

A Seven Year Plan for American Evangelicalism: The Challenges & Opportunities of the American Evangelical Awakening to Environmental Concern by Ken Wilson and Tri Robinson Revised Draft: 9/22/09

I. INTRODUCTION

Jesus of Nazareth announced the good news of the kingdom of God. He taught about this kingdom with the use of parables likening the kingdom to the created order over which God rules as King. The gospels depict him praying outdoors, with a preference for wild places. The prayer he gave his disciples urges them to pray that this kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus and his followers spread a love for the Hebrew Scriptures to the nations. These Scriptures speak of the world as a good creation brought forth by a good God to be stewarded as a sacred treasure. This plan is rooted in the hope that Jesus of Nazareth is the same yesterday, today, and forever and able to influence all whose hearts are open to him.

Care for creation is firmly embedded in the nineteenth century American evangelical tradition; yet this mandate has been buried in the American evangelical landscape by layers of cultural conflict since the early 20th century. This is the nub of the challenge and the opportunity presented by the emerging evangelical awakening to environmental concern: For the past thirty years the American evangelical community has been a locus of cultural resistance to stewarding the blessings of the creation responsibly. But it is in the very nature of the American evangelical religious experience to rediscover dormant biblical truths and give them practical expression within American society.

According to sociologist Christian Smith, American evangelicalism is the most vibrant form of American religion. Evangelicals volunteer more, give more (to and beyond the church), and participate in civic life more than any other faith group.¹ Without the entrepreneurial energy and support of the American evangelical community, efforts to address the global environmental crisis in the United States will be seriously hindered.

This seven-year plan is an attempt to tap into the substrata of evangelical identity, social networking, and capacity to catalyze cultural awakening so that American evangelicals can bring the power of faith in Jesus of Nazareth to bear on the global environmental crisis. American evangelicals have a spiritual and moral obligation to allow the gospel of Jesus to become good news for humanity and all of God's creation.

¹ See [American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving](#) by Christian Smith

II. FOUR STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS SHAPING THE SEVEN YEAR PLAN

The plan is informed by four strategic considerations.

First, the plan is suited to the diverse and diffuse nature of American evangelicalism in the 21st Century. Evangelicalism has a staggering variety of institutional, social, and cultural expressions. It mirrors the cultural diversity of American society at large. The plan seeks to influence key networks of influence within this diverse landscape.

Second, it is a bottom up as well as a top down plan. American evangelicalism has always been a "revival movement" with a potent grassroots, bottom up psychology and sociology. At the same time it is powerfully influenced by the cross-institutional top-down dynamics of national voices, networks and media outlets. An effective strategy must take both realities into account and take wise advantage of the synergy between the two modes of spiritual and cultural transformation.

Third, the plan is designed to communicate to a community which has become skeptical of environmental concerns for cultural reasons. This skepticism is part of a wider cultural conflict in the United States dating back to the fundamentalist movement in the early 20th Century and intensifying in the last thirty years. The environmental movement in the United States has been shaped by an ethos which is more secular than American society as a whole. As a result, its message, though often consistent with the core of evangelical faith, has been unnecessarily quarantined from large segments of American society. This is changing as leaders from both sides learn to listen to each other, but it constitutes a potent communications challenge.

Fourth, this plan seeks to mobilize the power of local evangelical congregations--the basic cell of the American evangelical organism. Local congregations have been largely missing from action in addressing the global environmental crisis and all efforts to embrace spiritual and cultural change must be doable and sustainable at the local church level. Supported by the early prophets of the evangelical environmental movement like Cal DeWitt, Jim Ball, and others, the awakening must increasingly involve pastors and local churches to gain further traction.

III. NINE INITIATIVES

In addition to the work already being done by evangelicals, including the individual efforts of evangelical Christians, churches and environmental organizations, we seek to launch the following new initiatives.

1. Facilitate an annual American Evangelical Creation Care Leadership Summit to gather evangelical leaders in the field of creation care for two days of prayer, planning, relationship building and coordination of efforts.

We propose that the members of the National Association of Evangelicals (N.A.E.) Creation Care Advisory Group be invited to coordinate the event. Invitees would include evangelical environmental organizations, national leaders of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, leaders of evangelical mission organizations open to creation care, and evangelical pastors involved in creation care, and any other evangelical thought leaders concerned for creation care. Special efforts should be made to secure the participation of evangelical pastors committed to creation care²

Purpose: to network established and emerging leaders in creation care; to learn from each other and coordinate efforts for optimal impact on the wider American Evangelical Community

2. Facilitate a high level Creation Care Summit to inspire, equip and empower the most influential evangelical to actively support creation care in the evangelical church community.

Purpose: to substantially expand the number of influential evangelical pastors committed to promoting environmental stewardship with the evangelical church community.

