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Communication

Renewing Evangelical Engagement on Climate Change: The Birth and Growth of “Young Evangelicals for Climate Action”

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Framing Evangelicals and Climate Change

The complicated relationship between Christians and anthropogenic climate change—particularly among self-identified evangelicals in the United States—is a hot topic in both academic and popular circles.¹ Consistently, American evangelicals have polled as the group most skeptical of the existence of human-caused climate change and least likely to support climate action and policies.² However, the full picture is more nuanced than can be captured in a news headline or polling survey. Evangelical Christianity is a diverse movement that is also found at the forefront of environmental and climate science and action.³

In light of changing demographics in America and the church, the purpose of this communication is to highlight a growing movement of younger evangelical Christians who are working to awaken the American church to its critical role in overcoming the climate crisis. We offer this unique contribution, having each served as the national organizer and

spokesperson for Young Evangelicals for Climate Action (YECA, pronounced Y, E, C, A). Since our founding, more than 10,000 self-identified young evangelicals have taken at least one action with us toward advocating for local and national climate solutions. We hope this work will encourage and inspire more faithful action by others.

The Context: The Evangelical Climate Initiative

In 2006, over eighty senior evangelical leaders—led by Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) and including Rick Warren, Joel Hunter, and the presidents of numerous Christian colleges, denominations, and major ministries—came together to release the groundbreaking Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), marking the first time that climate change was publicly identified as a major evangelical concern.⁴ Growing to over three hundred influential signatories, their joint statement affirmed that human-induced climate change is real, its impacts are significant—especially on the poor—and that Christian moral and biblical convictions demand that the church respond. The ECI generated widespread media coverage and positive momentum, but also stirred up considerable backlash from US-based climate skeptics both within and beyond the Christian community.⁵

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The Genesis and Foundations of a Movement

As concern for climate change receded into the background, troubling reports were coming in from around the world about rising sea levels, acidification of the oceans, increasingly extreme weather events, and more.⁶ There remained, however, very little discussion or action on these pressing realities within the American church and across the nation. During the 2012 election, climate change was effectively ignored by the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates—even though both had positive track records on the issue.⁷

It was in this context, in early 2012, that EEN facilitated a small weekend gathering of young Christian leaders. We met at the Washington, DC, home of a church leader who served on the boards of both the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and the World Evangelical Alliance. The purpose of this time together was to pray and dream together about how God might be calling our generation to respond more faithfully to the climate crisis.

Over the course of two days, we developed a shared vision for an ongoing grassroots climate initiative, spearheaded by our generation, that would bring our unique perspectives and strengths to the broader religious and environmental communities. This vision was grounded in a biblical creation-care ethic, along with a holistic understanding of God's redemptive mission and our role as his people in the world, which had been eloquently articulated by the Lausanne Movement in their seminal Cape Town Commitment published in 2011.⁸ We recognized climate change as an environmental and humanitarian crisis, as well as an issue of both social and generational justice.

Jesus taught that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor. We realized that we could not fulfill these commandments faithfully without caring for God's creation and for all the people already being adversely affected by a changing climate. Furthermore, global climate change is a defining challenge for our generation, as we will be the ones who suffer most from the consequences of current inaction.⁹

As we looked around, we found many Christian groups engaged in caring for creation, but few that focused on climate change. We sensed a strategic need, along with a moral and spiritual responsibility, to step into this gap; we were greatly encouraged to find that many evangelical leaders were open to our concerns and eager to better understand and support us in this endeavor.

The Creation of YECA

Young Evangelicals for Climate Action (YECA) publicly launched at the 2012 National Day of Prayer for Creation Care in Washington, DC, as an official ministry of EEN. The core team identified three strategic goals that guide YECA to this day: (1) to mobilize our generation of evangelicals to step up on climate action, (2) to influence and encourage senior evangelical leaders to set an example by supporting faithful climate action in their churches and communities, and (3) to hold political leaders accountable for enacting comprehensive and responsible climate policies through advocacy.

YECA quickly gained traction through a variety of engagement strategies in service of these three goals. We organized a college campus speaking tour to raise awareness and invite our peers to join the movement by signing our Call to Action.¹⁰ We launched a Senior Leaders Pledge and began meeting with college presidents, denominational heads, and other key leaders around the country to invite their support and partnership. We also organized a prayer rally at Hofstra University (NY) during the 2012 presidential debate they hosted, which generated early media attention that aided our efforts.¹¹

Within a year, we grew into a national initiative with activists and supporters across the United States. To help shepherd this growing movement, we designated a full-time national organizer and transitioned our initial core team into a national steering committee that has met regularly in person and via videoconference to set and implement the vision and programs of YECA. Through the financial support of EEN, and through the leadership demonstrated by creative and passionate young people, YECA has become an important example of Christian engagement on climate change.¹²

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Sharing Powerful Climate Testimonies

With our spheres of influence expanding, we recognized the value of sharing stories of how we each came to care about the climate crisis. We started recording and posting videos featuring such “Climate Testimonies”¹³ from young evangelicals across the nation. Common to each of these stories is a deep desire to love and serve God through this work, a conviction to be part of climate and environmental solutions through personal and corporate action, and a hope that the American church will lead by example.

These short videos have encouraged our peers, helping them realize they are not alone. Similarly, our stories have encouraged senior church leaders. In line with the important work of Dorothy Boorse in “Loving the Least of These,”¹⁴ we called upon NAE board members to take a public stand on climate action,¹⁵ which they subsequently did through their Call to Action on Creation Care.¹⁶ Just as there is power in our stories of coming to faith in Christ, these climate testimonies help showcase the redemptive and hopeful work Christ is calling us to through climate action.

