

Many clerics see need to fight warming

By Bob Doppelt

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Writing a column on global warming is interesting work. People with all sorts of views send me e-mails. Some ask for clarification. Others say they appreciate the information. About 15 percent — sometimes politely but often in strong (even unprintable) language — tell me to stuff it.

Curiously, the “go stuff it” crowd frequently uses religious arguments to claim that global warming is a hoax or, conversely, that it should not be feared because it is the fulfillment of the “end of times” biblical prophecy.

I was puzzled by these comments, so I called a number of leaders of local religious congregations to see how they view this issue. I obviously could not talk with every pastor, priest or rabbi. But I tried to speak with a variety of people. I learned that the majority of the local faith community is concerned about global warming and committed to doing something about it.

Rev. Lorne Bostwick of Central Presbyterian Church in Eugene, for example, told me that he believes the Earth is warming beyond natural levels and that human consumption is a primary cause. From the Presbyterian perspective, he said, “We acknowledge that all that takes place, even human misbehavior, is within God's sovereignty. God holds all of human history in God's hands. But we also say that God gave humans responsibility to care for the Earth.”

Rabbi Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin of Temple Beth Israel said that as a member of the clergy, he did not have the expertise to determine what effects humans are having on the climate, but he fully trusted the consensus among the scientific community that we are on a dangerous course.

“From a biblical perspective,” the rabbi said, “humans have a responsibility for creation. Humanity was placed in the garden to tend and till it. So humanity has a shared responsibility to honor the divine artist that created the Earth we live on.”

Rev. Melanie Oommen from the United Church of Christ said much the same thing. Global warming is real, she said, humans are the primary cause, and humans have a responsibility given by God to resolve the problem.

“I think of our responsibility to care for the Earth as obedience to the word of God,” was how Rev. Ben Cross of the First Baptist Church described his views. “Adam and Eve were given the responsibility to care for the Earth, not pillage it.”

If stewardship for nature is such a common view, why, I asked, do some people of faith link global warming with the “end of times” or claim it’s a hoax?

“We do not take the Bible literally,” Bostwick said. “We have theological concepts that guide us, such as justice, humility, generosity and sustainability which means living in a way that protects, even renews resources. Some people don’t understand the larger context of the biblical narrative and they misrepresent it by ‘proof-texting.’ They find words and phrases in the Bible and pull them out to support their political views or to support unethical behavior.”

“There are different ways to approach the Bible,” Oommen said. “It’s a misinterpretation to say that the Bible does not call for all of us to be good stewards of the Earth. As a Christian, the law of love always rules and God’s love for creation is pre-eminent. I find it troublesome that some people hold these views (of global warming), because it harms the world.”

Husbands-Hankin paused, then responded to my question by saying, “I would encourage people within other faiths to look at the rise of ‘Creation Care’ within their own communities.”

Cross directed me to the same place.

Creation Care is the term used by Rev. Richard Cizik, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and others to describe the responsibility of Christians for the environment. I learned how Cizik has worked to add global warming to his association’s traditional agenda when he agreed to a series of interviews for a book I was writing.

“Climate change is real and human induced,” Cizik told me. “It calls for action soon — and, we are saying, action based upon a biblical view of the world as God’s world. And to deplete our resources, to harm our world by environmental degradation, is an offense against God. That’s what the scriptures say. Therefore, if we are obedient to the scriptures, there is no time to wait, no time to stall, no time to deliberate.”

Although not every person of faith will agree with those I interviewed, its clear that the vast majority of local religious leaders believe that a truly religious life cannot

be separated from the responsibility to care for the Earth.

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