitors, as well. He stressed, “If you go home after this and don’t do anything about what you’ve seen, then you shouldn’t have wasted my time.” As harsh as this statement may sound, Larry finds hope in the number of people who leave Kayford Mountain committed to some sort of action plan to end mountaintop removal, and he believes that Christianity can play a central role in making mountaintop removal a personal issue for people who are not directly affected by it. He noted that if you cannot make it a personal issue, then no one is going to take action, and added that an emphasis on religious values is one way to frame mountaintop removal as a personal affront. From the responses of many Christians to mountaintop removal, it seems that Larry is right: religious values are a particularly powerful method of personalizing an issue that may

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280 Larry Gibson, personal communication, March 21, 2009.
281 Ibid.
seem distant to someone who does not live in the middle of the coalfields. For instance, dynamiting a piece of God’s creation is an insult to any Christian who believes that God created the earth, no matter where he or she lives. Similarly, many Christians recognize the truth behind Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous remark, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Even for those who live outside of the coalfields, the injustices perpetrated by the coal mining industry are a direct assault on Christian values, making mountaintop removal personal for those who are not directly affected by the damage it causes.

Yet for those who do live within the coalfields, in the hollows between flattened mountains, mountaintop removal mining could not get more personal. I visited Larry Brown, a Pentecostal preacher in Mingo County, WV, whose community and congregation has been almost completely wiped out by the poisonous effects of mining.

Larry showed me jars of water he had collected from the creek outside his home that runs down his hollow from the top of the mountain. What used to be clear, drinkable water, is now cloudy and murky; on some days the coal sediment makes it visibly black. Larry told me story after story about how the mining process has taken a deathly toll on the people in his area. The blasting put deep cracks in the foundation of his church, and shattered the windows. The impoundment pond at the top of the hollow and the abandoned underground mines pumped full of sludge leached into the town’s drinking water, poisoning residents. Larry noted that all of the children who grew up in the hollow have been victims of tumors, rashes, dysentery, or cancer, in

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283 Notably, Pastor Larry Brown is the brother of Ernie and Carmelita Brown, the couple featured in Bill Moyers’ documentary “Is God Green?”
addition to a wide range of other maladies. His own daughter, at the age of twenty-three, developed cervical cancer and has suffered two miscarriages. All of these afflictions can be traced back to the poisonous toxins discharged through the production of coal.

Larry considers mountaintop removal mining a serious affront to Christianity. As soon as we sat down together, Larry opened his Bible to Revelation 11:18, reading, “The nations raged, / but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, / and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” Larry added that it is a fact that God’s wrath will fall upon those who destroy the earth: if those accumulating riches from exploiting the land do not pay for their sins in this life, it is a certainty that they will be punished through a “second death” in hell. Taking a perspective similar to Larry Gibson’s, Larry Brown pointed to the sixth of God’s Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not kill,” as proof that the coal companies are disobeying God’s orders. Larry relates that he was first inspired to fight mountaintop removal through two successive visions that he received from the Lord, where he was called to hike to the top of the mountain and look down into his family’s hollow. He said that on the first trip, when he looked out, he saw the whole hollow covered in blood, and when he asked the Lord for an explanation, He told him that it was the blood of the people. On his second trip to the mountaintop, Larry perceived the hollow blanketed in a peaceful shade of white, and the Lord ordered Larry to stand up for every person in this hollow, Christian or non-Christian.

Motivated by these powerful visions, Larry has taken his orders from the Lord to heart. He organized a lawsuit against Massey to provide clean drinking water to the

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284 Revelation 11:18; Pastor Larry Brown, personal communication, March 23, 2009. This is a passage also cited by Allen Johnson in “Is God Green” as evidence of the fact that destroying the planet means breaking a covenant with God. [Bill Moyers. “Is God Green?”].

affected people in his town. Massey put up a significant struggle, but Larry eventually won his case, and Massey was forced to buy six gallons of clean water a week for every person affected. The burden fell on Larry, however, to distribute the water to everyone, and the mission quickly became a logistical nightmare, since every week he had to travel to Charleston to prove that each person received the exact prescribed amount of water. Larry emphasized that he shouldered this arduous task on account of his sense of obligation towards his neighbors. He felt in his heart that it was the right thing to do, and it was undoubtedly Larry’s Christian sense of responsibility that motivated him to deliver water singlehandedly to seven hundred people every week until his town was able to get connected to the city water supply.

Yet despite using the church as a meeting space to organize against the coal companies and to collect fresh water, Larry does not speak out specifically against mountaintop removal in his sermons. He assured me that when he preaches Revelation, people know he is talking about mountaintop removal, but he never makes that connection explicitly. It is clear that mountaintop removal is a very divisive issue in his community; when I asked if I could interview him, he agreed on the condition that I would not approach anyone within his church to ask questions about mountaintop removal. This reluctance to address mountaintop removal directly from inside the church walls may partly be due to the need for him to keep his congregation united. Larry has been a pastor for over thirty years, and over that period of time, his congregation has dwindled from one hundred fifty members to just twenty-five. Most of this loss has been due to death and outward migration, both of which can be traced back to the effects of

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mountaintop removal mining in many cases. \(^{287}\) Larry has shown remarkable courage in standing up for the people of his hollow against the force of the coal companies.

Although distributing clean water seems like a harmless, uncontroversial activity, Larry has faced a great deal of opposition from some people in his community. His neighbors, for instance, who live less than fifty feet from Larry and the church, have threatened him on multiple occasions, most recently with a pistol, for daring to stand up to the coal industry, which employs and influences many people in his neighborhood. Every time Larry tried to bring people together in the church to organize the lawsuit against Massey, his neighbors would call the police. Larry has approached other pastors in surrounding towns for help, but most of them have refused to involve their congregations in the lawsuit. Some pastors individually helped Larry to push the lawsuit forward, but they were very wary of making it public to their congregations.\(^{288}\) Yet while Larry believes that talking to people about mountaintop removal both inside and outside of the church is of vital importance, he does not bear any ill will to other pastors who refuse take part. He even acknowledges that God may have intended for their silence, since God has a plan for all aspects of life.\(^{289}\) Larry is confident, however, that the fight against mountaintop removal will succeed. He proclaimed, “Justice will prevail. You can’t lose with God on your side and if you have Jesus Christ in your heart.”\(^{290}\) Although Larry struggles with antagonistic neighbors and threats from Massey Energy, he draws

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\(^{287}\) This symptom is not unique to Larry’s community; the population of West Virginia is diminishing rapidly as a whole. Indeed, traveling through Appalachia, I was struck by the truth of Will Samson’s assertion at the beginning of this chapter. The brain drain out of Appalachia is leaving behind an aging population struggling with poverty and poor health, not the ideal candidates for waging a serious battle against mountaintop removal.


\(^{289}\) This foreshadows the problem of complacency, common among Christians who strive to accept their trials quietly, which I will discuss shortly.

\(^{290}\) Pastor Larry Brown, personal communication, March 23, 2009.
courage from the fact that he stands with the Bible. Larry imparted that is important to have faith in God, but also to have confidence that people will stand with you in a time of need.

Larry’s complete and unadulterated trust in God is certainly a strength in his particular conviction to speak out against mountaintop removal, but it is also a Christian attribute that can stand as an insurmountable obstacle when trying to convince conservative fundamentalist Christians that they should be concerned about the practice. Many Christians in Appalachia maintain that God will put an end to the problem if it is meant to be resolved. A firm belief in the omnipotence of God, coupled with the expectation of the immanent return of Christ, lulls some Christians into complacency.²⁹¹

In West Virginia and Kentucky, several of the people I stayed with had overheard their Christian neighbors arguing that with the End Times right around the corner, participation in any kind of environmental movement was futile and distracted from a more important spiritual quest to connect with God. Josh Macivor-Anderson, in an article entitled “The Faith to Save Mountains,” writes, “There is the giant of connecting churches theologically, morally, and biblically to the issue of mountaintop removal. No easy task when many congregations invest more theological currency in getting beamed up from a burning planet once the rapture comes than in practicing good stewardship while they’re still here.”²⁹² The difficulty of convincing a congregation full of coal miners and friends of coal miners to act out against mountaintop removal when many

²⁹¹ For a frightening account of why some fundamentalist Christians ignore environmental issues altogether, see Glenn Scherer’s “The Godly Must Be Crazy.” Scherer’s article is exaggerated and alarmist, since the Christians he criticizes represent a small fraction of evangelicals, but it does demonstrate how certain Christian philosophies, if taken to the extreme, dissuade believers from any type of environmental mentality. The article also discusses the environmental impacts of “End Times” theology, which I discuss throughout this chapter. [Glenn Scherer, “The Godly Must Be Crazy,” Grist Magazine, October 27, 2004. http://www.godlessgeeks.com/LINKS/godly_crazy.htm (accessed April 25, 2009).]
believe that Christ will soon return to claim the souls of true believers is indeed an imposing challenge, one that many Christians are grappling with across Appalachia.²⁹³

One Baptist minister I spoke with, Rev. Steve Peake, serves as an example of how fundamentalist Christians might participate in the fight against mountaintop removal, despite social and theological temptations to do otherwise. Rev. Peake lives in the coalfields of eastern Kentucky, in a community directly affected by strip mines. The economy of coal is still very much a part of his town; as we were talking on his front porch, I noticed his neighbor exiting the house and leaving for work at the mines, dressed in a Massey uniform. However, Rev. Peake emphasized several times that the profit gained from the coal mined above his town is not reinvested into the local economy. Even the coal is not used in Appalachia, but instead is shipped to a coal-fired power plant in Tampa, Florida.²⁹⁴ Rev. Peake’s community suffers the consequences of coal without receiving any of the benefits. Over the past few years, his town has suffered major floods as a result of mountaintop removal mining. Rev. Peake, like Pastor Larry Brown, has been active in trying to procure clean drinking water for his neighbors, and has offered his church as a place for people to meet to speak about the effects of mountaintop removal.

Rev. Peake believes strongly in the Christian responsibility of stewardship. He noted, “This is God’s green earth, and we’re supposed to be stewards of it and look after it...the result of being good stewards is that we get to enjoy the fruits of our land.”²⁹⁵

²⁹³ This “Rapture-ready” type of Christianity espoused by those who believe in the imminent return of Christ is referred to as dispensational premillennialism. I saw frequent evidence of this strain of Christianity in my visit to the coalfields, but it was not as prevalent in the wealthier areas of Appalachia that have not been devastated by mountaintop removal.
²⁹⁵ Ibid.
Peake agreed that the church should make people aware of the effects of mountaintop removal, but admitted that beyond praying for an end to the practice and for the health of those affected by it, he is not sure what kind of role the church can play. Rev. Peake, similar to Pastor Larry Brown, never preaches about mountaintop removal. He clarified that he feels comfortable giving information to people interested in mountaintop removal in informal church settings, but that during service he takes time for the spiritual realm rather than for the physical. This preference reflects the fundamentalist Christian emphasis on personal salvation and individual relationship with Christ instead of a Christian faith applied to the outside world, which many mainstream denominations embrace. Accepting the challenges and trials that God throws your way is one integral aspect of Christian faith, and Rev. Peake commented that he does not fight mountaintop removal as hard as he could or should, partly due to the fact that he has learned to be content in the situation he is placed in by God.

