

Jan. 9

Tension in Roane County congregations affected by TVA ash spill

When members of Swan Pond United Methodist Church were allowed back into their church, the first thing they did was walk over to the cemetery to look at the damage. An environmental catastrophe lurked at the bottom of the hill.

Rivers of toxic gray sludge covered up roads and trees. Dump trucks rumbled by, loaded with ash, leaving muddy trails. A church member pointed out where the landscape had been permanently altered by the accident that shook area residents out of their beds on Dec. 22.

"I woke up about 1:15 a.m. when I heard the sirens – big firetrucks – going by," said Charles McSween, who has lived on Swan Pond Circle since 1955.

Swan Pond is one of four United Methodist churches located within a few miles of the billion-gallon spill that came from the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston plant, a coal-burning facility in Roane County. The 300-acre disaster was the topic of a U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing Jan. 8. It has been reported that the spill covers an area several times larger than that of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill.

"It's heartbreaking. It's tearing us all to pieces," said Brenda Hendrickson, who has attended the Swan Pond church for the last 10 of her 47 years in Harriman, Tenn. "The workers, the equipment, the trucks – it's the only way it can be cleaned up, but it's disrupting our lives."

Swan Pond United Methodist Church overlooks the area where three homes were destroyed and the Emory River was clogged with the contents of a retention pond that burst. Harriman United Methodist Church and Midtown Valley United Methodist Church have hosted heated community meetings – including one attended by environmental lawyer Erin Brockovich, who was the subject of a movie in 2000.

All three churches, as well as Kingston UMC, have members who might be affected by health hazards or declining property values. Many are current or former TVA employees.

Tied together

"We are mutually tied together in this mess, and we are tied together in how we work through it," said the Rev. Katye Fox, pastor of Harriman UMC and Midtown Valley UMC.

Since Christmas, the Oak Ridge District pastor has checked regularly on parishioners living near the spill site while opening her churches to the city council, landowners, lawyers and media. The churches were asked to host meetings because the buildings are spacious and convenient and because prominent citizens are members, Fox said.

"I'm thrilled that they're meeting in the church. Thank God this is happening in the church and not

in some neutral territory, so that we can go forward together," Fox said.

Reactions to the disaster vary. Some residents express anger toward lawyers pursuing litigation against TVA on behalf of landowners, while others were pleased to meet with Brockovich and her team in a closed meeting at Midtown Valley United Methodist Church on Jan. 8. As of Jan. 9, at least two lawsuits—seeking at least \$5 million each and a state complaint asking \$165 million in damages, according to the *Chattannogan.com*—had been filed against TVA, claiming the dike that retained the toxic waste was faulty. More are expected.

Some residents showed anger toward TVA officials during a Jan. 6 town hall meeting at the Harriman United Methodist Church, while others said they trust the agency.

Thirty-five of their 250 acres are covered by ash-tainted lake water and debris from the broken dike.

Concerned for their livestock and own personal health, the Guptons plan to sell their property and relocate. Attorneys have filed a lawsuit on their behalf.

"My husband makes his living off this farm," said Sandy Gupton. "I don't want to be here, and I don't want to raise our cattle here."

Monica Ethridge, a member of Harriman United Methodist Church, has two children, ages 11 and 7. She said she will also sell her house, located less than a half-mile from the spill.

"We can no longer use the beautiful lake in front of our house for fear of what is in it," she said. "I can't risk my children's health, but the loss we have taken can't be replaced—the long days on the lake,



Members of Swan Pond United Methodist Church observe the ash spill at the base of the hill where their church sits.

"I understand the frustrations, but give TVA a chance," said Mike Hill, a member at Swan Pond United Methodist Church. Like McSween, Hill is retired from TVA after decades of service. He and his father, the Rev. Louis Hill, were invited to a briefing on TVA's planned disaster response.

"I have confidence in TVA, that they'll clean this up and that we'll be safe," said Hendrickson, a retired bookkeeper in her 60s. "They have promised the people they will take care of it and do the best they can. This fly ash has been with us a long time, anyway. There are people who work around things that are a lot more dangerous."

A byproduct of burning coal for power production, fly ash contains heavy metals such as arsenic, lead, barium and thallium, which have been linked to cancer, liver damage and neurological disorders.

Terry and Sandy Gupton, members of Kingston United Methodist Church, own a cattle farm.

playing in the backyard until dark, and riding bikes along the lakeside that we loved so much."

Valley of ash

The pastor of Swan Pond Church cancelled worship on the first Sunday after the spill because the roads leading to the church were covered by sludge or barricaded by authorities.

Later, the 15-member congregation was upset to learn that traffic from the clean-up crew and onlookers had left tire ruts in the cemetery lawn.

"Everybody wants to get up on the hill to look at the damage," explained the Rev. Louis Hill, who has served the 160-year-old church for 22 years.

On the following Sunday, Jan. 4, Swan Pond members asked police to temporarily open a road leading to the back of the church so they could worship. Before the service, members stood on the hill among grave plots, looking over the valley of ashes.

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