

Report on
ELCA Appalachian Ministry Leadership Team
Consultations, Bishop Interviews, and Background
6.30.16

CONTENTS:

Background

1. Recent Assessment of Appalachia by ARC
2. Economic, Ecological & Cultural Setting
3. Religious Mission in Appalachia & Lutheran Mission in Appalachia

The Study

4. The Call for Study
5. Notes on Procedures and Nature of Findings
6. Synthesized Summary of Findings from the Consultations
7. Synthesized Summary of Perspectives from the Bishop Interviews
8. Surveys & Pending Data – Next Steps at Meeting June 29-30, 2016

Appendices

- A. CORA Last Will and Testament (2006)
- B. Excerpt from *The Telling Takes Us Home*, a People's Pastoral Letter (2015)

I. Recent Assessment of Appalachia by ARC

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), a federally-mandated and federally-funded economic development agency, offers programs to state and local governments in 13 Appalachian states. Since 1965, ARC has invested in highways, education, job-training, health care, water and sewer systems, and economic development. The ARC definition of the Appalachian region has become a standard, even though there have been other definitions of the region.

In 2016, ARC released its latest strategic plan and noted the following successes:

- The Region's poverty rate has decreased from nearly 31 percent in 1960 to 17 percent today; and the number of high-poverty counties (those with poverty rates one and a half times the national average) has decreased from 295 in 1960 to 90 today.
- Between 1970 and 2012, in counties that received ARC investments, employment increased at a 4.2 percent faster pace, and per capita income increased at a 5.5 percent faster pace, than in similar counties that did not receive ARC investments.
- The percentage of adults in the Region with a high school diploma has increased by more than 150 percent, and students in Appalachia now graduate from high school at nearly the same rate as the national average.
- The percentage of homes in Appalachia with complete plumbing has increased from 86.4 percent in 1970 to 96.8 percent today, in line with the national rate of 98.0 percent.
- The infant mortality rate in the Region has been reduced by two-thirds since 1960.

The Commission states that despite the successes there is need for continued investment because "the Appalachian Region's economy has historically been dominated by a few industries, including mining,

textiles, tobacco, and timber. Dependence on these industries as economic drivers and employers has left many communities, particularly those in the most economically distressed counties, vulnerable to economic fluctuations as their businesses face increasing competition, specialization, and market changes.”

ARC proposes to address “the challenges associated with this economic transition” by focusing on the following:

- *The need for more jobs.* Job creation is increasing more slowly in the Region than in the nation as a whole. The number of jobs in the nation has jumped 83 percent since 1975, while the number of jobs in Appalachia has increased only 50 percent over the same time period. In addition, the Region’s labor force participation rate remains low (59.5 percent in the Region compared with 64.2 percent nationally).
- *The need for higher educational attainment.* While overall educational attainment rates in the Region have improved over the past 50 years, Appalachia continues to fall behind the nation on this measure. Fifty-seven percent of Americans have some post-secondary education; less than half of Appalachians (48 percent) have reached that education level.
- *The need for more investment to improve health status.* The health status of the Region’s residents continues to decline: the mortality rate in Appalachia is 27 percent higher than the national average, and the Region has disproportionately higher rates of cancer, diabetes, substance abuse, and obesity.
- *The need for more investment in areas of persistent and severe economic distress.* Nearly a fourth of Appalachia’s 420 counties still face high poverty rates, low per capita market income, and high unemployment rates.

II. Economic, Ecological & Cultural Setting

Industries that extracted timber, oil, coal and gas dominated much of the Appalachian region from the 19th Century until now. A chemical disaster in 2014 that left many people in the Charleston, WV area without water for days was a reminder of how the water, skies and land bear the brunt of industry which in turn impacts the health of the people. Deep in Appalachia human life span is years fewer than in the affluent suburbs of coastal cities. Environmental damage in Appalachia has adversely spearheaded global environmental problems such as human-induced climate change and pollution of air, water and land. In response, there are environmental advocacy and social justice advocacy movements in Appalachia from secular and religious sources, even though large numbers in the general populace scoff at concern for environment.

