

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

## **God's green Earth: Faith-based interest in environment spreads**

**Rise in evangelical Christian participation is a local and nationwide trend, as witnessed by evangelicals signed up for a seminar.**

By ANN PEPPER  
The Orange County Register

Margaret Henke and a couple of committed friends have grown their faith-based environmental group from a seedling effort that mostly preached to the converted into a force rooted in hundreds of members from a spectrum of faith communities.

And this year an October conference sponsored by the group, the Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment, will include for the first time a smattering of self-described religious conservatives who've lately gained a sense of urgency about the fate of the planet.

"It seems like people are finally realizing what's going on," said Henke, 72, a coalition founder who has relentlessly advanced the idea that the fate of the environment is a religious issue.

"If religions believe that God is the Creator, then why are we trashing his creation?" said Henke, a member of Tustin's Aldersgate United Methodist Church.

The increased participation by evangelicals at the Oct. 21 conference reflects a nationwide trend. Although the veracity of the global warming crisis is debated among evangelicals, many leaders express regret at coming late to the "caring for creation" effort. They're urging the faithful to look at what they waste, what they drive, the problems caused by greenhouse gases as Henke does – as a matter of faith and a moral issue.

Among them is Saddleback Community Church's Pastor Rick Warren, who joined at least 85 other prominent evangelical Christian leaders in signing a statement called "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action."

Sponsored by the "Evangelical Climate Initiative" coalition, the statement says, "Human-induced climate change is real." It calls on Congress to pass legislation limiting carbon dioxide emissions.

Initiative organizers also urge believers to pray, learn and take action in such areas as making church buildings more energy-efficient and writing Congress members to let them know Christians care.

Daniel DeLeon, pastor of Templo Calvario in Santa Ana, says that for too long, in its justified concern for spiritual matters, the church has neglected some of the practical matters of daily life.

"I believe with all of my heart that God has placed you here on this Earth to do more than take advantage of it," DeLeon said. "In the last few years there has been an awakening in the church about this."

One reason: the documentary "An Inconvenient Truth."

"So many people who've seen Al Gore's film ... have told me they didn't have a clue until they saw that movie," Henke said.

In the film, the former vice president builds a strong, often frightening evidentiary case for the growing environmental crisis of global warming and humanity's link to its causes.

But Gore's documentary isn't the whole story.

The increasing ability of people of varying belief systems to work together has evangelicals taking another look at their interpretation of scriptural passages on creation.

At the same time, those who brush off the worry over the planet's health include some of the nation's most high-profile evangelical leaders.

James C. Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and Charles W. Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, were among 22 leaders who wrote to the National Association of Evangelicals, a lobbying group that represents 30 million American Christians and more than 50 denominations, asking that it take no stand on global warming.

"Global warming is not a consensus issue" for evangelicals, their letter said.

Some have decried the science behind what's been called the global-warming crisis, calling it "inconclusive" and a distraction from work on behalf of families and against abortion.

Some evangelicals, such as megachurch founder Chuck Smith, pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, say taking care of the earth is important, but not a top priority.

"We should be trying to save souls rather than the environment," he said. "I think that you can get sort of sidetracked from the main thing: being bringing people to a knowledge of

God and salvation through Jesus Christ. I think that's what we are commanded to do in the Scriptures."

Many mainstream Christians, Jews and other faith groups have long seen environmentalism as a core value.

In 1997, Patriarch Bartholemew I, spiritual leader of 250 million Orthodox Christians, became the first major church leader to denounce damaging nature as sin.

Closer to home, Sherri Loveland, 43, who helps pilot the Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment, says her group is getting more calls from a variety of faith groups. She recently led a workshop at the Garden Grove Interfaith Council for about 20 participants – including Buddhists, Catholics, Mormons and Methodists – who want to start worship center-based environmental groups.

"Right now we're helping Morasha Jewish Day School green their school," Loveland added. "This is a moral issue for all of us. We are called on to be stewards of the earth."

Jeremy Cavallaro, 31, principal at Morasha in Rancho Santa Margarita, turned to the coalition for help because, while the command to care for the Earth comes straight from the Torah, there had been only a tepid response. His school had a recycling program.

Gore's film "really opened our eyes ... gave us a sense of urgency," Cavallaro said.

Now the entire school community is responding to the scriptural command to care for the Earth.

"And the kids are psyched about doing this because it empowers them and ... makes them feel they can make a real difference."

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PIPING UP: Eric Shumski shows a sprinkler piece that he picked up. The school's principal says the pupils are "psyched" to be taking care of the earth.

SANG H. PARK, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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A REAL PICK-ME-UP: Eve Fein, right, head of Morasha Jewish Day School, gets excited to see the trash that fifth-grade volunteers collected at the future site of a school building at the Rancho Santa Margarita campus.

