

# Warming Draws Evangelicals Into Environmentalist Fold

**By Juliet Eilperin**

Washington Post

August 8, 2007

LONGWOOD, Fla. -- At 8 on a Saturday morning, just as the heat was permeating this sprawling Orlando suburb, Denise Kirsop donned a white plastic moon suit and began sorting through the trash produced by Northland Church.

She and several fellow parishioners picked apart the garbage to analyze exactly how much and what kind of waste their megachurch produces, looking for ways to reduce the congregation's contribution to global warming.

"I prayed about it, and God really revealed to me that I had a passion about creation," said Kirsop, who has since traded in her family's sport-utility vehicle for a hybrid Toyota Prius to help cut her greenhouse gas emissions. "Anything that draws me closer to God -- and this does -- increases my faith and helps my work for God."

Her conversion to environmentalism is the result of a years-long international campaign by British bishops and leaders of major U.S. environmental groups to bridge a long-standing divide between global-warming activists and American evangelicals.

The emerging rapprochement is regarded by some as a sign of how dramatically U.S. public sentiment has shifted on global warming in recent years. It also has begun, in modest ways, to transform how the two groups define themselves.

"I did sense this is one of these issues where the church could take leadership, like with civil rights," said Northland's senior pastor, Joel C. Hunter. "It's a matter of who speaks for evangelicals: Is it a broad range of voices on a broad range of issues, or a narrow range of voices?"

Hunter has emerged among evangelicals as a pivotal advocate for cutting greenhouse gas emissions that scientists say are warming Earth's climate. A self-deprecating 59-year-old minister who can quote the "Baby Jesus" speech that Will Farrell delivered in the 2006 movie "Talladega Nights" as readily as he can the Bible, Hunter regularly preaches about climate change to 7,000 congregants in five Central Florida sites and to 3,000 more worshipers via the Internet. He even has met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill to talk about environmental issues.

While he remains in a distinct minority, and a number of others on the Christian right disparage his efforts, Hunter and others like him have begun to reshape the politics around climate change.

**Reaching Across the Ocean**

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Hunter came to the cause not on his own but rather through a six-year effort by British religious leaders to mobilize their U.S. counterparts on the issue.

"The United States is absolutely key to the question of climate change," said Sir John T. Houghton, a British atmospheric scientist and an evangelical. For nearly a decade, Houghton -- who said he has long sought to "put my science alongside my faith" -- worked to convince Hunter and other American evangelical leaders that their shared beliefs should compel them to focus on global warming.

In 2001, Houghton, a 75-year-old Welshman who has been honored twice by Queen Elizabeth II for his scientific work, walked the grounds of Windsor Castle with Calvin B. DeWitt, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin. The two, later joined by the Bishop James Jones of Liverpool, England, started organizing conferences on both sides of the Atlantic to convince U.S. evangelicals that human-generated warming poses a threat to God's creation.

Not long after that, several prominent American environmental leaders and scientists decided that they, too, needed to win over that same group.

Peter A. Seligmann, chief executive of Conservation International, an Arlington-based nonprofit group that seeks to preserve terrestrial and marine biodiversity worldwide, asked himself what sector of society was best positioned to shift U.S. climate policy: "What bloc of people has enormous influence, especially on the Republican Party? That group of people is right-wing Christian evangelicals" -- who made up 24 percent of the U.S. electorate in the 2004 and 2006 elections.

So Seligmann set about wooing church leaders. At the suggestion of former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw and his wife, Meredith, who serves on his organization's board, Seligmann flew to Colorado Springs to discuss global warming with Ted Haggard, then president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Haggard proved to be a willing partner until a scandal involving drugs and homosexual activity ended his public career. ("I bet on the wrong horse," Seligmann observed wryly.)

But Seligmann also made savvy choices, such as hiring Ben Campbell -- an evangelical who had worked on agricultural policy for Conservation International in the past -- to reach out to the religious right.

At the same time that Conservation International and other groups such as the Sierra Club were starting to strengthen their ties with religious groups, Houghton was making headway with Protestant leaders including Hunter and NAE lobbyist Richard Cizik.

