

How Many Christians does it take to change a planet?

or Why climate change is an opportunity for the Church

Synopsis of a talk by **David Hughes, National Co-ordinator for Eco-congregation**, to the Manchester and North Cheshire Circle on 2nd. November 2009. Eco-congregation is a partnership organisation within Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CCTBI); and, as such, offers a scheme for individual churches to develop a Christian environmental ministry. At The Newman Association's 2004 Hereford Belmont Conference 'Faith and the Environmental Imperative: responding to *The Call of Creation*', the then Assistant General Secretary to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Fr. Frank Turner S.J. said: "We are signed up to the Eco-congregation document, but frankly we are behind other churches..." By this talk, one Newman Circle offers an opportunity to learn more. Ed.

We live on a beautiful planet, but it is under threat from unprecedentedly rapid climate change. It is generally accepted that climate change is happening; that it is human induced and that a rise in the average global temperature of 2°C since the start of the industrial revolution is the maximum safe limit (the rise is currently 0.75°C). To this end, it is also regarded as essential that we should aim for carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere at 350 parts per million (ppm). They were 275ppm at the start of the industrial revolution and are currently 385ppm. Accordingly, we have a limited time to reverse the trend before some catastrophic tipping point occurs. Potential tipping points include Ice cap melting, the Amazon forest burning, permafrost melting, methane hydrate melting or ocean current disruption. We do not know when these tipping points will come but we can be sure their impact will be serious. We are already experiencing the impact of climate change in extreme weather events, sea level rise, flood and drought, species extinction, and environmental migration.

What can mankind do? Governments are working towards a target of cutting our CO₂ emissions by 80% by 2050. This can only be achieved if there are NO internal combustion engines powered by fossil fuels with all our power comes from low/zero carbon sources i.e. renewables, nuclear or carbon capture power stations. Why bother? I'm all right, Jack. The Mediterranean will come to Manchester, Bristol will be by the sea and Blackpool could take over from Ibiza as the hot destination for summer clubbing.

Actually Britain will generally be warmer and become one of the pleasantest climates in Europe. But it isn't fair. The price of our excessive emissions is paid by the world's poorest. 30 % of the most productive land in Bangladesh will be lost to rising sea levels by 2030. By 7th Jan we have used as much energy as an average Kenyan uses in a whole year. The average Brit needs 3 planets worth of resources but we only have one planet.

As a result of global warming "...approximately 40-50% of Earth's ice-free land surface has been heavily transformed or degraded by anthropogenic activities, 66% of marine fisheries are either overexploited or at their limit, atmospheric CO₂ has increased more than 30% since the advent of industrialization, and nearly 25% of Earth's bird species have gone extinct in the last two thousand years."

The Christian Response

So what is the Christian response? First it is a spiritual and moral crisis. It stems from a wrong view of dominion – as our right to exploit the earth for our benefit. Whereas the Christ centred view of dominion is one of service. We are given the earth into our care to steward. Our attitude to climate is one aspect of the wider problem of growth. We seek to use ever more of the world's resources to support unsustainable lifestyles. Lord May, the government chief scientist from 1995 to 2000 said "A supernatural punisher maybe part of the solution." And maybe Isaiah would have agreed:

The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The Lord has spoken this word. The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish. The earth is defiled by its people. They have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenants. Therefore a curse consumes the earth. Its people must bear their guilt. Isaiah 24.3

But actually the bible gives a more balanced view . See what Ezekiel says:

On the day I cleanse you from all your sins. I will resettle your towns and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated... This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden. Ezekiel 36:33

In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* Pope Benedict said:

- “The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.”
- “Human beings legitimately exercise a responsible stewardship over nature, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population.”
- “What is needed is an effective shift in mentality, which can lead to the adoption of new life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments.”

Here are a few bible verses to justify a more responsible attitude towards creation

- God made it Genesis 1
- God loves it Genesis 1:31
- God sustains it Psalm 104:27
- God made us responsible for it Genesis 1:28
- Jesus died to redeem it Colossians 1:15
- God will hold us accountable for it Revelations 11:18

What should Christians DO? We are called to love God, which means caring for his creation but we are also told to love our neighbour which means looking after her environment. So what is the opportunity for churches? We bring a different motivation to the environmental movement. We have an absolute God given duty of care which goes beyond caring for the future of our children or the needs of the developing world. The environmental issue is a great opportunity for us to demonstrate the essential unity that binds us together rather than the range of secondary issues which so often divide us. The secular world looks to religion for answers when it is desperate. In his recent Operation Noah lecture in Southwark Cathedral on 13th. October 2009, The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said:

“The potential of the crisis [is]to awaken a new confidence in local and civic democracy [and] ... a new sense of what is politically possible for people who thought they were powerless”

This is our opportunity to make the second sentence of the Lord's Prayer come true by living as though we are in heaven now. “Your Kingdom come, your will be done ON EARTH as in heaven.” The environment is a huge opportunity to engage with an issue which is of real concern to the rest of the communities we live amongst.

The Eco-Congregation Scheme

Eco-congregation is an ecumenical response to the global environmental crisis. It is a national project run by A Rocha and supported by all the main churches, to encourage churches to take care of creation seriously. We provide a toolkit with resources, support, an award scheme and a website. In 13 modules the award covers three main areas of church life

- **GROWING IN FAITH AND UNDERSTANDING**
- **PUTTING GOD'S HOUSE IN GREEN ORDER**
- **CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING COMMUNITIES**

How does it work? The church undertakes a check-up and identifies actions it wants to carry out to improve its environmental impact and message. Once it can demonstrate that there is a plan and the commitment to carry it through two independent assessors visit and make the award. Nearly 2,000 Churches are active & involved and we have made 160 awards so far. I would encourage you to apply for the Award or at the very least have a look at the website to find out more about the issues and what you can do about them. See www.ew.ecocongregation.org

Recently, I have had the honour to be one of two Assessors for the Eco-congregation Award Scheme in two local Churches in Herefordshire. On both occasions, it has been clear that participation in the scheme has been a great help and inspiration to those involved. Newman Association members may, therefore, wish to explore this scheme further.

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