

SPECIAL REPORT

Church joins crusade over climate change

Evangelical leaders have called on the United States to step up its efforts to control greenhouse-gas emissions. But can they force action where others have failed, asks **Amanda Haag**.

Fire and brimstone are coming to the aid of US science, as evangelical scientists and their allies in the religious community embark on a battle against climate change.

"The time has come...for destroying those who destroy the Earth," says Calvin DeWitt, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, quoting from the Scriptures. The Bible teaches stewardship of the planet, he says, which is partly why 86 prominent US evangelical Christians last month signed the 'Evangelical Climate Initiative' calling for mandatory limits on greenhouse-gas emissions.

The movement began in 2000, when 30 evangelical scientists — including DeWitt — signed a statement calling for policy-makers to take steps towards reducing the threat of climate change. It is a rare move in the United States, where environmentalists and the religious community often find themselves in opposite camps. Climate activists hope the

initiative will have the political clout to help sway President George W. Bush's administration towards mandatory emissions cuts. Bush has not signed up to the international Kyoto Protocol on regulating greenhouse gases. Instead, he is promoting clean-energy technologies through agreements such as the six-nation Asia-Pacific partnership. Yet many of Bush's core supporters are religious conservatives.

Evangelicals are a powerful social force in the United States, with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) boasting 30 million members. 'Evangelical' is an umbrella term encompassing more than 50 denominations whose members typically believe in Jesus Christ and that the Bible is the authoritative word of God. The NAE has not officially endorsed the climate initiative, but many of the organization's leaders believe it represents a growing consensus that climate change is a matter for concern.

Climate researchers are watching the



movement with optimism. Jim White, a University of Colorado geochemist who studies ice sheets in Greenland, says that it will almost certainly accelerate public support for action on climate change. "To have a group that has historically fought the notion come

The man who preaches science

John Houghton, former co-chair of the scientific working group for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and a lay preacher in his home church, has long worked to marry scientific understanding of the environment with Christian principles.

Many agree that Houghton's talk at a 2002 conference in Oxford, UK, which drew 70 leading climate scientists, policy-makers and Christian leaders, marked a turning point in mobilizing evangelicals to take a lead in climate change. "I had a conversion experience and just did a 180 on the subject," says Richard Cizik, vice-president of government affairs for the NAE. Jim Ball,

executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, calls Houghton and other evangelical scientists "our early prophets on this problem".

The US leaders who attended the Oxford conference told Houghton they were impressed with the humility with which he and other scientists spoke about their science, emphasizing the uncertainties.

In 1997, Houghton and other Christian scientists set up the John Ray Initiative, an educational charity to promote environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles. John Ray was an eminent seventeenth-century naturalist and theologian.



John Houghton: works to build bridges with industry over the environment.

Houghton travels extensively, lecturing on environmental stewardship and working to build bridges with business and industry. He has just returned from India, where as a trustee of the Shell

Foundation — a charity that encourages sustainable energy in the developing world — he was involved in a programme to build and market less-polluting, higher-efficiency cooking stoves for villages.

Calling on the biblical principle that "to whom much is given, much will be required", Houghton teaches that people in the wealthier parts of the world have derived huge benefits from fossil fuels and have a responsibility to the developing world. "One of our God-given tasks as humans is to care for creation," he says. "That, I think, is a strong imperative right at the beginning of the Bible." **A.H.**



Climate-induced changes in sea level are seen by many evangelicals as having a moral dimension.

around — I think that does impact on the public's thinking," he says.

And it is this public support that some believe could influence conservative legislators. Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, based in Arlington, Virginia, says that the lack of significant public demand for action on climate has hampered acceptance by members of Congress. "So I think the evangelical initiative is welcomed by all," she adds.

One reason many are hopeful about change is that certain key evangelicals — such as Ted Haggard, president of the NAE, and Richard Cizik, the group's vice-president of government affairs — speak regularly with the White House. "That's very significant," says DeWitt. "I think the president really wants evangelicals to see him as evangelical." If Bush does not warm to the idea of mandatory emissions, DeWitt says, he could lose some of his key support.

Backers of the initiative are now distributing the statement to Congress, hoping to educate legislators on their views. "They may be able to hear the message about climate change from

us where they couldn't necessarily hear it and really listen to it from others," says Reverend Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, which is championing the initiative.

A positive development would be to bring together two bipartisan groups of senators — one led by John McCain (Republican, Arizona) and Joe Lieberman (Democrat, Connecticut), and the other by Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico) and Jeff Bingaman (Democrat, New Mexico) — who have separately put forward climate-change legislation. Domenici and Bingaman have scheduled an April congressional climate conference to discuss ways of mandating emissions cuts.

The evangelicals say they realize they won't change minds overnight. "We're under no illusions that our statement, or its circulating, is going to break open the log jam," says Ball. In the meantime, the group is airing advertisements on major television networks. They next aim to build relationships within the business community, in part by planning for a November meeting between business leaders



SURPRISE ORGAN DISCOVERED IN MICE
Mice are shown to have two thymus organs, not just one.
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and evangelicals to help show that climate change can be tackled in ways that will not harm the economy.

John Houghton, a leader in the Christian environmental movement (see 'The man who preaches science'), says the task is particularly hard in the United States. He lectures frequently to international audiences and says that, outside the United States, he rarely encounters resistance to the validity of climate-change science. But leaders of the initiative feel the science is now solid enough to convince even the unbelievers. "If there was not such an overwhelming scientific consensus, we probably wouldn't be able to get traction on this issue in our community," says Ball.

Biblical imperative

But there is still plenty of ground to cover. The NAE's Cizik opted not to sign the statement, although he is a convert to accepting climate change as a reality and helped persuade many supporters of the initiative. Cizik had originally signed the document, but 22 evangelical leaders asked him not to be seen as taking a stand for the NAE, which historically acts only in cases of consensus on an issue. Cizik retracted his name, feeling that he could make a stronger case as a facilitator than an advocate.

For him, the ramifications are greater than politics alone. "I believe the very reputation of the gospel is at stake," he says. He likens climate change to the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, in which evangelicals did not act aggressively.

A union between evangelicals and scientists was only a matter of time, says DeWitt, who has written at length on "evangelical environmentalism". Raised in the Christian Reformed Church, he grew up believing that investigation of the natural world goes hand in hand with biblical theology. Not until he went to college did he become aware of the divide between the two communities. "We've built this illusion that we can talk about ourselves on the one hand and the environment on the other hand," says DeWitt.

For many evangelicals, the flashpoint was the growing realization that climate change could wreak its worst effects on the poorest countries, in the form of heat waves, floods and tropical diseases. Sea-level rise could immerse low-lying regions, and agricultural productivity could be sharply reduced in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa.

More than ever, evangelicals are viewing their call to respond as a biblical and moral imperative. "It's a bigger question now," says DeWitt. "Do you really answer to the creator of Heaven and Earth?" ■