

Protesters in the pews: Young pipeline resisters come to worship

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue



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Be careful what you pray for”—a variation on the old adage “Be careful what you wish for”—has been repeated over and over by many. We repeat it because we believe there’s some wisdom in it. It’s shorthand for the theological insight that God always answers our prayers but not always in the way we want. God’s ways are not our ways.

Take our small East Texas congregation, for example. For several years we have worked and prayed to have a young adult ministry. Located up the road from a state university, we get occasional graduate students and we have several young families, but next to no undergrads or young adults just out of college. A couple of months ago that changed abruptly.

Last summer, construction began in East Texas on the Keystone XL Pipeline, the southern leg of a massive complex of pipelines stretching from the tar sands in Alberta, Canada, to Cushing, Oklahoma, then to Texas and finally to refineries on the Gulf Coast where the refined oil will be loaded onto tankers and shipped to places like China. Owned and constructed by TransCanada, a Canadian-based billion-dollar multinational corporation, the pipeline passes roughly 20 miles from our church and only a few miles from some of our church members’ homes. We’ve known of the proposed pipeline for several years.

From the beginning, a few church members joined with others working against the project, forming a local organization called Nacogdoches County STOP (Stop Tar-Sands Oil Permanently). They educated people about the project, wrote letters to officials and went to Washington, where some were arrested as part of large protests outside the White House (see Bill McKibben's ["Pipeline to disaster,"](#) *Christian Century*, October 18, 2011). When pipeline construction began a couple of counties away, it was no longer an abstract proposal.

In Texas, crude oil pipelines tend not to be a big deal. There's a long history of companies working with landowners over the location of pipelines crossing their property and paying fair prices for the right-of-way. TransCanada is different. Not only is this pipeline transporting tar sands bitumen (the consistency of bitumen more like asphalt), but TransCanada has also used intimidating tactics with landowners who didn't want the pipeline crossing their property.

The company has invoked eminent domain, claiming that its tar sands bitumen is crude oil and is for the common good of the state of Texas (rather than for the private good of the company). In Texas, this move requires only checking a box on a form. Meanwhile, TransCanada has sponsored local festivals and civic charities and bought large ads in the local newspapers proclaiming that the company wants to be our new best friend.

Local and county officials have been promised that the pipeline will renew their depressed economies by providing thousands of local jobs. Those promises were subsequently revised to mention hundreds of jobs, then "some" jobs. Finally the company announced with great delight that one of its employees had bought a new truck in a town near the pipeline. The construction site involves plenty of jobs, but all the vehicles have out-of-state license plates. The company subcontracting with TransCanada to cut down the trees and clear the route is from Wisconsin, even though there are dozens of tree-clearing companies in East Texas.

So far, about the only local jobs provided are the deputies that the company has hired to keep the route cleared of protesters and snooping reporters. But in this depressed economy and in a part of the country that tends to be impoverished even in a healthy economy, the promise of anything new—jobs, money, people or anything else—is hard to resist.

Yet there is resistance. The first issue is property rights, since TransCanada has used steamroller tactics to seize land, with the acquiescence of the state regulatory agencies, and offered pennies on the dollar to property owners in compensation. The second issue is the environment: tar sands bitumen is one of the dirtiest energy sources in existence, and its use will contribute dramatically to carbon in the atmosphere and therefore to climate change. Additionally, in order to transport this heavy thick substance through a pipeline, it must be mixed with toxic and corrosive chemicals, heated to high temperatures and moved through the pipeline under extreme pressure. Our worries are heightened because TransCanada has a poor safety record with its pipelines. Its original Keystone, an older pipeline already in use, had 12 leaks in its first 12 months. We have reason to fear that the poisonous tar sands bitumen will leak into our aquifers and into the soil. Our church prayer list already includes enough people with cancer; we do not want more.

Local folks have organized resistance along with a conglomeration of young people coming from all over Texas and other states under an umbrella organization called Tar Sands Blockade. Using a variety of tools of nonviolent resistance, from letter-writing campaigns to civil disobedience, the blockade hopes to slow down construction while the fight continues in the courts and in Washington.

Meanwhile, TransCanada is moving fast to get ahead of the courts and political action. With its well-funded, slick public relations campaign, more lawyers than most small towns have people and a security apparatus that seeks to intimidate more than protect, the TransCanada message is clear: resistance is futile.

Yet resistance continues. Pipeline blockaders sit on platforms they've built in the trees in the path of the pipeline or lock themselves to heavy equipment. These protesters have been repeatedly hit with pepper spray in the face at close range. Some have even been tasered while still locked to equipment. Once in court these young people are assessed bails in excess of \$15,000 and charged with felony crimes.

Four of the Tar Sands Blockade young people showed up in church one Sunday morning. The night before, our congregation's Earth Care Ministry had shown a film on energy usage and climate change at the nearby university. These young blockaders came to see the film and were invited to our church, so here they were. At the conclusion of the service we prayed for them, and then they hung around for some time, hungry for fellowship and encouragement—and just hungry. We did our

best to meet all of those needs. The next Sunday 30 blockaders came, and since then we've had an average of about a dozen or more in Sunday morning worship.

