

# Foursquare Minister Seeks to Raise Awareness of Environmental Issues

Peter Illyn says a four-month trek through the Cascade Mountains led him to refocus his ministry on 'creation care' Waging a nationwide crusade to bring environmental awareness to Christian communities, self-proclaimed environmental evangelist Peter Illyn is dedicated to helping Christians reclaim the biblical mandate to love, serve and protect God's creation.

Illyn is a former Foursquare pastor and the executive director of Restoring Eden (), a ministry rooted in La Center, Wash., whose goal is to make environmental stewardship a core Christian value. "Our message is simple," Illyn said. "God is a good God, God made a good earth, and God calls us to be good stewards."

In 1990, Illyn traveled 1,000 miles on a four-month sabbatical through the Cascade Mountains. With Bible in hand and two llamas by his side, Illyn said there he discovered his calling to preach a message of environmental stewardship. He describes the experience as being born again, again. "God had become small in my heart in ministry," he said. "It was in the midst of the wild that God became real to me again."

Restoring Eden stemmed from Christians for Environmental Stewardship, a group Illyn founded in 1996 to support the Endangered Species Act. In 2001, the group became an independent, nonprofit organization and was renamed Restoring Eden to reflect its mission to protect endangered species,

ecosystems and indigenous cultures.

The organization strives to connect with younger Christians—typically the college crowd—through outreach programs, campus chapters and literature. Recent college graduate Andrew Hoeksema became involved with Restoring Eden when Illyn spoke to a crowd of his peers at Dordt College. In February 2004, Hoeksema attended Rescuing God's Creation, a campaign Illyn spearheaded to mobilize college students to unite with the Gwich'in people—a group of tribal Christians in Alaska who number about 8,000—and lobby to protect the Arctic Refuge from oil drilling.

"It's not about liberal or conservatism; it's not about Republicans or Democrats," Hoeksema said. "It's about preserving our environment for future generations."

"If we want to really define Christianity in the sense that it's supposed to be defined ... we have to decide what's right and what's wrong," said Gwich'in tribe member Peter Solomon. "In our case, there's no recovery. Our way of life will go away and that's it."

Increasingly, Christians are talking about the environment, with the National Association of Evangelicals stating in October that caring for creation is part of every Christian's duty and that government should protect its citizens from the impact of "environmental degradation."

"Peter [Illyn] is helping people understand ... that you may not think this is related to yourself as a Christian, but the Bible says that it is," said the Rev. Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, which has

23 partner organizations, including Restoring Eden. “If Christ’s blood reconciles all things, how can we be harming and extinguishing what Christ died to reconcile?”

Some Christians, such as Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson, worry that believers may take “creation care” too far by elevating environmental concerns over human needs. “We are stewards of all of God’s creation. And the supreme act of His creation is human beings,” Colson wrote in his BreakPoint newsletter. “It will do us little good to keep the Arctic Circle pristine if it’s at the cost of America being driven to her knees by Middle-Eastern oil traders. It does little good to preserve the Brazilian rain forest if the cost is millions of Brazilians living in shacks on sub-standard wages.”

But Illyn says it’s a mistake for Christians to assume God made the earth for people. “Psalm 24:1 says, ‘The Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it,’” Illyn said. “It’s not like a credit card I give my daughter and say spend it as you please.”

Illyn noted that loving the environment does not mean worshiping it. “We get accused of putting nature before people and that is not true and not fair,” he said. “I think the church today is scared to love nature; that somehow loving nature is the beginning of a slippery slope to worshiping the earth.”

Illyn, who was diagnosed with a rare form of eye cancer two years ago, likens his health battle to the one between man and the environment. “Cancer is when part of my body says I will not live within the boundaries that God intended me to live within,” he said. “It’s the ultimate of corruption. What we’re saying is that uncontrolled human development is similar.”

**Suzy Richardson**