

WHAT ON EARTH HAS THE ENVIRONMENT GOT TO DO WITH THE CHURCH?

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REVD DR DAVID PICKERING is Co-ordinator of Eco-Congregation a partnership venture between Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and ENCAMS (www.encams.org/ecocongregation), an environmental charity who run the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign. He studied environmental science prior serving the United Reformed Church as a minister.

WHILST SITTING ON A STATIONARY AND VERY DELAYED TRAIN A FELLOW PASSENGER, WHO WAS WEARING A LARGE CROSS AND WHO COULD SEE THE SUBJECT OF MY WORK, LEANED OVER OUR SHARED TABLE AND ASKED, "WHAT ON EARTH HAS THE ENVIRONMENT GOT TO DO WITH THE CHURCH?" The question that she asked is pertinent. Many in the church categorise environmental issues as the preserve of civil society – they do their bit at such places as the recycling bank, or put the environment on the busy church agenda along with a range of issues competing for their attention. However, it is increasingly recognised that good stewardship of the environment or creation care is a core part of discipleship; it is undertaken as part of a Christian response to the God of creation, rather than as an optional extra within church life. Churches also report that environmental initiatives are an effective mechanism for Christian mission because they can help the church engage with society on what is arguably one of the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century. I hope that the following Christian perspectives on the environment together with practical stories from churches that have woven creation care into their life provide food for thought for both my fellow train passenger and all pilgrims.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Passengers on planet earth are increasingly aware of the degradation of the environment by human activity and its effects on society. Some are concerned about local environmental quality – the air pollution caused by road congestion has economic costs and is associated with the rapid rise in childhood asthma and a significant number of early bronchial related deaths. Others are concerned with worldwide issues such as global warming, causing climate change, which leads to hotter, wetter and stormier conditions in many temperate areas such as the UK, and a reduction of rainfall in some semi-arid areas. As a consequence, all low-lying areas are increasingly vulnerable to inland floods and coastal inundation, and some drier regions to drought, each with high human, environmental and economic costs.

SOME FAITH PERSPECTIVES

Whilst the word "environment" is not found in the Bible – the importance of environmental care is implicit in many texts. Genesis 1–2 records two different creation stories, each of which set out aspects of a proper relationship between God, humanity and the rest of the created order.

In any society there are different perspectives and a good society brings these into some public arena where they can be explored and negotiated.

Rather than being an ordered or scientific account of the origins of the cosmos the story of creation in six days conveys the message that everything is dependent for its existence and meaning upon the sovereign God. The culmination of creation, with the Sabbath as a day of rest and celebration, reminds us that worship is the first response to God the creator. Christian environmental care should naturally flow from this. The creation story includes a refrain “and God saw that it was good”, which indicates that creation does not exist just for what humanity can get out of it, but has value in God’s eyes. The refrain reminds humanity that the whole created order is to be respected with integrity rather than relentlessly exploited.

The creation of humanity “in the image” reflects the privilege and responsibility we are given. It is a privilege to enjoy the gift of creation and a responsibility for those made in the image of God to live according to his teaching.

The next story, sometimes known as the “garden” story, tells of the creation of man and woman in the Garden of Eden, and includes in Genesis 2.15 the command to “tend and care” for the garden. This simple instruction portrays a living, loving relationship with the soil, from which we came and to which we will return. The garden story also gives an insight into the consequence of humanity refusing to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. It is notable that the move from a state of harmony in creation to the Fall is symbolised by an act of environmental disobedience.

Other parts of Scripture build on this foundation. The first covenant in Genesis is made by God to “Noah and all living creatures”, not just humanity, and includes an environmental promise: never again will God destroy creation by flood. Creation care is part of teaching from God in the Torah, where, for example, every seventh year the land is permitted to rest, not only to allow the poor to glean from the fields but also to let the land to rest from production (Lev. 25.1–7).

The Psalms add to the picture of a proper relationship between God, humanity and the rest of creation. Psalm 24 opens with the ascription, “The earth belongs to the Lord”. Alongside the image of the earth floating on the depths and anchored by God’s subduing of the powers of chaos is the affirmation that the earth belongs to God rather than humankind. The passage came to life for me on a family holiday to the Hebridean Isle of Colonsay. On arriving at the self-catering cottage we had booked, we found a welcome note which included

an invitation to enjoy the house and the island, and a request to leave both in the state that we found them for the next holidaymakers. We had the privilege to enjoy and the responsibility to care for both of them.

The centrality of Christ in creation is made clear in the New Testament where John’s Gospel, reflecting the opening words of Genesis, reveals that not only God but also the Word was present at the beginning in creation. Jesus revealed his mastery of creation by calming the storm on Galilee. His actions demonstrated that an appropriate motivation to subdue creation was the well-being of his friends; it was not about self-gain. It is a theme that Paul picks up in Colossians 1.15 where Christ is portrayed as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation”.