Once inhabited by a number of First Nations people, today Cherokee communities are the remaining original dwellers in Appalachia. In the 18th Century, Scots-Irish immigrants moved into the mountains, while Germans and English settled the Shenandoah and other valleys. Henry Louis Gates portrayed African American life and Appalachia in his masterful work, *Colored People* (1994). In the 19th and early 20th Centuries immigrant communities who came to work the mines or other industries further diversified the ethnic complexion of Appalachia. Since the mid-1960s the ARC funded highway construction with hopes of steady economic development. While there have been pockets of growth, much of the region remains subject to boom and bust cycles from extractive industries. Since the extractive industries no longer require large residential populations to sustain their work force, population has slowed and declined in stretches of Appalachia.

Radio and the early recording industry exposed the world to music from Appalachia. Today the world recognizes Appalachia for Bluegrass and traditional country music. Meanwhile, far fewer know Appalachia was an historic seedbed of organized labor and the “mine wars;” nor do many know that it was in Appalachia, at the Highlander School, that Martin Luther King, Jr. gained a reminder of an old spiritual, “We Shall Overcome,” that became the world-wide anthem for Civil Rights and Human Rights.

Appalachian literature throughout the 20th Century brought both folkways and social changes from Appalachia to wider audiences. Appalachian fiction and non-fiction presented Appalachia not only to outsiders but also to people in Appalachia, so that the concept of being “an Appalachian person” began to make sense inside and outside the region. Some works portrayed Appalachians who moved to industrial cities outside the region for work, and then moved back to the mountains. Beginning in silent films and continuing in many forms, portrayals of the “hillbilly” offered stigmatized stereotypes of backward, barefoot, obstinate people alongside other romantic notions of rugged American individualists making their own lives free from outside control.

III. Religious Mission in Appalachia & Lutheran Mission in Appalachia

In a book entitled *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, Deborah V. McCauley profiled popular religion among people whose families lived for generations in the mountains of Appalachia. McCauley argued that the mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations are outsiders to Appalachian Mountain Religion, a view she traced to John C. Campbell’s *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (1921), a seminal work in Appalachian studies. Radio brought preaching akin to Appalachian Mountain Religion across the region and beyond. Later, television spread American Evangelical religion throughout the southern United States and beyond. Appalachian Mountain Religion has complex interrelationships with American Evangelical religion and southern religion.

During the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy visited rural Appalachian people and the footage of the rustic conditions had national exposure on television. Kennedy initiated the Presidential Appalachian Regional Commission which led to the ARC. A national call to service by Kennedy inspired many religious people. The mainline churches formed the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA) in 1965 to spearhead response to social and economic challenges in the region identified by the ARC. CORA led advocacy and justice work for the churches until its closure in 2006.¹

This Land is Home to Me and *At Home in the Web of Life*, two pastoral letters that emerged from the Roman Catholic Church in Appalachia, eloquently stated for many a vision and impulse to care for the people and environment in the Appalachian region.² When Pope Francis in 2015 issued *Laudato Si*, his world-wide call to care for the earth, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia noted the Appalachian pastoral letters were predecessors to *Laudato Si* and urged application of *Laudato Si* in Appalachia.³ In

¹ See the CORA “Last Will and Testament” at <http://www.southernstudies.org/2006/10/cora-a-voice-for-justice-in-the-mountains.html>, which appears also in Appendix A to this report. Joseph K. Spiker argued in an MA thesis at E. TN State University in 2014 that CORA depended upon stereotypes of rural poverty, ignoring wider trends. <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/2332/>

² *This Land is Home to Me* (1975) & *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995) at <http://www.ccappal.org/CCAbok040307.pdf>

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html The CCA’s call for application: <http://www.ccappal.org/publications/statements-resolutions/3696-2>

2015, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia produced a new People's Pastoral Letter, *The Telling Takes Us Home*.⁴

Among member churches of CORA, the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) had an Appalachian Committee and an officer who traveled the region to encourage ministry engaged with the context. In the Extension Service of West Virginia University, the Rev. Dr. B.B. Maurer ran an Appalachian Regional School for Church Leaders from 1968 to 1982. Maurer helped shape the Town and Country Church Institute (TCCI), founded in 1981, with a similar vision for extension service to church leaders. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) formed in 1988, it belonged to CORA and also formed the Evangelical Lutheran Coalition for Mission in Appalachia (ELCMA) which operated until 2014. Among the major accomplishments of ELCMA and CORA among Lutherans was the ELCA resolution on mountaintop removal mining in 1999.⁵

Today there are over 1,000 ELCA churches in Appalachia (11% of ELCA churches). 88% of those churches are in northern Appalachia: Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Maryland and northern West Virginia. Five ELCA Synods are completely inside the Appalachian region, and four more have portions in the region. Rural and small town churches (open country to towns of 10,000) comprise 88%, 80%, 72%, 66% and 59% of the congregations in some Appalachian synods.

Recent statistics show that across the Lutheran church the number of multiple-church arrangements will rise. Already, 1 in 7 ELCA pastors serves multiple churches. By 2019, 1 in 5 full-time calls will have multiple churches. Over 2,000 additional churches will not be able to afford a pastor without either a multiple-church arrangement or a local part-time minister. Over 90% of the multiple-church arrangements are in rural and small town (<10,000) settings.⁶

IV. The Call for Study

ELCA Congregational and Synodical Mission (CSM) held an ELCA Consultation on Mission and Ministry in Appalachia on January 29-30, 2014, in Pittsburgh, PA. Afterwards, upon structured review, the Evangelical Lutheran Coalition for Mission in Appalachia (ELCMA) closed. CSM then "convened a task force to evaluate the current situation, articulate the mission and vision and recommended structural changes, strategic directions, prioritized issues, resources needed and a plan to communicate this throughout the church and the region." The task force recommended "intentional listening for the needs of the church and context for Appalachian mission and ministry in the future." It called for survey, conversations with constituents in the region, and interviews with bishops. The results of the listening were intended to inform fresh networking efforts for the mission of the ELCA in the Appalachian region.⁷

CSM appointed an ELCA Appalachian Ministry Leadership Team for a two-year period (2015-2017). The Leadership Team developed interview questions for bishops, a procedure for regional gatherings to do the listening recommended, and engaged ELCA Research and Evaluation to perform quantitative survey. In addition, a Leadership Team member developed another quantitative survey. The following report

⁴ *The Telling Takes Us Home* <http://www.ccappal.org/thetellingtakesushome2015.pdf> See Appendix B for an excerpt.

⁵ Assembly Action CA99.06.30 (1999) See <http://ilovemountains.org/resolutions/faith/elca>

⁶ Kenneth W. Inskeep, "ELCA Clergy Serving Congregations and Geographic Settings" (ELCA Research & Evaluation, 2016); Adam DeHoek & Kenneth Inskeep, "The Supply and Demand for Clergy in the ELCA" (ELCA R&E, 2016).

⁷ ELCA Appalachian Ministry Task Force Final Report, February 2015.

offers very concise summaries of findings from the gatherings in the region and the interviews with bishops. There is a separate report from ELCA Research and Evaluation on the survey it conducted, as well as the raw data including written responses. The results of the additional survey are available in a Survey Monkey report. The raw notes from the consultations and bishop interviews are available to the Leadership Team for their reading and direct engagement. In sections below, titular synthesized summaries are offered to prompt Leadership Team deliberation, but there is no intention to finality nor exclusivity.

V. Notes on Procedures and Nature of Findings

The consultations happened in the winter and spring of 2016 in the following locations: Sylva, NC; Radford, VA; Greeneville, TN; Parkersburg/Vienna, WV; Charleston, WV; Altoona, PA; Tyrone, PA; Petersburg WV and Pittsburgh, PA. In addition, “Central and Northeastern PA” were collected by email. The bishop interviews happened in person and by email in the winter of 2015-2016.

Members of the Leadership Team led the gatherings according to guidelines developed by the Leadership Team (see Minutes of the Leadership Team). The Leadership Team developed a template of questions. Individual leaders were free to adapt the questions in each situation. Also, methods of collection and reporting varied from verbatim notes to summaries by the leaders. Similarly, in nine bishop interviews there was adaptation.

Given the procedures, the nature of the findings is oral-historical. The raw notes from the gatherings and bishop interviews retain value apart from the synthesized summary offered below. Moreover, the following summary may be critiqued, in part or in whole, by references to the raw results from the gatherings and the interviews, which are available in electronic and printed forms. However, a good faith effort to synthesize the views into narrative form, and to be objective in doing so, meets to some degree the purposes expressed in the original charge from the previous task force to the current leadership team.

VI. Synthesized Summary of Findings from the Consultations

Perceptions of Appalachia

The reports indicated that the majority of participants did not identify themselves to be “Appalachian,” although they were aware of the use of the term by others. Participants indicated that each locality has its own labels (e.g. “West Virginian” or “Central Pennsylvanian” or “Ohio Valley”). Localism is strong. Characteristics such as strong loyalty to family and neighbors, resistance to outside control and so forth, were applied to each locality by those in that locality.

Participants in different locations identified patterns of misperception, including derogatory stereotypes applied to mountain people, racism against African-Americans, and dismissal of the perspectives of Millennials. People in rural areas of Appalachia face long drives for employment opportunities, health care and services. The damage to the landscape testifies the history of plunder with little reward for the localities impacted.

Mission and Ministry

Two themes emerged on a regular basis: (1) People in the churches are not aware of wider ELCA connections and resources. In many cases people are suspicious and resistant to the ELCA. (2) People in the surrounding culture do not know what “Lutheran” is. One participant captured the phenomenon starkly by saying he was asked if “Lutheran” was “Christian.”

Meanwhile, many called for better communication, networking and education so that Lutherans would know who they are and the extent of church resources and support available to them and their communities. However, no one wants to be told what to do. Also there is a complex twist of pride and low self-esteem that reinforces localism. Participants reported departures of qualified people and young people as serious problems – potential leadership and fresh energy was lost through outmigration.

More than once people distinguished between centripetal work of the church—gathering people to learn about God—with centrifugal efforts “to spread the blessings of God,” as one person put it, or to reach out in response to human needs. There is strong desire for the churches to be helpful in the world, but little consensus on how to do that beyond disaster response and general expectation that Lutheran social services would be available.

Future

There was no compelling vision for the future. Projections of hoped-for economic revival are many, but viable prospects are few. In regard to the church, Consultation participants said there is a need for rallying people “to be the church together,” meaning intentional focus and better communication. In some consultations participants asked for guidance in local ecumenical cooperation. Connection between white and black churches has not taken place in the past but could yield powerful results one participant noted.

In the face of condescension and misunderstanding, some consultation participants anticipated self-determined regional efforts rather than imported direction from church-wide offices. At the same time, grassroots church people would welcome assistance for mission renewal and assistance to social ministries.

Community Context & Justice

There were extensive lists of social and economic problems, and mention of some responses in some localities. Drugs and the systemic breakdown of family and community rivaled poverty as the main troubles cited by participants. There was no extensive consideration of racial injustice or sexism. At one consultation there was mention of concern for LGBTQ people. There was no mention of religious intolerance as a social problem. One participant said that “people are overwhelmed by needs” and one pastor called the destruction of lives and communities by drugs “the elephant in the room.” There were two mentions of environmental problems and the need for better care of the land.

