

## Is God Green?

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Local evangelical Christians want you to recycle. They'll be in seventh heaven if you walk more and drive less, volunteer to clean up rivers, highways and forest trails, plant more trees, and leave the ATVs and snowmobiles back at the house.

Now, hang a left for another message: The conservation community also wants you to recycle, walk more and drive less, clean up rivers and forests, plant more trees and leave the noisy dirty engines at home.

These hopeful stories of common ground are brought to you by God, says Pastor Tri Robinson of Boise's Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and by "shared core values," adds Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League. The two have never met, but both speak the language of caretakers of the earth. And in the public arena, they represent the tentative beginnings of an alliance between the left and the right on the issue of environmental responsibility.

Pastor Robinson puts it this way: "We believe environmental stewardship is a biblical mandate and commission from God. All of God's creation is important to him, down to the last sparrow and blade of grass. We have wrongfully assumed that creation exists for our own consumption. We must get back to the heart of God. It is the responsibility of every true Christian to take stewardship seriously, and that includes environmental stewardship. We need to embrace the task to 'tend the garden.' "

ICL's Rick Johnson: "Faith-based conservation is interesting to me because the core values that define most religious groups are values in common with ICL. The greatest threat to the environment is a lack of community, and faith groups promote community. When people are disconnected from each other, they can be disconnected from the physical world. But together, communities take care of their gardens."

The Vineyard Christian Fellowship's "Let's Tend the Garden" program was launched in the spring of this year with a heartfelt sermon by Robinson, who has a master's degree in ecology and was a science teacher for 12 years. Before preaching, he had consulted with several area clergymen, who were supportive and advised him to proceed. Still, he was downright nervous about how his own flock would react.

He needn't have worried: Robinson got a standing ovation that Sunday, and his congregation has embraced the idea of environmentalism by holding well-attended educational sessions and organizing volunteers. This summer, a group of more than 200 members of the Vineyard worked with Forest Service experts in the Payette National Forest to complete 25 miles of trail maintenance in the Grassy Mountain, Hazard Lake and Goose Creek areas, earning an enthusiastic letter of praise from Volunteer Coordinator Al Becker. The group also took on heavy maintenance, constructed two new campground fences and updated GPS mapping information for overworked Forest Service staff, who sometimes struggled with information dating back to the 1940s.

Pointing out that firefighting is even more dangerous without accurate maps, Let's Tend the Garden program director Jessie Milo was inspired by the mapping task. "Our weekends in the Idaho wilderness have been uplifting and fulfilling beyond what we could have imagined," she said.

"When we started up 'Let's Tend the Garden,' we didn't think it was any big deal," Milo said. "We aren't doing this to become any kind of power, we're doing it because we've neglected our responsibility to care for God's creation. We need to earn Christ's respect back using our hands to minister to the earth. We're trying to right a wrong."

On the Vineyard's Web site, Pastor Robinson explains, "Tending the garden is not a new commission to many Christians; it simply has been neglected by the [evangelical] church. However, the church can't just 'take it back.' We have to earn it back. At Vineyard Boise, we have acknowledged our shortcomings, have repented of them, and will endeavor, through our actions and ministry, to earn back the right to this vital, biblical commission."

Repented of their shortcomings? Clearing forest trails? Teaching about conservation? The idea that people who formerly appeared to oppose environmental action are working to change that is encouraging to Hans Johnson, president of Progressive Victory, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C., which has helped several conservation groups organize for political action. But Johnson still prods for bigger-scale action: "It's heartening that evangelicals have rediscovered Christ's injunction to properly steward the planet. However, they should fight organizations like Focus on the Family, which claim to speak in their name and which are waging jihad against sensible clean water, child safety and land protection measures," he said.

Other conservationists share Johnson's views, saying that while it's terrific the Vineyard works hard at hands-on projects, they wish for an evangelical Christian environmental political movement. Pastor Robinson doesn't dismiss the possibility. His essay "Global Warming: A Christian Perspective and a Call to Action" cites the popular scientific reasons for the warming of the earth, and then goes on to say, "For the Christian who cares about the earth and humanity, it is essential that we don't put our head in the sand on this very crucial phenomenon. No matter what has caused the earth's temperature to elevate, the result is hurting creation and devastating people's lives ... It is not an hour for the Church to remain lethargic or silent."

Robinson calls on evangelical Christians to put aside political differences: "We must see renewable energy development and conservation as a bipartisan issue," he wrote. "For some reason, the environment has landed in the liberal camp and because of it, many Christian leaders are afraid to embrace it. If we are to bring change, we must see this for what it is and take a stand for what is Biblical and right. The global environment is everyone's problem, and it will take all of us to turn this crisis around."

Mainstream religious groups and coalitions have been preaching a conservation message for more than 25 years, putting their faith into action through groups like the National Religious Partnership for the Environment and its subgroups, which include the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. In just one of many examples of Jewish environmental political action, the Rabbinical Assembly in 1996 adopted a statement supporting the Endangered Species Act, saying, "We are commanded by God to be wise stewards of Creation. The Torah specifically forbids human-caused extinction of a species." American Episcopalians have recently shown similar fondness for conservationist principles, even forming their own alternative-energy company, Episcopal Power & Light, in California.

