



Connecting Faith and Life

volume 16, number 4
may 23, 2010

Session at a Glance

The mining disaster in West Virginia has caused us to think again about the safety of the workers who mine coal. How dependent are we on coal? What more can we do to protect workers? How can our faith inform our actions?

FAITHLINK is available by subscription via e-mail (subservices@abingdonpress.com) or by downloading it from the Web (www.cokesbury.com/faithlink). Print in either color or black and white.

Find us on Facebook.
Follow us on Twitter.

Copyright © 2010 by Cokesbury. Permission given to copy this page for use in class.



Coal Mining Safety

by Rebekah Jordan Gienapp and Alex Joyner

A Deadly Accident

On April 5, an explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in Mont-coal, West Virginia, killed twenty-nine coal miners in the deadliest mine accident in twenty-five years. While the cause of the explosion is still under investigation, two miners reported to *The New York Times* that the mine had been evacuated three times in the previous two months because of dangerously high methane gas levels.

As the families of these miners and their entire community grieve, questions have again been raised about what can be done to prevent these deadly accidents. Even though coal mining is an inherently dangerous activity, are mining companies and government agencies doing all they can to keep workers safe?

A History of Safety Violations

The Upper Big Branch mine is owned by Massey Energy, the largest coal mine operator in central Appalachia. In March, the mine was cited for fifty-three safety violations by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). Last year the number of citations against the mine was over 500, more than double the previous year's total.

Massey's CEO, Don Blankenship, has defended the company's safety record, saying that the MSHA never would have allowed the mine to operate if it had been too unsafe for workers. "Violations are unfortunately a normal part of the mining process," he said. "There are violations at every coal mine in America."

Massey Energy's website states that 2009 was the seventeenth year out of twenty that the company's safety record was better than the national coal mining average. However, J. Davitt McAteer, a former assistant director of the MSHA, said that Massey is "certainly one of the worst in the industry" in terms of its safety violations.

Massey's commitment to workers' safety previously came into question in 2005 because of a company memo from Blankenship that seemed to encourage employees to place production needs ahead of safety. "If any of you have been asked by your group presidents, your supervisors, engineers or anyone else to do anything other than run coal (i.e., build overcasts, do construction jobs, or whatever), you need to ignore them and run coal," the memo stated. *Overcasts* are structures that help funnel air to working sections of a mine and dilute methane. A follow-up memo from Blankenship said that some may have misunderstood his first memo, but that safety was the company's "first responsibility."

Core Bible Passages

Job 28:1-4 describes in haunting terms the existence of miners who “search out to the farthest bound / the ore in gloom and deep darkness.” The passage goes on to say the miners are forgotten, and that they “sway suspended, remote from people.” Today’s miners also are usually far from the minds of anyone who does not live in a mining community, even while they extract resources that almost all of us use.

Psalms 23 expresses trust that God will be with us even in the valley of the shadow of death (**verse 4**). Many miners express this sense of God’s continual presence in difficult circumstances as they reflect on the danger of their work.

Jeremiah 22:13-17 speaks of God’s justice in the workplace. It is an oracle against a king who builds a palace through injustice, withholding his neighbors’ wages. The king is accused of setting his heart on dishonest gain and shedding innocent blood through the practice of oppression and violence. Jeremiah calls on him to remember that treating the poor and needy with justice is knowing God.

The threat of death from disease and disaster is a continual reality for coal miners. **Revelation 21:3-4** speaks of God’s future renewal of creation, where God will wipe away every tear. Death will end, along with mourning and pain, “for the first things have passed away.”

Preventing More Accidents

As of this writing, Congress has begun hearings on the disaster at Upper Big Branch mine. At a Senate hearing in late April, Joe Main, the Assistant Secretary of Labor for the MSHA, said the MSHA needs greater authority from Congress to investigate and punish violators of safety regulations. Main specifically pointed to the need to be able to subpoena testimony during investigations and to be able to issue stiffer criminal penalties for the most serious offenses.

Senators raised questions about why the MSHA had not been tougher on Massey for the hundreds of safety citations it received at the Upper Big Branch mine. Main responded that the Obama administration was prepared to use its authority to immediately shut down dangerous mines—something officials have rarely done in the past—but that it still needed additional methods to stop violators.

One of the challenges to ending patterns of unsafe conditions is that mining companies have the right to appeal safety citations against them before paying fines or being shut down. Because of this, there is currently a backlog of 16,000 cases to be reviewed. MSHA records show that Massey Energy, for example, contested 97 percent of its serious safety citations in 2007.

