

A Religious Call to Move Beyond Coal

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“Christians know that their responsibility within creation and their duty toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.” Pope John Paul II

Coal-fired power brings up images of the London of Charles Dickens, with the black smog of coal stoves hanging heavily in the chilly Thames fog, causing passersby to cough and wheeze from particulates in the air. Coal is clearly the fuel of the past. A more modern version of this urban horror is the ubiquitous pollution in China, home to sixteen of the world's twenty most-polluted cities where residents rarely see blue sky. Coal is the fuel of somewhere else.

But in the green Northwest, many people are not aware we have the same dirty coal power that sickened Victorian England and shortens lives in China today. TransAlta, the only coal-fired plant in Washington, is the state's single largest point-source of mercury, nitrogen oxide, and carbon dioxide pollution. Mercury from the plant causes neurological damage and developmental delays in our children. The nitrogen oxide haze of TransAlta, on the flanks of Mt. Rainier National Park, is the third worst in the U.S. for visibility impairment and contributes to our neighbors' asthma. Carbon emissions from TransAlta are the annual equivalent of 1.8 million cars on the road and contribute to the one and half billion tons of climate-warming carbon dioxide that American coal plants produce every year.

Most of the power generated by the TransAlta coal plant is sold to southern California, and its enormous profits fill the coffers of its Canadian owners. Its pollution and health damages stay in Washington, along with its toxic ash.

All major religious denominations are questioning the use of coal as a power source. Mining, processing, and burning coal destroys creation in many ways, from the ravaged mountain tops of the Appalachian plateau to coal ash landslides and toxic sediment in river valleys. Global warming pollution from coal plants exacerbates droughts and floods for the poorest of God's children around the world, those whose meager crops require a reliable climate for subsistence.

Coal is the single biggest driver of climate change, but that fact offers a solution as well. If America moves away from coal, there will be an 80% reduction in our greenhouse gas emissions, enough to prevent the most dangerous outcomes of climate change. Transitioning the economy from coal is far easier than changing the entire industrial base, and can be done much more quickly. There are three aspects of this transition: leave coal in the ground, no new coal plants, and phase-out existing coal plants.

Faith communities have been influential in each aspect of the transition away from coal and toward clean energy. We do this because of our love of creation, and our call to justice and the common good.

Leave Coal in the Ground

Keeping coal in the ground has been a major commitment of the faith community around the US. Evangelicals, led by Matthew Sleeth and others, have been instrumental in calling attention to the destruction of an entire region through mountain top removal mining in the coal states of Appalachia. Fr. John Rausch of the Catholic bishop's Committee of Appalachia has also led a powerful advocacy effort on behalf of the mountains and people of these Eastern communities.

Today, more than 500 mountains and 1.2 million acres of hardwood forests (about the size of Delaware) have fallen to mountain top removal. Earth Ministry's Interfaith Power & Light partners in the Southeast have been tireless advocates for an end to this devastating form of mining and to the dominion of coal. The efforts of these groups are beginning to succeed as the federal Environmental Protection Agency has for the first time denied a permit for mountain top removal.

Increased regulation of coal ash and other toxic effluents will increase pressure on Massey Energy, Arch Coal, and other huge strip-miners to leave the coal in the ground.

No New Coal Plants

In the inspiring short film *Covenant*, religious leaders in Texas join with a Republican state representative to stop permitting of 19 proposed coal plants around the state. Strong leadership from Texas Interfaith Power & Light, the Texas Conference of Catholic Bishops, and many other religious groups resulted in a leveraged buyout of the utility proposing 11 of the 19 plants, immediately taking all but three of their proposed plants off the table. Once a coal plant is built, the pollution from that facility is locked in for 50 years, and so halting new construction is vital. It is an unsung victory of the faith and environment movement that the great majority of proposed new coal plants will never be built.

Phase-out Existing Coal Plants and Invest in Economic Development

At the same time that grassroots and religious leaders around the US are stopping construction of new coal plants and leading public prayer to halt mountain top removal mining, faith communities in the Northwest states of Oregon and Washington have the opportunity to make ours the first coal-free region. This is an achievable goal, as there is currently only one coal plant in each state.

Earth Ministry and the Environmental Priorities Coalition of Washington have chosen Coal Free Future for Washington as one of its four top legislative goals for 2011. Washington families want protection from the state's single largest source of dangerous air pollution, the TransAlta coal-fired power plant in Centralia. This legislation will invest in the local community to stimulate economic development that will provide new opportunities for workers affected by the transition off of coal. The legislative package will also transition the dirty plant off coal in order to address Washington citizens' widespread concerns about the health impacts of coal.

We know, however, that any change on the scale of moving an industrial economy from dirty energy to sustainable power has consequences. In particular, the faith community is concerned for the roughly 200 workers at the TransAlta plant who may lose their jobs in changing from coal to clean energy by 2015. Earth Ministry and Washington Interfaith Power & Light are brokering dialogue among faith, labor, environmental and business leaders to find a path forward – one that both protects creation and gives workers opportunities for family-wage jobs.

A Faithful Commitment

Shifting American energy sources away from coal and toward clean energy is very difficult but very winnable goal. It took far more than one hundred years to end slavery, and economic interests were well-entrenched to keep humans as chattel. The public health campaign to make people aware of the deadly consequences of smoking lasted close to fifty years and we endured much “smoking does not cause cancer” misinformation. Protecting God's creation and changing the way we use energy as a world community is not an easy task, but one that can be achieved if each of us does our share.

Earth Ministry and the broader religious environmental movement are growing in strength, resolve, and influence every day. People of all faiths are providing reinforcement, hope, and moral clarity to the movement to end coal-dependence. With God's grace and the courage it gives us, we will uphold our responsibility to nature and the Creator. Please join Earth Ministry in faithfully advocating for a move beyond coal.