This admission of Rev. Peake’s reflects one of the main theological challenges in garnering fundamentalist Christian support for opposing mountaintop removal. Many Christians in Appalachia put their lives in God’s hands, and are unwilling to go out of their way to change their destiny. While Rev. Peake does recognize the need for churches to help spread information about the effects of mountaintop removal, he cautioned against churches getting too deeply involved with the politics surrounding the issue. He commented, “God is in control and He’s going to be in control. If we did some sort of civil disobedience, taking the law into our own hands, I think that would be operating out of the will of God.” Rev. Peake offered prayer as an alternative to direct action as an

296 Ibid.
297 Ibid.
avenue for church involvement in mountaintop removal. He attended the original Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal, and since then has led several prayers on the mountain behind his community (one of which I described in Chapter Two). When the wildflower seeds that the Christians planted on this destroyed mountain unexpectedly took root, Rev. Peake took this as a sign of hope that the land can be restored back to the way that God intended. Indeed, after the first prayer on the mountain, the mining company pulled out two or three months later, and the floods receded. Rev. Peake attributes this success to the power of prayer, and as evidence that God is listening to those who call for Him.

Religion and the Coal Economy

Rev. Peake’s faith in the efficacy of prayer serves as a relatively safe avenue for doing his part to combat mountaintop removal. His actions are examples of methods that Christians who are nervous about speaking publicly and directly against mountaintop removal might adopt to become a part of this movement. Like Pastor Larry Brown, Rev. Peake is reluctant to bring up mountaintop removal as an explicit part of his sermon. He noted that in the coalfields, it is likely that someone in your church will be an employee of the mountaintop removal coal company. He even divulged that one of his friends, who is also a Pentecostal preacher, is employed driving a bulldozer on a mountaintop removal site. Rev. Peake’s example highlighted a phenomenon that I was first clued into by Kathy Selvage, vice president of Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS), which is a non-profit fighting mountaintop removal in Wise County, Virginia. Kathy spoke about the struggle of organizing Christians in her area to speak out against mountaintop
removal: “We have preachers in our county that preach on Sunday and blow up mountains on Monday.”298 She even mentioned the case of a Freewill Baptist Preacher who works as the superintendent for A&G Coal Corporation in Wise County.

Kathy and Rev. Peake’s observations highlight yet another reason why it is especially difficult to engage pastors in the coalfields on mountaintop removal. Unlike many mainline denomination priests, who attended seminary school and are employed by the church, preachers in Baptist and Pentecostal congregations do not earn a living from giving sermons. Many have little formal schooling at all; Larry Brown told me that he only attended school until fourth grade and since then, has learned all that he knows from reading the Bible. In the coalfields, preachers work jobs with regular hours during the week and then preach on weekends. In Appalachia, where employment is scarce, the only job available is often one in the coal mines. I did not realize until I visited Appalachia just how many preachers were themselves entrenched in the coal industry, let alone how many congregation members worked within it. The deep-seeded connections between Pentecostal and Baptist preachers, congregation members, and the coal economy make it nearly impossible to envision a widespread fundamentalist Christian movement against mountaintop removal.

Kathy has been extremely discouraged by the reluctance of Christians to get involved in mountaintop removal issues. She delineated examples of the firm connection between churches and coal companies in Appalachia. When I asked her why more pastors in the coalfields are not speaking out against mountaintop removal, she answered that part of the reason is that they are taking money directly from the coal companies. In Russell County, VA, for instance, there is a church steeple with a coal company’s name

displayed prominently at the bottom, since the industry had provided the money for the construction of the church. I mentioned the absurdity of this situation before when reflecting on my conversation with Larry Gibson; the fact that preachers are receiving money from an industry that is oppressing and sickening their congregation members is a heart-wrenching paradox. Yet in an area as impoverished as Appalachia, there are few available resources to turn to for money. The coal companies can easily control the churches through comparatively small amounts of funding, since it is the only source of income the churches have to rely on. According to Kathy, this is an ideal situation for the coal industry, since they are well aware that the church represents the voice of the community. If the coal companies are able to get preachers and churches on their side, they have little to fear from the people in mining communities.

Kathy spoke at length about the obstacles she has encountered trying to organize through churches in Wise County. She remembered one instance where a Catholic nun tried to put together a meeting with ten to fifteen churches to discuss the implications of mountaintop removal for Christians and the Christian faith, but the only people to respond were Catholics. In another effort, Kathy tried to show *Mountain Mourning* (the film about mountaintop removal distributed by CFTM) in a church in her county, but the pastor refused to show it, arguing that he had coal workers in his congregation who might be upset by the film’s message. One member of SAMS added to his minister’s weekly church announcements some information about a hearing to demonstrate community opposition to a new mountaintop removal permit in the area, but the minister

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299 Incidentally, Catholics make up a small minority of Christians in Appalachia. In Wise County, where 22.4% of households fall below the federal poverty line, Christianity is dominated by Freewill Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Churches that occupy the next tier in terms of membership include Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of God, and Church of Christ. [Kathy Selvage, personal communication, March 16, 2009].
chose to ignore it, reading all of the other announcements instead (the opposite of bearing witness to the truth). As another example, the president of SAMS is Methodist, but his own church will not allow him to give any presentation to the congregation about mountaintop removal. Kathy even encountered a written agreement between Glamorgan Properties LLC, a strip mining company in Virginia, and a Freewill Baptist church that had been adversely affected by Glamorgan’s practices. Glamorgan had committed two serious blasting violations, damaging foundations in the area, but had evaded fines or punishments by setting up an agreement with the church to provide thousands of dollars of “landscaping work.”

The corruption that pervades the fossil fuel industry is strikingly apparent in the relationship between coal companies and Appalachian churches.

Even beyond politics and finances, garnering Christian support to fight mountaintop removal can be exceedingly difficult in Appalachia. Kathy argued that the Christian faith is teaching people to turn the other cheek, and not to stand up for their rights. She critiqued certain interpretations of Christianity for celebrating meekness and for urging people to pray when they have problems, instead of goading them to get out and take action (as Jesus himself did; Allen Johnson looks to the scene in the Bible where Jesus drives the money changers out of the temple as biblical evidence that Christians should act boldly and firmly to support their convictions). Additionally, Kathy referred to the problem of the fundamentalist Christians who wait in expectation of the End Times. She acknowledged that people in Appalachia understand the dire situation that mountaintop removal places them in, but added that some people believe that the rapture

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300 Kathy Selvage, personal communication, March 16, 2009.
is imminent, which eliminates their sense of urgency to heal the physical world. Kathy’s criticisms of these aspects of Christianity reflect exactly the sentiment expressed by Rev. Steve Peake, who noted that he himself has learned to settle into difficult situations without seriously questioning them. Kathy cautions Christians against depending on God to solve their problems. She pointed out that God gave humans a brain to be self-sufficient and that right living should be a joint venture between humans and God. She maintains that the trick to mobilizing the Christian community is to make them realize that God encourages them to have a voice, not to sit passively in the face of injustice.

Despite Kathy’s hesitance to rely on religious convictions as significant motivation to fight mountaintop removal, she does recognize the positive aspects of Christianity that can help contribute to the movement to end strip mining. A Christian herself, Kathy pointed out that God made resources for humans to use, not to abuse. She stated, “If you believe that there is a God, and you believe that he created this earth, then every time you blow up a mountain, it’s like slapping his face.” She wondered what God will say to the preachers who operate the strip mines come Judgment Day. Kathy stressed the importance of building relationships within individual denominations. She has noticed that reaching across denominational lines can be difficult, since so many people have radically different interpretations of the Bible and of the Christian faith in general. However, she believes that if Methodists began talking to other Methodists about mountaintop removal, and evangelicals spoke about it to other evangelicals, a stronger religious movement against mountaintop removal would begin to emerge. Speaking of the differences between denominations, Kathy commented, “Their God can grant courage

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302 Ibid.
303 Ibid.
as well as He can wisdom – but it will take one of their own to bridge the gap.” It was certainly encouraging for me to hear Kathy still speak positively about the potential influence of Christianity on activism in Appalachia, especially after her description of the daunting obstacles she has encountered in her organizing.

Kathy’s small note of optimism might stem from the fact that there have been some major successes in Virginia over the past few years in uniting the religious community’s voice over the issues of coal mining and climate change. In Wise County, for instance, the local chapter of a national interfaith group, Interfaith Power and Light, managed to stop a new coal-fired power plant from being built. As a result of this campaign, Virginia governor Tim Kaine was bombarded with letters from religious individuals and leaders of the faith community, all of whom vehemently opposed the power plant. The second hearing for a permit to mine Ison Rock Ridge in Virginia was held in a Methodist church, and seventy-five people came to protest the issuing of this new permit, many of whom understood the connection between their Christian faith and the importance of halting the permit. One friend of Kathy’s, a member of the First Baptist Church, told me that in her husband’s church, some of the pastors are strip miners, and that they sometimes actually cry when they talk about it to their congregation. She quoted them as admitting, “We know that God doesn’t want us to do it, but we need work.”

These examples do point to a slow shift in Appalachian Christianity, and a growing realization that mountaintop removal is a moral and religious issue. However, Kathy’s

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304 Mary Ellen Kelly, personal communication, March 16, 2009. The argument of needing work is not one that would hold up among some of the Christians who are vehemently fighting mountaintop removal. Allen Johnson, for instance, condemned this argument as an illegitimate excuse. He pointed out that there are many jobs that Christians consider absolutely unacceptable, even for those in dire poverty (such as prostitution), and argued that working on a mountaintop removal site should be considered one of these occupations that is fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith. [Allen Johnson, personal communication, March 16, 2009].
accounts of the corruption of the coal industry and the stubbornness of many churches to continue ignoring mountaintop removal betray the immense challenges that religious activists in Appalachia face today.

**Churches in the Coalfields**

I spoke with Kathy in Washington D.C. during the End Mountaintop Removal Lobby Week, before I had ever set foot in Appalachia, and I was shocked by her critique on how intimately involved the coal companies are with the churches in the area. Yet my visit to the coalfields confirmed many of Kathy’s comments as the painful truth. Driving around Appalachia, I passed a church approximately every one hundred yards. In the heart of the coalfields, Pentecostal and Baptist churches were by far the most common, with an occasional Methodist or Episcopal church in the mix. Many of the fundamentalist churches had enormous billboards that clearly portrayed the widespread prevalence of “End Times” theology. One, for instance, advertised, “Appearing soon, live and in person: Jesus Christ!”

