

Evangelicals split on global warming: How and whether to address climate change

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

Warning of millions of potential deaths worldwide from climate change, a new network of evangelical leaders has launched a campaign for government and grassroots action to reduce global warming. The network's formation symbolizes a growing divide among evangelicals on how—or even whether—to address climate change.

Some evangelical leaders, such as Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, oppose activism on global warming, saying there is neither a scientific nor an evangelical consensus on the topic. But others, including best-selling author and megachurch pastor Rick Warren, see it as an important Christian issue and have joined the network.

Leaders representing Christian colleges and relief organizations took turns decrying global warming at a National Press Club microphone in Washington February 8, but journalists knew weeks earlier that another, more conservative group—one that included Dobson—was registering its objections as it sought and received assurances that the National Association of Evangelicals would remain officially neutral on the issue.

The newer group, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, issued a document titled "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action." As of February 8, it had been signed by 86 evangelical leaders. "Climate change is the latest evidence of our failure to exercise proper stewardship and constitutes a critical opportunity for us to do better," the text said.

Jim Ball, a minister who is executive director of the Washington-based Evangelical Environmental Network, said he and others in the Evangelical Climate Initiative would meet with U.S. senators on both sides of the issue, hold meetings on college

campuses and at large churches and, late this year, hold a private meeting with leaders of energy companies.

Print and broadcast ads are scheduled to appear in a range of mainstream and Christian media in February, costing “a couple of hundred thousand dollars” and funded by individuals and foundations, including the Pew Charitable Trusts.

“What we need is a requirement that carbon dioxide start to be reduced,” Ball said. The “call to action,” which expresses special concern for the poor, says that passage of legislation to achieve that goal is “the most important immediate step” for federal officials.

But some evangelicals do not endorse such legislative action. “Mandatory emission reductions would make energy more expensive,” said E. Calvin Beisner, a founding member of the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, whose efforts are supported by Dobson and Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson. “Energy is an essential component of economic development, and economic development is what the poor desperately need.”

The alliance released a statement in January, signed by 22 leaders, declaring that evangelicals have not reached a consensus on global warming and asking the NAE not to take a position on it. Signers included Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention and conservative Presbyterian televangelist James Kennedy of Florida. The NAE board of directors is scheduled to meet March 9-10 in Dallas.

While saying that the association’s executive committee reaffirmed that evangelicals lack a consensus view on the issue, NAE president Ted Haggard added that the NAE applauds the work of both the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance and the Evangelical Environmental Network because “they are both striving to protect God’s creation and arrive at a biblical worldview concerning these important issues.”

Richard Cizik, the NAE’s vice president for governmental affairs, attended the launching of the Evangelical Climate Initiative but said in an interview that he withdrew his name from its call to action to prevent confusion about the NAE’s stance. He said that more than 20 NAE board members have signed the statement.

“I believe climate change is real and human-induced and will have consequences,” said Cizik, who owns two hybrid cars. “But I want to be a facilitator, a diplomat of sorts, for those who don’t yet hold that conviction.”

Ron Sider, president of the Pennsylvania-based Evangelicals for Social Action, said he and other signatories on the new statement deploring global warming represent the center of the evangelical movement. Signers include Warren, Pentecostal leaders Jack Hayford of the Foursquare Gospel Church and Bishop Charles E. Blake of the Church of God in Christ, Salvation Army national commander Todd Bassett and Duane Litfin, president of Wheaton College.

“There’s just no way you can describe these people as fringe,” Sider said in an interview. Though he respects some of those who agree with the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, Sider said he’s saddened by their stance. “Frankly,” he said, “they’re going to look really silly in another ten years.”