

A church is fighting back against the Atlantic Coast Pipeline

And it has some prominent allies.

by [Jesse James DeConto](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue



The Rev. Paul Wilson speaks with Virginia state delegates Marcia Price, Lashrecse Aird, and others. Photo by Alec R. Hosterman.

You've probably heard the statistics: the earth's surface is more than 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than it was a century ago. Scientists predict that with the current upward trend in greenhouse gas emissions, the increase could more than double by 2050 and might reach as high as 10 degrees by 2100. At that point, Virginia temperatures will be like those of Florida.

You can't have that kind of temperature hike and the climate changes that go with it—droughts, floods, soil erosion, and rising seas pushing salt water onto fertile

coastal plains—without affecting agriculture. By the end of the century, studies predict, worldwide vegetable crop yields could drop by more than a third, and production of corn—which feeds much of the planet’s livestock—could be cut in half.

What can any of us do about it? How do we force big business to move toward solar and wind energy rather than continuing to burn coal, oil, and shale gas?

If you’re John Laury and his neighbors in Union Hill, Virginia, you fight like hell. They’re up against some of the biggest energy companies in the world and the fracked gas pipeline these companies want to run through town.

Laury, Union Grove Missionary Baptist Church, and their neighbors in Union Hill—which was settled by freed slaves 150 years ago—are on the front lines of the climate struggle. They’re vying to preserve the health of their community and the health of the planet. They’re aware that over the years communities of color have been disproportionately afflicted with the consequences of environmental degradation.

A landmark report commissioned by the United Church of Christ in 1987 showed that 60 percent of African Americans and Latinos in the United States lived near a toxic waste site. The UCC report, titled *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, is often credited with raising the issue of environmental justice to public consciousness. The term *environmental racism*, in fact, was coined by Ben Chavis, a protégé of Martin Luther King Jr. As a UCC pastor and field officer for the denomination’s Commission for Racial Justice, Chavis was among 500 arrested while protesting a chemical waste dump in Warren County, North Carolina, which is often cited as the birth of the environmental justice movement. From higher asthma rates in Philadelphia and Milwaukee, to dirty drinking water in San Joaquin Valley, California, and Flint, Michigan, to oil spills and deadly hurricanes along the Gulf shore, to urban landfills in Houston and Harlem, minority populations have been more likely to suffer the consequences of industrial pollution.

The Atlantic Coast Pipeline would move up to 1.5 billion cubic feet of fuel per day along a 600-mile route from West Virginia to eastern North Carolina. With that kind of capacity, an \$8 billion financial investment, and the potential to export liquefied natural gas from terminals in Maryland and Georgia, the ACP would cement its lead developers, Duke Energy and Dominion Energy, into a long-term commitment to shale gas just at the time when scientists and most world leaders recognize the

urgent need to phase out fossil fuels and turn to clean energy.

“We’re supposed to leave this earth in the shape we found it or better,” said Laury. “That’s why we’re fighting this monster.”

Union Grove MBC is one of two historic black churches within a mile of each other in this tiny farming town of ranch houses and timber forests, a dozen miles from the nearest supermarket or fire station. Three out of four people within a mile radius of the ACP’s planned compressor station in Union Hill are African American, according to a University of Virginia study. The 42-inch pipeline, which could incinerate everything within a 1,000-foot radius of an explosion, would run within a few hundred feet of several Union Hill homes. The compressor would have about 55,000 horsepower, the strength of an aircraft carrier propeller, pushing the fuel along its route and joining the smaller Williams Transcontinental Pipeline (Transco) running through Union Hill from Texas to New England. The compressor station would repressurize the gas after its 250-mile run from near West Virginia’s border with Pennsylvania.

Residents worry about leaks and emissions impacting air and water quality. Health scientists in New York who studied 18 shale gas compressors across that state found that every year they emit millions of tons of pollutants, the sort that cause heart and respiratory diseases.

