

'All creation groaning': A theological approach to climate change and development

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We believe in life before death

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Preface

The starting point of this report is the fact that climate change is above all a justice issue. The people who are already suffering most from global warming are those who have done the least to cause it, and have the least resources to do anything about it. So the basic question underlying the theological statements made here is not 'why should Christians care about the environment?' It is 'why do Christians care about injustice?'

The answer can be simply put. The gospels tell us not only of the coming of Jesus but also of his complete identity with the human condition, in particular his solidarity with the vulnerable, with those who suffer injustice. In the words of St Paul: 'He emptied himself taking the form of a slave' (Philippians 2.7). That solidarity is also reflected in Jesus' unambiguous command to care for those who are sick, hungry or thirsty, the strangers and the prisoners, because 'just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40).

In the light of our concern for justice, this report proposes a theological model based on relationships, set out above all in the New Testament, as a basis for taking action to try to limit the environmental catastrophe that threatens us. It also examines some of the recent approaches to climate change by Christian environmentalists and by the Churches.

Climate change is not mentioned in the Bible, nor has it so far been part of contemporary systematic theology. In formulating some of the theological principles that underlie Christian Aid's climate change work, I am not claiming that this is in any sense a final theological statement. It is rather a report on work in progress; our theoretical thinking will develop alongside our experience of the complexity of climate-related issues across the world.

The theologians who have inspired many of the ideas in this paper are all from the global North. This is something that will surely change in the future, but it must be remembered that for the poorest and most vulnerable countries, climate change is just one more thing they have to bear. To step back and reflect on its theological implications is therefore an impossible luxury for most.

I am most grateful to the very many people who have helped me formulate my ideas this far. They include participants in seminars and conferences in the UK, Europe and Africa, as well as friends and colleagues nearer to home. In particular, I have benefited from discussions at a Christian Aid seminar for scientists and theologians held at Christ Church, Oxford in June 2006, and from meetings of the World Council of Churches climate change working group in Nairobi in November 2006 and in London in April 2007. It goes without saying that any errors contained in this report are entirely my own.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:23-24)

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The injustice of climate change

‘My father rode a camel. I drive a car. My son flies a jet airplane. His son will ride a camel.’
Saudi saying¹

Introduction

There are two key reasons why the crisis of global warming is first and foremost a justice issue. The first is that the people who are most vulnerable to its effects are those who have done the least to cause it. Today, these are overwhelmingly the poorest people in the poorest countries – for example, nomadic herders in northern Kenya, who trek hundreds of miles in search of water, only to encounter danger and conflict when they find some. Further examples include poor farming families in Bangladesh, forced by rising sea levels to leave their homes for temporary and illegal camps on embankments, where they cannot earn a living; and poor rural communities in Central America, who live with increasingly frequent and intense hurricanes. None of these people have more than a minimal responsibility for the CO₂ emissions that have caused, and continue to exacerbate, the current crisis.²

We should not imagine that this injustice affects only poor people in poor countries. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, it was the poorest people who suffered the most. The Catholic Bishop of New Orleans described his visit to the worst-affected areas as an abrupt initiation into social justice issues, saying: ‘I was baptised in dirty water’. Nor will this

injustice end with the present generation: the next generations – our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren – will inherit an earth that is struggling for survival. Like today’s poor people, tomorrow’s children – both rich and poor – are at risk.

The second major reason for regarding climate change as a justice issue is that it comes at a time when the world’s richest nations have reached a peak of development, while the poorest are still struggling to get on to the development ladder.³ While it is well within the means of rich countries to maintain their current levels of economic activity while adapting to climate change, the picture is very different for poor countries.

It is imperative that the development of poor countries should continue, and it must be recognised that this will present a challenge to the global North – a challenge that is, at least in part, an ethical one. As Juan Mayr Maldonado of Colombia put it:

It is the right time to re-think the development model... to establish a new social contract that leads down the path of poverty reduction and greater equality to sustainable development. It’s also the right time to re-think the model of international aid. Without question, it’s about an ethical commitment that can be put off no longer.⁴

Heat, drought and deforestation in Senegal⁷

The village of Seroume in northern Senegal lies on the banks of the Senegal River, which forms the border with Mauritania. The region is part of the Sahel, a transition zone between the arid north and the tropical green forest that borders the maritime coast. It is an area of sparse savannah vegetation; it has only 100-500mm of rainfall per year and this is slowly decreasing. The 70-year-old village chief, **Abdoulaye Diack**, describes how human activity has intensified the harsh effects of nature:

‘There has been a huge change. Until 1970 we had a

really good life, with lots of forests and bushes and wild animals. My grandfather came here because of the proximity of water so he could cultivate the land. There was a lot of rain back then, the river was full of fish, and whatever you grew was successful. Then came the drought in the 1970s and desertification.

