

Most get it

A new stewardship campaign paints evangelicals a lighter shade of green

Mark Bergin

Are evangelicals buying into global warming alarmism? Since February 2006, media reports throughout the country have claimed as much, often citing the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), a document calling for federal caps on greenhouse-gas emissions and boasting the support of such influential Christian leaders as Rick Warren and Bill Hybels.



UPI/Photo by Kevin Dietsch

Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe

But recent research from The Barna Group indicates that evangelicals are among the most reticent people to board the climate change bandwagon.

Only 33 percent of evangelicals in America consider global warming a major problem, compared to 62 percent of non-Christian religious people and 69 percent of atheists and agnostics.

Now, voices from the two-thirds majority of evangelical global warming skeptics have launched an initiative aimed at matching the decibel level of ECI backers. The "We Get It" campaign purports to better represent evangelicals regarding environmental stewardship. Chief among its declarations is an economic analysis suggesting that proposed solutions to climate change would do more to harm the world's poor than the potential impacts of rising global temperatures.

To prove its mainstream appeal among evangelicals, the initiative includes a goal to collect 1 million signatures. Initial supporters include James Dobson, Richard Land, and Chuck Colson, along with organizations such as the Family Research Council, WallBuilders, and the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

But organizers of this new campaign are intent on building a coalition that reaches beyond such established names of the evangelical right. Indeed, they must if the effort is to rival the media tempest surrounding the ECI's release two years ago, which made the front page of The New York Times.

E. Calvin Beisner, spokesman for the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation and one of the primary authors of the We Get It statement, bristled at the notion that this initiative simply trots out the old guard. "To write a group off as the usual suspects is the shallowest sort of ad hominem argument," he said, calling for engagement on the statement's merits.

The support of Union University president David Dockery might well provoke such closer examination. Dockery was among the dozens of influential leaders who initially signed the ECI. He has since removed his name and joined the We Get It campaign. "I thought I was signing a very strong environmental stewardship statement that wound up being portrayed almost entirely as a global warming statement," he said of the ECI.

A WORLD survey of ECI backers two years ago revealed Dockery was not alone in his misunderstanding of the ECI agenda. Robert W. Yarbrough, chair of the New Testament department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, signed the statement because he viewed it "as raising cautionary flags rather than making sweeping, definite, quantified pronouncements." When Yarbrough and others learned that the ECI represented far more than a general call to care for creation, they backed out.

In effect, the We Get It initiative provides what these former supporters of the ECI had hoped for -- namely, an earnest challenge for evangelicals to obey the biblical mandate for stewardship without adopting emotion-driven global warming hysteria.

Barrett Duke, vice president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, sees parallels between the ECI and a skirmish that erupted within his denomination earlier this year. A statement dubbed the Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative drew support from several denominational leaders including SBC president Frank Page, who simply wished to encourage better care for creation. But language in the document hinted at support for controversial government policies, prompting some media to report that radical changes were afoot among Southern Baptist leaders.

Page immediately quashed that notion with a clarification. And an internal SBC poll has since shown that 86 percent of Southern Baptist pastors believe the media has overhyped the global warming threat. Three-fourths of pastors oppose government action to cap carbon emissions. "You would find those percentages even higher among Southern Baptist leadership," Duke said.

Trouble is, that kind of skepticism and evangelical restraint won't make the front page of The New York Times.