

EEN urges conservative Christians to embrace the Earth Environmental movement finds way for evangelicals to tap into their green sides

By Deborah Pardo-Kaplan

Environmentalists and anti-abortion activists rarely rally together at the same event. But at a Washington, D.C., gathering this January, the two groups walked side by side.

Some participants at the 32nd annual March for Life held signs saying, "I regret my abortion," while other antiabortion marchers swayed banners proclaiming, "Stop mercury poisoning of the unborn." Many of the 100,000 marchers were evangelical Christians; that number included a small group of environmentalists. The National Association of Evangelicals, which has a membership of 45,000 churches and 52 denominations, led the mercury-awareness campaigners.



Photo / Lindsay Moseley
The Rev. Richard Cizik, vice president of governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, talks to a member of the crowd at the 32nd annual March for Life in Washington D.C., in January.

The Rev. Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, first brought the mercury issue to the attention of evangelical Christians at a June conference on the environment in Sandy Cove, Md. Ball suggested that evangelical Christians could enter the environmental discussion through aiding the unborn — who may be absorbing low but harmful levels of toxicity by the mother's consumption of fish, reported an NAE newsletter.

The meeting of 40 evangelical leaders at Sandy Cove reflected a growing trend of evangelical Christian interest in environmental stewardship. Among those attending were editors of *Christianity Today*, executives of World Vision, professors of Christian seminaries and heads of churches. By the end of the conference, 29 leaders had signed a covenant promising to follow up with a statement on climate change by the summer of 2005.

The Pew Center on Global Climate Change, a nonpartisan group, confirms that the world's climate has been steadily warming. It attributes the temperature change to carbon dioxide emissions and other greenhouse gases from industry, fossil fuel combustion and changes in land use, such as deforestation. The United States emits 25 percent of greenhouse gases worldwide. The center projects global temperatures to rise between 2.5 and 10 degrees Fahrenheit over the next century.

Christians have been realizing that as a result of global warming, many in poor countries will suffer with the rise from flooding, droughts and risks to public health. Some are concerned about predictions that 300 million cases of malaria

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could develop from global warming, Ball said.

At Sandy Cove, The Rev. Richard Cizik, the National Association of Evangelicals vice president of governmental affairs, noted Christian collaboration on a variety of issues. Christians aided peace in Sudan, helped feminists develop the U.S. Freedom from Sexual Trafficking Act, supported gay people with a global AIDS initiative and assisted Tibetan Buddhists pass the International Religious Freedom Act through the U.S. Congress. Cizik hopes that now evangelicals can affect environmental change.

"If evangelicals were to find a basis to collaborate with environmentalists," he said, "we can pass the Climate Stewardship Act," a U.S. bill which would limit greenhouse emissions.

Evangelicals have been concerned about the environment since the late 1960s, Ball said. "But what we are now experiencing is a growing interest within the center of the evangelical community," he continued, "and a growing activism by such groups as the National Association of Evangelicals." In the past, evangelical Christians have hesitated or largely ignored environmental issues, considering them to be the property of New Agers and left-wing liberals, and second in priority to salvation concerns. They have also questioned the science behind global warming.

Tony Campolo, founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, said Christians were more open to environmental activism prior to the current American presidential administration. He said the evangelical community takes its cues from the Republican Party.

"In so far as the Republican Party has over the last four years turned away from environmental issues, the loyalty to the party is such that the evangelical community has followed suit," he said.

Other evangelical leaders disagree. Ball said all that evangelicals need is to hear other evangelicals talking about environmentalism. "That's going to be much more important."

The environmental discussion among evangelicals is heading forward. The National Association of Evangelicals recently adopted a statement on civic engagement called "The Health of the Nation," listing "care for creation" as one of its principles. It was the first time the association had articulated its political and social agenda, said Cizik.

The Evangelical Environmental Network, with its 23 partner organizations, has launched campaigns since its founding 10 years ago. Five hundred evangelical leaders endorsed the network's initial guiding statement of faith on the care of creation. Among its programs over the years, the network has helped renew the Endangered Species Act, create environmental awareness for families and spark a large media blitz, with its "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign.

"The major goal in the ["What Would Jesus Drive?"] campaign was to begin the discussion of how our transportation issues have health consequences, consequences on global warming and the poor, consequences in terms of our national security," Ball said. The network didn't measure the campaign's success by the number of Christians driving hybrid cars, he added.

Despite the campaigns, some say many Christians still have reservations to take part in environmental issues. Tony Campolo blames the impact of the Left Behind series, written by the Rev. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. These books, he said, reflect a theology of the end of days that evangelicals may interpret as a lessening of Christian care for the Earth and a heightening of the relevance of eternity.

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Those leading the evangelical groups for creation stewardship see that kind of theology as a distortion of biblical truth. They say that following Jesus means also caring for the physical world that he created. They hope to pass on their ideology and biblical interpretation to many evangelicals.

"It will be as a result of their seeing this as God's call," said Calvin DeWitt, president of Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, "or their seeing this as a vital part of their responsibility, or a vital part of their dedication to the sanctity of life, or to the vibrancy of life, or their belief that might emerge here — that the creation story has as its core stewardship."

A number of Christians will have the opportunity to learn about the link between the creation story and environmental responsibility while at college. Christian educational institutions have been contributing to the growth of evangelical interest. Christian college environmental studies programs have seen a "steady, positive response from year to year," said DeWitt, also a professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin.

Au Sable, a Christian institution with campuses in Washington state and Michigan, was founded in 1979. It attracts 200 students per year and partners with 60 Christian colleges. In addition, 38 members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities offer majors, minors, or concentrations in environmental studies, environmental science or ecology.

Evangelicals have not only been cooperating with other Evangelicals, but have joined a wider religious movement that engages environmental concerns. When Ron Sider, the president of Evangelicals for Social Action, co-founded the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, an association of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants, he said the evangelical wing of the partnership would be the most challenging to bring on board.

"We knew that that community [evangelicals] were the least engaged," Sider said. "And that's continued to be the case. But there's no question that there are indications of breakthroughs, of growth, of openness, and I'm genuinely hopeful about the next few years."

The partnership released a document in July, called "Earth's Climate Embraces Us All," which affirms evangelical participation in a broader religious and scientific environmental cooperation, said Paul Gorman, executive director of the partnership.

The Christians for creation-care campaigns and covenant signing will continue in the months ahead, with hopes for full community penetration.

"We'd like to see, by 2015, creation care as a concern for the majority of evangelical Christians," Ball said. "It's a very doable proposition that would make a tremendous difference in the world."

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Green in Golden