

Southern Baptist group shifts position on climate: Denomination's past declarations "too timid"

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A group of Southern Baptist leaders has launched a new initiative on the environment, saying that their denomination's past declarations have been "too timid."

"We believe our current denominational resolutions and engagement with these issues have often been too timid, failing to produce a unified moral voice," reads the initiative's statement, which was released March 10. The lack of scientific unanimity should not prevent "prudent action" through changed habits and "responsible policies," it said.

Though SBC president Frank Page and two former convention presidents are among the initiative's 45 signatories, officials at the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the Southern Baptist entity that addresses environmental matters, have not signed the statement. The signers included Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church, Plano, Texas, who was the SBC president from 2002 to 2004.

Among others signing the statement were Timothy George, president of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama, and David Dockery, president of Union University, Jackson, Tennessee.

The four-page document says despite "justified disagreement" about the issue among Christians, there is a biblical mandate for churches to be actively involved in preaching and practicing care for creation.

The Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative was spearheaded by Jonathan Merritt, 25, a seminary student and son of 2000-2002 SBC president James Merritt, who also signed the document.

The younger Merritt said he was moved to act after hearing a professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, compare destroying creation to ripping out a page of the Bible.

He said the new statement is not meant to contradict a nonbinding resolution passed at last year's meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, which questioned findings that global warming is primarily human-induced. "Rather, it is a unique voice that advances our stand on the issue," he said.

Barrett Duke, vice president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said that agency discussed the document with Jonathan Merritt but was not comfortable with its final version. "We didn't feel that it was appropriate for us to tell Southern Baptists what we thought about how they expressed their opinions," he said.

The organizers of the new document, including Danny Akin, president of Southeastern Seminary, took pains to say that, while the document calls Southern Baptists to engage further on the issues, they aren't making any specific policy recommendations.

Nonetheless, the press call by organizers featured an appearance by Senator John Warner of Virginia. Warner cosponsored the first major greenhouse-gas-reduction bill to make it to the Senate floor. When the bill passed the Senate Environment Committee in December, Warner was the only Republican to vote for it.

"I took on this challenge of global warming thinking that I'd like to achieve one more piece of legislation before I retire," Warner told reporters.

The SBC's news arm, Baptist Press, led its March 10 issue with a story headlined, "Seminary student's climate-change project is not SBC's." However, it acknowledged that its backers include "a number of high-profile Southern Baptist leaders."

David Gushee, a Mercer University professor who has advocated for Southern Baptist attention to climate-change issues, said March 11 that the apparent divide over the statement indicates larger faults within the SBC.

"This may be the first public revelation of real differences in the currently existing Southern Baptist Convention leadership between center-right leaders and more hard-right people," he said. "I see this as a center-right statement, and it was just a little bit too far, a little bit too much, for those who would be more right, hard right."

-Religion News Service, Associated Baptist Press