“I have three small great-grandbabies,” said Union Grove MBC member Dorothy Oliver. “I don’t want them to grow up around that compressor.”

Dominion Energy insists this compressor station will be cleaner than older versions. So far regulators have trusted them. But Laury said, “These compressors have never been used in the field. We don’t even know if they’ve been tested in a lab.”

“We’re the guinea pigs,” said Paul Wilson, pastor of Union Grove MBC. “It’s not just black folks. It’s anybody that’s marginalized. It’s anybody who is disenfranchised from the real decision making, from the economic issues in the country.”

Industrial pollution disproportionately hurts communities of color.

Some 30,000 Native Americans live within a mile of the pipeline route in North Carolina, which would terminate in Robeson County, the ancestral home of the Lumbee, the largest tribe east of the Mississippi River, who live in one of the poorest

rural counties in America.

Retired United Church of Christ minister Mac Legerton points out that Robeson County, located south of Fort Bragg near the South Carolina border, already has a compressor station and an existing pipeline network buried under its forests and farmland, fed by the Transco pipeline that runs from the Gulf to the northeast Atlantic coast. Duke Energy subsidiary Piedmont Natural Gas is planning to build a new liquefied natural gas storage facility in Robeson County, and Dominion plans to build a link here to South Carolina's pipeline network, which it recently bought, including a connection to a liquefied natural gas terminal outside Savannah, Georgia.

"I can't find any other place in the country where you've got that much gas and potential explosive situation in one location, and this is in one of the oldest Native American communities in the United States," said Legerton.

Another ACP compressor station is planned for Northampton County in North Carolina, near where I-95 crosses the Virginia-North Carolina border. African Americans make up more than half the population countywide and more than three-quarters are within a mile of the proposed pipeline route.

Union Hill hasn't been fighting the battle on its own. The state's Advisory Council on Environmental Justice, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Virginia NAACP are among the groups that have tried to negotiate between Union Hill and Dominion. Dominion has offered the town \$5.1 million in the form of a new ambulance, upgrades to emergency services, and a community center. Many residents continue to fight against the pipeline, saying they don't want the accompanying noise, emissions, or potential explosions.

The Sierra Club and the Southern Environmental Law Center have taken up the case in capitols and courthouses. Moral Mondays founder William Barber II and former vice president Al Gore hosted a training session in Atlanta that featured Union Hill activists. In February, the pair visited Union Hill and called on Virginia governor Ralph Northam to prove his commitment to racial justice by standing against the pipeline.

"That was a really big moment," said Kendyl Crawford, who leads Virginia Interfaith Power and Light, a faith-based climate group in Richmond. "We're trying to keep the drumbeat going, to keep pressure on our decision makers to not ignore Union Hill, to

ask them to intervene.”

Other faith-based allies include the Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) at Union Theological Seminary in New York and the national Interfaith Power and Light network, which started two decades ago in San Francisco and now has affiliates in 36 states.

Will Barber III, an environmental lawyer and son of the civil rights leader, said “ecological devastation” of minority communities is a major concern of the Poor People’s Campaign which his father is leading. In May, Barber III and Karenna Gore, CEE director and daughter of the the former vice president, led a march across the Robert E. Lee Bridge in Richmond with Union Hill activists.

“These are the same communities that have often been detrimentally impacted by our dependence on fossil fuel in the first place,” said Barber III, who sits on the North Carolina Environmental Justice and Equity Board. “Even though they have contributed the least to the environmental factors that have caused climate change, they are the ones who’ve been worst hit.”

Social justice activists around the country have been emphasizing the connection between climate change and race. In early April, some 70 congregations participated in IPL’s Faith Climate Action Week. Churches in St. Louis and Louisville promoted the Green New Deal, which calls for creating jobs in alternative energy in minority communities. In Baltimore, a Quaker meeting house screened a documentary on how rising water in the Chesapeake Bay affects low-income black people in a city where they already suffer a high rate of asthma from fossil fuel pollution.

