

NAE rebuffs critics, affirming Cizik and a wider agenda: Caring for the environment, condemning torture

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The National Association of Evangelicals has affirmed its stance on caring for the environment—indirectly rebuffing complaints that its vice president for governmental affairs is too engaged in environmental issues—and endorsed a statement condemning torture.

Focus on the Family chair James Dobson and two dozen other evangelical leaders had asked the NAE board to oust Vice President Richard Cizik because of his “relentless campaign” against human-induced global warming.

NAE interim president Leith Anderson said no formal response was taken by the group’s board of directors. Anderson noted before the directors’ meeting that none of those seeking a change are members of the NAE, an evangelical umbrella group.

“I affirmed him [Cizik] and I’ve done that publicly and in the board meeting, and there was a lot of affirmation of Rich Cizik at the board meeting,” Anderson said.

With the NAE since the 1980s, Cizik, who holds a master of divinity from Denver Seminary, has been the most constant representative of the NAE during its ups and downs. The NAE suffered one of its severest blows last fall when its president, megachurch pastor Ted Haggard of Colorado Springs, resigned after admitting to lying about his contacts with a gay prostitute.

Meeting March 8-9 at Anderson’s church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, the board reaffirmed a 2003 document on “an evangelical call to public engagement,” which embraces care for the creation. It also affirmed a document titled “An Evangelical Declaration Against Torture: Protecting Human Rights in an Age of Terror.”

Cizik said he considered the board’s actions “a strong affirmation” of his role. “I think that support was . . . reflected in the vote we took on the torture and human

rights document,” he said. “There was only one dissenting vote.”

The “public engagement” statement notes the broad range of issues evangelicals should address, including religious freedom, sanctity of human life, care for the poor and protecting “God’s earth.” The antitorture document, developed by the Tennessee-based Evangelicals for Human Rights, is signed by Cizik, *Christianity Today* editor David Neff and 20 other ministers and professors.

“When torture is employed by a state, that act communicates to the world and to one’s own people that human lives are not sacred, that they are not reflections of the Creator,” the statement says.

In the March 1 letter to NAE board chair L. Roy Taylor, Dobson and other signatories had expressed concern that Cizik and others were moving the emphasis of evangelicals away from the “great moral issues of our time: notably the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage and the teaching of sexual abstinence and morality to our children.” Other signers included Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council; Gary L. Bauer, onetime Republican presidential candidate and now head of Coalitions for America; and Paul Weyrich, a veteran political strategist. They said that if Cizik “cannot be trusted to articulate the views of American evangelicals,” he should be encouraged to resign.

Cizik said that he doesn’t expect that evangelicals will always agree. “I think we should view ourselves as a family that pulls together and unifies around basic principles and affords the opportunity to disagree without being fractious relatives who don’t talk to one another,” he said.

One NAE board member who opposed Cizik publicly was Jerald Walz, recently named vice president for operations of the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy. The IRD customarily aims its critiques at the leaders of mainline Protestant denominations and the National Council of Churches.

Walz, in an IRD news release, said that Cizik “continues to step outside the approved public policy areas of the NAE.” He also criticized Cizik for using his position to endorse petitions against torture and against violence in Darfur that target President Bush and his administration.

Walz told the Century that “I am not the only one” unhappy with Cizik’s views on global warming, but since no vote was taken he said he could not gauge how many

might agree with him. “The NAE is at a crossroad—whether to follow the gospel of Jesus or a political gospel,” he said. “Unfortunately at this meeting a good chunk of time was spent on how to select a future president” for the group.

It was the first full board meeting since Haggard’s resignation. Several members of the NAE’s executive committee were chosen to begin work on picking a new president. “The organization has had both part-time and full-time presidents, and these different approaches have to be resolved before a candidate is approached,” Anderson said. *-Religion News Service and other sources*