Many of the churches I visited or passed had been funded in part by the coal industry, which I found out by talking to some of the local activists fighting mountaintop removal. Often, the church is the only communal space in a hollow, the last vestige of a downtown, which explains the influence (beyond the obvious theological realm) that it has over the community. A large proportion of churches sit right next to the railroad tracks, where coal trains run by several times a day, so members of the congregation are constantly reminded of Appalachia’s complete dependence on the coal industry.

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305 Church billboard in Mingo County, WV, March 24, 2009.
My visit to a Pentecostal service in Hiram, Kentucky, gave me an invaluable glimpse into the character of coalfield churches and how tied they are to the coal economy. I attended the service with my friend Carl Shoupe, a Pentecostal who can name the exact day and hour that he was saved by Jesus Christ in 2005. Ever since devoting himself to the Christian faith, Carl has become an active protestor of mountaintop removal. We met at the Lobby Week in Washington, and when Carl invited me to his home in the coalfields of eastern Kentucky, I immediately accepted his offer. Carl and I drove to Wednesday night service in the church van, and he warned me that I might not get the warmest reception in the church, since people often assume that guests of his must share his opinions on coal and mountaintop removal. The members of Carl’s church are extremely politically conservative, and many of them work in the mining industry for mountaintop removal companies.

Immediately upon entering the church, Carl’s friend (one of the only other congregation members besides Carl who stands openly against mountaintop removal) came up to us and began joking about how everyone in the congregation would be furious with them tonight, given the very recent news that the EPA had decided to suspend a large number of mountaintop removal permits (a decision the EPA partly rescinded after backlash from the coal industry and West Virginian politicians). However, everyone that I met at the service was extremely welcoming and friendly. The preacher came up to me right before his sermon to introduce himself, and Carl quickly explained that I was a student writing a thesis on Christianity in Appalachia, mentioning nothing about mountaintop removal. At the beginning of the service, the preacher introduced me to the whole congregation and explained why I was there, commenting,
“Hey, we’re sure glad she’s not here to try to end coal!” He was joking, but everyone in the audience, several of whom work in the coal mines, visibly squirmed. The preacher himself is employed in a deep mine down the road from the church, and he works the night shift. Directly after the sermon, he headed underground to the coal mines. In the middle of the service, a coal train that seemed to stretch on forever rumbled by on tracks less than twenty feet from the church, shaking the entire floor. Reflecting on the location of the church and the occupation of so many of its members, the pervasiveness of the coal industry’s influence in Appalachia became very clear to me; it is literally everywhere you turn.

The sermon at the Pentecostal church was very heavily focused on individual relationship with Christ and on the existence of only one path to Heaven. Notably, the preacher discussed several aspects of the Bible that have been used in opposition to mountaintop removal mining, but he did not speak of them as having any meaningful applied message beyond being the direct word of God. For instance, the preacher chose to read from the Book of Revelation, but did not include the passage that Pastor Larry Brown preaches, the one which warns that God will destroy those who destroy the earth. I have no way of knowing whether this omission was purposeful or whether the preacher was saving this chapter of Revelation for another day; it would be interesting to gauge his congregation’s response to the particular biblical message that Larry uses in his own church.

As another example, the preacher focused one of the main messages of his sermon on the covenant that God made with man, and the importance of maintaining the integrity of this covenant. I have discussed this passage from Genesis in Chapter Three,

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demonstrating how some mountaintop removal activists use this covenant (which was between God, humans, and all living creatures) to urge Christians to honor their commitment of caring for God’s creation. However, the preacher in Carl’s church never once mentioned that any creatures besides God or man were included in the covenant, despite the fact that in the story of Noah in the Bible explicitly articulates that God’s covenant is with humanity and “every living creature.”307 The preacher’s emphasis suggests that although most Pentecostals claim to take the Bible literally, congregants are selective in which particular passages they choose to celebrate in church service. It is likely that in Carl’s church, a call for stewardship would fall on deaf ears; his congregation seems much more concerned about the individual spiritual journey than in their faith’s application to the physical world.

Even Carl himself downplays the relationship between the Pentecostal faith and the movement against mountaintop removal. When I asked him which aspects of his Christian faith he drew on in his pursuit of activism, he answered, “My activism doesn’t fit into Pentecostal belief, but God has put me into this position to help my community.”308 Carl pointed out that his church is not involved in any social justice issues, and that he does not specifically bring up the issue of mountaintop removal from within his church. However, he assured me that the church has been receptive to certain measures like energy audits and weatherization work, although these are viewed as prudent ways to save money rather than as environmental initiatives. This last point suggests that until coal companies are forced to pay for the externalities of coal and

307 Genesis 8:21.
308 Carl Shoupe, personal communication, March 16, 2009.
mountaintop removal becomes cost-prohibitive, Appalachians will be extremely reluctant to give up the mining method.

Of course, coal has long dominated the economy of eastern Kentucky. Carl himself is a third generation coal miner, a proud member of the United Mine Workers union. He implored me to understand that deep mining is a culture, not just a job, and that it is impossible to eliminate with any kind of speed or grace. Yet Carl recognizes that the days of coal are numbered. He stated, “I am so proud that I was a coal miner, and my father and my grandfather. Now I’m not educated, but I’m intelligent enough to see that coal is not a part of my grandchildren’s future.”

Carl is frustrated with the poor treatment that mine workers today receive from the coal companies, and especially lambasts mountaintop removal companies, who are responsible for destroying all of the landmarks that Carl grew up with. He explained that coal has created a generation of poverty and inferior education across Appalachia. Visiting Carl in eastern Kentucky, it was clear that coal has indeed tortured the culture and economy of nearly every town in the region. Downtowns that used to be thriving and bustling now stand ramshackle and abandoned, a sad testament to the brevity of affluence that a coal economy provides.

**Mainline Denominations**

The towns in the heart of the coalfields are markedly different from the areas of Appalachia that have not been ravaged by the coal industry. It was incredibly interesting to watch the composition of church denominations change as I moved out of the coalfields and into the more urban areas of West Virginia and Kentucky. Leaving behind the rows of Pentecostal and Baptist churches, I found a much greater number of mainline

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350 Ibid.
denomination churches as I approached the area surrounding Charleston, West Virginia’s capitol. Episcopal and Methodist churches are most common in the Charleston area, and I was able to attend an Episcopal service with Bob Marshall, co-founder of Christians for the Mountains, at his church in Charleston. The difference in location between St. Christopher’s, the Episcopal church, and the Pentecostal and Baptist churches in the coalfields could not have been more obvious. While the coalfield churches stand next to the railroad tracks, surrounded by deep mines, flattened mountains, and impoverished neighborhoods, St. Christopher’s enjoys a hillside location in a wealthy neighborhood full of beautiful old homes, complete with cobblestones and cherry trees. The service at St. Christopher’s was radically different in message, tone, and structure than the sermon given at Carl’s Pentecostal church in Hiram. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to attend the service at St. Christopher’s, for the sermon was given by Reverend Jim Lewis, a priest who has been extremely active in a wide variety of social and environmental causes, including the fight against mountaintop removal. Hearing Rev. Lewis’s sermon and speaking with him afterwards renewed my hope in the potential for a powerful faith-based movement to end mountaintop removal. Rev. Lewis exemplifies the courage it takes to stand up for an unpopular cause, and he attacks mountaintop removal from a strong position of social justice, one that resonates with his church and with many other Christians in the area.

Rev. Lewis’s sermon focused heavily on the importance of creation care. He emphasized that God loves this world so much that He wants it to be healed, and is counting on us to be the healers. Lewis proclaimed, “The earth groans for renewal,
restoration, and redemption.” In the first prayer to the Lord, Rev. Lewis led the congregation in asking for help in restoring the planet: “Lord, you granted us dominion – help us use our resources wisely to ensure that our children have futures on this planet.” Lewis drew on the value of patience, calling all Christians to embody patience and hope. He clarified that patience is not a passive word, however, and that it takes a significant amount of effort to achieve patience. He redefined an active patience as perseverance; perseverance to fight against injustice and evil.

This is a radically different definition of patience than the one that Pastor Larry Brown and other fundamentalist Christians often abide by, the patience that implies a passive acceptance of whatever trials God may put in your path. Instead, Rev. Lewis’s definition of patience urges Christians to take concrete action and to fight for Christian values and for God’s creation. Lewis even mentioned mountaintop removal specifically in his sermon. He acknowledged that healing our planet will take time, and that just as cutting down a mountain does not happen overnight, it will also take time to redirect our culture from foolishness. He referenced the mercury and arsenic in streams that had been found in West Virginian streams that week as a result of mountaintop removal, and stressed the importance of healing the planet through love and patience.

The congregation members seemed very receptive to Rev. Lewis’s message; indeed, Bob Marshall informed me that it is not unusual for Rev. Lewis to directly reference mountaintop removal in his sermons. St. Christopher is clearly a church very dedicated to social justice and an applied, “lived” faith, which may have explained why congregation members accepted Rev. Lewis’s environmental message so readily.

311 Ibid.
Following the sermon, several of the congregation members gathered for breakfast and an informal discussion with Rev. Lewis about several health and social justice issues, including the poultry industry and the health care system. Rev. Lewis’s comfort in pushing traditional church boundaries on activism became clear during this discussion. At one point in the discussion on the unjust health care system in West Virginia, someone asked what we as individuals could do to take action to improve the situation. This question already demonstrates the general greater willingness of mainstream Christians to take action on certain causes, much more so than many fundamentalist Christians. However, Rev. Lewis took this one step further. He cautioned that the question reflected the missing gap in the larger picture: “We always think in our individualistic society that we as individuals have to do something – we don’t think about organizing.”312 Rev. Lewis accentuated the need for collective action on the part of Christians, a notion that has only recently taken root in Appalachia, in part due to the efforts of groups like CFTM, Restoring Eden, and the CCA.

The discussion turned towards the issue of mountaintop removal, and it became clear that not everyone in the congregation agreed with Rev. Lewis’s blanket condemnation of the practice, although they respected his opinion. One man assured me that not everything about mountaintop removal is bad, and that some of the mining sites are in the middle of nowhere, where no one would ever visit. He gave the example of Twisted Gun golf course, an eighteen hole golf course built on a reclaimed mountaintop removal site. [Appendix H] According to him, the golf course is gorgeous, and an enormous improvement to the undeveloped mountain that used to stand there (many residents of Mingo County who live below the golf course disagree, to say the least.)

312 Rev. Jim Lewis, Group Discussion at St. Christopher Episcopal Church, March 22, 2009.
Another man, Greg, whose father worked on Kayford Mountain, agreed in part that mountaintop removal is not inherently evil. He pointed out that coal companies have turned some mining sites into nice campgrounds and have ensured that there is no harmful runoff from the site. However, he draws the line at irresponsible destruction of the mountaintop. Greg commented, “I can ride the fence if they do mountaintop removal right – reclaim it, plant trees...but if they’re going to do it like they’re doing it now, then it has to be stopped. I’m a trout fisherman, and it kills me to see streams buried and fish dying.”

