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News

Christians taking on role as environmentalists: Many believe humans must be Earth's stewards

By John Iwasaki

SEATTLE-

Like shrinking ice caps, resistance among American Christians to address the effects of global warming is diminishing, creating a once-unlikely connection between the scientific and the spiritual, representatives of national and local religious organizations said Wednesday.

Even opposition from evangelicals, the Christian group considered least likely to embrace warnings of climate change, might be lessening.

"Science asks what, religion answers why," said Richard Cizik, vice president of governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, during a visit to Seattle. "People need reasons, not directives, to change their behavior when a profound change is required."

Those reasons are evident in scientific research on global warming, he said, and correspond with biblical mandates to care for and protect the Earth.

Although in agreement that Christians are to be good stewards of what God created, evangelicals generally don't view global warming as a threat partly because of opposition to other theories that challenge their faith, Cizik said in an interview before his appearance on a panel at the Burke Museum at the University of Washington.

"Evangelicals have not trusted mainstream science because of Darwin and evolution," he said. "So there's a deep repository of suspicion."

Time magazine named Cizik, a native of Quincy in Eastern Washington's Grant County, as one of the 100 most influential people in the world for 2008 for his activism, though noting his detractors "say there are more important issues for evangelicals to tackle, and there is no consensus within the community about global warming anyway."

Cizik's work made him a lightning rod among national evangelical leaders.

"The religious right asked for my head on a platter," he said.

Christian concern for the environment has been more typical among mainline denominations, whose top values include Earth stewardship and social justice, said LeeAnne Beres, executive director of Earth Ministry in Seattle.

"There is no inherent conflict between science and religion," said Beres, a former fisheries biologist. "We have an obligation to care for creation, whether we believe life evolved or is from God."

Peter Illyn, founder of Restoring Eden in Vancouver, Wash., sees a growing interest in environmental issues among college-aged Christians and others "tired of debating the origins of life while forgetting the degradation" of God's creation.

In her years of teaching about environmental issues at Seattle Pacific University, geography professor Kathleen Braden said, "I have seen a huge turnaround in attitude -- from skepticism to true concern -- and I would say the concern is often motivated by faith and their belief that God has entrusted the world to our care."

A study released early this year by The Barna Group, which specializes in religious surveys, found that only 33 percent of American evangelicals considered global warming to be a major problem facing the country. (Barna regards evangelicals as a socially conservative subset of born-again Christians.)

Two years ago, 86 prominent evangelical leaders signed a major statement to combat global warming, saying it was imperative of Christians to protect the earth and those affected worldwide. Among the signers were Richard Stearns, president of World Vision, the Federal Way-based Christian charity, and Philip Eaton, president of Seattle Pacific University.

The Rev. Joe Fuiten, pastor of Cedar Park Assembly in Bothell and known for his conservative positions on social issues, takes a dim view of global warming.

"Who is causing the warming on other planets in our solar system, and how can we really know how much of the current temperature rise is human caused rather than just the normal cycle of nature?" Fuiten asked. "I also wonder why previous rises in temperature were a good thing for the Earth, but the current one is bad."

Cizik said that 90 percent of global warming was attributed to humans by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations network of 2,000 scientists.

"It comes down to trust," he said. "Whom do you trust?"

But Cizik said underlying troubles remain that science can't solve.

"Loss of biodiversity, pollution and climate change are reflections of man's greatest problem: pride, apathy and greed," with society turning resources into commodities without replenishing the Earth, he said.

Solving global warming, he said, will "necessitate a cultural and spiritual transformation."