SANG H. PARK, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

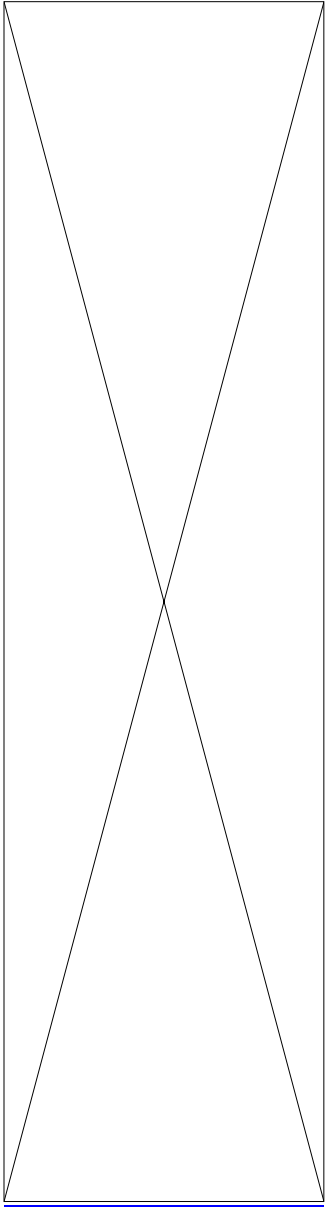


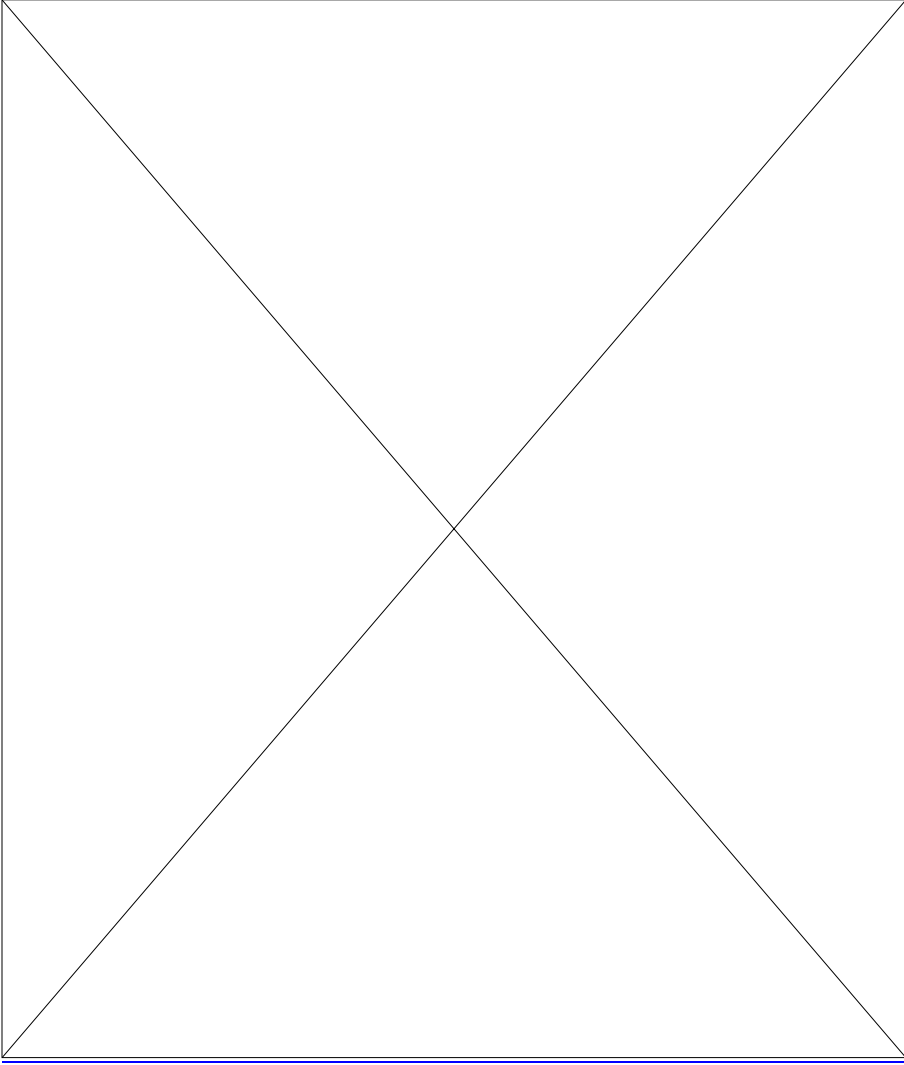
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GLOVES ARE ON:  
Michael Seligsohn at  
Morasha, which gets  
help from the Orange  
County Interfaith  
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Environment.

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