

W.Va. churches taking 'hard walk' on mining
Council's position unpopular in state dependent on coal
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By Sean D. Hamill, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



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The Rev. Dennis Sparks, executive director of the West Virginia Council of Churches at his office in Charleston.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- The Rev. Dennis Sparks calls it "the hard walk."

That's what you have to do when your religious organization decides to take a position -- in, of all places, West Virginia -- saying mountaintop removal mining is against God's will, but also raises money for the families of miners who died in accidents, and organizes a meeting to cool the debate over coal issues.

As a result, it has been loved and loathed by mining interests and mine families, acting as both an agitator on issues and friendly comforter in times of crisis. But it still manages to act as an intermediary, as it did at the extraordinary meeting it arranged in January with Gov. Joe Manchin, environmentalists and the United Mine Workers to talk about nonviolent communication.

"That's the hard walk we have to take, because it is hard to walk between those" positions and actions the West Virginia Council of Churches has taken on coal, said Rev. Sparks, the council's executive director for the past eight years.

"So when the Upper Big Branch disaster happened I didn't say, 'Gee, I've been criticized by some mining companies, or some miner, because of our position on mountaintop removal, so I'm not going down there,' " he said.

"You set aside whatever political differences you have when a crisis happens and you help."

Some of that help will be realized starting as early as this week when the council begins sending out checks from the \$870,000 it raised -- at Gov. Manchin's request -- for the families of the 29 men who died and the two men who were injured in the April 5 Upper Big Branch Mine explosion.

"From that standpoint, it's a very credible and very good organization," Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, said of the fundraising.

"But for an organization to be opposed to the way many of its members make their living [in mountaintop mining] as I've told them, that just doesn't make any sense to me."

If it might seem perilous for the council to take such seemingly contradictory positions on the most sensitive economic issue in West Virginia, you have to realize that this isn't just any not-for-profit religious group.

The 130-year-old council is the oldest, largest and, arguably, the most powerful religious umbrella group in the state, representing nearly 3,000 Christian churches of various denominations with nearly 600,000 parishioners among them -- or roughly one out of every three residents of the state.

"There's no doubt they can influence a few people in the House and the Senate down here," said Ted Hapney, the United Mine Workers' representative for West Virginia.

Much of that influence is due to the council's history and size. But over the past five years, it also has been, in part, because of the close relationship between Rev. Sparks and Gov. Manchin, who attends a council member church.

"One of the reasons a lot of groups that might not normally respond to us is they know the governor will take my call," Rev. Sparks said.

Although the council is best known in the state as a trusted social service organization -- supporting children's health care, helping veterans transition back into society, natural disaster recovery, among other efforts -- over the past decade it also has become increasingly involved in environmental debates.

In the late 1990s, it advocated fighting global warming and began looking into the environmental impact of mountaintop removal mining, but stopped short of calling for its end.

But in September 2007, after a yearlong debate, the council stepped fully into the coal debate by taking a policy stance against mountaintop removal mining.

Although there were clearly some parishioners and even some pastors upset with it, not one of the member churches lodged an official protest opposing the stance.

Officially, Rev. Sparks and other council members like to point out, the policy simply calls for "the strictest possible enforcement" of the Surface Mining and Reclamation Control Act and the Clean Water Act.

But they acknowledge -- sometimes indirectly -- that if the laws were interpreted and enforced the way they believe they should be, mountaintop removal mining would largely end. That's because mining companies would not be allowed to move rubble left behind from the process into the valleys next to the sites, covering streams.

"That may be. But I'm not going to say that. We'll leave [the coal companies] to say that," said Bishop William Boyd Grove, the retired bishop of the United Methodist Church of West Virginia, who helped write the council's policy.

The coal companies do say that.

"They don't seem to care about the jobs that would be lost because of this" if their statement was followed, said Mr. Raney of the Coal Association, which represents most of the coal companies that operate in the state.

The statement cites four Bible passages to support the council's stance that "we cannot stand by while our mountains are being devastated," including Psalms 24:1 that says: "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; and the world, and they that dwell therein."

But Mr. Raney, who also attends a council member church, sees it differently.