His sentiments are similar to the one I encountered often in West Virginia, that coal is not innately a harmful resource, but that it has recently been used irresponsibly. My conversations with the members of St. Christopher’s imparted on me the hopeful possibility of having a congregation that fully respects their priest or preacher, regardless of whether or not they agree wholeheartedly with his or her position on certain issues.

Speaking with Rev. Lewis after the discussion, I learned that he has always taken a hard line on social justice issues. He refuses to stay silent, even if he risks alienating people in the congregation. Rev. Lewis gained his voice predominantly working on labor issues, gay rights, and peace activism (he has been an ardent religious opponent of the Iraq War). His original interest in mountaintop removal stemmed from working for employee rights and benefits with deep miners in the coal industry. As a priest, Rev. Lewis has always recognized the deep connection between pastoral issues, such as tending to the sick and other immediate needs of congregation members, and prophetic issues, looking beyond the congregation to examine society as a whole through a Christian lens. Rev. Lewis claims that imposing some sort of separation between these

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issues is exactly like the old heresy of separating body and spirit.\textsuperscript{314} Clearly, Rev. Lewis disagrees with the exclusively personal interpretation of Christianity that many Pentecostal and Baptist churches promote. He celebrates the importance of silence and reflection, but cautioned that in many churches and denominations, too much emphasis is placed on silent spirituality. Rev. Lewis is frustrated by churches that are on a “personal piety spiritual kick.”\textsuperscript{315} Instead, he practices Christianity as a religion that must extend to all aspects of our lives, values, and actions, rather than stay limited merely to a private relationship between humans and God.\textsuperscript{316}

Knowing how difficult it can be for priests and pastors to publicize their position against mountaintop removal, I was surprised to learn that Rev. Lewis has experienced little opposition from his congregation members when he preaches on the subject. Once, he remembered, a man who worked as a machinery operator for the coal industry walked out on his sermon, but after Rev. Lewis initiated a dialogue with the man, he came back to the church regularly. Rev. Lewis recognizes that there are few priests who have been as vocal as he has on the issue of mountaintop removal. He admitted that he feels lonely in the church sometimes for being on the front lines of so many progressive issues, but he clarified that he has never felt \textit{alone}; he has always found many friends among the people he is speaking for. This is a poignant distinction on Rev. Lewis’s part. It demonstrates how a religious leader can depart from the silence of his or her peers, taking a significant

\textsuperscript{315} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{316} The traditional theological gap between body and spirit that Rev. Lewis spoke of was confirmed as a persistent problem of Appalachian Christianity by a retired coal miner named Terry, whom I befriended in Mingo County. Terry informed me that the Christians in his neighborhood are the type who go to church on Sunday but who do not actually \textit{live} their spirituality. In a fascinating parallel, Terry compared this disengagement to the same separation that Appalachians experience with nature. He noted that one would expect people who live in the mountains of the coalfields to have a strong connection to the natural world, but that beyond the sport of hunting few feel any sort of connection or affinity with the environment at all. [Terry Steele, personal communication, March 23, 2009].
risk, but will still stand on a solid carpet of support from the people for whom he or she is fighting.

However, it still can be challenging to consistently assume one of the lone voices in the church for the cause of social justice. I asked Rev. Lewis why he thought so few priests and preachers spoke out about mountaintop removal from the pulpit, and he had several speculations. First, he referred to the economic hold that the coal industry has over churches in Appalachia. Many of the churches have been built by coal money from the ground up, so the industry has a sure method of controlling them.\footnote{Indeed, I spoke with two other Episcopal priests who pastor a church that was started by the family who owns Gauley Mountain Coal Company. The coal company is now blasting Gauley Mountain, just a few miles from the church.} Rev. Lewis remembered an instance where he tried to get his diocese to take a strong stand on energy with the support of the bishop. Some of the church’s events, unfortunately, were funded by a woman who works as an environmental lawyer for the coal industry, so the bishop refused to allow any type of energy resolution to be drafted. Rev. Lewis indicated that risk is not always easy for churches to embrace since they are so beholden to the economic structure which supports them. It is a culture of fear which pressures many churches to remain in denial or silence over the truth behind mountaintop removal. Rev. Lewis made sure to distinguish his own position from one of a preacher in the coalfields: he is a priest that travels around to different churches with open positions; he does not represent the backbone of one specific community.

This is an incredibly important distinction, and one that I encountered repeatedly as a potential reason for why preachers in the coalfields tend to stay silent on mountaintop removal issues. A preacher is entirely beholden to the donations and sentiments of his or her particular congregation; a priest, on the other hand, is often
employed by the diocese, and is not as vulnerable to the pressures of the collective will of his or her congregants. There are two issues present in this distinction that both contribute enormously to a certain church’s stated or unstated position on mountaintop removal: church polity (whether congregational or diocesan), and the relative financial health of different denominations in a particular region. The combined influence of polity and financial challenges is what prevents many pastors from taking a stand against mountaintop removal, and explains why pastors in the coalfields might be more beholden to their congregations for support. Rev. Lewis is adamant in not tailoring the gospel to please people; many pastors from the coalfields cannot or will not take this risk.

Second, Rev. Lewis attributed the lack of action on the part of priests or pastors to the tendency of churches to maintain silent on most social issues. The clergy community is one that strives towards unity, and it is extremely difficult to break apart from fellow clergy members to advocate for a certain cause not directly associated with the church. Lewis noted that the clergy in Appalachia, whether rich or poor, are all bound together in an unspoken bond. In my understanding (and many of the Christians I spoke with would concur), if this collective energy could be channeled towards unified religious action against mountaintop removal, insight into this issue would change dramatically across Appalachia and the tides would begin to turn. The potential is real, but the question of how to reach this tipping point is the dominant hurdle of the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. Christian groups like Christians for the Mountains are grappling with how to tap into this collective energy. At the moment, most clergy are silent, just as they are silent on most of today’s critical issues. Rev. Lewis cited that ninety-nine percent of the Christians he asks say that their congregation is not even talking about the Iraq
War, a subject that has permeated the walls of many churches in America and across the world. The fact that even a subject like war would be locked out of many of the churches of Appalachia speaks to the presence of two fundamental challenges in organizing churches to oppose mountaintop removal: the theology and culture of personal salvation and the tendency of fragile communities to avoid divisive issues in favor of congregational strength and unity.

However, Rev. Lewis, like many Christians I spoke with, agrees that a massive mobilization of churches is exactly what the anti-mountain removal movement needs to take root in Appalachia. Rev. Lewis emphasized that the fight against mountaintop removal needs the participation of churches in order to succeed, both for their influential power and their ability to provide hope, and that the movement is not going to travel very far without the support of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches in the coalfields. I asked Rev. Lewis what needs to happen to garner the support of these churches, and he referred back to his point from the informal discussion with congregation members. “Organize, organize, organize!” he exclaimed. He added that the distances between people need to be breached in a search for common ground. In my opinion, the preservation of Appalachian culture, land, and people, is a common goal that Appalachians could unite around; perhaps Kathy Selvage’s idea of missionaries from certain denominations talking to other people within that denomination would begin to bridge the gaps of understanding that Rev. Lewis was identifying. Allen Johnson, too, emphasized the importance of building personal relationships during one of my conversations with him. He noted that organizing through the churches is effective, but that the work has to be done one church

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at a time, building strong friendships and mentorships with pastors. This is the work that Appalachian Christians have ahead of them, a daunting but exciting task.

Rev. Lewis cautioned against demonizing miners or other people within the coal industry, urging instead a balanced understanding of how we are all trapped in the same economic and social system. This approach is similar to one that Sage Russo promoted in his workshop for Christian students at Powershift 2009. Sage talked about how it is important to understand that the goal of this movement is not to combat anyone, but to reeducate people, moving from education to direct action. Similarly, Rev. Lewis warned that mountaintop removal opponents can turn the coal workers into the enemy too quickly, and that this polarization is divisive and unhelpful. Rev. Lewis challenges Christians to take action into their own hands rather than finding a scapegoat on whom they can blame the situation. He cited the example of Jesus on the cross as a revelation of what can happen when people seek out a scapegoat rather than addressing their own problems, a strong reminder for Christians that their faith compels them to act on the Gospel’s messages.

Rev. Lewis had both words of hope and a word of warning for the future of Christian involvement in mountaintop removal issues. He indicated that citizens coming from a Christian perspective are endowed with hope, an invaluable gift in a time of struggle. He forewarned, however, that if Christians choose not to act, the wrath of God will be a wrath that they bring upon themselves. This last point relates back to a notion raised by several Christians whom I spoke with, such as Pastor Larry Brown’s reference to God’s warning in Revelation and Kathy’s query of what would befall apathetic

Christians on judgment day. However, Rev. Lewis’s central message was one of encouragement, not one of threats. Rev. Lewis himself represents a symbol of hope, as a priest who has taken direct action (even in the form of arrest) against mountaintop removal. After being in Appalachia, however, it is difficult for me to imagine a preacher from a Pentecostal or Baptist church in the coalfields taking such a courageous stance on this issue. As I have stressed throughout this chapter, church polity, the fragility of finances, and a theological focus on personal salvation are all factors that would impede a Pentecostal or Baptist minister from identifying mountaintop removal as a major issue that needs to be discussed within church walls.

Even in the Episcopal Church, which has a steady tradition of advocating for certain justice issues, Rev. Lewis is one of the most outspoken priests against mountaintop removal. I spoke with two other Episcopal priests, Father Stan Holmes and Father Roy Crist, both of whom preach in churches in the New River Valley of West Virginia. Fathers Holmes and Crist are both openly opposed to mountaintop removal, and took initiative to lead the first Blessing on the Mountain that I mentioned in Chapter Two. Both, however, agreed that West Virginians are not ready to hear people preaching in church that God calls us to stop mountaintop removal. Father Crist assured me that he would never speak out from the pulpit, since there are people on both sides of the issue in his congregation (several members of the New River ministry are employed by the coal industry). Father Holmes affirmed that he, also, has not spoken out in his sermons, but that he has surreptitiously referenced mountaintop removal in sermons with a wider focus on stewardship. Fr. Holmes recalled an instance where Denise Giardina, author and mountaintop removal activist, spoke out directly from the pulpit at St. John Episcopal Church.

Church in Charleston, where she is a deacon, and some people were so furious that they left the church.

Instead of risking a reaction like this, Fathers Holmes and Crist look to spreading awareness about the effects of mountaintop removal and the opportunities for action that arise as the first step in bringing the issue to Christian consciousness. They stressed the dissemination of information about the effects of mountaintop removal as a relatively safe avenue of action for the church (similar to how Rev. Steve Peake highlighted prayer). First, Fr. Crist commented that people need to be educated in general about the harm that mountaintop removal causes. He noted that some people say that as long as it stays on the other side of the mountain, they are fine with it.\textsuperscript{322} Clearly, even in West Virginia, some people do not have a full understanding of the human suffering that mountaintop removal can cause.

