

Nature and the Church



Nature celebrated in stained glass at St Mary's Church, Pennard, on the Gower Peninsula. Photo: Sarah Leedham

Can churches be said to be 'friends of the earth'? **Andy Atkins**, A Rocha's CEO, looks at the Church's response to environmental issues and its potential for transformative change.

The environment is in crisis worldwide – from species loss to air pollution, from soil erosion to climate change. Avoiding catastrophe will involve much greater action by governments and all sections of society – including Christians and churches.

Fortunately, caring for creation has deep biblical foundations. A canter through the Bible shows us that God created nature, he loves it, and he wants us to love it and care for it too. Destruction happens because of humanity's selfishness, but Jesus came to reconcile all of creation to God through his death and resurrection. That's the short version! (See page 13 for some deeper biblical reflections from Peter Harris.)

Lost and found

Theoretically, then, followers of Christ and our communities – churches – should be in the vanguard of those protecting the environment, modelling a life of harmony with nature. But the sad and humbling truth is different. Until relatively recently, the Church's behaviour has been a mirror of the rest of society's, not a prophetic voice within it – in practice, treating the 'environment' as an infinite resource for people and economies to exploit unchecked, of no value in its own right. During the last two centuries, the Church lost the plot on the environment.

Thankfully, it's finding it again. The last few decades have seen a significant reawakening to what being a follower of Christ means for our relationship with creation. As early as 1984, the global Anglican Communion included care for God's creation as its fifth 'Mark of Mission'. The Eastern Orthodox Church introduced a new season of 'Creationtide' in 1989, now also

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recognised by the Catholic Church and Church of England. And in the UK since 2000, the rising threat of climate change has spurred most historical denominations – Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, URC, Baptist, Church of Scotland, the Church in Wales – to develop policy positions recognising human and Christian responsibility to protect the environment and address climate change.

Policy is one thing, but practice is another. Bold statements at denominational level did not translate into wholesale action by local churches. Yet this too is now changing.

For example, since A Rocha UK launched the Eco Church programme in 2016, more than 1,500 churches in England and Wales across denominations have registered, and well over 400 have earned an award (see page 4). These range from rural St John's Church, Levens, in Cumbria, to suburban Nailsea Methodist Church, south of Bristol. More than 450 churches have joined Eco Congregation Scotland. The Catholic Church's 'Live Simply' programme is growing. These practical schemes are helping local churches move from policy and theology to practice, incorporating care for creation in their everyday mission activity. This wave of interest and action is to be celebrated and emulated.

Work in progress

Yet with more than 50,000 church communities in the UK, there is still a very long way to go before we can say that action on the environment as part of core mission is the 'norm' among UK churches. And among those responding to the environmental crisis, action on climate change predominates over action on the needs of biodiversity. Many Christians rightly see climate change as a threat to humans and a justice issue, but have not seen the value of non-human nature in God's eyes, even less how biodiversity loss and climate change are inseparable, or, as the science is increasingly showing, how biodiversity loss will impact humans. In February 2019, a UN report warned of dire consequences for global food production if the sharp decline of insect and other pollinator populations continues.¹

Signs of hope

Even so, the Church has the potential, in the UK and globally, to make a transformative difference to society's response to environmental crisis. We can already glimpse what a difference it can make when it raises its voice. In May 2015, Pope Francis published a major encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, a letter to all humanity subtitled 'On Care for our Common Home'. Its message echoed round the world: a call to care for all creation – including people, biodiversity, our life-giving climate system – and for radical action to head off environmental and human catastrophe.

The UN Paris climate summit which followed in December 2015 led more Christians than ever to raise their voices for change. A global inter-faith petition gathered almost 1.8 million signatures and the then UN climate chief, Christiana Figueres, acknowledged this action by faith groups as highly significant in helping to achieve the Paris Climate Agreement.

Post-Paris, many denominations are now challenging themselves to bolder action. For example, the Church of England and Methodists have recently put an end-point on their investment in oil and gas companies which do not have plans aligned with the Paris Agreement to keep global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees.

The task ahead

Never has it been more urgent for churches to fully grasp care for creation as part of their core mission, to turn policy and theology into daily practice. There are now ample schemes to help practically and locally. In the UK, the next two years will also see important opportunities for Christians to raise their collective voice for change whether, for example, to protect UK's nature when (assuming, at the time of writing, that we leave the EU) we leave the EU's environmental laws behind, or to seek more ambitious climate change targets at the 2020 UN climate conference – which may even take place in the UK.

God's creation now needs the Church to become an agent for transformation in society in relation to the environment. It's possible. Let's pray that it will be so.

Reference

¹United Nations FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, *State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture*, Rome, 2019.

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Gold-award-winning St John's Church, Levens, in Cumbria. Photo: Rich Bee