

Moderate will lead Christian Coalition: New focus on social and environmental issues

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An organization once synonymous with the religious right has named as its new president a pastor who is becoming known as a critic of conservative Christians wedded to Republican politics.

The Christian Coalition last month named Joel Hunter, pastor of the Northland Church in the Orlando, Florida, area, as president. He replaces Roberta Combs, who headed the organization as it lately declined precipitously in influence, size and prestige.

Hunter will work on a part-time basis for the coalition and remain pastor at Northland, which is one church distributed among five concurrent worship sites. He reportedly will move the coalition's headquarters from Washington to the Orlando area. Combs will keep the title of chairman of the group.

In the 1990s, the Christian Coalition claimed millions of members and distributed hundreds of thousands of voter guides in churches prior to elections. But the group's annual budget has declined from \$26 million at its peak to around \$1 million. Recently four state Christian Coalition chapters parted ways with the organization.

Hunter's selection may further disturb the remnant. He has self-published a book titled *Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won't Fly with Most Conservative Christians*. "There ought to be more than just gay marriage and pro-life issues because the Bible is concerned with all of life," he writes. "We need to do everything we can to relieve poverty, to heal the sick, and to protect the earth."

Hunter has appeared with evangelical environmentalists who have called on like-minded believers to urge governments to deal responsibly with factors contributing to global warming.

He also was interviewed on Air America radio by Baptist minister Welton Gaddy, director of the Interfaith Alliance, which takes liberal stances on many social and political issues.

Hunter told Welton in an October 6 broadcast that the Christian Coalition must hold on to the “basic moral stances” in which it has always believed, but that it will also expand into “compassion issues.”

The Christian Coalition is “going to take our licks for doing this, but we’re going to do it because we think it is right, and we cannot ignore the rest of the gospel,” Hunter admitted. “We’re forging some new ground for the evangelical community, and that’s not going to go automatically and easily.” *-Associated Baptist Press*