

Stopping traffic: What would Jesus drive?

by [Katherine Ellison](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

Pastor Jim Ball has a message for car buyers. “Most people don’t think the kind of car they drive has anything to do with their faith. We want to show them how it does.” Ball plans a campaign based on one question: What would Jesus drive? “Evangelical Christians,” he says, “ought to relate everything we do to the Lordship of Christ.”

Despite more than a decade of warnings about the risks of global climate change, Americans are buying sport utility vehicles in record numbers. Automobile engines produce nearly 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, a leading greenhouse gas, for every gallon of gasoline burned. That means that SUVs, with their extraordinarily low gas-mileage rates, are stand-out contributors to the CO2 emissions that fuel climate change.

As director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, a “biblically orthodox” nonprofit network that works with World Vision, the International Bible Society and other organizations, Ball plans to relay his challenge to Detroit automakers by joining an interfaith press conference on cars and climate change in that city on November 20. He’ll follow up with a barrage of ads broadcast on Christian radio and TV stations.

The “What would Jesus drive?” ad campaign, financed by donations from the Energy Foundation, will target Iowa, Indiana, North Carolina and Missouri—states with a heavy evangelical presence. Ball anticipates spending up to \$65,000 on ad spots, and more for special events on college campuses and a “Creation Sunday” celebration in the spring. “I think it’ll make a splash,” he says. “Once you ask someone that question, it sticks with them.”

The initiative is part of a wider movement of religious environmental activism. “Somebody’s got to represent the long-term future, and the long-term future doesn’t get much market share. So we have to do it,” says John Briscoe, development

director for the National Council of Churches.

Officials from the NCC, which represents 50 million Americans, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, sponsored by more than a dozen major Jewish organizations, will join Ball in Detroit to help put pressure on automakers. NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar has asked chief executives of the Big Three automakers for a meeting to begin “a new conversation about cars and their impact on global sustainability, security, health and justice.”

“We’ll be showing up in Priuses,” says Briscoe, referring to Toyota’s high-gas-mileage hybrid car. “The key message is: You make it, we’ll buy it.”

But the automakers have yet to buy his argument. SUVs, pickups and minivans outsold cars for the first time last year, pushing the average gas mileage of new cars to its lowest point since the early 1980s. “The crux of the issue is that we make 50 different models that get 30 miles per gallon or better, and very few consumers buy them,” says Eron Shosteck, spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers. “We can’t control the price of gas, and as long as gas is an inexpensive commodity, there is no incentive for consumers to use less of it.”

Car manufacturers don’t fear the religious pressure, adds Shosteck, since they’re “acting morally and responsibly” in giving consumers a choice.

Even so, the industry has fought against attempts to improve fuel-economy standards. Earlier this year, automaker lobbyists challenged a California law that requires cuts in greenhouse gas emissions by cars and light trucks. (The law was signed by Governor Gray Davis in July.) They were also active on Capitol Hill earlier this year, joining debate over an energy bill that will likely include some sort of new regulations on fuel standards. Religious groups were there too, joining mainstream environmental organizations to press for tougher gas-mileage rules.

In February, 1,200 religious leaders wrote to every U.S. senator, calling for a substantial increase in the standards as well as new incentives to encourage the auto industry to produce cleaner vehicles. Yet in September, House and Senate negotiators agreed on proposed fuel economy rules that would, according to one government study, actually increase oil consumption.

Religious leaders decided on a new approach: mobilize millions of religious consumers to buy new, more energy-efficient, made-in-the-U.S.A. cars. The effort

builds on the strength of the Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, run by the NCC and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. With chapters in 21 states, the campaign has been educating Jews and Christians about climate change for the past three years. On November 10, for example, congregations in 15 states heard sermons on fuel efficiency and viewed hybrid electric autos on display. Meanwhile, in mailings sent to 100,000 congregations, the NCC is emphasizing the relationship of fuel economy to religious teachings about stewardship and justice.

Formed in 1994, the Evangelical Environmental Network demonstrated its clout in 1996 with a \$1 million crusade to save the Endangered Species Act from an attempted rollback by Republicans in Congress. The network took out TV, radio and print ads and mailed "Let the Earth Be Glad" kits to 33,000 evangelical churches. The Republican bid failed.

Now evangelical Christians are joining with Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign in one of the boldest initiatives ever taken by religious environmentalists. If they succeed in getting more Americans to think about climate change when they fill up their tanks, they may help reverse glacially slow U.S. progress in coping with this threat.