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Collection/Record Group: Clinton Presidential Records
Subgroup/Office of Origin: WH Task Force on Climate Change
Series/Staff Member: Roger Ballentine; Paul Bledsoe; Julie Anderson
Subseries:

OA/ID Number: 41300
FolderID:

Folder Title:
Religious Groups

Stack:	Row:	Section:	Shelf:	Position:
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Religious Groups Mount a Campaign To Support Pact on Global Warming

By JOHN H. CUSHMAN Jr.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 13 — The political debate on global warming, long dominated by arguments over science and economics, is spilling over into pulpits and pews as religious organizations speak out about morality, faith and the Kyoto Protocol.

Major church groups in the United States are mounting an unusually broad and active campaign to persuade the Senate to approve the protocol, an international agreement to fight climate change that was negotiated in Japan last year, leaders of the effort say.

Many Protestant, Greek Orthodox and Jewish groups, including black churches and some evangelicals, have joined the campaign, although Roman Catholic bishops are still considering their stance on global warming and some of the nation's more conservative Christian groups, like the Southern Baptist Convention, are not participating.

In a letter to President Clinton and the senators, 22 member churches of the National Council of Churches pledged to work for approval of the Kyoto Protocol, calling it "an important move toward protecting God's children and God's creation."

The Kyoto treaty calls on developed countries to make deep cuts in emissions of heat-trapping gases like the carbon dioxide that comes from burning fossil fuels, with the United States reducing 1990 levels by 7 percent over the next 10 to 15 years.

The Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, the council's general secretary, said the group wanted the climate issue to be "a litmus test for the faith community." Ms. Brown said the churches would demand that the United States lead the way on fighting global warming without requiring actions by the developing world, a condition the Senate has already set.

And in an unusual grass-roots campaign, an interfaith coalition, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, plans to have

'A litmus test for the faith community.'

members of the clergy and lay lobbyists focus on senators from nine states that stretch from Appalachia across the Midwest.

The states include West Virginia and Michigan, where the coal and auto industries are powerful opponents of the treaty. Some of the region's senators, like Richard G. Lugar of Indiana and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, both Republicans, are considered especially influential in the climate debate.

In October, the churches will bring together about 100 people in Columbus, Ohio, to coordinate the advocacy work in congregations across the region, organizers say.

"This is two parts ground swell and one part mobilization," said Paul Gorman, the executive director of the religious partnership. "This is really about the future of religious life itself."

Kim Winchell of Freeland, Mich., a medical laboratory technician who coordinates about 32 Michigan Lutheran congregations on environmental issues, said, "I plan to network, network, network and pray a lot."

Susan Harlow of Indianapolis, a seminarian who works with youth groups through the Church of Christ, said she was called to environmental causes during a course in prophetic ministry, which she defined as "speaking the hard truth, speaking out on issues that people would rather not deal with."

The Rev. Christopher Bender of the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church in Morgantown, W.Va., said his efforts on climate change "really have a long way to go."

"Given the fact that we live in West Virginia, the first step is just to get the subject on the table," Father Bender said. "Perhaps over the course of time we can also change hearts and minds."

The campaign on climate issues reflects a determination among churches in the past decade to involve the faithful more directly in matters like the disproportionate effects of pollution on poor people or the need to save endangered species.

When Pope John Paul II delivered his "Ecological Crisis" message in 1989, he said industrial nations could not demand that the third world set restrictive environmental standards without doing so first themselves.

Like other religious leaders, Catholic officials said they viewed global warming as a moral issue with profound importance for the world's poor, who stand to suffer most from disruptions to the climate. But they said it would take time for American bishops to consider where they stand on the treaty's specifics. Two committees are considering the issue.

John Carr, secretary of the department of social development at the United States Catholic Conference, said the bishops "understand there is a lot at stake here, and want to think our way through this."

At times, the convergence of religion and environmentalism has cast secular environmentalists and believers in unfamiliar roles.

At a conference last year in Santa Barbara, Calif., it was hard to say which was more notable: the pronouncement by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the Eastern Orthodox Christian leader, that polluting was a sin, or the public apology by Carl Pope, the executive director of the Sierra Club, for the rejection of religion by his generation of environmentalists.

Some participants said they expected resistance to the injection of morality into the climate debate.

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The New York Times

Circ: 1,187,950

AUG 15 1998

"I don't believe that there is a consensus in the country that it is a moral issue," said Mark Jacobs, director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. The coalition, which brings together 26 national Jewish organizations spanning the spectrum from Reform to Orthodox, is participating in the campaign.

"Many people don't believe we have an obligation to curtail our life style to protect future generations," Mr. Jacobs said.

The discussion in religious circles on global warming can be just as complex as the parallel debates in economic and scientific circles.

"There is considerable debate in the scientific community on the whole issue of global warming, enough to learn that working scientists are not monolithic on the question," said William Merrell, a spokesman for the Southern Baptist Convention. "The convention itself has not taken a position, and in view of the unsettled science, it seems unlikely that we will take such a position."

The National Association of Evangelicals has also largely stayed away from environmental issues, although it is planning a conference to discuss them next March.

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