

Creation Care Event Billed as Largest for Christians

✖ More than 60,000 churchgoers are expected to participate in a simulcast event Wednesday being billed as the largest gathering of Christians supporting creation care.

Hope for Creation, being held on the eve of the 40th observance of Earth Day, will be simulcast from Northland, A Church Distributed, a Florida congregation led by the Rev. Joel Hunter. Participants from as far as India, Thailand and Russia, will join in online, and many pastors will air the simulcast at their churches.

Photo: Dr. Matthew Sleeth will lead the Hope for Creation simulcast Wednesday.

“This is an effort to recast the environmental movement into its proper perspective-as a biblical issue that Christians should care about,” explains Hunter, Northland’s senior pastor. “I believe the church should be leading the conversation, and this event will give us all the chance to do just that.”

The event is spearheaded by Dr. Matthew Sleeth of Wilmore, Ky., an ER physician who quit medicine to preach on environmental stewardship. Sleeth, founder of Blessed Earth and author of *Serve God and Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action*, will host a live, interactive town hall conversation with audiences.

“Environmentalism is the only activity we can carry out where we worship God all the time,” Sleeth said. “When you begin to live more humbly, or meekly as Christ would put it, you begin to grow as a spiritual human being.”

The simulcast event comes as observers say churchgoers’ views about environmental issues are changing, though the validity

of climate change remains controversial.

Today three-quarters of Christians believe churchgoers should be more active in caring for the environment, according to research by The Barna Group. Among evangelicals the number is 90 percent. In addition to reducing electricity use and fossil-fuel consumption, more Christians are touting the benefits of simple living as a way to combat rampant consumerism.

“Over the last five years what I’ve seen is that people who are biblically based have actually gone to the Bible to see what it has to say,” said Sleeth, whose Blessed Earth nonprofit is dedicated to spreading environmentalism among churches. “It’s always been important since Genesis 2:15, where God puts Adam and Eve in the garden and says to tend and protect it. But I think in recent history there’s been too much politics around taking care of our environment.”

Christians’ evolution on the environment mirrors a broader change among evangelicals, who today are more apt to address social justice issues as they advocate for the sanctity of life and traditional marriage. Charismatic pastor Tri Robinson said seven years ago when he wrote *Saving God’s Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church’s Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship*, churches rarely discussed “creation care.”

“One of our goals was to really change the worldview of the evangelical church on the subject,” said Robinson, senior pastor of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Boise, Idaho. “It took a while, but it’s really starting to grow now. People are making the connection between biblical truth and the value of creation care, and they weren’t making that seven years ago. There was this idea if you were pro-environment you were probably pro-choice.”

Climate change remains a volatile issue, though, with only 27 percent of evangelicals convinced global warming is real,

according to Barna. In 2007 the Rev. Jerry Falwell said global warming is "Satan's attempt" to distract churches from fighting abortion and gay marriage. Since his death, leading evangelicals such as James Dobson have continued to challenge popular claims about climate change.

But unlike with abortion and gay marriage, opinions vary on the environment. In 2006 a group of religious activists led by Richard Cizik, then a vice president with the National Association of Evangelicals, penned a green manifesto calling Christians to action on climate change. The same year the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution urging better care of God's creation.

Even Christians who support creation care prefer to step away from left-leaning environmentalists. Sleeth emphasizes that unlike Al Gore he is nonpolitical and says the Hope for Creation event will not address global warming. His group is partnering on the event with Asbury Theological Seminary and Zondervan, the evangelical publisher of Sleeth's book.