During Faith Climate Action Week, North Carolina IPL, which functions as the environmental arm of the state’s council of churches, hosted Faith Voices for Creation Justice in the state capital, partnering with the Sierra Club to advocate halting the ACP. Two years ago, when developers were seeking regulatory permits, the council’s governing board issued a statement opposing fracked gas pipelines, specifically targeting the type of fuel that would flow through the ACP.

“Pipelines transporting fracked gas imperil water that flows near it and away from it every minute of a pipeline’s existence,” the council stated. “Once the gas is out, the only solution is to wait while this hazardous source wreaks havoc on the wildlife, plant life, and human life it encounters in its flow downstream. Cleanup is virtually impossible.”

Energy companies say natural gas extracted from shale is clean energy. It's true that shale gas, when burned, does emit less carbon than coal does. But shale gas emits high levels of methane, which warms the planet more than 80 times faster than carbon dioxide, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

"We oppose the continued development of a fossil fuel infrastructure that is literally killing our planet," wrote Jennifer Copeland, executive director of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

"We're trying to keep the drumbeat going, to keep pressure on our decision makers."

Dominion's chief counsel Carlos Brown said he understands the concerns about climate change. Despite falling costs for solar and wind energy, he said, corporate lenders still see those forms of energy as too risky an investment. So his company and partners are pushing a multibillion dollar investment in fracked gas and offering the emergency medical upgrades and the community center to offset the impact on Union Hill.

"How can you fight somebody this big?" asked Wilson. "They always get what they want. We're David, and Goliath is the industry. Each day we have to figure out which smooth stone to throw."

For Faith Climate Action Week, volunteers with North Carolina IPL and the Sierra Club took aim at North Carolina statehouse offices, asking legislators to sign a letter that calls on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to suspend the ACP's certificate, order a work stoppage, and reassess the need for the pipeline.

With several federal permits having been stayed, vacated, or suspended, delays have ballooned the pipeline's cost from about \$5 billion to nearly \$8 billion. The letter warned that the costs will be "passed on to captive ratepayers under the developers' plans." The letter points to evidence of decreasing demand for fossil fuels in Duke and Dominion's own long-term plans and to falling prices for solar and wind energy.

"If built, it would lock not just North Carolina but the entire Southeast region into decades of climate-disrupting fossil fuel use," states the letter, signed by 22 out of the state's 170 representatives and senators. "The burdens of this proposed project would fall hardest on communities of color and low-income communities."

One of the state legislators who didn't sign the letter was Joe Sam Queen, who represents a district in the far western part of the state. Queen, serving his sixth term in the state legislature, consistently receives high scores from groups like Environment North Carolina and the state's League of Conservation Voters. But he's been unwilling to join the battle against the ACP.

During the Faith Voices for Creation Justice event at the capitol, Queen was challenged by Marvin Winstead, a third-generation farmer fighting an eminent domain suit that would dig up 11 of his 39 acres of cropland, about 50 miles downstream from the Northampton compressor site. When Winstead asked Queen why he's neutral on the ACP, Queen conceded that solar power is the way of the future but noted that he's worked hard to get natural gas to his area.

"That's been years ago though, right?" said Winstead, who noted that renewable energies "have expanded very rapidly in the last couple of years."

"You're definitely working on me, but I'm working both sides of the fence right now," said Queen with a laugh.

The legislator echoed the North Carolina Council of Churches' statement on the permanence of fracking pollution but said his state might as well take advantage of the fuel, since states like Pennsylvania, Wyoming, and Texas have already allowed it. Even though he is aware of the environmental harm caused by fossil fuels, he finds it hard to resist the industry.

"You can't fix it," Queen said about the chemicals released in fracking. "Let's don't do maybe any more of it; that's what I'm trying to do."

"But I can't fix what they've done, so, you know, we'll just ride this horse till it's over, and then get off. You can see we ain't perfect. If they want to send it from somewhere else, we'll take it. There's a little hypocrisy in life."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Church vs. pipeline."