From early times theologians have explored the relationship between God, humanity and the rest of creation. The creeds set out core Christian beliefs, including an understanding of the relationship between God and the created order. The Apostles Creed states, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth”, and the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.”

The above, whilst necessarily a brief overview of some texts and thinking, reveals the centrality of creation within Christianity. However, the church has not always practised what it is called to preach. Thankfully, there is currently a growing interest in environmental issues within church life. Some contemporary Christian environmental organisations include: A Rocha (an international conservation organisation working to show God’s love for all creation, www.arocha.org); Christian Ecology Link (a membership organisation for those who wish to demonstrate care for God’s creation, www.christian-ecology.org.uk); The John Ray Initiative (an educational charity with a vision to bring together scientific and Christian understandings of the environment in a way that can be widely communicated and lead to effective action, www.jri.org.uk); the Church of Scotland’s Society, Religion and Technology Project (SRTTP aims to promote an understanding of key issues, including environmental, that confront society as new technologies emerge and develop, www.srtp.org.uk); and Eco-Congregation (an environmental resource for churches to help them green their life and mission, www.encams.org/ecocongregation).

Churches that undertake an environmental ministry often discover that it makes a significant contribution to their mission, helping them to witness to and engage with their local community.

► The following practical stories come from churches that have drawn on the support of Eco-Congregation to integrate creation care in their church life.

STORIES FROM LOCAL CHURCHES

The Christchurch Baptist/Methodist Local Ecumenical Partnership in Leicester chose to kick-start their environmental mission with a church outing to a local environmental centre. Members found out about a number of environmental issues and how they could tread more lightly on the earth as individuals. The outing also gave the church an impetus to plan follow-up activities, including a recycling scheme and tree planting. The latter began with an expedition to collect local seeds, including conkers and acorns. These were sown, nurtured as saplings and then planted in a nature reserve.

Dorking Society of Friends focused their environmental ministry by undertaking a comprehensive environmental audit of their premises and activities. This helped them identify their priorities and develop an action plan. Subsequently, they have switched to a green electricity supplier, initiated recycling of various items, improved energy conservation through the installation of draft excluders and promoted their environmental concerns to all building users via a room-booking sheet.

All Saint's Church in West Bromwich ensure that environmental issues form a central part of their church life through an annual Green Sunday and an "eau-de-nil" or light green Sunday! They are currently planning a wildlife walk through their churchyard.

St Osmund's Church in Derby, organise an annual community litter pick in their neighbourhood and the church has developed some creation-care liturgies and Zion United Reformed Church, Northallerton, undertook some practical conservation work in their community, including planting trees at a local sports ground.

Each of these churches gained the Eco-Congregation Award in recognition of their environmental ministry in the three key areas:

Spiritual – incorporating environmental issues in their worship life.

Practical – undertaking some tangible projects in their church or churchyard.

Community – working with or through their local community.

Feedback from participating churches reveals that their environmental ministry was stimulating and enjoyable,

and when affirmed by the Eco-Congregation Award, enhanced their profile in their community. John Parker, a Zion URC minister, commented, "along with our social outreach, our environmental mission has been good for the church. It has helped to bring us together as a family and grow as a family and has been heartening, inspiring and enjoyable."

ENVIRONMENT AND CHURCH MISSION

Churches that undertake an environmental ministry often discover that it makes a significant contribution to their mission, helping them to witness to and engage with their local community. Justin Dunne, who was a minister at Wakefield Baptist Church during the pilot of Eco-Congregation, identified that their environmental mission made a key contribution to seven parts of their church life:

1. Aiding *evangelism* by giving new opportunities to convey the good news about Jesus Christ and the kingdom values he calls us to follow.
2. Creating a positive *image* of the church in their community.
3. Inviting friends and members of the community to activities provided a forum for the *sharing of faith*.
4. Promoting *good stewardship* resulting in a reduction in the use of consumables and saving financial resources.
5. Creating a *better environment*, with tangible benefits to the local community.
6. *Releasing gifts*, with members finding that their environmental concerns and gifts were valued by the church.
7. Becoming a more *authentic church* – fulfilling its calling, building fellowship, and in worship listening to and responding to God's word in the light of new situations.

SO WHAT ON EARTH HAS THE ENVIRONMENT GOT TO DO WITH THE CHURCH?

As individuals we are aware of the detrimental impact that human activities are having on the environment and the serious consequences for current and future generations. As churches we perceive that caring for God's gift of creation is an intrinsic part of Christian discipleship and mission, and by putting our beliefs into practice, we can discover new and relevant ways of witnessing to God's purpose. It is food for thought for any passenger, whether on a delayed train or spaceship planet earth. ■