Second, the two priests advocated for an increased public awareness in courses of action against mountaintop removal, which is one way that the church might be able to help. Fr. Holmes remembered reading a poll taken in West Virginia in which seventy percent of the population polled opposed mountaintop removal, yet nearly all of these people sat idly by while mountains were being blasted. Frs. Holmes and Crist speculated that the majority of their congregations do not support mountaintop removal, but that Appalachia simply does not have a culture of grassroots activism that people can turn to for inspiration or support.\textsuperscript{323} Fr. Holmes has faith in the influence of the state and

\textsuperscript{322} Father Roy Crist, personal communication, March 29, 2009. This is an example of a very typical Not In My Backyard philosophy that has haunted environmentalists and social justice activists for decades.

\textsuperscript{323} Allen Johnson confirmed the latter point in one conversation I had with him, mentioned in Chapter Two, where he spoke about how even politically conservative issues, such as the fundamentalist emphasis on family values, have had a hard time making their way into local Appalachian churches. (Allen Johnson, personal communication, February 23, 2009).
n national government, and he is optimistic that our current administration will address
mountaintop removal concerns. However, he clarified that we cannot sit back and wait
for a legislative solution: we need to challenge our elected officials into taking action. Fr.
Holmes perceives a pervasive sentiment of hopelessness among Appalachian residents, to
which he refuses to succumb.

One of the main ways that the church can spread awareness, according to Frs.
Holmes and Crist, includes asking congregation members what it means to be a good
steward for God’s creation. Fr. Holmes directly connected the issue of mountaintop
removal to global warming, an issue that Christians have begun to take serious note of
over the past decade. He reminded me that even disregarding the coal that is mined,
mountaintop removal contributes heavily to global warming through the massive
deforestation that takes place atop the mountains in the preparatory stage before mining.
Fr. Holmes referenced these trees as the lungs of the earth, and noted that global warming
has very visible ramifications on people’s lives, especially people living in impoverished
areas. Tying mountaintop removal to the larger issue of global warming might be one
way to engage Christians (or at least Episcopalian Christians) on the issue of mountaintop

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324 Hopefully, Stan is correct in this assertion; the Obama EPA has shown hopeful signs in the last few
weeks of intentions to limit blasting permits on Appalachian ridges.
325 See the Evangelical Climate Initiative as an example of some of the ways in which Christians are
framing their concern over global warming. [The Evangelical Climate Initiative, “Climate Change: An
Evangelical Call to Action.”] Most recently, an exciting new coalition of Catholic groups called the
Catholic Climate Covenant has formed to address climate change from a Christian perspective. Reporter
Jonathan Hiskes writes, “Citing dual obligations to care for God’s creation and the world’s poor, a broad
coalition of Catholic groups today announced a new commitment to take action on climate change. The ‘St.
Francis Pledge,’ named after the patron saint of animals and ecology, urges Catholics to pray for those
affected by climate change, learn about the problem, and take steps to reduce their own consumption and
advocate for climate legislation that protects the world’s most vulnerable people.” [Jonathan Hiskes,
The language and theology behind the new Catholic Climate Covenant bears significant resemblance to
Christians’ involvement in protesting mountaintop removal mining, an example of the growing unity in
religious responses to environmental issues.
removal. Fr. Holmes noted that nonviolent, peaceful actions are a constructive method of bringing awareness. He remembers the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who “brought people to their knees in repentance.” Fr. Holmes envisions the Christian church playing a similar role in the fight against mountaintop removal to that of the role of King and the Christian faith in the civil rights movement (although King was certainly more outspoken from within the church than Fr. Holmes and many other Appalachian priests choose to be).

Both Fr. Holmes and Fr. Crist have encountered similar challenges in pitching mountaintop removal issues to Baptist and Pentecostal churches. They affirmed my observation that fundamentalist, biblical literalist churches are much less likely to organize around mountaintop removal or around any other social justice issue. Fr. Holmes remarked, “We’re in the heart of the Bible belt, and the fundamentalism that comes out of the Bible belt is about getting saved. It’s about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not about stewardship or works of mercy.” Fr. Holmes recalled being confronted by coal miners at a Department of Environmental Protection hearing over the issuing of a new blasting permit. The miners knew that he was a priest, and asked if he read the Bible. When Fr. Holmes answered affirmatively, the miners retorted, “The Bible says that we’re in the End Times, so what’s the difference? Why worry about the tops of

326 Father Stan Holmes, personal communication, March 29, 2009.
327 Ibid; Indeed, during my trip through Appalachia, I was reminded constantly of being situated in the heart of the Bible belt, both from the huge prevalence of churches and from my conversations with the local people. I recall one unintentionally amusing dialogue with a retired coal miner, Butch, whose community had suffered greatly at the hands of mountaintop removal companies. Butch fills with rage whenever he thinks about mountaintop removal, and he would consistently be in the middle of lambasting mountaintop removal miners with language that would make most Christians’ ears fall off when he would pause, look up to the sky, add “Scuse me, Lord,” and then return to his tirade.
mountains?" This interaction highlights the challenges of integrating a message of activism into End Times theology, and even the difficulty of using the Bible as ammunition against mountaintop removal, which so many Christians have been attempting to do. In fact, Fr. Holmes dismissed the approach of using scripture to promote a certain message. He commented that you can justify anything using scripture, which reminded me strongly of the attempts by mountaintop removal proponents (such as the Kentucky Coal Association) who take biblical passages out of context to suggest that God intended for mountains to be flattened with dynamite.

The challenge of using the Bible or sermons to oppose mountaintop removal comes back to the importance of the church’s efforts in spreading awareness. Fr. Holmes cited Jesus as urging Christians to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves, and notes that this is the kind of approach that needs to be taken in talking about mountaintop removal to Christians. It is certainly a more moderate approach than the one Rev. Lewis embraces; part of the differences in Fr. Holmes’ and Rev. Lewis’ philosophies might stem from the fact that Rev. Lewis preaches in Charleston to a comparatively wealthy congregation that lives away from the immediate effects of mountaintop removal, whereas Fr. Holmes preaches in an area that is just beginning to be exploited for the coal seams hidden in its mountains. Fr. Holme’s final message was one rather discouraging for anyone who has hope in the future of Christian involvement in protesting mountaintop removal. He alluded to the fact that he and Fr. Crist could lose their jobs if they spoke their minds.

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328 Ibid; Incidentally, I asked Fr. Holmes how he responded to this query, and his answer seemed to me remarkably effective. He, in turn, asked the coal miners if they sent their children to school. When they answered yes, he asked “Why bother, if Christ is coming?” Following this interaction, the coal miners changed the subject and were able to carry on a relatively amiable conversation, a perfect example of Rev. Lewis’ approach of finding common ground between people.

329 The Redeemer Episcopal Church, where I attended a service by Fr. Holmes, is located in Ansted, WV. Ansted lies just a few miles from Gauley Mountain, a relatively new mountaintop removal site that has ignited a great deal of opposition over the last few years.
within the church, and added: “We have a congregation full of miners who support this church with their donations; do you think we’re going to stand up against it?” He admitted that this paradox is a sad testament to the Christian faith, but this is the reality among many Christian congregations across Appalachia. They cannot bite the hand that feeds them, despite the fact that the hand is poisoning them with unseen fingers.

The Silence of Churches in the Coalfields

Father John Rausch, a Catholic priest in Kentucky, bluntly summed up the phenomenon described above. When I initially contacted him with an interest in talking about mountaintop removal, one of the first things he told me was, “You can’t do justice work and be a pastor, or you better have a congregation full of communists.” Father Rausch himself travels around to different churches giving sermons (he referred to himself as a rent-a-priest), so he is not beholden to one single congregation for support. This gives him the opportunity to speak out against mountaintop removal with a conviction that most pastors are not able to muster. Fr. Rausch blamed church politics for preventing pastors from talking about mountaintop removal; he gave two examples that highlight how difficult it is for pastors to take sides. In the first, he told me to imagine a strike, where both the union workers and the managers are sitting in the pews. Or, in a second example, in the middle of war, a pastor may (and often does) have a pacifist and the mother of a soldier simultaneously listening to the service. Fr. Rausch’s examples helped me to understand that the church may be the only place where the groups in both cases will tolerate each other’s company. In this situation, how could the pastor attack

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331 Father John Rausch, personal communication, March 20, 2009.
332 Father John Rausch, personal communication, March 25, 2009.
this momentary reconciliation by taking sides? Fr. Rausch emphasized that a pastor who is in charge of a single community congregation must constantly bow to the people in the pews. Unfortunately, if there are two types of people in the pews, the oppressors and the oppressed, and it is the oppressors who are funding the church, silence is the obvious solution for most pastors.

The political atmosphere of the church is clearly charged over a wide range of issues, even outside of Appalachia. Fr. Rausch recalled an instance where a group of congregation members in Illinois wanted to put up a sign outside the church that said simply, “We oppose torture,” as part of a national religious movement to address human dignity in wartime. This was during the height of the prison scandals during the Iraq War, however, and the pastor did not allow them to display the sign, claiming that it was too political. If the Catholic church is unwilling to speak out against torture, which seems obviously antithetical to Christian values, it is clear how much pressure it takes to persuade Christian communities to take on mountaintop removal, which does not immediately conjure up an image of severe human rights abuses to those who are unaware of its true effects. Fr. Rausch stated that most people want priests to recite their own personal mantra, and that they look at sermons that challenge them as threats to their structure and stability in life. Fr. Rausch has repeatedly been told by his parishioners that he is “getting too political,” but this does not stop him from speaking passionately against mountaintop removal.

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333 The only hopeful answer I can give to this question would be to look at Rev. Lewis’ example, where several members of his congregation do not agree with his position on mountaintop removal, but still respect the messages of his sermon. As can be seen from this example, differences in opinion do not always lead to a hostile atmosphere. However, the situation in the coalfields leads to a far more inflammatory environment than exists in the churches of Charleston, which are more removed from the heat of the fight against mountaintop removal.

334 Ibid.
Fr. Rausch looks to a fairly recent but strong emphasis on stewardship as inspiration for fighting mountaintop removal. He noted that since 1998, care of God’s creation has become one of the main social teachings of the Catholic Church. The tradition has always been there (Fr. Rausch referred back to St. Francis and Hildegard of Bingen, whom “At Home in the Web of Life” also celebrated), but it did not become pronounced until environmentalism became mainstream, starting in the 1970’s. Fr. Rausch looks back to Genesis 2:15, which reads, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Fr. Rausch takes this as environmental instruction, to cultivate and care for the planet. He also points to the fact that God called creation good in Genesis, not useful. The distinction here is critical, for “good” implies intrinsic value, regardless of human needs. Valuing the integrity of creation automatically leads to some sort of ethic of sustainability.

