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In global fight against fracking, faith community should lead

David Andrews | Aug. 28, 2013 Eco Catholic

Several recent posts at **Eco Catholic** have pointed out religious institutions (a Franciscan university [1]) and the Church of England [2] have adopted fracking, without much concern for the potential dangers.

But it is from the faith community that we have heard much of the opposition to the process of hydraulic fracturing as a means of natural gas mining, with many denominations and interfaith groups joining the efforts. That includes women religious such as the Sisters of Loretto in Kentucky, whose opposition to a potential pipeline carrying fracking byproducts made national headlines [3]. In its spring 2013 issue of Catholic Rural Life, the 90-year-old National Catholic Rural Life Conference listed the potential dangers [4] of fracking: blowouts, air pollution, wastewater overflow, home explosions, and gas and other leaks.

[**Editor?s note**: In June 2011, Andrews looked in-depth at the array of potential and reported effects of fracking. Click here [5] to revisit his roundup.]

Given those dangers, there is good cause for caution and responsible oversight before further fracking proceeds (currently, more than 30 states permit fracking). The Catholic Rural Life Conference has pushed for an infusion of ethical analysis into the fracking debate, like what has occurred in other issues, from agriculture and labor, to energy, water and other natural resources.

To get a sense of a religious and ethical evaluation of an untreated matter like fracking, simply peruse how parallel issues have been dealt with in the past.

We have seen large-scale threats to water, land and communities in the past and recognized that ethical analysis and even legal analysis gives way to income opportunity. Income interests often topped environmental concerns, greed prevailed over ethics.

In 1975 U.S. bishops located in coal-producing Appalachia drew attention to the environmental, social and power imbalances in the region. In powerful and poetic words the document on powerlessness in this region -- ? This Land Is Home to Me [6]? -- found an echo in developing countries around the world. Companies abused the land and the people of this significant rural region. The faith community gathered together to address the abuse of power and organized resistance to the abuses taking place.

Led by the late Bishop Walter Sullivan of Richmond, Va., grassroots networks organized throughout Appalachia from parts of New York into the South. Groups like the Catholic Committee of Appalachia developed courses of cultural identity and social justice. They held seasonal meetings, and efforts to stop mountaintop removal went forward.

Still, what had been a beautiful landscape became hugely deformed. Trees, brush and mounds of soil were pushed and deposited into rivers and streams, polluting waterways and rendering the region useless for human use beyond energy mining. Reclamation of the land meant simply taking grass seeds and spreading them to cover up the disfigurement of the land.

Communities fractured, as did the landscape. Over time, local and regional systems developed throughout the area; by 1995 a set of insights became concretized in a new regional pastoral letter, ?At Home in the Web of Life [6],? which called for the development of sustainable communities on the land. It proposed a complex series of alternatives to revitalize the area through community-based enterprises, local food systems, and scaled-down energy systems using solar power, wind energy and geothermal energy.

These efforts articulated a vision of transformed local economies using sustainability as the watchword rather than dominative power. When the people of the heartland in the late 1970s read ?This Land is Home to Me,? they saw its relevance to American agriculture in that region. They organized themselves at the grassroots level, found a leader in Des Moines, Iowa, Bishop Maurice Dingmann and developed a process that led many dioceses to join together in the articulation of a vision of community as an alternative to concentrations of power and wealth in the hands of a few.

In the 1980s, ?Strangers and Guests: Towards Community in the Heartland? became a process and a statement of an alternative to corporate agriculture. Coming in between the Appalachian pastorals (1975 and 1995), this effort also used the themes of the integrity of creation and Catholic social teaching as a framework for a better way of life and of social and environmental integrity, biodiversity and sustainability.

Like the Appalachian pastoral letters, the Heartland pastoral thematized a holistic, faith-based alternative that reached beyond the borders of the region into other parts of the globe. ?Strangers and Guests? brought hope to other food production regions of the world in their efforts for greater sustainable livelihoods and more holistic care for the earth.

Today, energy production and food production need to be appreciated in a context of integrity, not in the context of greed and domination. These environmental problems have gone ignored in order to reap huge monetary benefits. Governments and private industry have found ways to disregard the dangers for the ?rewards,? even overlooking the laws on the books that go unenforced.

The same could very well happen with fracking. Visions of sustainability, biodiversity, alternative technology and the integrity of creation can substitute for dominative power and corporate control. Humans can live in harmony with nature, recognizing the web of life as one. Churches should be leading the way, contrary to the examples shown by Franciscan University of Steubenville and the Church of England.

These visions can inspire and nurture alternatives to greed and domination. We can change our energy, food production and water management systems. We can put a halt to fracking.

Some cities in the U.S. have passed ordinances; some states have kept a moratorium in place; many citizens are organizing. People need vision and leadership and the power of the grassroots community to do so, but such holistic visions, faith-informed and transformational have occurred in the past and can be animated now in this present moment.

Fracking is the current problem. A global effort to challenge fracking on Oct. 19 ? titled Global Frackdown [7] ? has brought nearly 200 organizations to the cause. The faith community should be first in line!

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that advocates for safe, accessible and sustainably produced food and water.]

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