Not everyone agrees that additional regulations will necessarily prevent miners’ deaths. Economist Price Fishback admits that though some specific regulations in the early twentieth century did reduce the number of mining accidents, regulations are not usually passed until larger, leading companies support them. This means they usually reflect practices that those leading companies in an industry have already adopted and therefore do not affect many workers. Fishback points to fear of bad publicity and declining stock prices in the face of accidents, as well as workers’ compensation insurance requirements, as more significant incentives for companies to operate safely.

Factors Discouraging Safety

Although Massey Energy has a particularly problematic safety record, experts on coal mining and worker safety point to other factors endangering mine workers that are not specific just to Massey. While some technology has allowed mining to become less dangerous, Georgetown University business professor Beverly Sauer points out that sometimes automation of mining has replaced “common-sense mining precepts. Previously, for example, conveyor belts in ventilation shafts were not permissible—for good reason.” Sauer explains that conveyor belts carry potentially explosive coal dust to the mine surface, and the friction from the rubber belts can be a fire hazard. Air present in the ventilation shafts can feed a fire and trap miners inside the mine.

Author Jeff Goodell, who has written two books on coal and environmental issues, points out that underground coal mining is particularly risky in Appalachia. Mining has taken place there for so long that most of the coal that is less dangerous to extract has already been removed. Goodell

Miners' Faith

A number of news stories about the Upper Big Branch mine disaster have pointed to the deep faith of miners and their families as a source of strength through the tragedy. Former miner Ronnie McKinney stated, "The Lord is our shepherd. Hey, you can say that, but he really goes with us down to the dark, cold mines and brought us out time and again."

An ABC News story profiled several mining families and pointed to their faith as the reason they were not angry at Massey Energy. Pastor Jeffrey Perdue, whose son and brother both still work at the Upper Big Branch mine, told a reporter, "We're all going to die. Things happen, accidents happen. . . . That day's done and past and now we can only pray."

Yet some miners' faith may call them to challenge unfair practices by the company. In his book *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust*, historian Richard Callahan talks about early-twentieth-century coal miners who were also preachers. Some used the story of the Exodus to support the idea that miners should have a union to protect them. Callahan also points to the modern example of the 2006 Sago mine disaster, after which mining families flocked to churches both to pray and to determine what actions to take in response to the accident.

also points to politics and the influence of the coal industry as another reason why conditions are not safer for miners. He asserts that lobbying by coal operators inevitably leads to weakening of proposed safety legislation. "The real lesson of [the Upper Big Branch] tragedy may be that the best way to make mines safer is to make politics cleaner," Goodell writes.

Union representation for workers is a factor likely to make some mines safer than others. David Moberg of *In These Times* magazine found that between 2006 and 2009, miners in union mines were between 25–50 percent less likely to be killed in mining accidents than workers in non-union mines. In an April article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Bobby Gray, who works in a non-union mine, said he would rather work in a union mine because the union provides safety representatives. Former Massey miner Jimmy Platt stated that the primary difference between working for a mine with a union versus working for a non-union mine was "the right to say no."

Black Lung Disease

While dangerous accidents that kill multiple workers cause us to ask questions about miner safety, we are far less likely to talk about a deadlier problem for miners: pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease. Anita Wolfe of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health points out that in 2004, twenty-eight miners died from safety problems in mines, while more than 700 died from black lung disease. The disease occurs when the dust from excessive mining seeps into miners' lungs. Scar tissue forms on the lungs, which makes them less able to circulate oxygen.

Because there are currently fewer miners in the United States than in previous periods, the overall number of miners with black lung disease has decreased. However, the percentage of miners who do contract the disease is increasing, and researchers are not certain why. According to epidemiologist Mike Attfield, it may be because production of coal has greatly increased through technology, which means workers are breathing in more dust. Miners are also more likely to work twelve-hour shifts than in the past, which means they are breathing in 50 percent more dust per shift. Longer shifts mean less time away from the mine to cough up the coal dust.

Our Dependence on Miners

While those of us who do not live in a mining community may not always think about the safety and health concerns of coal miners, most of us rely on coal miners' work to supply at least part of our electricity. In January 2010, coal-powered electricity plants supplied 48 percent of the nation's electric power.

