



VIRGINIA EPISCOPALIAN

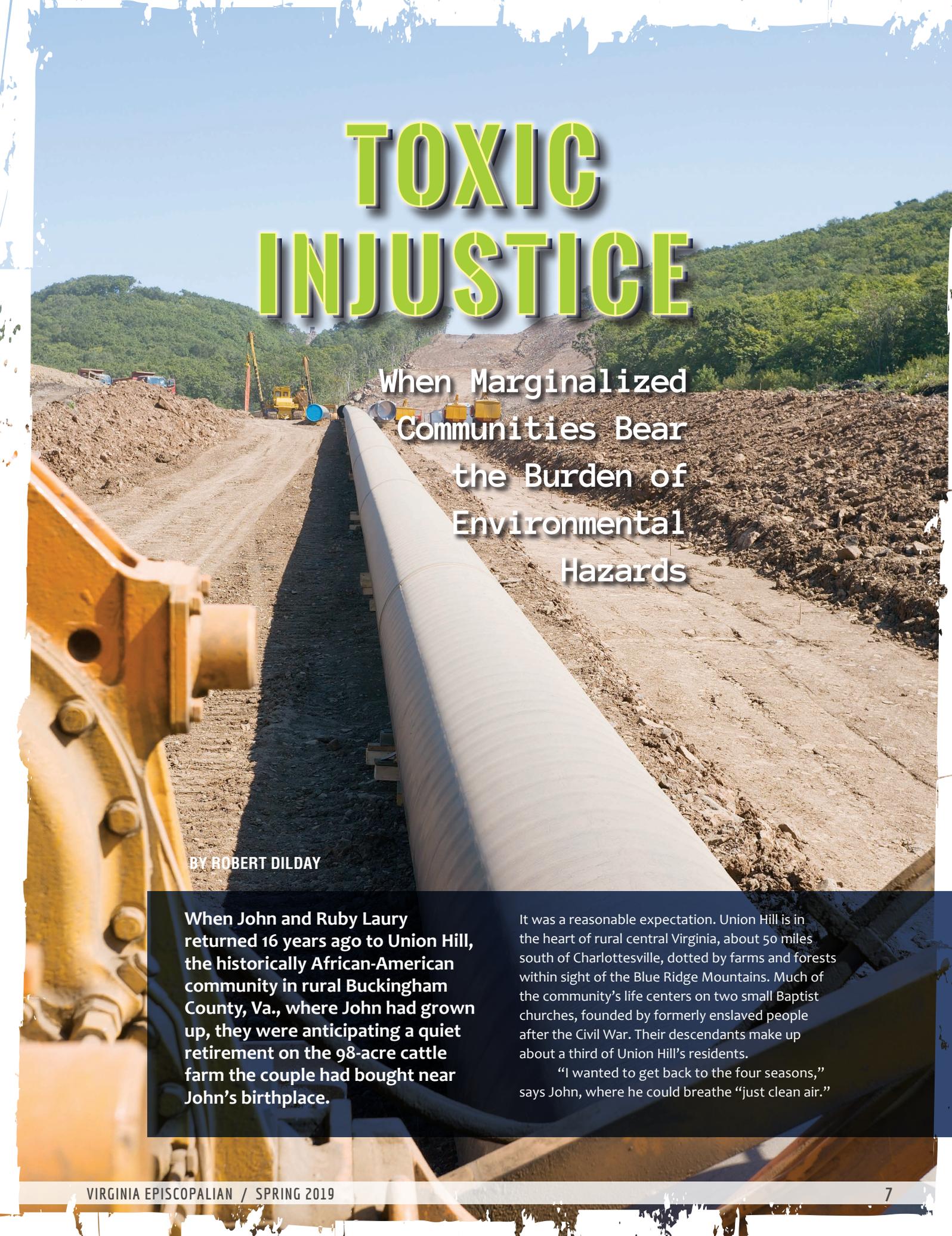
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TOXIC INJUSTICE

Ecological Crisis in Marginalized Communities

FOR JESUS. FOR THIS TIME. FOR ALL TIME.



