

Bishop tours West Virginia's largest coal mine

WHEELING, W.Va. – To see firsthand the latest advances in coal mine safety and the daily operations of a mine, Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston joined West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin and others on a tour of the McElroy Mine, near Moundsville, the largest coal mine in West Virginia.

In a news conference at Wheeling Jesuit University Feb. 19 following the tour, J. Davitt McAteer, vice president for sponsored programs at the university and special mine safety adviser to Manchin, said the purpose of the visit was to look at the emergency communication systems between its mines, the telephone communication systems being developed and tested there and at other facilities, and the steps being taken to introduce new technology into U.S. mines.

Bishop Bransfield said the tour has given him greater knowledge of mining in the state.

“It was just astounding to see how deep and how extensive the mine is and the kind of technology that is used today, but to also understand the miners and how difficult it must be to work down there all day long – 10 hours a day, six days a week,” he said. “It just gives you a great admiration of them and a respect for them.”

Bishop Bransfield said employees of the McElroy Mine, which is roughly 800 feet deep, explained to him the safety measures they are working with.

“I was so happy to have the bishop with us to be able to really see” what is being done, Manchin said at the news conference. “With all the local tragedies that we endured last year as a state, with the Sago Mine disaster, with Alma and (other disasters) we lost far too many of our brave miners ... who provide energy for the rest of this country and for our state.”

At the core of mine safety initiatives is response time and communication. “What we know is that we need rapid response,” Manchin said. “We need communication and tracking and we need oxygen so, in case the unfortunate would happen, the people

in those mines have a chance to be rescued safely. We were able to see the newest of technologies and things that are working and ways they can communicate.”

The coal industry has been working with the state in safety initiatives, he said, citing especially Consol Energy Inc., which owns the McElroy Mine and has opened its mines to use as test laboratories under “real conditions.”

McAteer said Consol is testing communications systems and assessing their ability to sustain an explosion. He also said that there is a need for alternate communications systems in the event of an explosion.

“What we’re trying to do is build systems that are much like the Internet – if one portal goes down the other can pick it up,” he said.

Manchin commended Wheeling Jesuit University for its commitment to improving mine safety, and noted its sponsorship of the upcoming International Mining Health and Safety Symposium to be held at the university April 26-27.

Bishop Bransfield thanked Manchin and McAteer for allowing him to tour the McElroy Mine with them and commended them for their commitment to mine safety improvements.

“It obviously is the governor’s and Mr. McAteer’s objective to bring as much safety into the mines as possible and I continue to pray that they will be successful and that all of us will work together,” the bishop said. “Coal is an important part of our world and we should all realize what a great gift it is and how miners put their lives at risk to get it for us.”