We propose that the ARC and United Nations Development Office work with the authors of this report to explore the most effective setting, format, and host for such a summit, including the White House. The Summit would be designed to draw the most influential evangelical pastors and provide a confidential and non-pressured setting for them to understand the importance of creation care and the role that evangelical pastors can play. The Summit would be designed to promote long term spiritual and cultural transformation in the evangelical church

² Currently, the various leaders in American Evangelical Creation Care movement, are busy leading their respective efforts, often on a shoe-string of time and financial resource; having a fully funded two day event that covers transportation and meeting expenses would facilitate such an event. A yearly leadership summit to gather the key leaders of various Creation Care efforts would greatly enhance connections and coordination of efforts.

community so that political and policy efforts to address the environmental crisis will enjoy greater popular support.³

3. Support a Creation Care Churches Clearing House to identify American evangelical church congregations committed to creation care.

Purpose: to promote best creation care practices among evangelical churches and establish the most accurate data regarding churches committed to creation care.

Currently there is no clearinghouse for up to date and reliable data about churches involved in creation care. We hope to identify "model congregations" which are actively adopting best practices and "emerging congregations" which are open to receiving help from them. Such a data base would be a powerful tool for the existing creation care organizations. It could be used to offer a registry of churches committed to creation care; churches that meet the criteria could then advertise their acceptance, which can serve as an outreach tool for local churches.⁴

4. Support Best Church Practices for creation care congregations.

Purpose: to develop environmental quality standards for model congregations to set the pace for growth in environmental stewardship among American evangelical churches.

The "Best Practices" would be specific to evangelical church congregations and include such things as energy audits, energy conservation, environmental stewardship policies to be adopted by local church and denominational boards, integrating creation care into existing vision and mission statements, promoting good creation care practices through the existing ministries of the church, including global missions efforts. These could be promoted through the existing creation care organizations, a Creation Care Church Clearing House, and the Annual Creation Care Leadership Summit.

³ Evangelical mega-church pastors are sophisticated change agents. Many of them are well read in business literature, and concerned about civic issues. Historically they have been courted by those who are less supportive of environmental stewardship. They tend to be tuned in to media outlets that are similarly skeptical. Leaders in business, government and environmental science should be encourage to reach open new dialogue with these evangelical thought leaders. Two of the leading three evangelical pastors promoting creation care at a national level were inspired and equipped to do so through an event like this.

The single most critical shortage in efforts to promote creation care among evangelicals is evangelical pastors committed to this effort. Mega church pastors and thought leaders like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels are needed to mobile the evangelical church in America.

⁴ The "Creation Care Consultation" the cooperative effort of many existing evangelical creation care organizations (steering committee chaired by Ed Brown) is working toward this and is a likely coordinating sponsor for such an effort.

5. Establish a Church Network Task Force to promote Creation Care within each of three influential American Evangelical Church Networks: Willow Creek Association, Saddleback Resources, and Vineyard: A Community of Churches.⁵

Purpose: to develop a model mechanism for promoting creation within the three most influential "post-denominational" church networks in American Evangelicalism, in order to mobilize the most evangelical churches for creation in the shortest period of time.

Providentially, three of the most influential networks of evangelical churches in the United States are led by three pastors who are committed to creation care, including addressing climate change. While creation care is already spreading throughout these networks, there is currently no *focused effort* to do so by the leadership of these networks. Recently, the two authors of this report, pastors in the Vineyard: A Community of Churches, met with Bert Waggoner, the National Director of Vineyard USA, to explore such a task force, called Justice Ministries, combining creation care with efforts to abolish human trafficking and mercy relief efforts to natural disasters in the United States.

Once this model produces demonstrable results, it could be promoted within the Willow Creek and Saddleback Resources church networks. This would represent an historic and exciting breakthrough for the promotion of creation care in American Evangelicalism.⁶

6. Promote Creation Care among younger generations of American Evangelicals through a partnership with Renewal (an evangelical student led creation care movement on Christian College Campuses) and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (an evangelical student-led organization on secular college campuses.)

Purpose: to inspire, equip and empower a new generation of evangelical leadership committed to integrating faith and environmental stewardship.

Compared with their elders, younger generations of American evangelicals are more environmentally active and aware. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship includes many leaders who are supportive of creation care, including IV's national evangelist, York Moore. InterVarsity is the largest and most effective student led evangelical movement on University campuses today. Renewal is a new student

⁵ These three networks, Vineyard, Willow Creek, and Saddleback (Rick Warren), have key leaders who are supportive of Creation Care; two of the three are interdenominational; Vineyard is a new, but influential denomination; Saddleback has a following in the Southern Baptist Convention and a strong interdenominational component.