TOXIC INJUSTICE

When Marginalized
Communities Bear
the Burden of
Environmental
Hazards

BY ROBERT DILDAY

When John and Ruby Laury returned 16 years ago to Union Hill, the historically African-American community in rural Buckingham County, Va., where John had grown up, they were anticipating a quiet retirement on the 98-acre cattle farm the couple had bought near John's birthplace.

It was a reasonable expectation. Union Hill is in the heart of rural central Virginia, about 50 miles south of Charlottesville, dotted by farms and forests within sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Much of the community's life centers on two small Baptist churches, founded by formerly enslaved people after the Civil War. Their descendants make up about a third of Union Hill's residents.

"I wanted to get back to the four seasons," says John, where he could breathe "just clean air."

So the Laurys were shocked to learn in 2014 that, just down the road, Dominion Energy would build one of three large compressor stations for the company's proposed \$7 billion fracked-gas pipeline project.

Dominion's 600-mile Atlantic Coast Pipeline, if completed, will carry natural gas from West Virginia's fracking fields, through Virginia into North Carolina and perhaps further south. Compressor stations are essential to keep the gas flowing through pipelines, but several times a year "blow down events" – necessary to relieve pressure – release toxic emissions such as methane, nitrogen dioxides, particulate matter and volatile organic compounds. The compressors' loud noises are heard 24 hours a day and, in rare instances, they explode.

Pastor Paul Wilson, who has led Union Hill and Union Grove Baptist churches for nearly two decades, calls the community "sacrificial lamb."

"This whole pipeline is based on false premises," he said at one of many public hearings held on the project. "Politicians were bought off, and this county had no choice but to say yes."

Buckingham County's plight is only one of multiple examples across the United States of environmental injustice, a concept that emerged in the 1980s as environmentalists awakened to the impact on historically marginalized communities from fossil-fuel infrastructure and the disposal of waste from energy sources. While the devastating effect on the planet's climate of continuing to burn fossil fuels remains a top concern and "keeping it in the ground" a key priority, those who care for creation increasingly realize that communities of color and poverty are consistent sites for unwanted infrastructure and disposal – in part because energy companies and state regulators assume that residents will be unable to resist powerful political forces.

The historically African-American community in Buckingham isn't the only victim of environmental injustice. The Atlantic Coast Pipeline's proposed route begins in West Virginia's economically depressed Appalachian communities and ends in Robeson County, N.C., home to the largest indigenous tribe east of the Mississippi River.

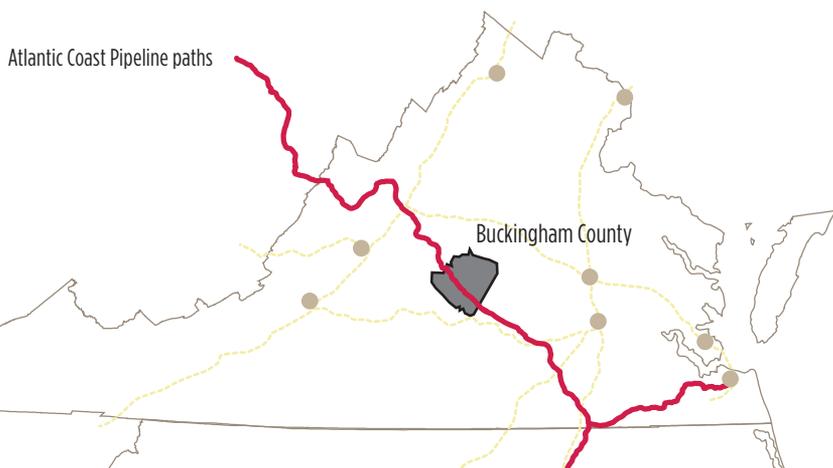
In Southwest Virginia, the Mountain Valley Pipeline follows a similar pattern. A disproportionate number of minority communities across the nation play host to landfills, incinerators, and other potentially toxic facilities – "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is only one example.

