UNH Media Relations

Green Evangelicalism Gives Christians, Environmentalists Common Ground

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September 9, 2009

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DURHAM, N.H. –The often adversarial groups of evangelical Christians and environmentalists are finding common ground in the green evangelical movement, according to new research from the University of New Hampshire.

Lawrence Prelli, UNH professor of communication who studies rhetoric, discusses his findings in "Rhetorical Features of Green Evangelicalism," which appears in the current issue of Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture.

"The spiritual and moral resources of green evangelicalism are potential grounds of division from more secular environmental discourses, but those same resources might disclose rhetorical opportunities for engaging with powerful potential allies among the variety of religious discourses now undergoing a 'greening' in response to climate change and other environmental problems," Prelli says.

Lawrence Prelli, UNH professor of communication and rhetoric

According to Prelli and co-author Terri Winters, a master' s student at UNH, Christian evangelicals and environmentalists often are viewed as holding irreconcilable and mutually exclusive views on a wide range of issues. However, a review of green evangelicalism shows that there is more ground in common between the groups than most people realize.

Green evangelicalism uses biblically based interpretation of Christian doctrine to address environmental problems. At the core of green evangelicalism is the belief that evangelical Christians must join with others to improve stewardship or ensure "care of creation" through moral actions that rectify humans' sinful degradation of creation, and thereby, reconcile humans with their Creator.

As a result, green evangelicals are open to working with a wide range of individuals, groups, and institutions, on such issues as climate change -- even those with whom they have conflicting viewpoints on other, non-environmental issues.

"Whether within or outside of the evangelical community, individuals, groups, and institutions are motivated for the moral good when they enact practices that work toward the care of

God's 'good' creation," Prelli says, explaining the green evangelical world view. "Those who act in ways that degrade creation are sinful. Evangelical Christians are thus motivated to work with others regardless of their secular or religious standing insofar as they are rightly motivated."

"The paramount motivation for evangelical Christians to engage the climate change issue is to reconcile those who have become spiritually estranged with God through performing and witnessing moral actions in the effort to heal ailing creation," Prelli says.

Green evangelicalism also finds common ground with the sustainable development effort in its depictions of the relationship between environmental degradation and poverty.

"The interconnection between environmental degradation and poverty is linked inextricably with the Christian imperative 'to love your neighbors' and 'protect and care for the least of these as though each was Jesus Christ himself.' And the 'least of these' – 'our poorest global neighbors' – are confronted with the prospects of dislocation, famine, and death because 'the consequences of global warming will hit the poorest the hardest,'" Prelli says, citing the 2006 Evangelical Climate Initiative.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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Lawrence Prelli, UNH professor of communication and rhetoric
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