Ranging in age from early twenties to mid-thirties, they come from all over: several from New York (some of them veterans of the Occupy Wall Street movement); Appalachia, where they've been opposing the coal companies and mountaintop removal; California, where they've opposed the cutting of old growth forests; and other places like the cities of Chicago and Nashville and the states of Maine, Minnesota, Vermont and, of course, Texas. They are smart and articulate, and they've made great sacrifices. Some sold all of their belongings except what would fit into a backpack, squeezed into a car with four or five others and drove across the country to be here. Some have families who support them, while others have families who think they are crazy. A few don't have families. They live in campsites on private land at the invitation of the landowners. One young woman from a major city, when asked if she had camped much in her life, replied, "Recreational camping? No. But I've been homeless my entire life, so I've camped in cars, vacant lots and wherever I could find some sort of shelter."

These young people have diverse religious backgrounds or no religious background. Most of them are secularists, several are Christian. Most agree that the church is often part of the problem—its colluding with the powers that be—and they've put the church behind them. A few practice Buddhism or other religions; some observe various spiritual practices. But they all agree that they receive spiritual nourishment from attending our church. One Sunday morning some of them, who had been at a gathering in a distant town, got up early and drove three hours just to be in church.

During a meal, a young woman who grew up in the Church of the Nazarene told my wife that a year ago she was working undercover on a documentary film in an Asian country on animal rights and illegal trade. She was arrested by the government and kept in solitary confinement for a month in total darkness. One day, the cell door slammed open, a hood was put over her head and she was led out and put on a truck. When the truck stopped, she thought she was going to be shot. They removed the hood, faced her down a road and said, "Walk!" She looked down and saw her backpack, grabbed it and walked. Later she discovered that she had walked across the border. Now she's here in East Texas. I'm thinking to myself: Jesus can work with kids like these.

But not everyone is of the same mind. While most of the congregation opposes the pipeline, the presence of folks committed to direct action and civil disobedience leaves some congregation members uneasy. Our Earth Care Ministry sponsored a forum within the congregation shortly after the blockaders started showing up in church. Four lawyers who are members of the church presented some of the legal issues we might be facing, especially in view of TransCanada's reputation for aggressively threatening lawsuits. After listening to the lawyers, we were all terrified to even speak to each other, much less feed a blockader. I walked out realizing that if we ran a church based on lawyers' advice, we wouldn't have a church.

We look up on Sunday mornings and see these kids coming into church with wild haircuts, scruffy beards and raggedy clothes and smelling as if they haven't bathed in a week or two—because they haven't. They sit on the edge of their seats during the sermons. They ask questions, they are passionate, they hug people, they pitch in and wash dishes and set up chairs, and they jump up and down with glee when invited to share a home-cooked meal and have a shower and their clothes washed. I preach hard every Sunday, with my heart in my throat, because I know that in the next few days it is likely that they will be standing in front of what Steinbeck called "the monster" and Paul called "the powers," and they will be hit with pepper spray and hauled off to jail. One Sunday, the kids joined in as we all gathered around a church member to pray as he went off to Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. We knew that the battle against cancer and the battle against tar sands are connected.

In the next few weeks, these young blockaders will move on to somewhere else in the fight against the pipeline, and we will still be here. It will be interesting to see what we learn from these kids. We are a Prius-driving, recycling, eating-local kind of church that will most likely soon be face to face with a toxic pipeline, hoping and praying that it doesn't leak—a pipeline owned by a multinational corporation that has enormous power and does not blink before using it.

During one of the tree-sitting actions one of the older couples in the church drove out in their Prius to the site. Police were everywhere, awaiting the orders of TransCanada officials who were moving about on their ATVs. The couple approached some of the kids supporting the tree-sitters with a platter of brownies but were intercepted by police and given such an antagonistic interrogation that they visibly blanched. They still delivered their brownies. But their eyes have been opened. So much for TransCanada as the nice new neighbor that sponsors our local blueberry festival.

Recently we held a rally at a park, a completely public area, with children running and playing, while nearby many of our church members stood by in support of the blockaders as they locked themselves to equipment and did more tree-sitting. About a dozen women, mostly church members, dressed in ridiculous “old lady” clothing, did their version of the Raging Grannies, lampooning the powerful by singing a song about the pipeline to the tune of “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain.” A police cruiser kept us under surveillance while another drove slowly through the parking lot, checking license plates. We waved at them; they didn’t wave back.

Down at the tree-sitting site, it wasn’t long before a truck arrived with a cherry picker mounted on the back to remove the kids up in the trees. Alongside the road, in the public easement, stood more than 100 of us holding signs. In a spontaneous act, some of the kids moved into the road to block the way; the truck slowed but kept moving and pushed one kid onto the ground. In an effort to stop the truck, the kids began to pound on its hood and cab. With that, a veritable hornet’s nest was stirred up: deputies came running, wielding pepper spray indiscriminately, hitting a 75-year-old great-grandmother. Fleet-footed young people ran in every direction while sheriff’s deputies pretended to give chase—Keystone Cops with a serious edge.

In a new book, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers suggest that when we read the apostle Paul saying, “We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ” (1 Cor. 4:9–10), we should imagine a theatrical fool “dashing unexpectedly onto the stage and disrupting the entire play with his shocking words and antics.” That image has come to my mind not only on that particular day of action, but during the entire time these young people have been with us. They have “dashed unexpectedly onto the stage” of our town, our church and our lives. Only God knows what the impact of their “shocking words and antics” will be in the end.

To stand against the Keystone XL Pipeline is nothing short of foolish. Overwhelmed, outnumbered and underfunded, these blockaders and our church are no match for TransCanada. With most of East Texas supporting the pipeline, we wonder sometimes if we are simply damned fools rather than fools for Christ. I don’t know. But what I do know is that we prayed for a young adult ministry, and God sent us these young adults who have led us into a ministry of folly.