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The Greening of Evangelicals

Christian Right Turns, Sometimes Warily, to Environmentalism

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SEATTLE — Thanks to the Rev. Leroy Hedman, the parishioners at Georgetown Gospel Chapel take their baptismal waters cold. The preacher has unplugged the electricity-guzzling heater in the immersion baptism tank behind his pulpit. He has also installed energy-saving fluorescent light bulbs throughout the church and has placed water barrels beneath its gutter pipes — using runoff to irrigate the congregation's all-organic gardens.

Such "creation care" should be at the heart of evangelical life, Hedman says, along with condemning abortion, protecting family and loving Jesus. He uses the term "creation care" because, he says, it does not annoy conservative Christians for whom the word "environmentalism" connotes liberals, secularists and Democrats.

"It's amazing to me that evangelicals haven't gone quicker for the green," Hedman said. "But as creation care spreads, evangelicals will demand different behavior from politicians. The Republicans should not take us for granted."

There is growing evidence — in polling and in public statements of church leaders — that evangelicals are beginning to go for the green. Despite wariness toward mainstream environmental groups, a growing number of evangelicals view stewardship of the environment as a responsibility mandated by God in the Bible.

"The environment is a values issue," said the Rev. Ted Haggard, president of the 30 million-member National Association of Evangelicals. "There are significant and compelling theological reasons why it should be a banner issue for the Christian right."

In October, the association's leaders adopted an "Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility" that, for the first time, emphasized every Christian's duty to care for the planet and the role of government in safeguarding a sustainable environment.

"We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part," said the statement, which has been distributed to 50,000 member churches. "Because clean air, pure water, and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation."

Signatories included highly visible, opinion-swaying evangelical leaders such as Haggard, James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministries. Some of the signatories are to meet in March in Washington to develop a position on global warming, which could place them at odds with the policies of the Bush administration, according to Richard Cizik, the association's vice president for governmental affairs.

Also last fall, Christianity Today, an influential evangelical magazine, weighed in for the first time on global warming. It said that "Christians should make it clear to governments and businesses that we are willing to adapt our lifestyles and support steps towards changes that protect our environment."

The magazine came out in favor of a global warming bill — sponsored by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) — that the Bush administration opposed and the Republican-controlled Senate defeated.

Polling has found a strengthening consensus among evangelicals for strict environmental rules, even if they cost jobs and higher prices, said John C. Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. In 2000, about 45 percent of evangelicals supported strict environmental regulations, according to Green's polling. That jumped to 52 percent last year.

"It has changed slowly, but it has changed," Green said. "There is now a lot of ferment out there."

Such ferment matters because evangelicals are politically active. Nearly four out of five white evangelical Christians voted last year for President Bush, constituting more than a third of all votes cast for him, according to the Pew Research Center. The analysis found that the political clout of evangelicals has increased as their cohesiveness in backing the Republican Party has grown. Republicans outnumber Democrats within the group by more than 2 to 1.

There is little to suggest in recent

elections that environmental concerns influenced the evangelical vote — indeed, many members of Congress who receive 100 percent approval ratings from Christian advocacy groups get failing grades from environmental groups. But the latest statements and polls have caught the eye of established environmental organizations.

Several are attempting to make alliances with the Christian right on specific issues, such as global warming and the presence of mercury and other dangerous toxins in the blood of newborn children.

After the election last fall, leaders of the country's major environmental groups spent an entire day at a meeting in Washington trying to figure out how to talk to evangelicals, according to Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation. For decades, he said, environmentalists have failed to make that connection.

"There is a lot of suspicion," said Schweiger, who describes himself as a conservationist and a person of faith. "There are a lot of questions about what are our real intentions."

Green said the evangelicals' deep suspicion about environmentalists has theological roots.

"While evangelicals are open to being good stewards of God's creation, they believe people should only worship God, not creation," Green said. "This may sound like splitting hairs. But evangelicals don't see it that way. Their stereotype of environmentalists would be Druids who worship trees."

Another reason that evangelicals are suspicious of environmental groups is cultural and has its origins in how conservative Christians view themselves in American society, according to the Rev. Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network. The group made its name with the "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign against gas-guzzling cars but recently shifted its focus to reducing global warming.

"Evangelicals feel besieged by the culture at large," Ball said. "They don't know many environmentalists, but they have the idea they are pretty weird — with strange liberal, pantheist views."

Ball said that the way to bring large numbers of evangelicals on board as political players in environmental issues is to make persuasive arguments that, for instance, tie problems of global warming and mercury pollution to family health and the health of unborn children. He adds that evangelicals themselves — not such groups as the Sierra Club or Friends of the Earth, with their liberal Democratic baggage — are the only ones who can do the persuading.

"Environmental groups are always going to be viewed in a wary fashion," Ball said. "They just don't have a good enough feel for the evangelical community. There are landmines from the past, and they will hit them without knowing it."

Even for green activists within the evangelical movement, there are landmines. One faction in the movement, called dispensationalism, argues that the return of Jesus and the end of the world are near, so it is pointless to fret about environmental degradation.

James G. Watt, President Ronald Reagan's first interior secretary, famously made this argument before Congress in 1981, saying: "God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back." The enduring appeal of End Time musings among evangelicals is reflected in the phenomenal success of the Left Behind series of apocalyptic potboilers, which have sold more than 60 million copies and are the best-selling novels in the country.

Haggard, the leader of the National Association of Evangelicals, concedes that this thinking "is a problem that I do have to address regularly in talking to the common man on the street. I tell them to live your life as if Jesus is coming back tomorrow, but plan your life as if he is not coming back in your lifetime. I also tell them that the authors of the Left Behind books have life insurance policies."

This argument is apparently resonating. Green said the notion that an imminent Judgment Day absolves people of environmental responsibility is now a "fringe" belief.

Unusual weather phenomena, such as the four hurricanes that battered Florida last year and the melting of the glaciers around the world, have captured the attention of evangelicals and made many more willing to listen to scientific warnings about the dangers of global warming, Haggard said.

At the same time, activists such as Ball from the Evangelical Environmental Network are trying to show how the most important hot-button issue of the Christian right — abortion and the survival of the unborn — has a green dimension.

"Stop Mercury Poisoning of the Unborn," said a banner that Ball carried in last month's antiabortion march in Washington. Holding up the other end of the banner was Cizik, the National Association of Evangelicals' chief lobbyist.

They handed out carefully footnoted papers that cited federal government studies showing that 1 in 6 babies is born with harmful levels of mercury. The fliers urged Christians not to support the "Clear Skies" act, a Bush administration proposal to regulate coal-burning power plants that are a primary source of mercury pollution.

Although Cizik carried the banner and handed out literature that implicitly criticized Bush's policy on regulating mercury, he conceded that many evangelicals find it difficult to criticize the president.

"It is hard to oppose him when he has the moral authority of the office of the president and a record of standing with us on moral issues like abortion," Cizik said.

In Seattle, Hedman says that evangelicals should worry less about the moral authority of the president and more about their biblical obligation to care for Earth.

"The Earth is God's body," Hedman said in a recent sermon. "God wants us to look after it."