The burgeoning construction of natural gas pipelines across the U.S. – prompted by the discovery in the 1990s of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking – are expanding examples of environmental injustice. One that captured national attention is the Dakota Access Pipeline which plowed through ancestral lands of indigenous tribes on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota.

The situation is especially acute in Buckingham County. An antebellum plantation there, known as Variety Shade, gave rise to the Union Hill community and, after the Civil War, the two churches at the center of it. Unmarked graves



John Laurys



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Episcopal Church Creation Care Pledge

Join Presiding Bishop Michael Curry in making the Pledge to Care for Creation. It's a promise to protect and renew the Earth and all who call it home. It's a promise to share stories, stand with those who are most vulnerable, and live more gently on the Earth. For more information, go to www.episcopalchurch.org/creation-care/pledge.

Interfaith Alliance for Climate Justice

The mission of the IACJ is to be faithful stewards of creation by supporting resistance to its degradation and exploitation. This ministry intends to provide resources to those who protect the earth's ecosystems, safeguard public health, and ensure sufficient, sustainable energy for people. For more information, go to www.iacj.org or find it on Facebook.

Diocese of Virginia Creation Care Task Force

Through sharing faith, information and ideas for care of creation, this task force helps church members, parishes and missions of the diocese consider environmental issues as religious concerns. For more information, go to www.caringforgodscreations.com.



In April, Scott Ziemer, 69, of Albemarle County, Va., replaced one of the tree sitters along the path of Mountain Valley Pipeline, where tree sitters have been protesting for more than 200 days. Ziemer is a rock climber and grandfather who says he is thinking about the future for his grandchildren.

(Photo: Heather Rousseau/The Roanoke Times via AP)

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of enslaved African-Americans and their descendants – some on the compressor site -- are scattered throughout nearby woods. It was the white descendants of the owners of Variety Shade who, in 2015, sold a 68-acre plot to Dominion for construction of the ACP's compressor station.

Dominion's first choice for the compressor was on national forest land, but the U. S. Forest Service ruled it a threat to wildlife. The wildlife was spared and the facility moved to Union Hill.

The energy company has promised to take extraordinary steps to keep the compressor safe and argues that relocating the Buckingham County site is not possible because the station needs to intersect with an existing pipeline, the Transco. But earlier this year, when a similar facility was proposed across the Potomac River from Mount Vernon, advocates for George Washington's home raised objections. Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam intervened, and Dominion agreed to find another location.

Gov. Northam has declined to take similar action for Buckingham, but despite assumptions of acquiescence there and in other locations, resistance from Virginians over the past three years has temporarily stalled the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and delayed the Mountain Valley Pipeline.

"Dominion thought they could just come in and we'd all roll over," said Ruby Laury. The company was wrong.

The shape resistance has taken in Buckingham and elsewhere in the Commonwealth is as varied as the locations themselves. Hundreds of people have attended public hearings of county and state regulatory agencies, sometimes traveling hours to witness to the destructive impact of both the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the Mountain Valley Pipeline.

Writers have sent letters to newspapers and posted blogs.

Protest marches and rallies at the Capitol in Richmond and in other cities have drawn crowds and media attention. Lawsuits, launched by groups such as the Southern Environmental Law Center, are challenging federal and state permits.

Some advocates have climbed into tree sits and remained for weeks to block the clearing that always precedes pipeline construction. Others, in acts of non-violent civil disobedience, have locked themselves to construction equipment or blocked roads leading to construction sites -- followed by the inevitable arrests.

Inspired by these passionate protectors of creation and motivated by our commitment as Episcopalians to walk in the way of Jesus, Weston Mathews, rector at Grace Episcopal Church in The Plains, Va., and I, a candidate for holy orders in the Diocese of Virginia and a seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary, launched a non-profit organization a year ago to provide needed financial and other support for this widespread movement.

