

# The Detroit News

## Don't let environmental radicals co-opt evangelicals

By REV. GERALD ZANDSTRA

**E**vangelicals are all the rage. For the last year, the media, political leaders, thought leaders and lobbyists for various groups have been paying homage to the newly found cultural muscle of those who are described as evangelicals.

This month the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) sponsored an event called the "Evangelical Leaders Summit" in Washington. Leading figures from evangelical circles met to discuss pressing issues on America's religious scene.

One subject has gathered particular interest: evangelicals and the environment.

In a unanimous vote adopting a historic statement of purpose, the directors affirmed the commitment of evangelicals to the environment. The NAE called this vote "a milestone in the movement of evangelicals from the insularity of a revival tent mind-set in the early 20th century to the political activism of the 21st century."

In at least one sense, this is an overstatement. The Judeo-Christian community for 5,000 years or more has taken its responsibility for the environment seriously.

The concept of "stewardship" comes directly from sacred texts. It is built into the opening chapters of Genesis and woven into the Scripture. Human beings, acting

as God's stewards, are to care for the earth, remembering it does not belong to us.

What is new here is the road taken to express concern for the environment.

The direction of the NAE and others carries a distinctly political tone. Religious leaders must beware of politically savvy ideologues who seek to exploit the moral authority of evangelicals in service of morally questionable policy.

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Many of us who are pastors find all the attention lavished on us lately to be rather flattering. But it is also dangerous because it appeals to our pride and takes advantage of our naiveté in the world of public policy.

How can the NAE and the evangelicals it represents avoid the pitfalls of aligning themselves with those in the more radical branch of the environmental tree? By asking at least the following questions. I have suggested some answers, too.

The first question: Is the water and air in the United States generally cleaner or dirtier than it was 50 years ago? It is cleaner. We produce more goods and services for

the world with less pollution every year.

Second: What is the cause of this improvement? The driver has been technology and the advancement of industry. Economic development is one of the key components to improving the environmental conditions in virtually every nation.

Third: To whom should we look for solutions? One of my fears is that religious leaders will lay this at the feet of politicians, who will then regulate to solve a political problem rather than innovate to find an environmental one.

Economic growth is the engine that has and will drive environmentally friendly goods and services. We don't need less trade and business. We need more.

Just as the complexity of environmental issues is a barrier to hasty and uncritical statements by evangelical leaders, neither can this complexity be an excuse for Christians to remain silent about God's wonderful gift of creation. In this way, evangelical environmentalism can be a Biblically sound, politically informed approach to Christian stewardship.

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