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News

## Peter Illyn: Baptists battling for the environment

By Peter Illyn

LA CENTER, Wash. -

RECENTLY, A GROUP of 46 Southern Baptist leaders signed a declaration on the environment and climate change calling for bolder leadership from within their ranks. The document also urges Baptist ministers to preach more about the environment and to keep an open mind about considering environmental policy. These signatories represent three of the past four presidents of the convention, as well as presidents of some of the largest Baptist colleges and seminaries in America.

What is most compelling is not who signed the declaration, but who led the initiative, a 25-year-old seminary student named Jonathan Merritt, the son of a megachurch pastor and past president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

This represents a significant milestone in the Baptist ministry, demonstrating a generational shift of power and priorities within the ranks of conservative evangelical Christians. This generational shift is not unique to the Baptists. We have a vast generation of young faithful who have an enhanced sense of global justice and community. These are the pastors raised on U2 and Bono, Christian rock festivals and summer-mission trips to plant trees on the barren hills of Haiti.

Some of the fastest-growing churches are now being led by Gen-X pastors who have made caring for creation core expressions of their churches. They light candles like Catholics, sing like Pentecostals, quote scripture like Baptists, drink beer like Lutherans and recycle like Mennonites. And they fill me with hope.

These young leaders have an expanded sense of community. Language such as "man vs. nature," or "jobs vs. the environment," seems foolish. These young Christians are holistically pro-life and therefore understand that something is flawed in a concept that justifies driving species to extinction for the mere sake of making a profit.

These young leaders also share a greater sense of interconnectedness about the world and recognize the link between responsibility and environmental change. We should applaud them for taking a public stand to acknowledge this and for sharing their position to preserve God's creations and "return to a biblical mandate to guard the world God created."

They see a biblical mandate to struggle for the common good and see a role for good government in civil societies. And they are not frightened to stand alongside new allies to fight for the causes they hold dear.

I am a part of such a unique new coalition, connected by faith, science, art and conservation. We are faith leaders, scientists, photographers and secular environmental groups who have joined together around the idea that we have a moral duty to protect imperiled species threatened by climate change. While we represent different ideologies, beliefs and histories, we are connected by a similar sense of moral responsibility.

The Southern Baptist document states, “We must care about environmental and climate issues because of our love for God. This is not our world, it is God’s. Therefore, any damage we do to this world is an offense against God Himself. We share God’s concern for the abuse of His creation.”

The Baptists are right. God calls us to a theology of engagement. When Bible-believing Christians read in Psalm 104:24, “In wisdom you made them all, the earth is full of your creatures,” what else can they read into it except that God cares about eco-systems — living communities of life, a creation full of wonder, beauty and interconnectedness.

The Bible also says that the Earth reveals its goodness and sings praise to the Creator. If growing older has made us blind to the intrinsic beauty of nature, or tone deaf to the earth songs that mystics and children have always heard, then I thank God for the clear eyes and sharp ears of these young Christians. It is they who will whisper “hush!” and remind us how to squint our eyes and cup our hands around our ears. They will teach us to see the beauty of creation and to hear songs of life. They will remind us what is truly irreplaceable. To the young Christians everywhere — thank you. Be bold and stay forever young.

Peter Illyn is executive director of Restoring Eden.