

Christian Coalition head quits before start: Cites differences on broadening agenda

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Joel Hunter, a megachurch pastor in Orlando, Florida, has resigned from his pending presidency of the Christian Coalition of America, citing differences on how to broaden the group's agenda.

The organization, which was a political force for conservative Christians in the 1990s, has diminished in prominence in recent years. Hunter had hoped to expand its agenda beyond traditional stances against abortion and gay marriage.

"When it came right down to it, when we were ready for the transition, we had a meeting to make sure we were on the same page and we weren't," Hunter, 58, said in an interview with Religion News Service.

The coalition announced Hunter's presidency in early October, but he said he and its board came to a "mutually respectful separation" in a telephone conference call November 21.

Hunter wanted to broaden the agenda "to the compassion issues of Christ—poverty and justice, creation care," he said. "Because if we are going to care for the vulnerable, we ought to care as much about the vulnerable outside the womb as inside the womb."

Roberta Combs, chair of the Christian Coalition, said the board and Hunter came to "an amicable agreement."

Hunter has been a spokesperson for the Evangelical Climate Initiative, an effort launched last February that urges greater attention to reducing global warming.

Hunter, pastor of the multisite Northland Church, calls himself a political independent, not a Republican.

Analysts indicated that Hunter's quick departure was not a surprise—especially considering the title of his self-published book, *Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won't Fly with Most Conservative Christians*.

Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Washington-based Ethics and Public Policy Center, said Hunter and the Christian Coalition didn't seem like the right match.

"While his goals are well-intended, if your organization for its entire existence has been concerned about pro-life issues and pro-family issues and pro-traditional marriage issues, then to come along and say it's the wrong bird, I think the first discussion he must have had [was] 'Well, what's the other bird got to offer?'" said Cromartie.

Likewise, staffer Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State said that Hunter's short-lived appointment as the Christian Coalition's volunteer president was "not a match made in heaven."

Boston remarked that Hunter should be thankful for the turnaround. "He sounds way too reasonable to head a political unit founded by TV preacher Pat Robertson."