Lutheran social services and disaster response have great respect, and many participants expressed their appreciation for “when the church gets involved in things.”

Reflections on the Consultation Results

The consultation reports are full of excellent specific suggestions, pithy observations and hard-earned lessons. There is need for communication, education and networking to strengthen the identity and purposes of the church, in both its centripetal and centrifugal trajectories of its work. Compelling church needs among small membership congregations are shared by the church in other regions.

VII. Synthesized Summary of Perspectives from the Bishop Interviews

Perceptions of Appalachia

All the bishops said that the people do not readily identify themselves to be Appalachian, except occasionally in specific pockets. Particularly in Pennsylvania people do not identify themselves to be Appalachian. A majority of the bishops said the Lutherans are an alien people in the “Bible Belt” and Baptist religious culture in Appalachia and the south. Alternatives to the “Appalachian” identifier were local geographic designations.

Mission & Ministry

The majority of bishops said that mission is no different in Appalachia than anywhere else, but that contextual characteristics impacting ministry are always important. More than one bishop called for strengthening Lutheran theological understanding in distinction to other approaches, and one bishop called the ELCA an “outside church” to Appalachia. More than one acknowledged that Lutheran congregations in rural Appalachia are becoming smaller and struggling.

There was extensive call to help very small congregations and to bring guidance for multiple-church arrangements. There were calls to raise up leaders to serve small congregations. The bishops envision faithful pastors who will tend to people’s needs and stay with them. More than one warned against trying to take something from the people, or arriving to do works and then leaving.

There was some affirmation of “accompaniment,” but also, as one bishop said, that it is difficult to accompany when the economy busts for long periods. One bishop recalled deaconesses who lived in Appalachian communities their whole lives, and one bishop posed the possibility for an ELCA officer to travel the region to encourage people in ministry.

Future

The bishops did not speak in encouraging tones about the future of the ELCA expression of the church in remote stretches of Appalachia or away from metropolitan areas in general. Several bishops requested fresh support for multiple-church ministries, and efforts to raise up people with a specialized vision to serve small congregations. Bishops spoke of growth and vitality in metropolitan areas and identified remote rural places to be specialized ministry.

Community Context & Justice

Bishops were aware of intense poverty, drug abuse, lack of education and dissolution of families and communities in the Appalachian region. They associated those problems with occurrence of the same

problems in other locations. The bishops were unequivocal that Lutheran social ministries should get more support and reach out to problem areas wherever they occur.

All the bishops said economic disparity was at the root of much suffering. One noted that the people who live in the land do not own the assets under their feet or around them. Another said people have lost ancestral land to recreational development and higher taxes. More than one spoke of the needs of migrant Latino labor, and one spoke up for Cherokee people. Two bishops called for environmental advocacy.

Reflections on the Bishop Interviews

While some of the bishops exhibited extensive historical knowledge about the Appalachian region, the bishops acknowledged that the region has been changing to such a degree that its social and economic problems are not distinct from the rest of the country or the world. There was stark realism about the demographic and economic decline of Lutheran congregations. Ideas for reaching out to address social problems depended upon generosity from affluent congregations in metropolitan areas and the church at large. At the same time, several bishops idealized faithful ministers who would carry Word and sacrament ministry into small congregations and remote locations, and almost all called for distinctively Lutheran theology and practice which they saw to be alien to popular religion in Appalachia.

VIII. Surveys & Pending Data – Next Steps at Meeting June 29-30

There is a report from ELCA Research and Evaluation from a statistical survey collected during the same time period as the consultations, and another survey produced by Ron Davis. There also will be two additional consultation reports arriving to the Appalachian Ministry Leadership Team before its meeting on June 29-30, 2016. It will be the task of the ELCA Appalachian Ministry Leadership Team to assess the results of the surveys and additional data along with the consultation and interview results in order to determine its conclusions from the entire study process to report to attendees of the pending ELCA Appalachian Gathering in 2017.

