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Roughly 150 people took part in a dialogue on labor and the environment in Appalachia Oct. 25 at the pastoral center of the Pittsburgh Diocese. The event marked the 50th anniversary of the Appalachian bishops' pastoral letter "This Land is Home to Me" and the 10-year anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home." (Pinnacle Productions)



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The Catholic bishop of West Virginia lent his support to union-led boycotts as a means to close rising wage gaps and "foster a more just economy, more humane world."

The comments came at an event in Pittsburgh Oct. 25 marking the 50th anniversary of the Appalachian bishops' pastoral letter, "This Land is Home to Me," and the 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home." Both church documents delve into social issues facing people and land stemming from mining, extractive activities and environmental exploitation.

"The fruits of labor are not fairly distributed," Bishop Mark Brennan of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, said in a clip of his remarks released by organizers. The event was closed to the press.

"We need to raise our voices and start boycotts," answered Brennan in response to his own question of what can be done to address economic disparity. He suggested possible targets as companies relying on forced labor in China, those underpaying workers worldwide, and corporations with large pay gaps between executives and lower-level employees.

"The goal is not to hurt. It is to call attention to the hurt that's being done by them," he said.

The endorsement of boycotts drew applause from the roughly 150 people gathered at the pastoral center for the Pittsburgh Diocese, including Angela Ferritto, president of both the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO and Union Energy, a state coalition that advocates for unionized jobs in clean energy and sustainability.

"The more solidarity that we can grow between the labor community and the faith community and students and activists, the more likely we are to get traction on those sorts of things," she told National Catholic Reporter.



Bishop Mark Brennan of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, speaks at a labor-and-environment conference Oct. 25 hosted by the Pittsburgh Diocese. (Pinnacle Productions)

In an interview, Brennan said the idea of boycotts could be a discussion point for U.S. bishops at their annual assembly in Baltimore in mid-November.

"That would be a way of showing solidarity with people," he said, referring to workers in the U.S. and abroad as well as immigrants.

The dialogue on labor and the environment in Appalachia brought together representatives from the two dozen dioceses across Appalachia. The daylong event, titled "A Healthy Future for This Land," was organized by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia and In Solidarity, a Catholic nonprofit in Washington D.C.

Fifty years ago, in the groundbreaking pastoral letter "This Land Is Home to Me," 25 bishops across Appalachia — a mountainous region across 13 states in the eastern U.S. — expressed solidarity with "the cries of powerlessness from the region" and its people living amid mountain coalfields.

While the bishops lauded the "great progress" the coal industry brought the United States, they condemned "oppression for the mountains" where wealth from its natural resources more often left the region. The bishops also bemoaned "shrinking paychecks," scarce jobs, inadequate benefits and safety standards, and "destructive" industrial activities that "pollute the air, foul the water, rape the land."

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A central source of it all, they said, was the idolization of the "maximization of profit" that placed economic gains over the interests of people and the land.

"'Maximization of profit' in today's world," the bishops wrote, "has become a crazy death wish, every day using up more and more of the earth's riches and our own dignity."

Two other pastoral letters followed from the region: In 1995, the Appalachian bishops issued "At Home in the Web of Life," which more deeply explored the interconnections between ecological crises and the plight of the poor; and in 2015, a grassroots "people's pastoral," "The Telling Takes Us Home," articulated the lived experiences of those suffering from economic deprivation and environmental ruin.

In his landmark papal teaching document *Laudato Si'*, issued earlier in 2015, Francis stressed the need "to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," writing that "a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment."

The interconnectedness of economic struggles, social ills and environmental destruction was a central focus at the Catholic gathering in Pittsburgh.

"The question that faces you and I today, in a very particular way, is this: How do we lift up and care for creation and care for the workers in Appalachia?" retired Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik said.

Related: Before 'Laudato Si'' Appalachian pastorals explored themes of mining in the mountains

Appalachia is home to some of the most impoverished counties in the country. The coal industry, once an economic engine and source of well-paying jobs, has been in a decades-long decline, as energy sources like gas and solar have become cheaper and widespread. Mining and other extractive activities have stripped mountaintops, cleared forests and polluted waterways. An estimated 1 million orphaned oil and gas wells and hundreds of thousands of acres of abandoned mines dot its landscape.

The region's residents disproportionately experience pulmonary conditions, like black lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer, while opioid abuse has devastated communities and families.

St. Joseph Sr. Helen Skormisley witnessed through her coal miner father and family members the toll of black lung — an irreversible condition where inhaled coal dust scars the lungs and makes breathing difficult. Now she worries about health problems associated with fracking, after a 2022 law opened the Congregation of St. Joseph's lands to the chemical-intensive drilling despite their long-standing opposition.

"We can't allow them to poison our water," she said at the event.

Brennan, whose diocese includes all of West Virginia, said water polluted from mining and industrial waste remains a constant health problem, forcing people already struggling economically to purchase drinking water. He told NCR that both the bishops' pastoral and *Laudato Si*' remain relevant to the present-day issues facing the region and offer guidance on how to respond.

"We need government and pressure from the public to really force companies that are making a profit off [polluting the water and land] — otherwise they wouldn't do it — to take care of repairing the damage that they do," he said.



Clergy and Catholic sisters joined workers and union leaders in conversations on labor and the environment in Appalachia Oct. 25 at the pastoral center of the Pittsburgh Diocese. (Union Energy)

The commemoration of the anniversaries of two powerful church documents offered a moment to rekindle the long-standing relationship between the Catholic Church and organized labor, participants said.

Just as the two united in the 1960s and '70s around the farmworkers movement, Ferritto said a similar coalition is needed today in the energy transition from fossil fuels to clean energy, to ensure entire communities and generations tied to coal and mining aren't left behind, as she's witnessed in parts of western Pennsylvania.

"Everybody talks about this just transition, but so far it's neither just nor a transition," she said. "There really isn't a path toward good family-sustaining wages and good benefits in a lot of what has been replacing what's been lost. And so we want to be at the table. We want to ensure that when these investments are being made that they're being made with the people who live in those communities in

mind and those communities in mind."

Much of the conversations at the "Healthy Land" conference focused on what can be done today to protect workers and ecosystems. Participants suggested recruiting former miners to cap and seal the region's many abandoned wells, advocating for family or living wages and supporting "right to repair" laws that give consumers greater control over repairing items like cars and electronics.

"We have — certainly in this country of all countries of the world — the resources to be able to have a safe environment where we work, and a safe environment for the people who live in that area," said Pittsburgh Bishop Mark Eckman. "There's no reason why we can't develop better techniques and better methods to keep our air clean and our water clean."

Read this next: Bishop John Stowe urged Appalachia to heed the call of Laudato Si'. Here's how parishes are responding.