Father Rausch recognizes a sound, obvious connection between Christian ideals and opposition to mountaintop removal, and he has tried to impart to Christians the urgency of this effort. Fr. Rausch was the original organizer of the Religious Leaders’ Tour of Mountaintop Removal, and since then he has led several tours every year that expose the devastation of Appalachia. He clearly acknowledges the importance of Christians bearing witness to the truth behind mountaintop removal. However, Fr. Rausch, too, has encountered the wall that exists between mainline denominations and fundamentalist denominations. He agreed that mainline churches are more involved in

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335 The others include human dignity and the equality of all people, preferential option for the poor, participation in community, protecting the common good, workers’ rights, and solidarity with immigrants. (“Economic Justice in 21st Century Kentucky: Holding Ourselves Accountable,” Catholic Conference of Kentucky, 2009.)
336 Genesis 2:15.
mountaintop removal protests (however little that may be) than the coalfield churches, and attributed this divide to both theological and social differences between the types of churches. Fr. Rausch noted that mainline churches have a broader understanding of the social gospel, whereas evangelical sects like Pentecostalism advertise a strictly soul-saving type of religion. He speculated that Pentecostalism appeals to people who want certainty in religion, perhaps because they suffer from so much uncertainty in life. Allen Johnson, in an earlier conversation, asserted a similar opinion, noting that many of the coalfield churches have a very narrow theological focus on heaven and hell only, thus practicing a form of escapism from the reality of daily life.338

This leads directly to the social difference between the denominations: Fr. Rausch reflected that fundamentalist churches generally attract followers from a lower class who encounter hardship on a daily basis. Many of them are attracted to the fundamentals of Christianity because the Bible teaches that Heaven is promised to those who endure these struggles. Fr. Rausch’s perception of the class divide between mainline and fundamentalist denominations is certainly one that my observations supported; the impoverished areas in the coalfields were replete with fundamentalist churches, while mainline denominations seemed more prevalent in the wealthier areas of West Virginia and Kentucky.

However, despite the theological and social divides that lull fundamentalist Christians into silence on many social and environmental issues, Fr. Rausch has encountered a number of Pentecostals and Baptists who are involved in the fight against mountaintop removal. He noted that these activists tend to come at mountaintop removal from an individual and personal struggle, though, not through motivation from the

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church. He gave the example of Truman Hurt, a Holiness Pentecostal minister in eastern Kentucky, who has been very outspoken against mountaintop removal. Yet he clarified that Rev. Hurt did not get involved in mountaintop removal issues because the Pentecostal church ignited his interest; he got involved because the people in his community were struggling daily with the effects and came to him in a united voice, appealing to him to help them redress the wrongs that had been brought upon them.\footnote{Ibid.}

This assertion of Fr. Rausch’s reflects my own experience talking to Baptists and Pentecostals. Pastor Larry Brown most overtly connected mountaintop removal to the Pentecostal faith, but he did not get directly involved until his own family and neighbors were being poisoned and until he received a personal vision from God. Similarly, Carl Shoupe and Rev. Steve Peake have fought in their own communities, and view their actions as something they are personally called to do, but they do not necessarily view activism as an integral part of the Christian faith.

After encountering the obstacles that hinder a united Christian movement to end mountaintop removal, Fr. Rausch has been forced to conclude that the Christian faith will not be leading the charge in this fight. He hopes that the Holy Spirit will move Christians to take action against the injustices that mountaintop removal causes, but he is skeptical of the church’s ability to provide the moral imperative that motivates people on a national scale to get involved. Fr. Rausch commented that economics is the religion of the United States, not Christianity, implying that as long as mountaintop removal remains profitable to the influential elite of society, it cannot be conquered.
Messages of Hope

After traveling across Appalachia and witnessing the numerous theological and social pressures that influence churches to stay silent, it is easy to see how one could be skeptical of the potential of Christianity to make a serious dent in mountaintop removal. Many of the people I met are quickly losing hope in any successful movement against mountaintop removal at all, whether it involves communities of faith or not. Nearly everyone I spoke with agreed that the fundamentalist churches in the coalfields are especially reluctant to get involved, which leads many Appalachians to abandon faith in the power of the religious voice on this issue. However, it was heartening to meet people who had encountered this same denominational divide, but who had arrived at different, more hopeful conclusions from their experiences. The last two conversations from my time in West Virginia that I would like to highlight gave me a timid strand of hope in the future of the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. The first was with Carol Warren, a Catholic from West Virginia; the second, with Will Samson, an evangelical who lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

Carol Warren has worked for many of the organizations I mentioned in Chapter One, such as the CCA, CFTM, and, most recently, the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC). As part of her work for OVEC, Carol tries to organize faith communities around the issue of mountaintop removal, and she has perceived the same division between mainline and fundamentalist denominations that nearly everyone else I spoke with has observed. Carol has noticed that Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians are all very receptive to messaging that condemns mountaintop removal,
but that Baptists and Pentecostals are very hard to reach with this message.\textsuperscript{340} Notably, Carol has accomplished a lot of her work within the West Virginia Council of Churches (WVCC), which is a coalition of eighteen different congregations, in which Pentecostals are not included. She has observed that churches in the hollows are constantly splitting over minor issues, making unity over a major cause a near impossibility.\textsuperscript{341} She referred to the desperation among impoverished populations that Father Rausch spoke of, and how it can transform religion into something quite unrecognizable to mainstream Christians. She warned of the danger of preachers who have no religious education just saying what they believe from the pulpit, and congregation members taking their words at face value.

Carol also noted that many smaller churches in the coalfields are so localized that they do not affiliate with any sort of national denomination and instead represent a sort of “unofficial” Christianity, which makes them extremely hard to access. Carol has had most success in reaching Christians through church bulletins, workshops at educational conferences, and workshops at the WVCC’s annual assembly. Smaller churches often do not publish a bulletin, and do not attend any of the conferences or assemblies to which Carol brings information. This adds to the social and economic hindrances I have referenced several times previously, that churches in the coalfields nearly always have mountaintop removal miners or industry representatives who support their congregation. Carol remarked that many churches are left with the choice of keeping their heat on in the winter or talking about mountaintop removal.\textsuperscript{342} Thus, due to logistical, economic, social, 

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\textsuperscript{340} Carol Warren, personal communication, March 22, 2009.
\textsuperscript{341} This reflects a culture of family feuding and bickering which seems to dominate many of the small towns that I visited (a culture that is certainly not limited to Appalachia and its residents).
\textsuperscript{342} Carol Warren, personal communication, March 22, 2009.
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cultural, and theological reasons, the coalfield churches are often left out of the greater religious conversation on mountaintop removal happening in West Virginia.

However, Carol still believes in the potential for a strong faith based movement against mountaintop removal. She has found that it is effective to approach mountaintop removal from the angle of human rights, and asserted that environmentalism is the ultimate pro-life issue; it just takes time and effort to make Christians realize this (and to overcome their prejudice of the term “environmentalist,” which is sometimes tagged with misanthropic connotations).343 She has noticed that advertising how slurry injections are making people sick often hooks Christians into taking interest in the matter. Carol expressed that the most effective method of tackling mountaintop removal is to chip away in pieces that are already accessible to Christians, such as talking about the need for clean drinking water or about cemetery protection.344 These are issues that many Christians view as directly connected to their faith, and can influence them to get involved at a rudimentary level. Carol believes that the moral voice is extremely helpful in the fight against mountaintop removal. She objects to the huge amount of power that the coal companies wield as a result of their money, the same power that Father Rausch

343 Carol Warren, personal communication, March 22, 2009. Most of the Christians I talked to spoke of the importance of framing mountaintop removal in a way that would resonate with people, and revealingly, many of them talked about avoiding the term “environment” completely and focusing instead on the term “creation.” Will Samson and Dwight Billings write, “By framing opposition to [mountaintop removal] as ‘creation care,’ CFTM activists attempt to target by-stander churches and individual Christians in Appalachia, both by appealing to values and conscience and, where necessary, by transforming culture to forge a link between religion and environmentalism.” This insight illustrates the importance of language in social movements: while the terms “the environment” and “the creation” are referring to the same concept of landscape, they conjure up markedly different associations to those who hear them. [Will Samson and Dwight Billings, “Christians for the Mountains in the Appalachian Movement against Mountain Top Removal Coal Mining,” 23.]

344 Mining companies often blast away ancient family cemeteries and burial grounds in the process of destroying the mountain. Talking to Christians about how the dead are not being allowed to rest in peace can elicit strong feelings of regret and outrage that these religious, cultural, and historic landmarks are being desecrated.
named. To counter the power of economics, the religious voice of morality is essential in reframing the debate on mountaintop removal.

An emphasis on the importance of the religious voice was the central component of my conversation with Will Samson, as well. Will is a professor at Georgetown College in Kentucky and has studied the efforts of Christians for the Mountains in depth. It was enormously helpful for me to hear Will’s perspective on the denominational split in social engagement, since as an evangelical Will understands the more literalist theology that many coalfield churches espouse. Will, too, attributes the denominational divide between churches to both social and theological reasons. He pointed out that the poorer a person in Appalachia is, the more likely he or she is tied up in the exploitive coal economy, and it is the poorer citizens who tend to gravitate towards the fundamentalist churches. Will also discerns a linguistic and symbolic explanation for this division, characterizing a difference in the way data is processed between members of different congregations. Will contends that a literal application of scripture leads to a more conservative, cognitivist framework, a framework that has not been molded to promote social justice.345

Will brought up the End Times theology in fundamentalist traditions, noting that it has only recently become the primary narrative among fundamentalist Christians. He recognizes how End Time theology can lead people to pay little attention to the physical world. He asked, “If you think your house is going to burn down tomorrow, would you vacuum the carpet?”346 Will’s question illustrates the paradox of trying to persuade

345 A cognitivist framework is an ethical philosophy that sees matters of ethics as either true or false. As I understand it, Will is using the term here to highlight the tendency of fundamentalists to take unwavering stances on certain issues based on the word of God.
biblical literalist Christians to save the mountains when according to their theology, the end of the world is an imminent reality. Will claims that activists and Christians must re-narrate this theology with rationality, a rationality that encourages a sense of daily purpose with long-term intentions. Will acknowledges that the mainline churches, with their tradition of social justice activism, have an experiential perspective which is partly drawn from a more narrative or symbolic interpretation of the Bible.

This narrative is helpful in garnering the support of other mainline Christians, but Will warned that mainline Christians attempting to talk to evangelicals about an issue simply does not work, since the two groups of Christians are operating in different frameworks. Mainline Christians look at the broader range of Christian theology, including the historical tradition of Christianity, whereas evangelicals embrace a cognitivist approach in which they open the Bible and follow instructions directly. In order for the movement against mountaintop removal to take off, evangelicals who understand the literal aspects of the Bible in addition to the urgency of social justice issues need to reframe the debate for more conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists, demonstrating to them the importance of purpose and right intention in the physical world today.