Since receiving 501(c)(3) approval for the Interfaith Alliance for Climate Justice in March 2018, we have been able to raise almost \$300,000 and disburse it to advocates of environmental justice across the region. The reason is simple: Our baptismal vows call us to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself" and to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

"It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of the human race is now at stake. The nature of the changes in climate and environment that we are living with threaten not only the wellbeing but possibly the very being of our species on this planet in the long term. And in the short term, they threaten the most vulnerable populations on earth. So it is not at all surprising

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The Rev. William Barber (left) and former vice president Al Gore (center) talk with Union Hill, Va., resident Ella Rose (right) in front of her home last February. Barber and Gore were on an “environmental justice tour,” visiting the area that is the proposed site of a compressor station for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Mrs. Rose’s home is adjacent to the site. Gore called the compressor proposal a “vivid example of environmental racism.” (AP Photo/Steve Helber)

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that the families and organizations we work with throughout Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, and around the world, in this urgent situation, feel like they need support to take nonviolent direct action and protect their children, homes, and neighbors,” says Weston Mathews.

Our commitment is consonant with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s encouragement for all Episcopalians to be engaged in robust care of creation, and with the aims of both the Episcopal Church’s Task Force on Creation Care and the Diocese of Virginia’s Creation Care Task Force.

While our Episcopal identities propelled us into this initiative – and many Episcopalians have joined it – we recognized the importance of an interfaith component as we found natural allies among people of all faiths and no faith.

It’s that powerful solidarity that will be necessary to counter the extractive instincts of a nation addicted to fossil fuels – and one that reflects Episcopalians’ witness to the gospel.

“I must confess,” says Mathews, “that we have loved progress more than the goodness and beauty of God’s creation and we have loved gold more than our own neighbors who disproportionately experience ecological devastation, poverty, and racism. But we believe in redemption as followers of Jesus, and by water and the Holy Spirit, we are called by our loving God to show our neighbors what the divine image looks like even in life’s darkest places and the most fearful times. The image of a divine creator who formed the world from goodness, and summoned human beings to reflect this divine care and find joy through our own work in the world, animated by the gift of Christ’s Spirit, is our foundation. Prayerfully we must go into the world, in light of ecological crises, and encourage one another to grow more fully into the joy of Easter, with concrete action as a people of resurrection and hope. We have little time to waste.”



Robert Dilday is a seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary and co-founder of the Interfaith Alliance for Climate Justice.

Focus on Environmental Justice at 2019 Diocesan Convention

The conversation on the intersection of racial justice, climate change, and environmental advocacy continues at the 2019 Convention in November with a series of keynote plenaries and workshops with the Rt. Rev. Marc Andrus and the Rev. Melanie Mullen. A grateful welcome back to Virginia to them both!



The Rt. Rev. Marc Andrus

Since 2006, Bishop Andrus has served as the eighth bishop of the Diocese of California. During his ministry, his climate advocacy work has taken him to the UN Climate Conferences in Paris, Marrakesh, Bonn, and Katowice, Poland, as well as the Dakota Access Pipeline demonstrations at Standing Rock, North Dakota. In addition to his service on many boards, Bishop Andrus is a member of the “We Are Still In Leaders” Circle, a diverse group of ambassadors for American climate actions.

Bishop Andrus is excited to return to Virginia. He received a Masters in Social Sciences at Virginia Tech, then worked in Virginia’s Delmarva Peninsula. He obtained a Masters of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary, served as Chaplain at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, and then as Rector at Emmanuel, Middleburg.



The Rev. Melanie Mullen

As the Episcopal Church’s Director of Reconciliation, Justice, and Creation Care, Melanie is charged with bringing the Jesus Movement to the concerns of the world. Prior to joining the Presiding Bishop’s staff, she was the Downtown Missioner at St. Paul’s, Richmond.

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Before ordained ministry, she worked in campaign fundraising and development, raising more than \$10 million for leadership PACs, the Congressional Black Caucus, and various U.S. Congressional and gubernatorial races from Louisiana to Connecticut. She also served in the development office for the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, with a focus on poverty advocacy. Melanie received her Bachelors in History from UNC, Chapel Hill and her Masters of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary.