

Some evangelicals go green, but skepticism lingers

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—When Harry Jackson saw melting glaciers and devastated forests on a recent trip to Alaska, he decided global warming should be a higher priority on his list of key issues for evangelicals.

“I thought the globe was warming, but I thought that there was a whole lot of hype attached and there were not a lot of practical solutions presented,” said Jackson, pastor of a megachurch in Beltsville, Md.

Rob Bell is pastor
of Mars Hill Bible
Church in
Grandville, Mich.
He says
evangelicals need
to take greater
action on the
environment.
(RNS
photo/Zondervan)

The trip to Alaska was a bit of a road-to-Damascus moment for Jackson, a leading voice among conservative black pastors. Earlier this year, he had gone on CNN to question environmentally friendly evangelical leaders and joined a protest against Richard Cizik, the green-minded vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

But now, after traveling with scientists and evangelicals on a weeklong trip last month sponsored by Harvard Medical School and the NAE, Jackson is ready to work to bring evangelicals from the left and right together to address reducing carbon emissions and oil use.

“I believe we can kind of come to a working agreement on an environmental agenda,” he said.

Some evangelical leaders, often one by one, have similar conversion stories, moving them from merely being concerned about creation toward a sense that they should do something to protect it. One group, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, says its number of supporters has inched up from 86 early last year to 106 today.

But the support that’s slowly growing in some circles is nuanced at best,

and there are many evangelicals who remain unconvinced.

Religious broadcaster Pat Robertson made headlines during last summer's heat wave when he remarked, "I have not been one who believed in this global warming, but I tell you, they're making a convert out of me with these blistering summers."



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But Robertson's spokeswoman said he still hasn't joined one or the other side of the climate change debate.

"Pat has not made any new comments since last summer, and he hasn't joined any organizations regarding global warming ... and continues to weigh all the facts and arguments," said Angell Vasko.

Jackson, though moved by the sight of an Eskimo village losing island homes to storm surge erosion, remains hesitant to embrace some energy-reducing recommendations, but he admits he's a changed man who better understands the need for "environmental justice."

"You're not going to change this problem by turning lights off so many hours a day," said Jackson, who also flew over forests eaten up by spruce bark beetles, whose reproductive rates have increased with warmer temperatures. "The personal impact is not as heavy as the corporate impact of transitioning fuel sources."

While Robertson and Jackson haven't, others have signed onto the Evangelical Climate Initiative, hoping to be role models.

"I wanted to take a public stance and be an encourager to others to get serious about our responsibility to care for creation," said Paul Corts, president of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, who added his name this spring.

"And signing the ECI was a simple but significant way I could encourage others."

Other evangelical leaders are being outspoken in other ways. Progressive evangelical pastor Rob Bell, who leads Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Mich., recently concluded a summer sermon series on "God is Green."

Bell, who's preached on the environment for five years and made family lifestyle changes such as downsizing from two cars to one and swapping a clothes dryer for a clothesline, said he was surprised that a statement from the Evangelical Climate Initiative was even necessary.

"To me, it's just obvious," said Bell. "It's sad to me that they would even need to state the obvious."

Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, is among those who remain unconvinced humans are the major cause of global warming.

"It's certainly going to be an uphill battle to get a significant number of evangelicals to support the Evangelical Climate Initiative because it's wrong-headed," Land said.

"Science is not near as clear as liberal arts theologians are."

Rusty Pritchard, national outreach director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, said despite continuing criticism, there is a "transformation in the conversation," with people asking how to answer skeptics rather than being skeptical themselves.

"It's an uphill battle," he said. "But I feel like the wind is at our backs."