Will acknowledges the difficulty of disseminating this new framework; in the coalfields of Appalachia, most pastors do not go to seminary, so there is no shared body of knowledge or shared goal among them. However, Will believes that if more evangelicals got involved in the fight from within their own communities, spreading the

Furthermore, one of the dominant paradigms among anti-environment fundamentalists is that destruction of the planet is actually a signal of the impending Apocalypse, a sign of Christ’s second coming. This belief leads to a celebration of upheaval and degradation as positive symbols of the End Times narrative. This embrace of destruction, however, is by no means touted by the majority of evangelical Christians, only by a small (but vocal) fraction of radically conservative fundamentalists.
word of the Bible as it relates to mountaintop removal, then evangelicals would begin to
take up the call for social justice (notably, this is the same conclusion that Kathy Selvage
and Allen Johnson draw from their work with faith communities). Indeed, Will added
that the evangelical voice has been a common addition to progressive social activism in
our country’s history; it is only fairly recently that evangelicals were “co-opted by
fundamentalists.”348 This assertion is analogous to one I heard from Peter Illyn, founder
of Restoring Eden. Peter claimed that evangelicals have been “co-opted by
individualism,” that they have been directed away from broad application of their faith to
focus only on personal relationship with God.349 Rev. Dennis Sparks from the West
Virginia Council of Churches similarly reflected, “It’s too bad that Christianity has
turned so inward that we’ve lost the true calling of the gospel.”350 Will, Peter, and Rev.
Sparks are all part of a concerted effort to redirect Christian focus away from personal
salvation and back to the global spiritual gravity of their faith.

As part of this effort, Will highlighted the need for people in the coalfields to find
theological language to talk about oppression, noting that this was one of the most
successful tactics used by Martin Luther King, Jr. He maintained that while searching for
a frame in which they can talk about mountaintop removal in biblically based, cognitivist
ways, Christians need to ask, “What are the moral imperatives that force us to act
now?”351 In order to find these talking points, Will suggested that evangelicals reconnect
with their own tradition through the life of Jesus and the minor prophets such as Micah,
Isaiah, and Jeremiah (from whom King often quoted). He argued that evangelicals hear

349 Peter Illyn, Powershift 2009.
350 Rev. Dennis Sparks, personal communication, April 29, 2009.
few sermons from Paul, or from the prophets or the psalms, which in Christian
interpretation deal with the example of Jesus. Narratives of the life of Jesus, however, can
elicit a deeply engaged discussion on social justice and freedom from oppression, and
connecting this to the more conservative theological frames would provide a strong
starting point for conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists to become involved in
issues like mountaintop removal.

Will honored Allen Johnson as an example of someone who has played a critical
role in redefining theology to make stewardship and social justice activism accessible to
biblical literalists. He commended Allen for crafting language and linguistic frames that
allow people who do not usually affiliate with environmental or social justice causes to
begin to understand why mountaintop removal is a critical issue. Part of Allen’s success
perhaps stems from the fact that he himself looks to the Bible as the source of truth, and
understands the type of immediate theology that biblical literalists embrace. Will
mentioned that every social movement requires people to reframe ideas in an effort to
make them accessible to the general public or to a certain interest group. Allen Johnson
has been at the forefront of the Christian movement against mountaintop removal, and if
all goes well, we can hope that he will be credited with helping to build a widespread
Christian social movement to end mountaintop removal from the ground up.

Just like many of the people I spoke with in Appalachia, Will identified the
current understanding of mountaintop removal as an economic problem: people do not
see any sort of alternative to the coal economy in Appalachia. However, Will rejected the
economic framework as a valid way to look at things, and instead argued for the need for
linguistic frames that create a moral problem out of mountaintop removal. It is here
where Christianity can play an integral role, in providing the moral language necessary to
win the battle. Will emphasized that mountaintop removal cannot be fought as an
economic issue, since the coal company spreads so much of its money around and has
such a strong hold over Appalachia. The issue cannot be solved through an argument
over economic alternatives to mountaintop removal; since an economic linguistic and
psychological frame (the promise of cheap coal) is what ruined Appalachia to begin with,
an entirely different frame needs to be utilized in order to save Appalachia from the
devastation of coal.

Allen Johnson, too, agrees that Christian values are the key to defeating the
economic framework. He states, “Right now the conversation seems locked in
economics...We want to get down to a moral and spiritual plane. I want to get down to a
deeper level: What is really meaningful in our society? Producing and consuming,
producing and consuming? I don’t think so. I think it’s neighborliness. It’s caring for one
another. It’s generosity of heart.” While I wholeheartedly agree with Allen on this
point, I believe that the economic framework cannot be abandoned entirely, since the
people of Appalachia need a future to fight for, not solely an enemy to fight against.
Highlighting the opportunities for wind power and green jobs in Appalachia is an
important step in shifting away from coal, one which many secular groups in Appalachia
wholeheartedly promote. However, I do think that Appalachia’s singular focus on the
economy at the expense of its citizens’ lives and health must be trumped by an alternative
paradigm that frames the crisis in a more compelling manner. Will believes (and I agree)
that religion has the power to provide this alternative framework. By focusing on the

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example of Jesus and reestablishing a sense of purposeful intention among biblical literalists, Christians will encounter the moral imperatives at the heart of their faith that drive them to fight for social justice and stewardship.
Chapter Six: Lasting Impressions

“The shadows of [Allen] Johnson’s goliaths are large, bleak, ever-looming. But his is a cautious hope, a foolish-to-the-world belief that the pebble in his slingshot is powerful, accurate, and true.”

The sentiment of hopelessness that pervades Appalachia can be painfully oppressive. The people of the coalfields have been exploited for the cheap energy hidden in their mountains for the last century, and many of them see no reason to believe that the tides are finally turning. For the few who are not resigned to their situation, fear or apathy influences their silence on mountaintop removal issues. The church is one of the last places communities can still turn to for hope: all of the church services I attended set aside time to pray for individual congregation members or relatives who were sick or struggling. In the small communities of the hollows, the church is often the only space where neighbors come together in peace. A polarized battle over mountaintop removal is the last thing that most pastors and congregants want inside their church. Throughout my experience in Appalachia, it became clear that the churches in the coalfields are, at present, unlikely allies of the movement against mountaintop removal, for theological, cultural, and socio-economic reasons. However, mainline denomination Christians are beginning to take up the call for the mountains, thanks to the efforts of dedicated Christians throughout Appalachia.

I still struggle with this paradox; the fact that Christians in wealthier areas, who do not actually experience firsthand the devastating effects of mountaintop removal, are more inclined to speak out against it (although I understand in many ways their separation and distance gives them the leisure to do so). Meanwhile, the people who are

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bathing their children in poisoned water and who have lost organs to the toxins of coal sludge cannot bring this issue to their churches. Yet the more I learned about the theological divide between the coalfields and the more urban areas of Appalachia, in addition to the actual theology of literalist Christians, the better I was able to understand the paradox. While certain mainline churches are beginning to stand openly against mountaintop removal, it will take an enormous concerted effort on the part of Christians in Appalachia to expand this message to the smaller, literalist churches in the coalfields. Allen Johnson warned me that “getting the church out of cultural captivity is hard,” and it was not until I visited Appalachia that I understood how true his words were.\textsuperscript{354} The magnitude of the effort required to make the movement against mountaintop removal a success cannot be underestimated. While the Christian voice to save the mountains and the people is gaining momentum, it has not yet reached the critical tipping point needed to attract the attention of most churches.

However, individual activists in Appalachia still come at this movement from a Christian perspective, one motivated by a deep-seeded desire to work for stewardship and social justice. I found hope in the priests and pastors who have taken on the issue of mountaintop removal, whether inside or outside the church. I look forward to this summer, when Christian students from many different denominations will travel to Ansted, WV to test water quality and fight for safe living conditions, united by their faith to help Appalachia in her struggle. We can look to the growing number of Christian students who have become devout environmental activists as a hopeful symbol of a widespread shift in Christian theology from an emphasis on the private and personal aspects of faith to a more visible celebration of faith as applied to social and

\textsuperscript{354} Allen Johnson, personal communication, March 16, 2009.
environmental movements. Allen Johnson emphasized the importance of youth in the fight against mountaintop removal, commenting, “We need young, idealistic, committed people with strong faith.” Christian students from across the country are answering his call, a definite sign of hope in the establishment of a broader Christian movement to end mountaintop removal.

Christian students’ commitment to action reflects the emergence of the larger Christian movement against mountaintop removal. Despite the overpowering monopoly of the coal economy, the scare tactics used by the coal industry to silence mountaintop removal protesters, the barriers between different denominations that prevent cooperation, and the resigned attitude of most Appalachians towards their personal plight, Christians are beginning to gain strength in numbers and in conviction in the fight against mountaintop removal. Groups like CFTM, Restoring Eden, the CCA, and LEAF identify the powerful theological issues at the heart of Christianity that demand Christians to oppose mountaintop removal. They also provide avenues of action for Christians to participate in the growing movement against mountaintop removal. At this point, most Christian opposition groups focus primarily on the importance of spreading awareness, explaining to individual Christians and individual church communities the theological relationship between Christian ideals and mountaintop removal protests. This educational initiative is critically important, as many Christians in Appalachia still do not recognize the deep connections between their faith and mountaintop removal mining.

The dissemination of information about mountaintop removal to the Christian community takes two different forms, both of which are equally important. First, Christian organizations are widely publicizing the devastating effects of mountaintop
removal on the land and people of Appalachia. They reach out to Christians across the region and across the country who do not directly experience mountaintop removal and who are often altogether ignorant of its existence and its implications. The coal industry has managed to keep its practices remarkably hidden from the general public, and Christians are working to expose the evils behind the industry’s motives and actions.

Second, Christian organizations target Christians who live within the coalfields and who are directly affected by mountaintop removal mining. These coalfield residents know too well the harmful outcomes of mountaintop removal; their communities have been ruined by floods, polluted air, poisoned water, and economic depression. Here, Christians work to educate their neighbors about why they can and should speak out in church about the suffering caused by mountaintop removal. They highlight the numerous aspects of Christian literature and tradition that betray mountaintop removal as a practice incompatible with Christian values.

Christians also build on the important precedent set by key religious figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. They draw upon King’s inspirational speeches connecting Christianity to the universal struggle for justice. They follow a Gandhian model of envisioning all humans as fellow individuals trapped in the same economic and social system, embracing coal miners as potential allies rather than estranging them as the enemy. Celebrating the notions of social justice, stewardship, creation care, preferential option for the poor, human equality, and bearing witness to the truth, Christians illuminate the myriad ideals of their faith that inspire them to stand up against the coal industry.
The wide range of theological justifications for fighting mountaintop removal is reflected in the varied strategies of different Christian denominations opposed to mountaintop removal. Certain denominations, such as the United Methodists, embrace values like stewardship and creation care as primary reasons for combating mountaintop removal. Other denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church, shy away from eco-theology and focus instead on human rights and human dignity. The plurality of beliefs and theologies present within the Christian tradition strengthens the religious movement against mountaintop removal, since Christians find commanding reasons to fight the practice from many different theological angles. However, this same plurality contributes to the sharp divide between different types of congregations in Appalachia. Mainline and fundamentalist denominations are separated theologically, culturally, socially, ritually, and in many cases economically. These factors join together to form an often impenetrable wall that prevents ecumenical cooperation and understanding.