⁶ For this reason, we would recommend that this initiative be supported by funding organizations committed to the promotion of creation care in the American Evangelical community.

led organization to promote creation care on Christian College Campuses. Leaders of these two organizations have already met with Ken Wilson to explore such a partnership.

7. Work with the N.A.E Creation Care Advisory Group develop a strategy to bridge the cultural divide between evangelicals who support action to mitigate human caused climate change and evangelicals who are skeptical about climate change science.

Purpose: to move beyond the partisan rhetoric surrounding climate change in order to focus American evangelicals on the fact of climate change (irrespective of cause); evangelicals skeptical of anthropogenic climate change could thus be mobilized to aid in adaptation efforts, especially through global missions, where evangelicals are already helping populations vulnerable to the dangers of or a warming climate.

While the broad principles of creation care would be supported (in theory) by the vast majority of American evangelicals, the cultural divide over climate change in America prevents many American evangelicals from getting involved in creation care. This controversy in the American evangelical community obscures the fact that even climate skeptics agree that the earth is warming. It is important to help American evangelicals who are skeptical about the cause of the warming to focus on that fact that it is happening, and vulnerable populations are suffering as a result. The N.A.E Creation Care Advisory Group has begun to discuss such a strategy for consideration by the N.A.E. board.

We think this could be an important breakthrough in the current cultural divide affecting the American evangelical community. We would like to open avenues for dialog between evangelicals who support the science of anthropogenic climate change and those who are skeptical of the scientific consensus, so that evangelical climate skeptics could become allies in helping vulnerable populations adapt to the threats of climate changes.

8. Promote a new partnership between evangelical global missions leaders and creation care leaders.

Purpose: to mobilize the vast network of evangelical missionaries working among vulnerable populations to assist in improving environmental conditions affecting those populations.

Nearly every evangelical church in America supports missionaries who are often active in promoting public health among vulnerable populations around the world. These missionaries are an important bridge to these churches--to educate American evangelical churches about the effect of environmental degradation on

the populations they work with, and to demonstrate the power of the American evangelical church to help these populations.⁷

In all of the initiatives of this plan, the voice and cooperation of American evangelicals involved in global missions is needed and should be actively solicited.

9. Integrate evangelical concern for creation care with the much broader movement of growing evangelical concern for other justice issues.

In recent years, American evangelicals have been rediscovering the gospel imperative to promote justice on earth, as it is in heaven. American evangelicals are already a voice for the sacredness of human life, and are becoming a more active voice in addressing abject poverty in Africa and around the world, seeking to abolish human trafficking and nuclear weapons, promoting education and equal rights for women globally, and other concerns. While advocacy for these concerns has often been promoted issue by issue, the injustices involved are powerfully interconnected.

Recently, Tri Robinson, a co-author of this plan, helped to lead a RE: FORM conference of evangelical pastors and activists addressing several of these issues as symptoms of a world in crisis. All the initiatives of this plan should assist in the framing of creation care under the broader umbrella of the biblical imperative to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

IV. CRITICAL FIRST STEPS TO LAUNCH IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAN

1. Meet with funders at the Windsor Castle in November who are interested in supporting the initiatives in this plan to discuss funding strategies.
2. Continue to review the initiatives of this plan with the N.A.E. Creation Care Advisory Group to coordinate implementation support among the environmental organizations involved in the group and to recommend specific initiatives to the N.A.E board for N.A.E. support.
3. Identify and empower a plan coordinator and/or team of evangelical creation care leaders to shepherd the plans promotion and implementation.

V. CONCLUSION: THE LOVE OF CHRIST COMPELS US

⁷ For example, the missions director for the Great Lakes Region of Vineyard USA, Ross Naylor-Tatterson, has been leading a church planting movement in Indonesia, which has assisted in reforestation and the planting of rubber trees to help the local economy. Pastor Naylor-Tatterson has agreed to advocate for including environmental care in the missions strategy of the national missions task force on which he serves.

One of the most powerful social movements of our time, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, was led by The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the pastor of a local church. Rev. Dr. King understood the power of the African American local church to influence change. He applied the evangelical impulse of African American churches to the moral challenge of racism, centering his approach in the teaching of Christianity's founder, Jesus of Nazareth.

A century earlier, Charles Finney, an evangelist in the revival tradition of American evangelicalism, applied the power of the gospel to the moral outrage of slavery, fueling the abolitionist movement with the power of love and faith.

It can happen again. One might say, it must happen again if we are to make the kind of progress that our times call for. But no one group or religious tradition or segment of society can do it alone. We cannot leave our faith behind when it is most needed.

In the face of the global environmental crisis we must learn to work together across social, national, religious, and cultural divides in new and risky and exciting ways. But the voice of love, understood within the Christian tradition to be none other than the voice of God, beckons us to move forward with courage and wisdom and urgency.