

Any Earthly use? Can the church make an effective response to climate change?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world is now waking up, albeit very belatedly, to the fact that we are in an unfolding climate crisis. In the last few weeks, a spate of extreme weather events worldwide and the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have seen to that¹. According to their latest analysis we have only 10 years to cut global greenhouse gas emissions by 40% or face runaway climate change, with large parts of the world becoming uninhabitable within the next few decades.

This is an emergency. We cannot avoid further damage whatever we do; and even if the world did all the right things tomorrow, the damage would still get worse before it got better, because of the planetary scale, systemic changes humans have set in motion.

¹ See IPCC's 6th Assessment Report on Climate Change: the Physical Science Basis, August 2021 at <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>

The two big question communities, organisations, citizens, leaders now all must face is:

- What must we do to limit the level of climate change to the smallest now possible?
- And how do we endure even that, protecting people, our economies, nature and everything else that is affected.

These are questions which the churches and Christians within the churches, must urgently face - just like any other section of society and individual who wishes to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly (to quote the Prophet Micah) in order to secure a future that the younger generation might even survive, never mind prosper in.

But if this sounds serious, and it is, the churches have the potential to bring great and very practical hope in this crisis. And that is what I want to explore tonight.

And that is what a Rocha UK wants to see happen: *our mission is to equip Christians and Churches to care for the environment.*

And we want this, not just because we are passionate lovers of God's creation - nature and people. But also because we believe in the role, power and purpose of God's church, and want to see it thrive.

- To me this is personal. I am not an ordained clergyman. I'm an economic geographer who has worked all my life so far mobilising people around issues of international social justice - from human

rights abuses, to unpayable debt, and now to the climate and nature crises. But I have grown up in the church. Not only was my Grandfather an anglican minister, but my father was a missionary, then a vicar back in the UK, then my mother got ordained too. And, then, just when I thought the genes had run out with me, my son, and now my wife have got ordained. Can you imagine my life!?

I hope I have some understanding of the church itself, in the broadest sense. I have huge respect for those who lead churches, local or national.

So what I want to address tonight are three main questions:

- Why should the church act on climate change?
- What's the potential for the churches to make a difference? (and what is the current state of play)
- And what can the churches most usefully do right now, in the run up to COP26.

2. Why should the churches act on climate change?

In summary, I would say we have a double Biblical mandate to do so.

First, the bible is very clear - from the first book, Genesis, onwards - that God created the Earth and everything in it, he loves it, and gives us the honour and responsibility to love it too. So, we have a responsibility as Christians, to care for God's creation - and the climate system is a fundamental, life-giving part of that.

Secondly, we're commanded to 'love our neighbour' aren't we - defined as the poor, the vulnerable, the person in need. That, of course, is the point of Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 which we heard earlier.

And what we now know is that global heating, driven by human action, is already drastically harming millions of people world wide. The deadly power of global heating, which is now disrupting the climate on a planetary scale, is manifested in an array of phenomena: from much more intense droughts, storms, floods, fire season etc.

- So low lying countries and regions now face certain swamping by a degree of sea level rise;
- Mountain regions face the drying of their water supplies as the glaciers melt completely away.
- Already arid regions like the African Sahel and much of Australia are enroute to become impossible for agriculture

And always, the poor in every society are least able to afford to move, to get insurance, to buy food at vastly inflated prices when national crops fail etc.

To put it another way, climate change is massively undermining the livelihoods of our global and now even some local neighbours, and taking lives. Out of love for our neighbour, therefore, we must address climate change.

So, we have a double Biblical mandate.

I would also say that we have a strong civic responsibility, just like everyone else, to act for the common good in society, not just our individual interests.

So, let me turn to what the churches can contribute to the fight against climate change

3. What's the potential for the churches to make a difference? (and what is the current state of play)

I suggest, if we look at what is needed right now, that the churches could make the world of difference, because we have – despite how weak and financially stretched – got incredibly earthly, as well as heavenly, resources - huge assets of a hard and soft kind - that we can direct to this problem. This applies internationally, but just to illustrate it tonight, I'll focus largely on the UK. So, let's look at some of those assets:

3.1 First **Numbers and geographical spread**: There are around 50,000 place-based worshipping christian communities in the UK. These are present in almost every village, town, city neighbourhood.

- *Imagine if even just a quarter of Churches of the UK became beacons of good practice on tackling climate change in the local community and adding their voice to national campaigns. The practical difference and influence that would have.*

What might that involve?