"I think [mountaintop removal] is right in the eyes of the Lord," said Mr. Raney. "He gave us stewardship of the land, and he put those resources in the mountains for us to use."

If the statement upset coal interests, it heartened environmentalists, even if they thought the council could have gone much further.

"I'd like to see a stronger stance," said Vernon Haltom, co-director of the Coal River Mountain Watch, one of the environmental groups that have been involved in protests against mountaintop removal. "But I understand for them that's probably the strongest stance they could take."

Starting in February 2009, activists began adopting tactics used in battles over the old-growth forest logging in the Western United States, chaining themselves to dump trucks, cranes or some other piece of coal mining equipment.

They also did protest marches and sit-ins, and, for the first time, "tree-sits" were used, in which a protester would climb to the top of a tall tree near a mountaintop removal site and live for days or weeks at a time, preventing the blasting that precedes the mining.

As a result, "there's a lot of tension on both sides," said Sgt. Mike Smith, commander of the West Virginia State Police's Whitesville detachment, which covers the area where most of the protests have taken place.

"The miners feel these folks are coming in trying to take their jobs away and criticize their way of life, and the environmentalists feel they're here to save the world."

More than 100 people were arrested making anti-mountaintop removal protests from February 2009 until April 2010, when the protests were largely put on hold in the wake of the Upper Big Branch disaster.

But as the protests heated up last year, on June 23, 2009, in one infamous case widely viewed on YouTube.com, the wife of a miner slapped a well-known anti-mountaintop removal activist, Judy Bonds, during a march.

Two weeks later, on July 4, a group of pro-mining residents came out to an environmentalist picnic on Kayford Mountain, and one of them made a throat-slashing gesture that also was captured and posted on YouTube.

On top of that, Rev. Sparks said he and others began to notice that even statements from politicians seemed to OK the increasingly violent conduct, and they began to fear the worst.

"The tensions were running so high, all of us could see how someone could get killed," said country music star Kathy Mattea, who grew up in South Charleston and became involved in the mountaintop removal debate three years ago. Not coincidentally, her most recent album is titled "Coal."

Two years ago, she met Rev. Sparks and was impressed with his and the council's work around coal issues.

Last winter together they asked Gov. Manchin to sit down with leaders from both sides to talk about the increasingly violent rhetoric and potential for violence in the coal fields. They even offered to bring in an expert on nonviolent communication, John Kinyon, from California.

The governor -- who supports mountaintop removal -- agreed for one basic reason, said Jim Pitrolo, the governor's legislative and policy director.

"I don't know if there was a concern of immediate violence. He was more concerned with both sides talking to each other," Mr. Pitrolo said.

So on Jan. 24 at the governor's mansion, Gov. Manchin, his wife, Gayle, and Mr. Pitrolo met with Rev. Sparks, Mr. Kinyon, Ms. Mattea, activist Si Kahn, Mr. Hapney from the UMW, Mr. Haltom and Maria Gunnoe from the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition. Mr. Raney was invited but couldn't attend.

At the beginning of the extraordinary meeting, the group was told that Gov. Manchin and his wife would be able to stay for only an hour or two.

But after a grilled chicken and asparagus dinner, the group began an informal conversation -- moderated by Mr. Kinyon -- that lasted four hours. The governor and his wife stayed the entire time.

"The conversation was very interesting," Mr. Pitrolo said when asked what compelled the governor and his wife to stay late into the evening.

But Ms. Gunnoe, who has faced threats herself because of her anti-mountaintop removal stance, said: "I can't help but think the governor stayed because he really wasn't aware of the real threats of violence we live with every day."

The meeting had at least one immediate impact. The next day Gov. Manchin made a public statement about the increasing tension: "There is no place in West Virginia for violence. I won't tolerate violence and my West Virginia State Police won't tolerate it. We must have peaceful dialogue about these passionate issues."

For his part, Rev. Sparks, who hopes to host another similar meeting in the future, said his favorite result of the meeting was the meeting itself: "Everyone was talking and listening to each other."

Has it solved the problems over the debate of mountaintop removal?

"No," Rev. Sparks said, "but it was a start."

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