

Warming Up to Environmentalism: A Changing Climate in the Politics of Evangelicals

By Kevin Kovaleski, NCRP

In early 2005, NCRP published *Funding the Culture Wars: Philanthropy, Church and State*, which analyzed the philanthropic influence of evangelical Christians. The report's author, John Russell, defined who evangelical Christians were and their emerging influence in the state of philanthropy. Russell concluded,

"Whether planned or as a side effect of [the recent] weakening of government, evangelical Christian leaders seek to *subordinate government to religion*. Based on the previous success of their supporters at conservative foundations, it is not unimaginable that they might succeed." (emphasis added)

Today, more evangelical organizations have added their voices to an unexpected cause: environmentalism. With a year of gas prices skyrocketing, a summer of record heat, the increased instability of our oil supply, and even Al Gore exclaiming in his box-office hit *An Inconvenient Truth*, "This is really not a political

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issue so much as a moral issue," evangelicals' growing interest in protecting the environment might be peaking at a time when more Americans are ready to listen. This new movement challenges previous stereotypes about evangelicals and enjoys support from *both* progressive and conservative groups. Until recently, evangelical Christians have been relatively deaf to the warnings of climate change and relatively silent on the

issue of environmental stewardship in the public debate. Because of evangelicals' lack of a unified position on environmentalism, and because of the historically close ties of many evangelical organizations to the Republican Party, some progressives understandably have been skeptical of the evangelical commitment to environmentalism.

A few traditional environmental groups have shown hesitation to collaborate with the evangelical voice, mainly due to the traditional evangelical insistence that climate change is an individual, rather than governmental or business, issue. Evangelical leaders understand this reality, and some have dedicated their moral message of "creation care" to include pressuring political leadership on environmental issues. In doing so, these leaders have broken from political and religious stereotypes and articulated that faith includes moral imperatives ignored by the Christianity promoted by President Bush. One example of such leadership is the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). As its name suggests, EEN devotes its entire mission to the cause of environmentalism. The Rev. Jim Ball, Ph.D., the executive director of EEN, has been highly visible in the mainstream press in the past year. He was recently

named a "Climate Change Innovator" by *Time* magazine, and in *Time*'s April 3, 2006, issue on climate change, *Time* wrote of Ball, "[He] practices what he preaches (he drives an energy-efficient Toyota Prius) and he came to his environmental beliefs honestly: through Scripture and concern for the living and the unborn."

Ball and EEN have communicated their message of creation care through media-savvy campaigns and

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meetings with highly visible politicians. In 2002, they launched the "What Would Jesus Drive Campaign," a self-regulatory effort to educate evangelicals on the need for more fuel-efficient and hybrid vehicles that emit low levels of carbon dioxide. Similarly, through the Evangelical Climate Initiative, EEN published *Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action*, an eight-page declaration affirming the commitment to creation care by prominent figures in the evangelical movement. The release of *Climate Change* was launched in February 2006, with a Senate breakfast and press conference sponsored by, among others, Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.), Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), and Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine). The cadre of high-profile senators from both sides of the political aisle hints at a potential bipartisan environmental agreement framed in morality.

While this offers some optimism for the future of the environmental movement, we must consider the potential effects of including such language in a democracy historically committed to the separation of church and state. By publicly approving a biblically based message

of environmental care, are politicians favoring Christianity? And if progressives accept the religious message of evangelical environmentalism, what then gives progressives the right to condemn their religious views in other arenas?

Such questions can and most likely will be exhausted by political pundits and columnists as the environmental movement continues to generate momentum. However, conventional knowledge would remind such talking heads that because more than 30 million Americans identify themselves as evangelical Christians, their voice will undoubtedly contribute to policymaking. Kate Smolski, a campaigner for Greenpeace, one of the most well known environmental organizations in the United States, argues that the exclusion of evangelicals is counterproductive in pushing the environmental movement forward. "There is no silver bullet for how to fix the environment," she says. "Evangelicals are part of the solution, and it is going to take many different voices to make effective environmental change." People interested in actual environmental improvement should therefore move away from the ideological differences between

secular environmental organizations and evangelical environmental organizations, and focus instead on more substantive analysis of this emerging voice and the motives behind it.

One of the most conventional means of uncovering motives of nonprofit organizations is to understand how they generate and spend money. The surge of pro-environmental action by evangelical leaders in the past few years implies an increase in funding being channeled to such programs. NCRP has been historically successful in understanding the motives behind social action by following the financial streams between grantmaking foundations and their grantee nonprofit organizations, an approach that Russell used in *Funding the Culture Wars*. However, following the financial flows of evangelical organizations is no sim-

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ple task. Because many evangelical organizations claim the organizational status of a church, they are not required by law to file IRS 990 forms*—an example being the large and visible *National Association of Evangelicals* (NAE). For these organizations, it becomes difficult to ascertain any pattern in funding or spending. This problem, more so than the religious ideology of the organizations, should be the focus of concern: What does it mean for democracy when an organization engaging the policy process does not have to disclose its financial information to the public?