Appendices A & B, attached to the present report, offer examples of visions for mission in the Appalachian region. Appendix A is the last statement from CORA, in which the Lutherans once located their voice (in addition to ELCMA). Appendix B is a recent statement of Appalachian mission by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, which signals opportunity to join voices in ecumenical church witness in the Appalachian region.

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APPENDIX A

A Last Will and Testament for the Commission on Religion in Appalachia

"Let justice roll down like waters." (Amos 5:23-24)

Perhaps it's a tale woven in the fabric of the mountains. Some say the Appalachian Mountains are the oldest mountain range on the face of the planet. In this context, the forty-year life span of the Commission on Religion in Appalachia compares to looking up from the top of a high peak and watching a comet flash by. To the lives impacted, the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, affectionately known as CORA, has served as a forty-year sojourn lighting the way to justice.

"Let justice roll down like waters." With the cry of the Biblical prophet Amos, 'Let justice roll down like waters,' CORA has engaged the faith community with the people of the Appalachian Mountains. Marching side by side with the mission 'to express God's love in the empowerment of the people of Appalachia by working for justice', time and time again the prophetic voice of the prophet Micah has been proclaimed from the hilltops to the deepest hollows -- 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.'

"Let justice roll down like waters." To confront the structural causes of injustice, CORA has channeled seed money to the region from the churches, through its Appalachian Development Projects Coalition (ADPC), giving birth or support to numerous organizations - such as the Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprise and the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center in Kentucky, the Virginia Black Lung Association, the Southern Empowerment Project in Tennessee, and Stop Abusive Family Environments in West Virginia.

"Let justice roll down like waters." As people of faithful conscience, CORA declared 'we have a responsibility to dismantle the racism that has been built into our organizations and our communities.' The Anti-Racism Team set out on this difficult but necessary mission.

"Let justice roll down like waters." In response to the need for improved housing, CORA established a volunteer program bringing work teams to the region from churches across America. While houses were being refurbished, the gift was reciprocal and the volunteers returned home with a renewed understanding and affection for the people of the mountains.

"Let justice roll down like waters." CORA activities and achievements have extended to battles with the mountain-top removers and the coal companies who abused those at work digging deep into the mountains. Public policy and even globalization has caught CORA's attention.

"Let justice roll down like waters." The memories are lasting, the sentiments, ever-flowing, the relationships, binding; the need for justice in Appalachia still cries like Rachel weeping for her children, and now, the CORA sojourn of forty years is ending -- ending because the denominational pool of money is fading -- ending because the organizational internal mechanisms are waning -- ending because CORA courageously believes it has the responsibility to take the steps for the future of the mission of justice and hope for Appalachia.

"Let justice roll down like waters." Likened unto some of our forbearers of history, CORA rises to declare this document as its 'last will and testament.' In CORA's ending, we know that the God of justice is ultimately in charge of the spirit of hope and justice in Appalachia.

As faithful stewards we pray for and will the rebirth of the mission of CORA to the region as a new sojourn. For we can already see rising from the valley a fertile spark. [...]

"Let justice roll down like waters." We will that CORA's story be held both in the hearts of the people of Appalachia as it is recorded in the archives of the University of Kentucky. Someday, when an inquisitive mind asks, 'how did that great accomplishment happen?' let it be said, by a wise one, 'oh, that was another CORA initiative that has lived on throughout these Appalachian Mountains.'
And the people said 'Let justice roll down like waters.'

Signed by the Commission and Board and friends of CORA on October 13, 2006.

APPENDIX B

Excerpt from *The Telling Takes Us Home*, a People's Pastoral Letter (2015)

Here in Appalachia,
we are people of stories.
These mountains have heard
the stories we tell,
and have told,
across time and space.
The mountains hold our stories,
and they have stories of their own.

Our stories are the lifeblood
that connects us to each other and to this land.
Even those who have left these hills
know the power of the telling
that connects them to home.

