By Kaye Hult

Thirty-five gathered for the Vigil of the Healing of the Earth on Sunday, Oct. 2, at Old Mission Landing near the Mission of the Sacred Heart in Cataldo, Idaho.

Faith Leaders and Leaders of Conscience of Eastern Washington and North Idaho (FLLC) organized the annual event, held near the epicenter of the Bunker Hill Superfund Site, one of the largest U.S. lead toxic waste Superfund sites, extending from Montana to the center of Spokane.

Before the vigil, participants saw signs, such as one warning: “The soils and sediments in this area contain harmful levels of lead, arsenic and other heavy metals. Young children and pregnant women are at the greatest risk from exposure.”

Sister Pat Millen, OSF, of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, guided the afternoon’s activities.

Roger Lynn, sabbatical interim pastor at Veradale United Church of Christ in Spokane Valley, acknowledged the vigil was taking place “on the ancestral lands of the Coeur d’Alene people, who for thousands of years, camped along the shores of the lakes and streams, rode canoes across the waters, and walked the forests of North Idaho and Eastern Washington,” he said.

Barbara Miller, director of the Silver Valley Community Resource Center (SVCRC), said the center has worked 35 years to hold the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) accountable to its mandate to clean up from mining in the Silver Valley.

The mine waste, including lead, arsenic and other heavy metals, has mixed into the soil and water, creating a poisonous environment. Through the river system, the poison has made its way into the Lake Coeur d’Alene and the Spokane River.

Among actions still needed, Barbara said, are shutting down the Old Mission Toxic Waste Dump near the Cataldo Mission and accessing settlement funds to create a community lead health center to address the generations of people who live with lead-related health issues.

“SVCRC provides lead testing and intervention to meet the health intervention law mandates,” she said, telling of the Children Run Better Unleaded (CRBU) project.

Betty Belisle, who helps coordinate CRBU, tells of growing up in Kellogg in the 1970s when the rivers were gray.

“We called the main river through our valley Lead Creek. No one swam or fished in these rivers. Dogs and cats drinking from these waters died. Swans to this day die on the three chain lakes,” she said. “Sulfur acid smoke from the mine covered the valley. We rode bikes, played in neighborhoods, went hiking and swimming in the Kellogg City Pool. We did not know anything different.”

Betty moved away. When she returned as an adult to raise her family she learned that “the toxic air and water I grew up with as a child, caused medical disabilities and mental health issues.

“We who have spoken up from SVCRC and CRBU are demonized, harried and threatened,” Barbara said. “With support of folks here today, FLLC, national groups and others, we feel safe speaking out now.”

Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB, of the Benedictine Monastery of the Ascension in Jerome, Idaho, a long-time supporter of SVCRC, sent a statement.

Referring to the 2001 “Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good, An International Pastoral Letter,” he said all of Idaho except a small section in the southeast corner is in the watershed.

“We are at a figurative watershed moment, a time to make important decisions that will impact into the future the place we call home and habitat,” he said, noting gains and losses. “According to the EPA, since 1997, two sites have been taken from the list of Superfund sites in Idaho, two have been proposed, and six remain, including the Bunker Hill Superfund site, first listed in 1983.

“This vigil occurs at a Christian mission and at the Missions Flat Repository for toxic waste,” Fr. Hugh continued. “The bishop’s pastoral letter envisioned ‘individuals and communities honestly evaluating their conduct and objectively viewing consequences to see how their conduct impacts the environment.’ That is what each of us must do and what we ask agencies responsible for the environmental health of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho to do.”

He spoke of an integral ecology, advanced by Pope Benedict and Pope Francis “that sees human beings as part of nature. This means that we look at the plight of salmon not just in terms of species extinction, but also because of their importance to Native Americans, whose history and identity is bound up with salmon and whose right to fish for salmon is assured by treaties. Integral ecology also means we look at the poor, who usually suffer the most from environmental degradation.”

Calling people to work for environmental justice, he said, “The world is a book written by the hand of God. It is speaking to us clearly. We need to listen to its message and respond together. We are in a watershed moment.”

Kaye Hult of FLLC rang a bell and invited reflective silence.

Vigil sponsors and others spoke.

Sister Patricia Novak, OSF, read from the Laudato Si Action Platform Plan, prepared by the Sisters of St Francis of Philadelphia and their companions, a call “to intensify efforts to care for Earth, especially on behalf of those most affected by our unsustainable practices.” Their 2017 Corporate Stand on Care for Creation calls them to “ecological education of ourselves and others leading to concrete action.”

She said the sisters and companions, respond to Pope Francis’ call to commit to a seven-year journey to develop and implement a Laudato Si Action Plan.

Three nuns from Sravasti Abbey shared wisdom for living a practical life of kindness and living in peace.

Kaye shared ways The Fig Tree supports work for environmental and social justice through stories, its calendar, the Eastern Washington Legislative Conference, and the Resource Directory.

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