Cizik -- another ebullient evangelical, who quips that "When I die, God isn't going to ask me 'Did I create the Earth in six days or five days?' but 'What did you do with what I gave you?' " -- started lobbying other evangelicals to sign a statement on climate change. Jim Ball, a friend of both who heads the Evangelical Environmental Network, sent it to Hunter.

Hunter began researching the subject. Afterward he wondered, "How have I missed this?" He not only signed the statement but also filmed a national television ad on climate change, and by summer of 2006 he found himself at a Windsor Castle retreat with Houghton and Cizik, talking about global warming. There was a private session with Prince Charles and a tour of the organic garden at the prince's Highgrove estate, as well as intense conversations among the participants about how Genesis 2:15 calls upon Adam to "serve" and "keep" the Garden of Eden.

Hunter had joined the civil rights movement in college, but he became disillusioned with activism after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Global warming offered a chance to reconnect his faith to national politics.

King's death prompted "a crisis of faith," he recalled. He questioned whether politics could actually spur societal change. "What I realized was political systems are simply mechanisms of power," he said. Religious faith, on the other hand, could prompt people to change the way they lived their lives. Now he was doing both.

## **Seeking Reconciliation**

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Several eminent scientists also set out to repair the breach that had divided American faith leaders and scientists for nearly a century. Harvard University entomologist Edward O. Wilson, who had grown up Southern Baptist but drifted away in college, decided that if he could win over the religious right, he might be able to convince Americans that their entire ecological heritage was in jeopardy.

"I was working off the 'New York effect': If you can make it in New York, you could make it anywhere," Wilson said. In the fall of 2006 he published "The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth," a short treatise in which the biologist makes his case for environmentalism in a series of letters to an imaginary pastor.

Last fall, Hunter and Wilson were among more than two dozen scientific and evangelical leaders who met secretly at a retreat in Thomasville, Ga., to draft a joint statement calling for immediate action on climate change. A month and a half later, they released a statement saying both camps "share a moral passion and sense of vocation to save the imperiled living world before our damages to it remake it as another kind of planet."

After the meeting, Hunter and Conservation International's Campbell drafted a tool kit titled "Creation Care: An Introduction for Busy Pastors" to send to evangelical leaders. Within a matter of months, they had produced a package of Bible passages and information on scientific findings to promote action on climate change.

## **Strong Push-Back**

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The "greening" of Hunter and others still elicits scorn from many evangelicals, including Focus on the Family's James Dobson and Prison Fellowship's Charles W. "Chuck" Colson. They

question whether humankind really deserves the blame for Earth's recent warming and argue that their battles against abortion and same-sex marriage should take precedence.

Even some of Hunter's own congregants remain skeptical: Glenda Martinet refers to his sermons when she's urging her kids to stop wasting electricity, but her husband, Gary, notes that NASA scientists have detected warming on Mars. "Obviously they must have a bunch of SUVs running around there we can't spot," he joked as he walked into one of Hunter's Saturday-night services.

But the fledgling alliance has begun to reshape attitudes among some evangelical and environmental leaders. Hunter, who helped gather about 4,000 signatures during the 2006 election for an initiative opposing same-sex marriage, talks of moving beyond "below-the-belt issues" such as homosexuality and abortion. And Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope is reaching out to the 40 percent of Sierra Club members who are religiously observant.

"We don't have a Sierra Club prayer circle -- that's conceivable, but we don't have that yet," Pope said. But he noted: "It's the role of faith in our lives to help us act on something that is inconvenient and is, in some ways, abstract."

And Hunter, who knows that a handful of his congregants have left his church in response to his environmental activism, said that he is comfortable with the shifting direction of his religious mission. In November he turned down the presidency of the Christian Coalition after deciding that the group was not fully committed to fighting climate change and world poverty.

"There's something in me that really admired Gandhi -- these people who did what was right, no matter what it cost," he said.

*Staff researcher Eddy Palanzo contributed to this report.*