3.2 Second, **buildings**: Not all churches and worshipping communities have buildings, but still most do. Not only are these sources of greenhouse gas emissions - which can and must therefore be cut, if we put our mind to it - but they are also potentially convening places for others in the community seeking safe and welcoming ground to brainstorm options for the whole community, coordinate action etc.

3.3 Thirdly, there is **land**: There are thousands of churchyards in the country. While individually they may be small parcels, they add up to considerable land which, if managed consciously, could make a contribution to cutting carbon in the mid term, by everything from changing mowing regimes to planting a few more trees. But go beyond churchyards, to assess the land that is in the hands of the other Church and Christian institutions and organisations, and the acreage goes up and up.

- The Anglican Church commissioners alone have more than 100,000 acres of land.
- There are also in the high dozens of Christian conference centres, retreat centres, communities etc across Britain, many set in wonderful grounds or in working farms etc.
 - A Rocha has formed a fast growing network of these, with the specific aim of managing our collective land for climate and biodiversity, as well as increasing the public's access to thriving nature.

To avoid catastrophic climate change, there is no alternative but to get off fossil fuel very very fast. However, so called Nature Based Solutions to climate change, such as rewetting wetlands, changing farming regimes so that soil holds more carbon, reforestation etc can and must make a major contribution in the long run. Land is a foundation for such solutions: and the Churches and Christian organisations have a large amount of it.

What if they coordinated and collaborated to maximise the impact of their land for cutting carbon?

3.4 Fourthly, there are **numbers**: Although the number of regular church goers is falling, the absolute numbers are still significant enough to make a big difference to our agenda. There are still over 3 million people in the UK regularly attending church – around 5% of the population.

- *Imagine if even a quarter of these began to take the environment seriously at home and the workplace, and to ask their church leaders to act in the Church.*

3.5 Financial clout of the denominations themselves – investments, pension funds etc., that could be divested from fossil fuel and invested instead in green tech, land restoration etc.

- I'll come back to this when I look at what churches are actually doing.

3.6 Influence on public and political debate: With so many Christians at grass roots level, as well as in public positions, we are in a strong position to shape public and political debate around climate change IF we choose to and organise ourselves accordingly. The Anglican Church even has 26 Bishops in the upper house of our legislature, the Lords Spiritual as they are called. What other segment of society is currently guaranteed such high level representation?

- I'm pleased, and as a church member, proud to say that many of our Bishops have been speaking out for some years on this issue in the Lords, and I'm sure their voices will become even more insistent in the future.

3.7 International body and communication networks. Global heating, causing climate change, is, par excellence, the global problem with local

impacts. The worldwide church is in a unique position to learn within itself, to exchange information and stories in impacts and on solutions, as well as to bring them to the attention of the wider public and policy makers as part of the urgent imperative of influencing public and political debate on this issue.

- My own experience: Hurricane Mitch 1998 -- big influence on my policy team at Tearfund, setting up the Climate and Development programme there - bringing evidence and stories to a supporter base among the British public, getting media attention, attempting to influence policy on the basis of what we were leaning on the ground.

3.8. Spiritual and emotional resilience - the power of prayer, God-given perseverance, hope – when we are tempted to despair. Pastoral care - climate grief.

- If you are interested, A Rocha recently coordinated a pack of resources to help churches engage in this area, available on the Climate Sunday website.

I'm going to draw this section on the potential to a close. But I'm sure we could add other assets of the churches to this, nationally or locally? What other sector of British civil society has such a diversity and wealth of assets which it could deploy on this problem. I can think of none.

4. Where are churches and denominations now?

So, before I look at how we make the most of this special year, when the UK is hosting the COP26 climate negotiations, let me give a very partial view of some of the things that the churches, in different forms, are already doing. We are absolutely not starting from scratch here. Not only have there been many working on environmental matters within the churches for decades - I'm sure many of you here - but I would say that over the last few years we have seen a rapid acceleration of action and commitment. Let me give a few examples from what I know about at A Rocha.

4.1 Local churches/Eco Church: A Rocha runs the Eco Church scheme and community, helping churches in England and Wales address the gamut of environmental issues, from climate change to biodiversity, practically and theologically.

- This scheme was founded on a predecessor which had begun forging the path.

But since we launched Eco Church in 2016, we have now had more than 3,500 churches registered, and we have given over 1,200 awards. This includes more than 20 Gold awards - extremely difficult to achieve.

