



## **KAIROS Ecumenical Delegation to the Athabasca Tar Sands, May 21-27, 2009**

### **Concluding Statement - June 11, 2009**

An ecumenical delegation of ten leaders from Canadian churches and church organizations, a hereditary Indigenous chief from British Columbia and partners from Ecuador and Nigeria traveled in Alberta from May 21 to 27 to learn more about the tar sands and their impacts on people and the earth.

The delegation was organized by KAIROS ([www.kairoscanada.org](http://www.kairoscanada.org)), which does social justice work for eleven churches and church-related organizations. As Christians, we seek a positive role in the care of God's creation, right relations among peoples, and economic justice - all of which raise questions about the Athabasca tar sands.

We came to Alberta to listen and learn from the people who live and work in the tar sands, Indigenous people who live downstream from them, church and community groups, the industry itself, unions, government, and environmental groups. At the end of our journey, we are left with enduring images and questions.

Local churches and communities in Alberta are deeply engaged in the tar sands and see great benefits from these projects. They don't want to lose jobs, and they are also concerned about the environment.

The people of Fort McMurray are rightly proud of their vibrant, multi-faceted community and its generous spirit. Our experience there has shown us that while the pace of tar sands development and the influx of workers have overburdened the town's infrastructure, the community itself is working hard to solve problems.

On our journey, we met with Indigenous peoples from Fort McMurray and Fort McKay First Nations. For a day and a half, we stayed in Fort Chipewyan, meeting with members of the Mikisew Cree First Nation, Athabasca Chipewyan Cree First Nation and the Metis. Some spoke of the economic benefits of the tar sands, of not wanting to damage that economy. Some mentioned receiving compensation for the use of their traditional territories. Companies owned by Indigenous peoples contract services to the tar sands sector.

Yet we also heard that their way of life, as fishers, hunters and trappers, is being negatively affected, as well as the health of water and land. We heard that their concerns about the impacts of the tar sands developments have been largely ignored, how Treaty and Indigenous rights have not been respected, and of the need for greater involvement of Indigenous communities in tar sands planning.

In Fort Chipewyan, people told us of rare illnesses, the growing number of deaths from cancer and frightening changes to local ecology. We saw how rapidly the graveyard is

filling up. People in Fort Chipewyan need answers about why this is happening and how it can be prevented.

Environmental groups point to the pace of ecological damage that needs bold action. Land reclamation lags far behind stripping and mining of the boreal forest.

Tar sands industry spokespeople are aware of and concerned about the ecological impacts of tar sands extraction, including greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and possible impacts on water. Regarding possible aquifer or river contamination from extraction, greenhouse gas emissions and other dangers, they believe that the protections they are constructing will help considerably. In response to Indigenous health concerns, they reply that there is no proof these issues are related to tar sands development. They argue that tar leaches naturally from the soil into the river and for hundreds of years this has not been a problem. They state that 70 to 80% of greenhouse gas emissions are from cars and other consumer uses of oil and gas. Although Carbon Capture and Storage is much talked about in the media and by government, industry representatives note that it can only work in very limited situations.

We are concerned about the industry's response to the serious questions that have been raised, its determination to keep up the pace of development, and its confidence in what has been done to mitigate damage to people and ecosystems. The current pace of development along the Athabasca River is very different than what has occurred naturally for hundreds of years. Synthetic crude production is the most GHG-intensive form of fossil fuel production. In the face of climate change and the cumulative impacts of environmental toxins, we believe that all responsible parties - individual consumers, industry, and government - must take a greater role in creating solutions.

Industry plans to increase the pace and expand the scope of tar sands development. It will adapt to more government regulation if it happens. Alberta government representatives emphasized the economic importance of the tar sands, and gave no indication they would strengthen government's role in regulating industry to protect the common good.

These are the conclusions we reached as a delegation:

- As citizens, we all need to reduce consumption and help generate solutions.
- We believe the tar sands pose serious, complex questions for Alberta, for Canada and beyond. These questions deserve public discussion and we will encourage this in our churches.
- We agree with Indigenous peoples' and environmentalists' calls for independent studies on the cumulative impacts of the tar sands development, especially concerning water and ecosystems. These studies need to be accessible to the Canadian public.
- We agree that tar sands development must respect and protect Indigenous peoples' rights.

- We question the pace of tar sands development and the sustainability of the tar sands industry and the communities on which it has an impact. There is need for more regulation by the Alberta and Canadian governments to protect the common good.
- Our delegation hopes to meet with elected federal government officials at the highest level. We believe Canada needs a sustainable energy policy, including targets for more renewable energy and sustainable livelihoods.

Our delegation thanks all who met with us for their kindness and honesty, and we hold their perspectives as important. Our faith inspires love for God's creation and a passion for protecting the most vulnerable - both peoples and ecosystems. We seek positive directions that will protect jobs, people and the earth.

June 8, 2009

### **Members of the Delegation**

#### **Church/Organizational Leaders**

- The Rev. Bruce Adema, Director of Canadian Ministries, Christian Reformed Church in North America
- Dana Bush, Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (The Quakers)
- Abe Janzen, Executive Director, Mennonite Central Committee Alberta
- The Rev. Susan Johnson, National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
- Sr. Anne Lewans, OSU, Ursulines of Prelate, Vice-President of the Canadian Religious Conference
- The Right Rev. Thomas O. Morgan, Retired Archbishop of Saskatoon, Anglican Church of Canada
- The Rev. Cheol Soon Park, Moderator of the 134th General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church in Canada
- Donald Peters, Executive Director, Mennonite Central Committee Canada
- The Very Rev. Bill Phipps, Former Moderator of the United Church of Canada
- The Most Rev. V. James Weisgerber, Archbishop of Winnipeg, President, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

#### **Indigenous and Southern Partners**

- Fabricio Guamán, Accion Ecologica/Oil Watch South America, Ecuador
- Ray Jones, Hereditary Chief, Gitksan First Nation, British Columbia
- Michael Keania Karikpo, Oil Watch International, Nigeria

#### **KAIROS Staff**

- Ed Bianchi, Indigenous Rights Program Coordinator
- Mary Corkery, Executive Director
- Sara Stratton, Education and Campaigns Coordinator - Sustainability