

West Virginia Council of Churches Statement on Mountaintop Removal Mining

Adopted by the Board of Directors, September 11, 2007

Revised (in bold), December 2011

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. The destruction caused by mountain top removal mining, as presently practiced, is unprecedented and permanent. We believe the 1977 Surface Mining Reclamation and Control Act was intended to put an end to the abuses of surface mining, not to further them. Therefore, we deplore recent changes to the rules governing this law that may actually serve to promote mountain top removal. We have, in the past, called for the strictest possible enforcement of SMCRA and the Clean Water Act. We strongly renew that call for enforcement, believing that if the law is fully enforced, the terrible damage of large-scale mountaintop removal will end.

Creation is a revelation of God, brought forth by God's Word. When we spend time with the wonders of Creation, we observe and learn about the beauty and marvelous attention to the smallest details that fills God's work. Jesus often went into the wilderness to pray, and there is something special about the closeness many feel to God when contemplating such grandeur. Psalms 24:1 reminds us that "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; and the world, and they that dwell therein." According to Genesis 2:15, humans have been made stewards of all that God has made. We are called to be responsible and faithful in caring for all that God has faithfully given.

Our West Virginia mountains are a wonderful example of the beauty of Creation: a temperate rainforest, full of unique plants, trees, flowers, and creatures, the diversity of which is unduplicated in our nation. The mountains are home to deer, black bears, bobcats, frogs, turtles, snakes, and a remarkable variety of birds. As Genesis 9:9-11 says, "God's covenant is with all living creatures." For generations these mountains have also been home to people. The mountains have provided a rich assortment of foods, medicinal plants, abundant clear and pure water to drink, materials with which to build homes, and glorious beauty to nurture the spirit. The mountains are full of blessings for which to thank and praise our God.

These mountains, for many years, have also contained coal, a source of energy now used for electricity. Mining coal has employed thousands of men and women since the early Twentieth Century. For most of that time, the mining took place underground. Miners faced daily hazards in earning their living and gaining needed income for their families. But still, for the most part, the people were able to maintain harmony between their livelihood and their mountain environment.

But with the advent of surface mining, the relationship changed. Obtaining the coal has become a trade-off for the destruction of the surrounding land and forest. Mountaintop removal mining, in particular, blasts the tops from our mountains and obliterates healthy streams, filling them with waste material. The damage done is permanent and irreparable. Once the top of a mountain has been removed, it cannot be put back. The streams cannot be replaced, and the native hardwood forests and diverse under-story do not grow back. The animals, birds, and people are deprived of the welcoming environment that once nurtured their minds, bodies, and spirits and provided food, water, and shelter for them. Hundreds of thousands of acres of our beautiful state, God's gift of Creation, have already been affected.

In addition to the direct and immediate harm to the environment, toxic chemicals from coal waste impoundments can leach into the water table and contaminate water supplies. The possibility of failure of slurry dams constitutes an ever-present and growing threat to the community below. Floods worsened by runoff from the denuded mountains are becoming a routine occurrence. Some children sleep in their clothes, fearful that rain will force them to flee during the night.

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. There used to be over 100,000 miners employed in West Virginia, while now there are perhaps 15,000 direct mining jobs. We still observe that the areas of our state in which coal mining has been the primary occupation remain among the poorest and have the least-diversified economies in the state. Mining families deserve our support and help in making a secure, just economic transition. We urgently

request that state leaders and our Congressional delegation work diligently toward economic diversification for our state. Irresponsible mining practices damage the environment, hurt businesses based on tourism and the natural beauty of the state, and do not help us build a Twenty-first Century economy.

We are also called upon to support others in the coalfield communities whose health is being compromised, and whose ancestral homes are being destroyed, disrupted and devalued. We are particularly saddened and troubled by a number of recent health studies that indicate that living in a community where there is mountaintop removal mining may be hazardous to the people's health, especially that of children, who are more vulnerable to environmental toxins than most adults. One study released in June 2011 suggests a very significantly higher incidence of birth defects among infants in areas where mountaintop removal is occurring, as opposed to areas where there are other types of mining, or no mining. These are children whose life potential may have been compromised in the womb, and who will require specialized care for the rest of their lives. This is a tragedy for children and their families.

Mountaintop removal mining may be more cost effective for coal companies. But scholarly studies are providing troubling evidence that the method is extremely expensive to the health of people living in our mountain communities. As we value the lives of our people, we cannot in good conscience condone the future well-being and life prospects of our children being disregarded for the sake of cheap electricity and modest amounts of employment. Mountaintop mining is not the only way to recover coal and to provide miners with jobs. The present and future harm to our people - especially the health and well-being of our children - and to our state's air and water are unacceptable, and we urge the industry to immediately begin to seek and implement alternative models of production.

Genesis 1:31 tells us that God looked at everything God had made and found it very good. In obedience, we are obligated to care for God's wondrous Creation that we may one day walk with God in the garden without shame.