Yet there are stories here
that separate us from one another as well,
false stories that alienate us
from our sisters and brothers
and from Earth,
given to us as a garden.
When the story of these mountains as
"resource"
takes over the story of the mountains as "home,"
we become homeless in our own place,
and disconnected from Earth and one another.

Wherever we are,
and whatever our relationship to these hills,
telling our stories
connects us once again,
takes us home,
and gives us a place
from which we can act for justice.

RE-MEMBERING OUR HISTORY IN A CHANGING CHURCH

Forty years ago,
people of faith in Appalachia set down their story
in a pastoral letter
called "This Land is Home to Me."
A collaboration among laity, religious, clergy,
and bishops,
that letter reflected the voices of the people
and empowered new movements for justice.
Twenty years later,
a second pastoral letter followed,
"At Home in the Web of Life,"
which spoke of creation's interconnectedness
and the need to create a sustainable future for
all.

Both of these letters spoke boldly
from our particular place on this planet
about our belief in a God of the poor,
demanding justice and healing for God's
creation.
They spoke beyond the Catholic community,
as diverse people heard in them
the longing for justice
found in the message of Jesus
and in the struggles of the human spirit
across cultures throughout the world.

Today, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia
(CCA)
offers this third pastoral letter

as a prophetic word spoken
for new realities among us.
We recommit to reading the signs of the times,
listening to the stories
of the places and people who hurt most,
to create new paths forward
toward greater justice, peace, and wholeness
for our communities and for creation.

In this statement,
we recognize a deepening ecological crisis
and new pressures on our struggling
communities.
But we also offer a statement of hope,
lifting up communities, organizations,
and movements
that are pointing us toward a better way,
a message for and from youth
about the future they desire,
and a statement which calls churches
to reconnect with
local, regional, and global movements for
justice....

In this bewildering but exciting time in history,
we have been reminded
by the founding members of our movement
that all of us, young and old,
must *re-member* our history
as people of faith in Appalachia,
that is, to collect the pieces of the story,
to stitch it together again,
to find our places within it,
and to retell the story for new generations.

TAKING OUR PLACE IN THE STORY

The stories we tell and pass along
help us to remember, to make sense of our
lives,
and to create meaning within them.
But powerful elites tell false stories
about this world and about their communities
in the loudest of voices.
These stories reflect values
which are not in the best interest of everyday
people,
especially those who are poor or vulnerable.
When powerful people in our communities,
our region, our nation, and even our church
abuse their power and tell false stories
that shape our lives and our values,
reality can be distorted and injustice grows.

But when common people retrieve the power
to tell their own stories,

profound liberation can occur.
People find liberation in telling stories of
struggle,
because these stories show us
that things are not as they should be.
And people find liberation, too,
in telling stories of creativity, community, and
justice,
because in them we catch glimpses of a new
world.

We have faith that a new world is possible
because we feel that yearning for a new world
across time and among diverse peoples.
We have faith in this new world, too,
through our belief in Jesus of Nazareth.
Jesus told stories of struggle and of hope,
parables rooted in the images
and stories of his people,
and he confirmed our hope in a new world
through his death and resurrection.
Jesus' life reveals to us the source of his hope,
the parental love of God
which makes all things possible.

And so, in this "People's Pastoral,"
the Catholic Committee of Appalachia,
along with our ecumenical friends and
organizations,
offers a message inspired by our shared stories.
By lifting up the authority of these stories,
we Christians at the grassroots hope to
contribute
to the growing movement
that is telling a new story about our region.

This is a pastoral message
from the people themselves
to our region,
to the world,
and to the churches,
leaders and laity alike.

There is a psalm sung in our churches,
which insists, "The Lord hears the cry of the
poor."
In this People's Pastoral,
we Christians in Appalachia ask ourselves:
The Lord hears the cry of the poor, but will we?
And how will we respond?