- It's extremely impressive, and an excellent example to others, that Salisbury cathedral recently obtained Gold! There are now denominations area schemes too - like Eco Diocese, Eco District for the Methodists, Eco Synod for the URC etc

4.2 Sister schemes such as Eco Congregation Scotland and Ireland, and Live Simply (run for the Catholic Church) are also recording significant new

interest and we are approaching having a combined participation of 5,000 churches. That is very significant.

4.3 Land managers. A Rocha also facilitates the network of Christian land managers - conference centres, retreat centres with land, known as our partners in action scheme. This has doubled in size in the last two years, to now more than 20 Christian land-managing organisations (from Lee Abbey in Devon to Scargill in Yorkshire). We have a waiting list to join which is now expanding faster than we can assess and bring new partners in. Our goal is for this group to bring at least 25,000 acres of land into play for cutting carbon and increasing biodiversity in the next 5 years.

So, the evidence is there from where I stand, of a growing grass roots Christian willingness to take much more action, and to do it together learning from each other - which I think will be essential for achieving the maximum speed and scale of change, which the climate emergency demands of us.

4.4 Denominational ghg emission cuts targets: And of course, at denominational level we are seeing big change, even if it is not as fast as many of us would like. For example:

- **A number of denominations have committed to Net Zero Targets:**
 - Church of England - 2030 target (excluding the investment portfolios of the National Investing Bodies, which are still 2050 target).

- The Commissioners announced its goal to reduce the carbon intensity of its investment portfolio by 25% by 2025 in April 2021.
- Church of Scotland - 2030 target
- Church in Wales - 2030 target

- **A much smaller number have so far committed to divestment from fossil fuel, but pressure for that will, i believe, become irresistible**

Church of Scotland - divestment announcement May 21

Church of England - policy of engagement

Let me move towards a close now by looking at what churches can best do this year.

5. What can churches best do now?

With COP 26 in this country, there is an urgent need for the church to use all its collective influence to shape the public and political debate and commitment to much greater ambition from our government - both on domestic policy and in what it seeks to achieve from COP26.

But COP 26 also provides a unique opportunity to help raise the profile of climate change with British churches and encourage them to commit to ongoing action: however good the outcome of COP in policy terms (and it

may not be good) all sections of society will still need to take significant practical action, and maintain that socially over the decade to come.

So, that is why the Churches Environmental Issues Network, which I co-chair, has put together the Climate Sunday initiative. This is now a coalition of more than 30 denominations and Christian Charities. We are calling on all churches to do three things (and the excellent website, climate.sunday.org provides some rich resources to help in this); three things:

First: to **hold a climate focused service** of worship, to pray, understand the theology and the science - and do this before COP26

Second: there or soon after, **make a commitment** as a church to ongoing practical action eg join EC or EC S; or if already a member, commit to getting to the next award level within a clear time frame

Thirdly: **speak up**, join others in asking the government to move much more and faster on this. We recommend that a good starting place for this is for churches to sign the Time is Now declaration via the website, which calls on the government to :

- o put the UK back on track to reach our own short term climate targets and
- o invest Covid recovery funds in a fair transition to low-carbon, high-nature economy – not on prolonging the old environmentally damaging economy.

Last weekend we held a Nations' Climate Sunday service in Glasgow cathedral. By then,

- Almost 2,000 local climate Sunday services have been registered on our website including by a number of cathedrals; we know that many many more are planned - including at York Minster.
- We know that more than 300 churches have signed the Time is Now declaration via our website and many more have probably done so through other links.
- We are still collecting data, but we believe that hundreds of churches have made commitments to ongoing action.

So, with the 7 weeks that remain before COP, the best thing we think any church can do, if it has not done so, is hold a Climate Sunday service, make that commitment, sign the Time is now and register all that on the website. That not only helps influence the government before COP, but also puts churches on a track to keep taking action, and enables us and our sister organisations like Eco Congregation Scotland, Ireland etc, to support them in doing so, so that we do learn together and advance faster together.

6. Conclusion

- Climate Change is an unfolding catastrophe.

- It's a global justice issue with horrendous local implications, now and for future generations.
- Society needs governments to treat this as the emergency it is - not just to declare a climate emergency, which is nothing more than words if that is all that happens - but to take bold and urgent action.
- The churches and Christians have a double biblical mandate to act.
- Fortunately, by God's providence, we also have immense resources to contribute.
- Making the most of these will require leadership from Church leaders, pressure from the church grass roots, and an enhanced spirit of collaboration, humility, ability to learn from each other, not just between the denominations, but between the Christian charities who need to overcome their competitive instincts and learn to work together like never before.
- **Climate Sunday suggests that is possible. But it must now become the norm, not just this year of COP but for the critical decade ahead.**

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