

TESTIMONY OF JOHN S. HILL
DIRECTOR – ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
GENERAL BOARD OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Good Afternoon. My name is John Hill and I serve as Director for Economic and Environmental Justice at the General Board of Church and Society, the international public policy and social justice agency of The United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church has approximately 11.3 million members worldwide, 8.3 million of which reside in the United States.

I am here today as a person of faith to speak out against the proposed changes in the buffer zone rule – changes aimed at legalizing waste dumping in streams and expediting the outrageous practice of mountaintop removal coal mining.

The Christian faith tradition teaches that all of Creation is a sacred gift from God that is to be celebrated and protected. The mountains, the rivers, the streams -- the very presence of the created world -- are all evidence of God's love for us. As The United Methodist Social Principles state, "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." (§ 160 – The Natural World)

The practice of mountaintop removal is anything but an act of loving care and respect. It desecrates the natural beauty of the mountain and the surrounding valleys and streams which are filled with waste, blast rock and dust. It destroys the homes of nearby residents and sacred lands where generations have lived and died. We cannot stand by while timeless, sacred mountains are turned into heaps of rubble for the sake of corporate profit and to feed our nation's unsustainable dependence on fossil fuels if we believe ourselves to be stewards of God's creation. Such desecration highlights the degree to which we see the created world as simply a resource for human use and abuse.

The proposed changes to the buffer zone rule are the latest in a series of actions by the current Administration to ensure that mountaintop removal coal mining operations continue unabated. The proposed rule would remove one of the critical tools under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act used to protect streams and challenge mountaintop removal operations. Rather than using regulatory authority to expedite this destructive practice, the Administration should be using its full legal authority to halt it altogether.

The United Methodist Church speaks officially through its General Conference which meets every four years. The 2000 General Conference spoke clearly in opposition to this practice when it adopted a resolution titled "Cease Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining" (*2000 Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, Resolution 3*) I would ask that the text of the full resolution be entered into the hearing record at this time. Briefly, the resolution highlights the cost of these operations to both the natural world and the

human community and asks state and national regulatory agencies to halt the practice of mountaintop removal.

In response to this resolution of our denomination, the General Board of Church and Society has worked alongside other faith organizations, including the Appalachian Ministry Network and the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, to lift up the voices of those most affected by these operations – many of whom you have heard at this hearing today. We will continue to share the stories of the victims of mountaintop removal with United Methodists around the country and work through education and advocacy to end this practice.

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. By some estimates, mountaintop removal mining has leveled between 15 and 25 percent of southern West Virginia’s mountains, burying more than 1,000 miles of streams and leveling 300,000 acres of hardwood forests.

Those are not the actions of a steward of the land – rather these actions fulfill the prophetic words of Isaiah who said “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)

And yet, as people of faith, we also understand God’s healing power and promise. 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 heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” God will heal the land, but we must first humble ourselves and change our ways.

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. Thank you.

For further information, contact:
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Or visit www.umc-gbcs.org

Only General Conference speaks officially for The United Methodist Church. The General Board of Church and Society is the international social justice and public policy agency of The United Methodist Church.

3. Cease Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining

(2000 Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church)

WHEREAS, mountaintop removal coal mining is extremely profitable to the coal companies who practice it; and

WHEREAS, a large part of its profitability is that fewer miners are required than in the usual traditional methods of coal mining, and

WHEREAS, the entire tops of West Virginia mountains have been removed at Kayford, Kanawha County, at Blair, Boone County, at Sharpless, Logan County, and at Spruce River, Boone County, and at Wise County, Virginia, and mountaintop removal projects are proposed in Kentucky and Tennessee, and

WHEREAS, this removal of mountaintops has resulted in severe damage to homes of persons living in the nearby communities, along with damage to wells, the bombarding of their homes with "blast rock," and massive amounts of dust, and

WHEREAS, the millions and millions of tons of earth and rock removed from the tops of mountains are dumped into the valleys next to these mountains, totally destroying the springs and headwaters of streams in these valleys, along with all plant and animal life in them, and

WHEREAS, mountaintop removal mining, by destroying home places, is also destroying ancestral ground, sacred ground where generations after generations have lived, gone to church, married, made and birthed babies, taken family meals, slept in peace, died and been buried, and

WHEREAS, staff employees of the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Natural Resources testified before the West Virginia Legislature in its 1998 session that the long-term effect of mountaintop removal is unstudied and unknown, and that it should be stopped until its long-term effects are known, and

WHEREAS, Psalm 24:1 firmly reminds us that "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; and the world and they that dwell therein," and

WHEREAS, the sanctity and sacredness of human life and the natural environment should not be destroyed in the name of corporate profit,

Therefore, be it resolved, that the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, meeting in Cleveland, Ohio in May of the year 2000, implore those state and national governmental and regulatory agencies involved in mountaintop removal mining to halt this practice until scientific study of its long-term effect on human life and the natural environment has been accomplished.

ADOPTED 2000

See Social Principles, ¶ 160A.