Developing Our Signature Leadership Programs

YECA has maintained a consistent orientation toward identifying and supporting emerging young leaders. Early in the organization’s history, outreach to Christian colleges and universities became a foundational component of this work. Our own respective experiences as undergraduates at Christian liberal arts institutions provided important integration of our faith and climate action, despite the often-slow movement toward climate leadership at the highest institutional levels of our campuses and churches. Seeing the increased potential for peer-to-peer engagement and ongoing opportunities to engage senior leaders through students, we founded the Climate Leadership Fellows program.

The central goal of this program is to equip new leaders to promote a biblical understanding of the climate crisis and to organize faithful responses within their campuses, churches, and communities. We view this as a contribution toward discipleship by walk-

ing alongside young Christians to help them develop a more holistic faith in which their desires to serve God, neighbor, and creation are nurtured within Christian community. Projects implemented by our fellows have increased awareness about climate change science and action, fostered waste reduction programs in local churches, led to renewable energy initiatives, and facilitated transparent and honest discussions about evangelical engagement on climate change with elected officials.¹⁷ Having supported more than twenty emerging leaders through the first four years of this program, it serves as a critical path for affecting change within our communities.

Advocacy across Party Lines

YECA is and always has been distinctly nonpartisan. However, as a voting bloc, American evangelicals have traditionally been considered politically conservative.¹⁸ While there are many reasons for this association, it has helped precipitate an unbiblical assumption that evangelicals are and will remain complicit with inaction on climate. YECA demonstrates why this should not be considered the case. In fact, American evangelicals have the unique opportunity to reach moderates and conservatives on climate.

During the 2016 presidential primaries, we made it possible for several Christian college students to travel across Iowa and engage Republican presidential candidates. Introducing themselves as young evangelical Christians, the students asked the candidates to comment on camera about their plans for stewarding God’s creation and acting on climate. We then shared their responses on social media so that voters could better evaluate the candidates.¹⁹ The questions highlighted that conservative climate solutions exist and that voters are interested in them.

We have consistently raised our voices for changes in public policy, attending the People’s Climate March in 2014 and 2017, and facilitating a number of meetings with elected officials in Washington during sponsored Climate Advocacy Days.²⁰ Our members have also participated in hearings of the US Environmental Protection Agency, organized letter-writing campaigns aimed at state officials, and contributed public comments on proposed rules and bills that directly affect progress on climate action.

Strategic Planning for the Future

In the seven years since YECA's inception, we have seen encouraging progress at the grassroots, institutional, and systemic levels toward a distinctly evangelical, youth-led climate movement. We have received significant attention from national and international media outlets, including CNN, PBS, NPR, Reuters, and the *New York Times*. In early 2016, YECA also became a member of the US Climate Action Network, the largest coalition of civil society organizations focused on climate action in this country. This partnership has further solidified the value and importance of Christian witness in the larger national climate movement.

As we look to the future, we recognize that there is much more to be done to move the needle toward effective national climate policy and more faithful earth-keeping practices in evangelical churches and campuses across the country. To this end, the national steering committee adopted its first strategic plan in fall 2016, celebrating our successes and laying out a path for sustained and dynamic growth.²¹

One of the priorities developed in the strategic plan is to build relationships with new grassroots networks and partners that represent different communities than those historically mobilized by the YECA. In particular, the steering committee recognized the deep racial disparities within the US evangelical community at large. In lament over this tragic reality and in hope of a different future, we committed to increasing diversity in our organizational leadership and partnerships over the next five years. We also drafted a Commitment to Diversity Statement, laying out the theological imperative and the strategic rationale for pursuing greater equity, inclusion, and reciprocity with minority communities in the common work of climate action.²²

As part of expanding our outreach to senior evangelical leaders, YECA is seeking to cultivate relationships, not only with leaders as defined by a more traditional evangelical institutional structure (i.e., pastors, denominational leaders), but also with innovative voices in emerging forms of leadership such as artists, prominent bloggers, writers, and social media personalities. Leadership is taking new forms in the twenty-first century and, as institutional affiliation decreases, it is critical for us to reach the

leaders whom our target audience engages most attentively.

Finally, we recognize the unique ability of young evangelical voices to gain the attention of conservative lawmakers. We desire to continue stewarding this opportunity for faithful advocacy. We plan to engage thousands of new young evangelicals in upcoming election years and to offer creative opportunities for our networks to communicate the need for a clear national path forward on climate using a shared set of policy principles. Our goal is that elected officials will hear rising generations of evangelical voters saying with a louder and clearer voice that we care about climate change and want them to as well.

Conclusion

Many US evangelicals have disconnected a concern for the created world from their faith commitments, which is particularly evident on the issue of climate change. YECA occupies a unique space among both Christian organizations and mainstream climate advocacy groups seeking to change this. Motivated by our evangelical faith, we are able to speak biblically and persuasively to Christian communities, particularly to those groups that large environmental groups often struggle to understand and include—groups that will be crucial for achieving lasting policy change in the United States.²³ More than shifting the political needle, however, YECA is positioned to help renew evangelical climate and environmental engagement as an integral part of biblical discipleship and gospel witness. In doing so, we pray that, by God's grace, the evangelical church will become a more faithful advocate for a just and livable future that points to the redemption yet to come. ✧

Notes

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