The existence of this wall speaks to the importance of intra-denominational evangelism within the Christian movement against mountaintop removal. Christians from all denominations need to actively encourage their fellow parishioners to join them in their stance against the coal industry. Baptists need to proclaim to the people in their church why all Baptists should forcefully fight against mountaintop removal; Methodists need to explain to other Methodists why their particular faith drives them to stand against the injustices perpetrated by mountaintop removal mining companies. This essential aspect of activism in Appalachia stands in contrast to the characteristics of religious activism in more liberal regions of the country, where interfaith and ecumenical actions have been particularly effective because they reach across differences. In Appalachia, it
seems that the most successful efforts will be those focused on intra-denominational communication. Interfaith and ecumenical statements and actions are certainly important in the battle against mountaintop removal, but the grassroots Christian movement against this practice will never fully take off unless there are leaders from within each singular denomination who can speak from the heart about mountaintop removal’s assault on the values of their faith.

In addition to spreading awareness about the connection between Christianity and mountaintop removal, Christians need to continue to step into roles of public leadership and organize actions and protests that decry the loss of Appalachian land and people at the hands of the coal industry. Currently, Christians in Appalachia embrace less confrontational tactics in their protests against mountaintop removal compared to the actions of certain secular groups. While this may reveal a certain reluctance among Christians to fully engage in direct action, it also provides a comfortable space for Christians new to the movement to begin participating without threat of arrest or intimidation. Through prayer vigils, Christian conferences, creation care study groups, political lobbying, church statements, rallies, and religious ceremonies that celebrate the mountains, Christians are contributing a great deal to the movement against mountaintop removal at the local, state, and national level. The more they publicize their actions, the more successful they will become in reframing mountaintop removal as a moral issue that Christians must confront.

My research into this subject focused primarily on how Christians are benefitting and strengthening the fight against mountaintop removal. I set out to ascertain the scope of Christian involvement in mountaintop removal issues and to uncover the actions that
Christians have taken to protest directly against mountaintop removal or to pray for those affected by its destruction. My study of Christian participation in this movement led to many answers about the theologies that motivate Christians to oppose mountaintop removal and the concrete actions they have taken to eliminate the practice. My exploration of this subject also led me to discover an unexpected attribute of this movement, however. I spent a great deal of time examining the efficacy of Christian theology and culture as a tool to fight mountaintop removal, but I soon discovered that the potential for growth exists in both directions. Not only can Christianity aid the movement against mountaintop removal; fighting for social and environmental justice against the power of the coal industry can actually strengthen the Christian faith.

Several of the Christian activists I spoke with divulged that their efforts to fight mountaintop removal had brought them closer to God and to the roots of their religion. Writer Josh Macivor-Anderson spoke to Allen Johnson, founder of CFTM, about this phenomenon. He writes, “Johnson sees a mutually beneficial relationship between Christians and environmental activists. He cites the way many of his activist friends have shaken the dust from their dormant faith and started going back to church, and he sees the gospel gaining credibility among secular activists if the church could gain credibility in the fight against mountaintop removal.”

Macivor-Anderson’s insight takes the notion of how Christians contribute to the movement against mountaintop removal and turns it around the other way, demonstrating instead how the fight against mountaintop removal contributes to Christianity.

Another example of the influence of the mountaintop removal movement over the Christian faith is the story of Judy Bonds, winner of the 2003 Goldman Environmental

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Prize. Judy, featured in Bill Moyers’s documentary “Is God Green?,” is one of the key leaders in the fight against mountaintop removal from both a secular and a Christian perspective. She is co-director of Coal River Mountain Watch, a secular organization that fights mountaintop removal and works for sustainable alternatives in its local community. Despite leading a secular organization, Judy is no stranger to the Christian connection to mountaintop removal. To illuminate the incongruity of mountaintop removal mining with Christian tradition, Judy asks her neighbors, “Now which one of these mountains do you think God will come down here and blow up? Which one of these hollers do you think Jesus would store waste in?” Her simple question clearly illuminates the absurdity of mountaintop removal practices from within the context of Christianity. However, Judy has not always celebrated Christian values and tradition. A portion of her life was spent away from the Christian church, until the fight against mountaintop removal drew her back in. Bill Moyers narrates, “Bonds was raised a Christian, then strayed from the church. This fight, she says, has brought her back to God...now Bonds is bringing her faith to her fight for the mountains.” Judy Bonds was attracted back to the promise of the Christian faith through her deepening concern about the injustices perpetrated on the Appalachian people.

This trend of a return to religion can also be seen in Christian youth participation in the movement against mountaintop removal. Faced with a global culture of greed and exploitation, the younger generation seeks a philosophical or theological framework that addresses evil and injustice and unites them in their efforts to heal our planet. Young people today seem less interested in embracing a faith that deals only with personal

356 Bill Moyers, “Is God Green?” Chapter 2
357 Ibid.
salvation and are instead searching for an integrated, applied spirituality that directly relates to the divine and physical realms. Christian students who witness mountaintop removal in Appalachia are turning to their faith as a support structure for action. Christianity is becoming a source of comfort to those faced with the painful reality of mountaintop removal’s destruction. Judy Bonds relates, “It was the unjustness that I saw that was being heaped upon the people - the blasting and children suffering from the coal dust. And the elderly suffering from the coal dust. And the flooding. And I began to pray for help. For guidance.” Now, Judy uses her faith as an important tool for raising concerns over mountaintop removal across Appalachia.

The examples of Judy Bonds and the other activists who are rediscovering Christianity as a source of strength and solace represent one of the enormous strengths of the movement against mountaintop removal. Just as participation in civil rights actions brought lapsed Christians back to the church during the Civil Rights movement, activists across Appalachia are reconnecting with the roots of their faith, grounding themselves in their religious heritage for the strength they need to fight the onslaught of mountaintop removal mining. The Christian faith can combat despair with hope, and can replace apathy with urgent concern. My time in Appalachia, although it highlighted the difficulties of organizing through churches, also made clear to me that the assumption of a strong moral voice is essential to reframing the debate over mountaintop removal. Christianity, the core of Appalachian culture and community, occupies the perfect position to provide this moral voice.

Christians and secular activists face enormous obstacles ahead of them, however. The coal industry occupies an absolute position of power over almost every other force in

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Appalachia. The priests and churches that are speaking out openly against mountaintop removal are still few and far between. It will take an enormous effort to persuade churches to take the serious but essential risk of standing up against injustice and opposing mountaintop removal. The churches in the coalfields, especially, will be particularly resistant to this effort. Yet although the challenges are daunting, the Christian faith offers hope that these obstacles will be overcome.

Christianity provides powerful theological motivations that drive Christians to oppose mountaintop removal. Religion unites Christians in prayer and action, giving them a strong sense of courage and helping them to harness the spiritual force needed to overcome the powerful influence of the coal industry. Churches provide a space to meet for Christians discuss the effects of mountaintop removal and the implications of the practice to the Christian faith, and church congregations serve as important infrastructure through which Christians can organize their communities. Christianity reframes the issue of mountaintop removal as a moral and spiritual crisis that demands urgent attention from Christians all over the world. It connects mountaintop removal to the ideals of social justice, stewardship, and oppression that are so central to Christianity, boosting Christians into action to save the land, culture, and people of Appalachia. Bolstered by the collective prayers of Christians across the country and across the globe, the Christian movement against mountaintop removal has the chance to help lead Appalachia towards a just, clean energy future.
Appendix A: Poverty and Mountaintop Removal in Appalachia
Appendix B: Pictures of Kayford Mountain

These are all pictures I took during my visit to Kayford Mountain on March 21st, 2009.
Appendix C: Marsh Fork Elementary School

March 21st, 2009 – Corinne Almquist
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Date Published</th>
<th>Title of Statement</th>
<th>Main Points</th>
<th>Biblical References</th>
<th>Commitments to Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in America     | 1999           | “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice” | • mountaintop removal harms people, communities, and landscapes, and threatens the social fabric of all of Appalachia  
• harms people at a physical, emotional, and spiritual level | None                | • church will deliver this letter to U.S. Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and various congressional committees  
• church members should push national and state legislators towards certain policy initiatives, such as the development of alternative energy, a promotion of deep mining over strip mining, and a land reclamation requirement for mountaintop removal sites  
• church will stay updated on issues and concerns surrounding mountaintop removal |
| Episcopal Church                           | 1999           | “Resolution Number: 2000-D005”           | • mountaintop removal threatens the environment and low income communities  
• disproportionately affects the poor | None                | • Washington office will monitor proposed legislation that mentions mountaintop removal and will keep congregants informed |
| United Methodist Church                     | 2000           | “Cease Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining”  | • land itself is sacred  
• mountaintop removal desecrates families, homes, and wildlife  
• mountaintop removal | “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; and the world and they that dwell within.” | • recommends long term scientific study about effects of mountaintop removal  
• asks state and national governmental and regulatory |
Appendix D: Denominational Statement Chart (cont.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Resolution Title</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Biblical References</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church of the United States of America</td>
<td>“217th General Assembly Commissioners’ Resolution”</td>
<td>eliminates jobs and prioritizes corporate profit over human life and the environment (Psalm 24:1)</td>
<td>agencies to end mountaintop removal mining</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• strong focus on humanity rather than environment</td>
<td>• “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• mountaintop removal leads to lost lives and homes, decrease in quality of life, loss of culture, and emotional stress</td>
<td>• God instructs us to “…not defile the land where you live and where I dwell.” (Numbers 35:34)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• mountaintop removal perpetuates a cycle of poverty</td>
<td>• “Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.” (James 4:17)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• destroys beauty and productive capacity of land</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unitarian Universalist Association</td>
<td>“End Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining”</td>
<td>• mountaintop removal devastates the environment, the people, the culture, and the economy of Appalachia</td>
<td>Unitarian Universalist congregants and organizations should raise awareness about impacts of mountaintop removal and petition local, state and national representatives to:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Appalachia is being unfairly exploited for the benefit of other regions of the country</td>
<td>• support H.R. 2719, the Clean Water Protection Act</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• availability of cheap coal</td>
<td>• suspend or refuse permits for mountaintop removal coal mines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious Society of Friends</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>“Letter of Concern on Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining”</td>
<td>• mountaintop removal threatens human and ecological health, as well the possibility of peace</td>
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Appendix E: Hobet Mine Complex in Mud, WV, superimposed over Washington, D.C.

*Photo taken from Google Earth with help of ilovemountains.org coal mine overlay function*
Appendix F: Hell's Gate

March 21st, 2009 – Corinne Almquist
Appendix G: Water collected by Pastor Larry Brown

March 23rd, 2009  -Corinne Almquist
Appendix H: Twisted Gun Golf Course, Gilbert, WV

Photo taken from galleries of Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition\textsuperscript{359}

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