
The purpose of the 2021 short film *Virginia’s Calling* is to encourage a productive conservation among American conservative evangelicals regarding the topic of anthropogenic climate change. The intention is most timely (if not past due) as conservative evangelicals are widely known to oppose environmental protection initiatives including human caused global warming (see e.g., Pogue 2022; Veldman 2019; McCammack 2007: 645–68). This community should be understood as a multi-million member, virtually all-white, demographic of American Christians who interpret the Bible as the literal word of God and make up the social/political movement commonly known as the religious right.

*Virginia’s Calling* begins by focusing on the background of homemaker Virginia Wasserberg of Virginia Beach, Virginia, whose existence revolves around her Christian faith, and her two young children and husband. Her life comes crashing down in October 2016 when Hurricane Matthew causes the first floor of her home to flood.

The flooding of the house quite literally destroys Virginia’s perspective of life, challenges her faith, and drives her to contemplate suicide. However, her brother convinces her that the hardship is a test from God and that she must learn from it and take action. Her spirits are lifted as she educates herself on the drainage infrastructure of her town and how anthropogenic climate change played a role in the disaster. After adopting this new perspective, she works to convince others that global warming is a real threat and that together they must find solutions. Her strategy to persuade includes the use of social media and organizing educational events for the public.

A central strength of the film is that it urges audience members to question what they, as individuals, care about in contrast to their wider community and the world. This very question is at the heart of most environmental issues including global warming and it becomes the foundational struggle for Virginia as she tries to make sense of events. Before the flood, Virginia seems to only care about herself and her immediate personal relationships. She states that before the hurricane, she ‘could have cared less about climate change’ and that, amongst her wider religious community, climate change is dismissed as a fake ‘political angle’ (17:55). It is only after her first-floor floods that she realizes the need to care about the environment. As she later states, ‘water is coming into my house… it does matter!’ (18:47). It is only though this personal hardship that she becomes an advocate to protect her family and ‘stop it from happening.
again’ (18:27). Personal hardships are so alien to Virginia that the flood causes her to truly question her faith for the first time and she yells at God, ‘Why did you do this to me?’ (0:46). The issue of only caring about herself is also reflected in her relationship to God, as before the hurricane she was under the impression there was no need to care about problems that face other people because God would keep her safe. At one point she reasons that studying the Bible and strengthening her faith should have saved her home and when it does not, she wonders, ‘What have I been doing all that (studying) for?’ (11:51). Such perspectives will likely give a dim view of Virginia, while encouraging viewers to ask of themselves, to what extent do I care about issues beyond myself?

Virginia’s somewhat selfish outlook is certainly not unique and is reflected in our wider society such as at election times when the economy is consistently the number one issue while environmental protection struggles to rank in the top five. Pondering what personally benefits the individual in contrast to what benefits the wider community and/or non-human nature, is a foundational environmental question and Virginia’s Calling underscores this very issue throughout the film.

Another strength of the film, and one that could have been further expanded, is the theological reasoning about why white conservative evangelicals should support nature protection initiatives including climate change. Toward the end of the film, Virginia explains her faith-based understanding of caring for the earth, which is commonly referred to as ‘stewardship’. Stewardship is traditionally used to encourage Christians at the grassroots or congregant level to invest money and time into the upkeep of their church building, grounds, and community in general. The same idea was utilized in the 1970s to support caring for God’s earth because it was created and is perpetually owned by God. Humans, on the other hand, are only the caretakers or custodians. Such ideas were offered by white conservative evangelicals such as prolific writer Francis A. Schaeffer in his book Pollution and the Death of Man published in 1970. This theological reasoning is an extremely important perspective and has proven to convince at least some in the community to support the eco-friendly efforts of organizations like the Evangelical Environmental Network (founded in 1993). For the purpose of this film, stewardship could have been extended or even have taken a central role. After all, conservative evangelicals pride themselves on interpreting the Bible literally and try to make life decisions based on that approach.

Overall, the film should effectively encourage conversations about the environment within and beyond the white conservative evangelical community. By realizing that climate change can impact the individual, as it does with Virginia, perhaps more support for the environment will grow amongst the community and abet the efforts of groups like the Evangelical Environmental Network. The producers of the film hope for such an outcome and have provided a helpful website with resources including group discussion questions for viewers (see https://www.virginiascalling.org/get-involved/). Global warming is indeed impacting everyone and the faster we accept this fact, the quicker we can find solutions. Virginia’s Calling is a welcome addition to the growing call amongst the wider American populace that asks white conservative evangelicals to help in the effort to save people like Virginia and also the earth.
References


Neall Pogue
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies
The University of Texas at Dallas
Neall.Pogue@utdallas.edu