



*What have we  
done to the earth  
and to ourselves?*

## REPENTANCE

### Reflection on Mountaintop Removal

**by Mary Minette**

**ELCA Director of Environmental Education and Advocacy**

They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the  
knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

- Isaiah 11:9

**Fact:** If you live in the Northeast, Midwest or South, in all likelihood your electricity comes from a coal-fired power plant. And some of that coal probably comes from mountaintop removal mines in the Appalachian Mountains. (*To find out, go [here](#) and type in your zip code.*)

**Fact:** The Appalachian Region includes 420 counties in 13 states. In the region, the highest levels of coal production are in the area at the intersection of West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia. According to the 2000 census, in central Appalachia (southern West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee) the poverty rate was 22.1 percent, compared to the overall poverty rate for the region of 13.6 percent and the average poverty rate for the U.S. as a whole of 12.3 percent. (*Source: [Appalachian Regional Commission](#)*)

**Fact:** According to the [National Mining Association](#), there are more than 14,000 mountaintop coal miners in the Appalachian Region. They estimate that for every mining job, an additional 3.5 jobs are created through mining services, sales, and other related business.

**Fact:** Mountaintop removal coal mining is "a mining practice where the tops of mountains are removed, exposing the seams of coal." Mountaintop mines can remove 500 feet or more of the summit to reach buried seams of coal; earth from the mountaintop is then dumped as "fill" in the neighboring valleys. Fill from mountaintop removal mines has buried over 1000 miles of streams in the Appalachian region and the mines have leveled at least 800 square miles of mountaintops. (*Sources: [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#); [ILoveMountains.org](#)*)

**Coal mining in Appalachia is a complex issue.** On the one hand, coal mines provide well-paying work in a region that has been systemically poor for most of its history. Many families have worked in the mines for generations, despite the difficulties and dangers of this work. Coal mining is an integral part of the history and rich cultural traditions of the region. Coal is the primary source of electricity for much of the United States because coal is a cheap and abundant source of energy.

On the other hand, the relatively recent practice of mountaintop removal mining is destroying the mountains, streams and hollows that are so much a part of the fabric of life in these ancient mountains. Once clear mountain streams are contaminated with mine waste or buried under rubble; blue mountain vistas are reduced to grey-brown gravel pits; and communities are displaced. Families are either forced to leave the land that has sustained their families for generations or suffer health consequences that can be life-threatening. And [mountaintop mines employ far fewer people than traditional underground mines](#), so unemployment rises and people who were already struggling to make ends meet are forced to leave the land they love to find work.

How do we confront this complexity? How do we, as Christians, discern where God wants us to be? The ELCA has [social statements](#) on care of creation and economic life, based in our shared Lutheran theology, which can help us to find our way. We invite you to read the statements and encourage you to visit the links above to learn more about the effects of coal mining on God's creation.

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### **Prayer for the Journey**

Gracious God, builder of mountains and keeper of waters, creator of people and trees and coal, help us to balance the needs of your people with the needs of your earth. Help us to understand and name our own culpability in the destruction that is being wrought in your beautiful world.

We pray for understanding.

We pray for a solution.

We pray for our shared future.

Amen.

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