

Blog Entry for Green Sanctuary Blog, Congregational Stewardship
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Part I Feb. 11, 2010 The Struggle Begins -- A Hearing in Richmond on the "Stream Saver" Bill

I first realized how tough a fight we would be engaged in on a cold, sunny February morning this spring when I traveled with a group of Charlottesvilleans, mostly UU's, to our state capital to address a Senate committee in the Virginia General Assembly. We knew we were making state history that day, because this was the first time that any bill to curtail mountaintop removal coal mining (MTR) had been introduced in the Commonwealth.

The atmosphere was "highly charged," as they say, as supporters of a "Stream Saver" bill gathered outside the Capital Building in Richmond, alongside uniformed police officers and coal miners wearing T-shirts provided by the mining companies. Once inside, police had us line up in two rows, with proponents and opponents on either side of a long hallway, while police officers patrolled between us. I smiled at the miners, but they mostly avoided eye contact. Over 200 people had assembled, and only half were allowed to enter the hearing room, with the overflow assigned to watch the hearing on closed circuit TV.

Richmond happens to be the location of the headquarters of the now-infamous Massey Energy, operator of the Upper Big Branch Mine near Charleston, West Virginia, where 29 miners died in April. And Massey just happens to be the corporation with the largest MTR mining operations in Appalachia. The bill was intended to end the coal industry practice of dumping toxic coal sludge into the streams in southwest Virginia, the headwaters of the many rivers that provide drinking water to all of Virginia. Residents of Wise County, 1/4 of which has been mined using MTR, came to testify on both sides of the issue. Coal industry opponents outnumbered us in the hearing room, and the bill was soundly defeated in committee, but this marked the beginning of the moral struggle the members of TJMC UU, Charlottesville, have launched against MTR coal mining in Appalachia, and particularly in Virginia.

That day I testified on behalf of our UU churches and five other national denominations that have passed resolutions condemning mountaintop removal coal mining. In our 2006 Act of Public Witness and in statements by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church of the USA, and the Religious Society of Friends, we argue that mountaintop removal coal mining and the resulting environmental devastation it brings ought to end immediately because it is immoral. Despite claims to the contrary, it irreversibly destroys the oldest mountains in the world -- the sacred home of people, wildlife, and forests.

It was clear from the way the senators addressed the coal industry representatives at the hearing by first name that our struggle would be "uphill," no pun intended. We went home more determined than ever to continue the fight to end this unnecessary, devastating practice. We had learned from Appalachian Voices' office in Charlottesville that our power

company, Dominion Power, bought coal from five MTR sites in West Virginia and Kentucky for the coal-fired power plant that provides our electricity, and we felt guilty. Then we met Larry Gibson at a screening of the documentary “Coal Country,” and decided that the first step to becoming credible advocates was to become witnesses.