When evangelical organizations do disclose their financial information, by voluntarily filing 990 forms—and many do—we can learn much about the organizations' intentions. The Evangelical Environmental Network has been transparent in its reporting of tax documents and in disclosing major donors. When

transparent reporting exists, meaningful analysis of organizations can start. With EEN, for example, a surprising reality emerges: Both conservative and progressive foundations are funding the programs of overtly evangelical organizations. EEN's reporting shows that progressive funders are beginning to see the value of evangelical environmentalism. For example, the Bauman Foundation—which usually donates to more liberal organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the Clean Water Fund; the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice; as well as the Sierra Club (which recently created the position of coordinator of religious outreach)—contributes to EEN. This demonstrates Bauman's belief that EEN is a dedicated ally in the cause of environmental preservation. Similarly,

the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which focuses its philanthropy on progressive issues of social and economic justice and equal access to healthcare by donating to EEN, also expresses at least some

support for evangelical environmental efforts. Currently, grants by progressive foundations like the Bauman Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation to an overtly Christian organization are not common in the world of philanthropy. However, it shows the potential of foundations' willingness to look beyond the ideological exteriors of organizations and support issues of common ground.

The Evangelical Environmental Network also received major grants from The Stewardship Foundation, a conservative organization that funds initiatives that are "Christ-centered." The Stewardship Foundation has funded conservative organizations such as the Association of Christian Schools International and Americans United for Life. In funding EEN, the Stewardship Foundation is making the claim that environmentalism is not exclusively a secular or liberal issue, but that it has Christian connections, as well. From this cursory analysis of foundation spending, it seems that though there has not been a great deal of agreement between evangelical and traditional environmental organizations to date, there is evidence that traditional secular and traditional evangelical environmentalists can collaborate.

* The IRS 990 form is the annual report for federally tax-exempt organizations. It provides information on an organization's mission, programs, and finances. The 990 form used in this analysis was filed by Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA) in 2004. At that time, the Evangelical Environmental Network was an affiliated organization, and received all funding through ESA. This information is available on www.guidestar.org.

If this interest in the environment on the part of evangelicals is not simply a trend, but instead becomes a new tenet in the political creed of evangelicals, the environmental movement might progress further than anticipated. In light of the potential strengthening of the environmental movement by the presence of the evangelical voice, it might be beneficial for those in politics and in leadership roles of both environmental and evangelical nonprofit organizations to follow the example of foundations that financially support the work of evangelical environmentalism. Embracing the organizations that are working to bridge a gap between liberals and conservatives through the message of morality in environmentalism, rather than exploit the stereotyped differences between traditionally conservative and progressive organizations, has the potential to move environmentalism to the fore of political and public policy debate.

Though evangelical organizations potentially take environmentalism in a positive direction, the question remains whether or not it is ethical for directors of pub-

lic policy to withhold financial information. Financial transparency is needed for all organizations attempting to act as movers of policy, so that potential supporters and critics alike can understand an organization's true motivations. This clarity should be a hallmark of philanthropy as well as democracy.

Until religiously affiliated organizations are required to publicly disclose financial information, evangelical environmental nonprofits like NAE should be watched with cautious skepticism. Evangelical organizations that voluntarily provide transparency in their financial reporting should be applauded, as well as carefully researched. More importantly, if progressive environmental organizations ignore, or even alienate, an accountable and transparent organization merely because of its religious affiliation, the environmental movement will have missed a valuable opportunity with an unexpected ally.

Kevin Kovaleski is a research intern at NCRP.

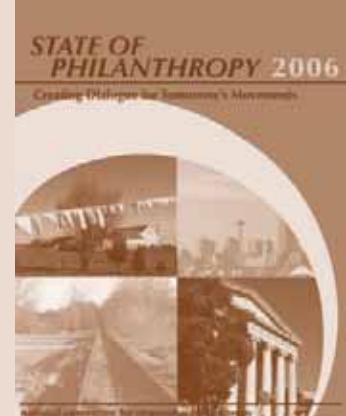
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New from NCRP

State of Philanthropy 2006: Creating Dialogue for Tomorrow's Movements

(July 2006)

NCRP's third in a series of biennial collections, *State of Philanthropy 2006* aims to initiate conversations about creating progressive social change and increasing foundation accountability. It confronts contentious issues faced by today's nonprofit and philanthropic sectors from a variety of perspectives.

By addressing new foundation strategies, the impact of federal budget constraints on nonprofits, accountability legislation and regulations, and emerging progressive movements, *State of Philanthropy 2006* promotes the strengthening, redirecting and refocusing of foundation and nonprofit efforts to better meet the needs of the disenfranchised. This publication serves as a primer for progressive change during an era dominated by political conservatism.

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New Research Project on Rural Philanthropy

NCRP recently began a research project to help improve and strengthen philanthropy in rural regions across the United States, which are home to some of the nation's most distressing socio-economic living conditions. In the coming months, NCRP researchers will examine the roles that foundations play in supporting nonprofits and impoverished communities in Kentucky, Montana, eastern and northern California, and towns along the Mexico-US border. Our goal is to find and help replicate foundation best practices for rural grantmaking, and to increase the number of foundations engaged in rural regions. A report will be published in spring/summer 2007.

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