People of faith find their place in new wave of anti-pipeline activism

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins in the August 12, 2020 issue

A pipeline protest in Washington, DC. (Photo by Vlad Tchompalov on Unsplash)

Last month, three major pipeline projects in the US were canceled or temporarily halted in the span of 24 hours—due in large part to grassroots activists and their increasingly creative and sophisticated legal strategies.

On July 5, Dominion Energy and Duke Energy announced they were canceling plans to continue with their Atlantic Coast Pipeline, citing the cost associated with the "incremental delays" caused by incessant legal challenges. Then, the next day, a federal judge suspended construction on the Dakota Access Pipeline, pending a new environmental review, and the Supreme Court excluded the Keystone XL pipeline

from eligibility in a fast-track permitting process.

While these new efforts haven't garnered perfect success—for example, an appellate court blocked the Dakota pipeline shutdown about a week after it was ordered—they do illustrate a sea change in the way communities respond to pipeline projects.

According to the *New York Times*, just a decade ago, energy companies laid down thousands of pipelines with little opposition. But now, local community members and grassroots environmentalists routinely disrupt these projects by repeatedly dragging energy companies to court, appealing permits, and litigating things like the effect pipelines have on water quality or the danger they present to endangered species.

These legal delays have dramatically increased the amount of time it takes to get approval to construct a pipeline—in 2009, it took 386 days, according to the *New York Times* report. By 2018, it took more than 580 days. Meanwhile, energy companies complain that they lose millions of dollars each day a pipeline project is delayed.

In many instances, religious groups have been at the forefront of these legal battles. In the case of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, Union Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Union Hill, Virginia, was one of the key opposition leaders. In March, John Laury, one of the church's deacons, told local media that people have an obligation to stand up against the "plundering" and "poisoning" of the earth.

"We are all stewards of God's creation," Laury told the *Farmville (Virginia) Herald.*

Likewise, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe have described their years-long legal efforts to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline as religious obedience, noting they've been instructed by the Creator to care for the land and the water, both of which they consider to be sacred.

In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, a congregation of Catholic sisters, unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the construction of the Atlantic Sunrise pipeline on their property, claiming it was a violation of their religious freedom. The sisters repeatedly lost in court, and in 2019, the Supreme Court declined the order's petition for a hearing.

Despite their legal defeat, Janet McCann, a member of the congregation’s leadership team, told Catholic media that the sisters hoped their efforts to engage in this new frontier would inspire others.

“We’re hoping that our willingness to kind of stumble through all of this will give some encouragement to other individuals, other communities, or other entities to do the same,” she said.