Recognizing our dependence on miners who risk their lives daily, United Methodist pastor L. A. McCrae organized a twenty-nine-minute "Black Out for Miners" on April 29. He participated in an Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center immersion trip earlier this year. Seminarians participating in the trip asked people to unplug their appliances for twenty-nine minutes in honor of the twenty-nine miners who

Mining Disasters and Regulation

Tony Oppegard, a former official with the MSHA, stated after the disaster at the Upper Big Branch mine that legislation regulating coal mining is “always born out of disaster . . . the safety laws are always written with the blood of miners.”

MSHA’s website describes several incidents that moved new mine safety legislation forward. In 1907, an explosion at the Fairmont Coal Company in Monongah, West Virginia, killed 362 men and boys. Congress soon strengthened mining regulations. That decade was an especially deadly one, with an average of more than 2,000 mining deaths each year. In 1910, Congress established the Bureau of Mines and ordered it to carry out research and reduce accidents in coal mining.

But it was not until an explosion and fire killed seventy-eight men in Farmington, West Virginia, in 1968 that the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 was finally passed. The act significantly strengthened governmental enforcement tools such as annual mine inspections and penalties for unsafe conditions. For the first time, coal miners were given the right to ask for an inspection when they believed conditions were unsafe. After the 2006 explosion at the Sago mine killed twelve workers, all underground mines were required to build refuge chambers.

Historian Sean Patrick Adams describes this history of disaster followed by regulation as “spikes of demonstrative sympathy sandwiched between periods of public indifference.” He warns that to be most effective in reducing mining deaths, the public must be more steadfast in their concern about miners’ working conditions.

died. The group hopes that participation in the blackout will encourage conversation about the “the pandemic poverty in Appalachia that contributes to such disasters.” While McCrae and his fellow seminarians had the opportunity to connect personally with the people of mining communities, he points out that “these miners gave their lives gathering raw material for our energy use. We should all care.”

God’s love for the twenty-nine miners who died in the Upper Big Branch accident last month calls us to respond with compassion and justice. Long after the headlines fade, God still calls us to speak and act for wholeness and justice with our brothers and sisters who walk through the valley of the shadow of death each day.

United Methodism and Worker Safety

In 1908, the Methodist Federation for Social Service pressed the Methodist Episcopal Church to adopt its first Social Creed. The creed, which was passed at General Conference that year, raised up eleven social reforms for the church to uphold, most of which were related to the workplace. Abolishing child labor, protecting workers “from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries and mortality,” reducing work hours and having a sabbath day for all workers, and establishing a “living wage in every industry” were among the reforms that were championed by the creed. The last statement of the creed states that the Methodist Episcopal Church stands for “the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills.”

The current Social Creed of The United Methodist Church reflects the Social Principles. Paragraph 163C of the Social Principles emphasizes that the needs of persons are more important than the desire for profits. Worker safety is addressed in the statement that “we support rights of workers to refuse to work in situations that endanger health and/or life without jeopardy to their jobs” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*; page 536).

Rebekah Jordan Gienapp is an ordained deacon in the Memphis Conference and the executive director of Workers Interfaith Network.

Alex Joyner is the pastor of Franktown United Methodist Church on Virginia’s Eastern Shore.

FAITHLINK: Connecting Faith and Life is a weekly, topical study and an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by the General Board of Discipleship and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House; 201 Eighth Avenue, South; P.O. Box 801; Nashville, Tennessee 37202-0801. Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved. **Permission is granted to photocopy pages 1–4 of this resource for use in FAITHLINK study groups.** All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication.

Fax **comments** to FAITHLINK, 615-749-6512, or send e-mail to Pamela Dilmore, Lead Editor, pdilmore@umpublishing.org, or Mickey Frith, Associate Editor, mfrith@umpublishing.org. For **fax problems**, fax FREE to 800-445-8189. For **e-mail problems**, send e-mail to Cokes_Serv@umpublishing.org. To **order**, call 800-672-1789, or visit our website at www.cokesbury.com/faithlink.



Coal Mining Safety

What more can we do to protect coal miners? How can our faith inform our actions?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from "Teaching Alternatives" to plan the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Ask participants to visualize the work of coal miners in dark, cramped, and dangerous underground mines. Then pray together the Twenty-third Psalm as a prayer not only for ourselves, but also for those workers who confront potentially deadly situations on a regular basis.

