

Christians Urged to Care for the Earth

'Creation care' advocates say protecting the environment is part of biblical stewardship

For the last 20 years, charismatic pastor Leroy Hedman has taught his small Seattle congregation that caring for the environment is part of being a good Christian.

"Romans 8 says creation is in travail, and we can help that as Christians," said Hedman, pastor of the nondenominational Georgetown Community Chapel.

The congregation of several dozen grows a large vegetable garden that it uses to feed people in the community. And in 1999, Georgetown became the first U.S. church to be awarded an Energy Star Award from the Environmental Protection Agency for its use of energy-efficient appliances, lighting, heating and cooling, which Hedman said has cut its electricity bill down to \$25 a month.

He said the savings are used to fund outreach and missions activities. "It honors Christ to serve the creation," Hedman told Charisma. "Why should the New Agers be the ones gathering the attention for preserving 'Mother Earth'?"

For many Christians, environmental issues haven't been high on the list of social concerns. But that may be changing as a small but growing number of believers begin to view "environmental stewardship" as part of their Christian responsibility, and examine ways to become more vocal about such issues as global warming, air and water pollution, and

species extinction.

In June, about 30 ministry leaders—including representatives from the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), World Vision, Southern Baptist Convention, Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.), International Church of the Foursquare Gospel and Charisma magazine—convened at the Sandy Cove Christian Retreat Center outside Baltimore for a “creation care” conference aimed at raising awareness among Christians about pressing environmental issues.

Organized largely by the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), the invitation-only meeting included presentations from Sir John Houghton, an evangelical British physicist who is widely considered to be a leading authority on global warming; Howard Snyder, an Asbury Theological Seminary professor who discussed developing a theology that embraces creation care; and Larry Schweiger, a Christian who was recently named president of the National Wildlife Federation.

Several participants were hopeful that Christians would one day reclaim biblical environmental stewardship from radical extremists who have been accused of valuing trees and birds over humans. “Many people believe that in order to be concerned about the environment, you have to embrace liberal politics,” said NAE President Ted Haggard. “That is not true, and we need to reverse that stereotype.”

The three-day conference ended with participants agreeing to give further study to environmental issues, to educate their constituents about them and to develop a formal position on global warming within a year.

For people like the Rev. Jim Ball, who has been trying to mobilize Christians around environmental causes for 10 years, the meeting was an encouraging sign. "This [conference] was to reach out to those key leaders who really hadn't thought about [the environment] much," said Ball, executive director of the EEN (). "This is what we were hoping to achieve, that they would be open to listening to what other evangelical leaders were saying about this issue."

Last year, Ball organized the What Would Jesus Drive? campaign to challenge Christians to purchase more fuel-efficient vehicles. It is widely believed that fuel emissions from cars are raising the level of carbon in the atmosphere, which some, such as Houghton, say is causing the earth to grow dangerously warmer. Other scientists say the warming trend is part of a natural weather cycle.

The debate, and the complicated scientific jargon, is what has kept many Christians from engaging environmental concerns, said NAE Vice President of Governmental Affairs Richard Cizik, who attended the creation care meeting with Haggard. Although both men say they are committed to addressing environmental issues, they want to find solutions that nurture free-market capitalism. "There are over 6 billion people on the earth. During our lifetime it could go up to 9 billion," Haggard said. "The only way to provide enough goods and services is through capitalism."

But for many other Christians, environmentalism is not a debate about science or economics; it's about theology. "Any time Christians get seriously involved in public policy issues, Christians have to be clear that they understand how things work and that they're not being taken advantage of by the left or the right because you're bringing the moral authority of the church [to the debate]," said Gerald

Zandstra, programs director for the Acton Institute, a Christian think-tank that studies religion, economics and public policy.

Cheryl Johns, professor of church formation at the Church of God Theological Seminary and a participant in the Sandy Cove meeting, said Christians have a unique responsibility toward the environment. "I think most Pentecostals and charismatics understand that Jesus saves, but He also heals," she told Charisma. "God is at work restoring and bringing healing. We participate in that as people of God. We participate in the creation being restored. To care for creation, I think, is to participate in healing."

Snyder has studied renewal movements extensively, and he said mobilizing charismatic and Pentecostals around this issue would cause a significant shift in momentum, as that demographic is believed to be the largest segment of Christianity worldwide.

"The same God who is concerned about the renewal of the church is concerned with the renewal of creation," Snyder told attendees at Sandy Cove. "The same Spirit who hovers over the church hovers over the waters and wants to bring both into reconciliation under the headship of Jesus Christ.

"If we are concerned about revival in its truest sense, we will be concerned about creation care. Conversely, if we are genuinely concerned with creation care we will want to see the Holy Spirit renew God's people, sending a revival of such depth that it not only stirs our hearts but also heals our land."

For Francis MacNutt, a longtime leader in the charismatic renewal, change begins when individuals decide to do something. In 2002, he bought a Toyota Prius, a hybrid car that gets an estimated 52 miles per gallon in the city, compared with 36 miles per gallon for a nonhybrid Honda Civic and 22-25 miles per gallon for the more fuel-efficient SUVs.

“It would take a million people driving Priuses to make a dent in [global warming]; I know that,” MacNutt said. “But it’s something I can do.”

Adrienne S. Gaines