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Dave and Veronica Commire attend a thriving megachurch and proudly call themselves evangelicals. (RNS photo by Dave Raczkowski/*The Grand Rapids Press*)

Evangelicals apply the ‘good news’ in diverse ways

By Charles Honey

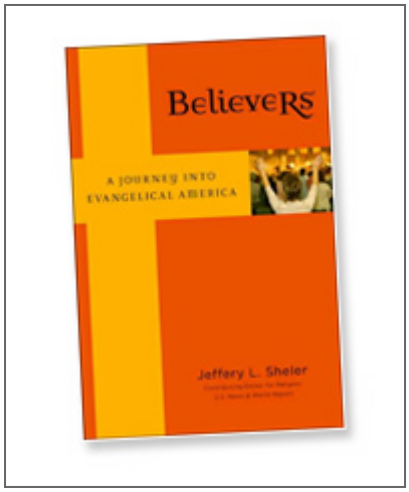
Religion News Service

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich.—If you want to serve me, Dave and Veronica Commire heard God saying, paint this guy’s house.

So, the couple rounded up about 15 of their church friends and beautified the home of a neighbor who had lost a son and was angry at God. Telling him about Jesus had not worked; painting his house did.

“It unfolded to be this incredible moment where God met us there,” said Dave Commire. “He was at church the next week.”

The Commires are evangelicals, proudly so. They believe in what the word means—good news—and believe God calls them to share it in every facet of their lives—his job, her home-schooling their three children, and their sleeves-rolled-up ministry to their neighbors in Lowell, Mich.



“It’s not about handing out Bible tracts,” said Commire, 37-year-old co-owner of an auto-repair business. “The best way to someone’s heart is to be in their life through service. We want to model Christ-like behavior.”

Living out their faith in a modest home and at a booming megachurch, the Commires typify in many ways the 60 million or so Americans who call themselves evangelicals. They are part of a powerful religious movement that has become a potent political and cultural force in American society.

But don’t dismiss them as the Bible-thumping, pushy cultural warriors of the popular stereotype. Evangelicals share core beliefs but span a wide sweep of denominations and apply the gospel in sometimes surprising

ways.

Indeed, most evangelicals are “extraordinarily normal,” notes Jeffery Sheler, a longtime religion writer and author of a recent exploration of the evangelical movement.

“They are your neighbor, your doctor, the insurance salesman, the person who checks you out at the grocery store,” Sheler writes in *Believers: A Journey Into Evangelical America*. “Their distinctive faith aside, evangelicals are looking and acting more and more like the rest of America.”

Sheler’s book, which follows the evangelical movement from the 18th-century Great Awakening through Billy Graham’s crusades to Christian rock festivals, evangelicals’ affinity for President Bush and Rick Warren’s mega-best-seller, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

“They have a tremendous amount of influence on the culture,” said Sheler, a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report* magazine.

Sheler said he was prompted to write the book partly by his own upbringing. He became a Christian as a teenager and boldly told his parents he would no longer watch movies, go to school dances or play cards. He and his wife later joined Nazarene and Presbyterian churches.

Sheler’s book debunks stereotypes of evangelicals as a primarily political monolith, he said. Evangelicals range from conservative Baptists and tongues-speaking Pentecostals to pacifist Mennonites, Dutch Reformed Calvinists and countless nondenominational churches. They are united by belief in the authority of the Bible, salvation in Christ and an obligation to share the gospel.

“The difficulty arises in trying to apply those Scriptures to the contemporary needs of a changing society without changing the basic core

of evangelical belief," Sheler said.

While evangelicals vote overwhelmingly Republican and spawned the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, the movement is more politically diverse than meets the eye, he adds.

"Evangelicals today are very much in tune with the world around them. They are not marching in lockstep behind some celebrity preacher."

Sheler pointed to a recent full-page national newspaper ad calling for an end to genocide in Darfur signed by evangelicals across the spectrum. The ad exposes a "fault line" between evangelicals focused on a few issues such as abortion and gay marriage, and those whose faith compels them to tackle human rights and the environment, Sheler said.

"There is an increasing recognition within the evangelical movement that its agenda needs to be expanded beyond two or three hot-button issues if it's going to continue to be relevant and effective as a voice in our culture."

Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Mich., said he signed the ad because he believes Christians should respond to Darfur's "crisis of epic proportions." But he rejects the conservative political agenda advanced by the religious right.

"The first Christians would be so unbelievably offended that in our culture this word has come to mean those who are grasping for political power," said Bell, who calls himself a "small e" evangelical. For him, it does not mean trying to impose Christian values via government. Rather, "Being an evangelical is about believing that God can use people through humble acts of compassion and service."

The Commires call themselves conservative Republicans. Abortion, gay marriage and character education are key concerns. But politics are less important than serving Christ where they live.

“Showing Jesus to our neighborhood in tangible ways—that’s what (being evangelical) is to me,” Veronica Commire said.