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Issues of ecology, theology collide

Factions within some churches debate global warming and the moral response.

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Before watching the end of the world, hundreds of movie viewers bowed their heads.

"Guard us against the historical arrogance of our own species," a Methodist minister prayed recently at the Glenwood Arts Theatre in Overland Park. Then lights dimmed for the Midwest premiere of "The Great Warming."

The documentary on the man-made dangers of global warming is being released for church groups to review before the Nov. 7 elections. While its plot is an easy sell to this invited crowd — more left than right, plenty of hybrid cars parked outside — the film raises spiritual questions that could carve up evangelical voting blocs in new ways.

Is protecting Earth a moral value, an act of stewardship?

Seeking to nudge more social conservatives into the ecological fold, bumper stickers are asking, "What Would Jesus Drive?"

"This movement in the last six to nine months has mushroomed," said Chuck Gillam, a one-time Republican who is a representative to the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition, an interfaith group that meets monthly in Prairie Village. "Global warming could be the one thing where you can get a united front between the secular and religious."

Cracks are appearing within evangelical communities once inclined to dismiss environmental protection as a scientific rush to big government. Many conservative pastors remain skeptical — not because the science is wrong, but because they say their congregations would rather take on abortion, stem-cell research and same-sex marriage.

The harmful effects of those issues will "come kicking at our door far quicker than global warming will," said the Rev. Jerry Johnston of First Family Church in Overland Park.

But in February, an unlikely coalition of church, corporate and seminary leaders called for the U.S. government to aggressively curb greenhouse-gas emissions. Their TV ad campaign urged Americans to "stop global warming for our kids, our world and our Lord."

Backers of this so-called Evangelical Climate Initiative include Rick Warren, author of the best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals — a group comprising 60 denominations representing 45,000 churches.

In July, an opposition group fired back.

More than 100 Christian pastors, economists and climate researchers calling themselves the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance signed a 12,000-word manifesto debunking the science that blames global warming on human activity and the burning of fossil fuels.

Saying that global warming exists but probably by natural causes, the group questioned whether humans can or should do anything to correct it.

"It is immoral and harmful to Earth's poorest citizens to deny them the benefits of abundant, reliable, affordable electricity and other forms of energy," the policy statement noted.

Still, groups such as Green Cross International and the Evangelical Environmental Network hope "The Great Warming" will prompt some social conservatives to slide left on this one topic.

The campaign aims to schedule special screenings for large churches nationwide before the film hits theaters in late October. About 500 pastors have been asked to give Earth-friendly sermons and urge their flocks to quiz candidates on environmental positions.

"There are socially conservative business leaders frustrated with the current administration when it comes to energy policy," said Troy Helming, a "green Republican" and founder of Lenexa-based Krystal Planet Corp., a renewable-energy company that is backing the film.

"Some feel they can't speak up without alienating themselves."

A crossover issue

An August poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found global warming was considered a serious problem by 79 percent of Americans — and 68 percent of "white evangelical Protestants."

Nearly half of white evangelicals who responded to the poll said stricter environmental laws were "worth the cost," still less than Catholics, mainline Protestants and "secular" respondents.

"There's a real potential for this to become a crossover issue," said John Green, a Pew Forum fellow.

"White evangelical Protestants are much more sympathetic to environmental problems than other people might think," Green said. "It could be that their attitudes are changing. It could be they're just beginning to form opinions as more becomes known" about global warming.

The Rev. Richard Cizik pushes "creation care" — a crusade against climate change. Cizik, the former head of the National Association of Evangelicals, calls ecological degradation "an offense against God."

Weighing in last month in *The New Republic* was Harvard University biologist Edward O. Wilson, the winner of the National Medal of Science and two Pulitzer Prizes.

"Despite all that divides science from religion, there is good reason to hope that an alliance on environment issues is possible," Wilson wrote in an open letter to an imagined Southern Baptist pastor.

"While the Old Testament God commands humanity to take dominion over the Earth, the decree is not ... an excuse to trash the planet."

That was the broadside attack in 1967, when historian Lynn White Jr. wrote in *Science* magazine that Christianity "bears a huge burden of guilt" for raping the planet. He blamed a dominion theology spelled out in the book of Genesis for allowing centuries of misuse of the environment.

"You don't hear those arguments about dominion anymore," said Bill Stancil, the chairman of the theology department at Rockhurst University.

However, Armageddon and the end of days remain popular concepts, evidenced by huge worldwide sales of the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins. Those beliefs may work against efforts to spur Christian conservatives to rally against climate change.

After all, said Stancil, "what instigates the second coming of Christ is the world getting worse, not better."

'A matter of priorities'

Says Johnston of First Family Church: "I doubt you'll have more than a small handful of churches that will get on this global-warming bandwagon." Johnston is the host of a conservative radio show and leads a congregation of 6,000.

It is not so much a matter of religion versus science, said Johnston. "It's a matter of priorities. On the list of priorities of most evangelical churches, it would be way down the ladder," he said of global warming.

At a meeting of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition last week at Village Presbyterian Church, a dozen volunteers from 10 congregations discussed how best to spread the bad news about God's green Earth. Many weren't sure their pastors were willing to extol a message that some churchgoers may see as too political.

And their own politics?

Only one coalition member professed to be Republican. Another proudly flashed a sticker thumping the GOP as the "Grand Oil Party."

None who spoke up agreed with the Bush administration's position on the Iraq war or the president's ban on funding embryonic stem-cell research.

Meet the religious right's alter ego — the social-justice left. Beyond politics dividing the two, theological differences can lead to stalemate.

"The fork in the road is when you question whether the world is unfolding according to God's plan or we're just messing it up on our own," said coalition leader Margaret Thomas.

There is one sure way to end the conversation, said Stancil, the Rockhurst theologian.

"We've become so polarized, the easy thing is to fall into group think: 'That's your group's issue — not my group's issue.'"

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