Locally, Boise First Congregational United Church of Christ has a long history of teaching environmentalism. Steve Scanlin, who is moderator-elect of the UCC's northwest region, says his heart "leaped for joy" when he read about the Vineyard's "Let's Tend the Garden" program. "We welcome them to the environmental ministry and hope to work together soon," he said. In a vivid illustration of how faith and environmental action can go together, as a state legislator from Canyon County during the 1980s, lifelong Christian and minister's son, Scanlin received the Idaho Conservation League's highest possible rating on his environmental record.

Strangely, critics of evangelical environmentalism come from the left and the right. A Seattle environmental nonprofit agency called Grist ([www.grist.org](http://www.grist.org)) published "The Godly Must Be Crazy," by Glenn Scherer, a liberal who is passionate in his belief that all evangelical Christians are anti-environment. He uses former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chair James Inhofe (R-OK) as examples. "DeLay has fought to gut the Clean Air and Endangered Species Acts." Inhofe invited a stacked-deck fossil-fuel-funded global-warming group of skeptics to testify at a Senate hearing which climaxed with him calling global warming "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people." He claims that DeLay has acknowledged his

membership in the Christian Zionists, a group which believes environmentalism is a waste of time because there is enough of everything to last until Christ's Second Coming.

A right-wing group calling itself the National Center for Public Policy Research ([www.nationalcenter.org](http://www.nationalcenter.org)), a repository of strident anti-environmentalist writings, published an article by Samuel Casey Carter called "What Scriptures Tell Us About Environmental Stewardship." Carter writes, "Negotiating the sweeping statements of green theologians requires some care, even if the challenge they present is painfully uncomplicated. If we take the time to read the Scriptures as they have been understood for centuries, so much of this greenery goes away. As we will see, its teachings are simply at odds with even the most basic Christian doctrines." Carter believes that Christian environmentalism is "scientific talk unhinged from its religious origins" and that "God is made redundant" if man helps restore the world he has polluted.

Is there a scripture-based justification for anti-environmentalism? Yes, according to dispensationists, Christian fundamentalists who believe that environmental destruction is to be welcomed, even hastened--as a sign of the coming Apocalypse.

Robinson was both dismayed and dismissive of Carter's brand of theology and says he does not represent the majority of evangelicals. "That is the sort of thing that has alienated us from our brothers and sisters," he said. There's no information on how many dispensationists there are, but Robinson says it's not his interpretation of the Bible or his idea of how Jesus wants him to live.

The ICL's Rick Johnson, like Robinson, is also a fan of breaking down barriers between the two groups. "So much of it can be fear of the unknown. Ask conservatives who they'd least like to have over for dinner, and they may say 'an environmentalist.' They think we're going to be shrill and adamant, won't eat the food, will want to know what pesticides are on the vegetables or ask about the thermostat setting."

A member of the Vineyard laughed at that and said it works both ways. "People think having an evangelical Christian to dinner will be a boring, stressful evening of sanctimonious preaching and judgment."

Johnson, while raised Episcopalian, is no longer a religious practitioner. But those who know him say his environmental work is his religion. He was first made aware of the possibilities of the connection between Christians and environmentalism by an Episcopal priest more than 20 years ago, and says that as he gets older, he is more and more aware of his own deep connection to the earth--a connection that may transcend science. He says he is genuinely happy to hear of the Vineyard's work and hopes they'll be able to help make progress in the legislature this upcoming session.

"Conservatives are great to work with on these issues," he said, gently chiding the Democrats for being more talk than action. "They tend to be more organized and business-like when they tackle a specific project."

So, how to build a community of shared responsibility and values? Break down those barriers and find out where you can get together, said both Johnson and Robinson.

**The effort to find common political ground is being written about by both left and right. In his bestseller *God's Politics: How the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, evangelical Christian author Jim Wallis offers what he calls "the fourth option." He describes a group of non-right-wing Christians "and other morally concerned people" who are "moderate to conservative on personal moral questions and very progressive on social justice." He equates good morals with action, a decidedly leftist idea. But his belief that liberals should embrace "the language of faith and values" is seen by some as too much emphasis on Bible-based thinking and not enough on constitutional values.**

Yet even liberal writer Hans Johnson cites Martin Luther King Jr., an ordained minister, when talking about collaboration. "King believed that a broad civil rights movement could

build and sustain a beloved community of shared opportunity and shared responsibility," Johnson writes. "He envisioned a future where Americans would realize their interconnection with one another and struggle against injustices because their effects diminished all humanity. Bringing this vision to life means putting a compelling human face on issues and linking stories to simple actions people can take to secure change."

Is there a Christmas message in these stories of collaboration gaining ground over competition? Robinson has one: "Christmas is a time to acknowledge and give thanks for His provision and plan to restore and bring salvation to everything He loves through Christ. It is the responsibility of every Christian to receive God's commission to participate in this amazing plan both by sharing His unconditional love and by being good stewards of His creation."

Johnson's secular version: "Simply and quietly, go outside, look up in the sky, and take five long, deep breaths. Just ... go outside."