

The Clergy Letter Project

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For far too long, some outspoken religious leaders have been attacking a range of scientific ideas, especially evolution. By doing so, they've created a false dichotomy that has been detrimental for both religion and science.

There's a far better way to deal with these controversial subjects, however, and the more than 13,000 members of The Clergy Letter Project are staking out a positive solution. Thousands upon thousands of clergy members have come together to make two points absolutely clear.

First, they want to demonstrate that the loudest voices, those claiming that people must choose between religion and science, are not speaking for the majority of religious leaders. Second, they want to show that religion and science should be seen as complementary rather than confrontational.

The movement began in 2004 with The Clergy Letter, a two-paragraph testament articulating the fact that Christians can embrace evolution and calling for the teaching of evolution in public schools. The Clergy Letter makes these points absolutely unambiguously:

Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts. . . . We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

The Clergy Letter, signed by almost 12,000 Christian clergy in the United States, has been renamed The Christian Clergy Letter because it has been joined by two additional Letters: a Unitarian Universalist Clergy Letter (with more than 200 signatures); and a Clergy Letter from American Rabbis (with more than 450 signatures).

These forward-looking clergy haven't stopped there, however. They've invited religious leaders from all religions and all corners of the world to come together to celebrate Evolution Weekend, an annual international event that takes place in local congregations in all corners of the world, designed to significantly elevate the quality of the discussion about the nature of religion and science.

While sound bites can be clever and catchy, they don't encourage thought and learning. Coming to grips with complex issues requires more time, more reflection, and more dialogue. And that's exactly why Evolution Weekend was created. Clergy deliver sermons, lead discussions and host speakers, among other activities, and parishioners all over the world engage in meaningful discourse. February 12-14, 2010 will be the fifth anniversary of Evolution Weekend, an event that has expanded by 30% each year and has seen participation from 19 different countries.

With favorable stories about Evolution Weekend 2009 appearing across the media, from NPR to Fox News, it is fair to say that a successful movement is being created. That movement now extends beyond clergy to include the world's scientific community.

When the National Academy of Sciences released its book (*Science, Evolution and Creationism*) defending evolution and explaining why it's imperative that it be taught in science classes at all levels, for example, it pointed to The Clergy Letter as evidence that teaching evolution needn't be a controversial topic.

And, when The Clergy Letter Project created a list of scientific consultants, experts willing to answer questions posed by clerical colleagues, more than 650 scientists representing every state and 29 countries quickly enrolled.

With clergy members and scientists banding together to proclaim that their fields have much to teach us about the world and the people in it, with both groups demonstrating they can work collaboratively, there's now hope that we can put the divisiveness that has been the hallmark of this struggle behind us. We can look to a future in which it's no longer controversial to teach our children the best science has to offer. We can create a future in which experts in different fields respect one another and the ideas each has to offer.

You can join this growing, exciting movement. Participate in Evolution Weekend in a way that is comfortable for you and elect to celebrate how various modes of inquiry can enrich our lives. If you're a clergy member, add your signature to one of The Clergy Letters (www.theclergyletterproject.org), and if you're a scientist join the list of scientific consultants. **4R**

Michael Zimmerman is founder and director of The Clergy Letter Project.