Consider the Safety of Your Workplace

Explain that today's study will focus on the safety and health of coal mine workers, particularly in response to the death of twenty-nine miners at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia. Ask: Do you feel that your places of employment provide you with a safe and healthy working environment? Why or why not? Participants could also consider past jobs or the present jobs of their family members. Are there any factors that put you or a loved one at risk? Are there certain jobs you would not consider taking because of the potential harm to your health or life?

EXPLORE the Topic

Examine Massey Energy's Safety Record

Review "A Deadly Accident" and "A History of Safety Violations" (page 1). Ask: How do you respond to the statements about Massey Energy's safety record? What light does this shed on the explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine? Does CEO Don Blankenship's assertion that all coal mines have safety violations affect your view of the accident? What message do you think Blankenship was trying to convey to employees in his memo about running coal before other tasks?

Explore Government's Role

Read "Preventing More Accidents" (page 2) and "Mining Disasters and Regulation" (page 4). Talk about the following questions: Do you believe that the MSHA could do more to protect workers without new regulations? Why or why not? What effect could proposed reforms, such as greater criminal penalties for mine operators or MSHA being able to subpoena testimony, have on the industry and on workers? How do you respond to economist Price Fishback's claim that other factors besides regulation are more likely to prevent deadly accidents?

Study Scripture

Form three teams. Ask Team 1 to read Psalm 23, Team 2 to read Jeremiah 22:13-17, and Team 3 to read Revelation 21:3-4. For Psalm 23, talk about why this psalm is so meaningful to many Christians. How could it especially speak to the experience of miners? For the Jeremiah passage, talk about why the king is being judged. What similarities and differences do you see between the treatment of today's miners with the workers mentioned in the passage? For Revelation, talk about what thoughts or feelings the image of God wiping away every tear brings to

mind. Do you see relevance in the promise of the passage for our lives today, or only for a future time? Explain. Have each team report the highlights of their discussion to the entire group.

Discuss Safety and Health at Work

Review “Black Lung Disease” (page 3), pointing out the much greater number of miners who die from the disease than those who die from mining accidents. While miner safety has received a flurry of media attention since the Upper Big Branch accident, miner health and black lung disease have received little attention. Why do accidents generate more political and community concern than diseases such as black lung? Consider epidemiologist Mike Attfield’s theories about why the percentage of miners with black lung disease may be increasing. Ask: What changes do you think need to be made to mining practices?

Explore Methodism and Worker Safety

Read “United Methodism and Worker Safety” (page 4). According to Darren Cushman Wood, author of the book *Blue Collar Jesus: How Christianity Supports Workers’ Rights*, Methodism is the Protestant denomination that historically has stood most consistently for workers’ rights. Why do you think so many of the social concerns raised up in the 1908 Methodist Episcopal Social Creed were related to the workplace? How might “the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ” change our workplace practices today, in mining and in other industries? The current Social Principles emphasize the importance of workers being able to say no to dangerous working conditions without the fear of losing their jobs. How might the fear of being fired have affected the willingness of Upper Big Branch miners to raise safety concerns?

Consider Your Dependence on Coal

Read “Our Dependence on Miners” (pages 3–4). Does knowing that nearly half of the United States’ electrical power comes from coal affect how you think about your relationship to the issues discussed in this session? Do you think reducing your community’s energy use would have any effect on the safety of mining workers? Why or why not? What responsibilities do we have to workers who provide for our daily needs, even if we do not know them?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

Close your time together by praying petitions brought to mind by your discussion, or use the following prayer: O God, we know that you are always working for good in your world. We mourn the lives lost—now and in the past—of workers in the mines. We ask that you give our nation the steadfastness of purpose it will take to protect the lives of miners. Give us your discernment about how to use your earth’s resources wisely to provide for the needs of all. Help us never to forget or take for granted the work that others do on our behalf. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- Although the official observance of a twenty-nine-minute blackout for coal miners was on April 29, consider organizing a similar observance for your congregation. Invite participants to refrain from using any electricity for a brief period in honor of the coal miners who died at Upper Big Branch. Organize a discussion of our dependence on coal for energy use and ways we might reduce that dependency and ensure safer conditions for miners.

- Check with your pastor or your annual conference’s office to see if any Volunteer in Mission teams or other mission groups have traveled recently to coal mining communities. Perhaps a member of the team could speak with your congregation about what he or she learned about the lives of people in coal mining communities.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Memorial Day Sunday

On Memorial Day, many Americans remember those who have sacrificed their lives in the service of our country. What is the value of such sacred memory? How does our Christian faith help us find unity, healing, and hope through the act of remembering?