Desertification was caused by the drought, but also by human action. At the time of French colonisation it was forbidden to cut down trees, but after independence in 1960 the Senegalese government allowed it and the whole area became totally bare. Even worse, as woodcutters produced charcoal, it burnt and

damaged the soil, leaving it infertile. If you look at what’s happening in the world today, there is also a lot of industrial pollution. We now see the effects of ships transporting chemicals. And there is just one atmosphere that affects everyone.’

Abdoulaye’s daughter, **Mariam**, has similar memories: ‘When I was a little girl there were lots of trees and now we can no longer talk about a forest. It is also much hotter than before. The heat is unbearable. And I remember, the annual flooding of the river would reach 2km around the village, and because of that we could grow sorghum. Today it’s over. Instead, we get huge floods that bring lots

of rubbish and destroy the crops.’

Christian Aid partner Union pour la Solidarité et l’Entraide (USE) is working with the villagers, teaching them how to protect and replant trees. Besides providing fruit, the new forests will give some protection against the heat and the Saharan dust and sand storms. But while people in this vulnerable area are doing all they can to reverse the effects of local activities that have damaged their environment, they have done nothing to cause today’s dangerously high temperatures and can do little about other forms of environmental pollution that are affecting their region.

‘A theological approach to climate change must be rooted in the wider theology and ethics of development, rather than treated as an extension of Christian environmentalism.’

The 2006 *Stern* Review makes a similar point in economic terms:

The world does not need to choose between averting climate change and promoting growth and development. Changes in energy technologies and in the structure of economies have created opportunities to decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, ignoring climate change will eventually damage economic growth. Tackling climate change is the pro-growth strategy for the longer term, and it can be done in a way that does not cap the aspirations for growth of rich or poor countries⁵

However, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is less upbeat, referring in its May 2007 report to ‘multiple barriers’ that will have to be overcome if development is to be made more sustainable by changing development paths.⁶

Climate change impacts development programmes across the board, from disaster risk-reduction to food security and health. The injustice that has brought this about suggests that a theological approach to climate change must be rooted in the wider theology and ethics of development, rather than treated as an extension of Christian environmentalism.

A theological response

Over the last 20 years, poor countries have been adversely affected by major world issues, in particular the international debt crisis, unfair trade rules and the AIDS epidemic. In all these, the biblical basis for action is clear and its details will be familiar. The point of departure is the statement by Jesus in Luke 4, quoting Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.
(Luke 4:18-19)

This preferential option, or bias, to the poor is also the starting point for much of the thinking of liberation theologians. And the imperative for Christians to translate this

bias into practical care for the vulnerable, in particular those who have suffered injustice, is set out in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

While the duty to care for the weakest members of society – the ‘alien, the orphan and the widow’ (Deuteronomy 24:21) – is firmly established in Old Testament law, the ministry of Jesus establishes the restoration of justice as a key element of life in his kingdom. This hope for the future is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, not so much in its legal tenets as in the figure of the suffering servant in the second part of Isaiah, where we read of the servant who was ‘despised and rejected’ (Isaiah 53:3), ‘oppressed and afflicted’ (53:7), in short the servant who was in solidarity with the vulnerable, whose calling was to ‘faithfully bring forth justice’ (42:3). This is the same solidarity with the poor that is revealed in the ministry of Jesus, from his baptism, through his teaching and healing miracles, to his death on the cross.

However, the problem with this approach – which is thrown into sharp relief by the crisis of climate change – is that it assumes that the perpetrators of injustice will be led to change their ways. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann highlights this question when he asks ‘How can unjust people become just?’ This will be considered in more detail when we come to look at how some people have made a link between climate change and sinfulness. However, it is worth mentioning here Moltmann’s argument⁸, that the Old Testament ideal of establishing justice for people deprived of it, needs to be related to the Pauline idea of the justification⁹ of sinners (those who have acted unjustly towards others), since they both have the effect of revealing God’s mercy in the world.

It should be emphasised that with climate change it is not simply a question of acknowledging and addressing injustice – which is arguably the case with debt relief, where the crucial first step (though probably not the final one) is for rich countries to write off poor countries’ debts and therefore stop their demands for payment. Climate change makes a double demand on us: first to recognise the link between human-induced global warming and poverty; and secondly to formulate a just response. The first has been hindered for years by a reluctance to view climate change as a ‘people’ issue rather than a purely environmental one, while the second raises ethical issues that have barely begun to be considered. It is imperative that theology offers a framework in which both these aspects of injustice may be adequately

The distraction of environmentalism: moving beyond stewardship and dominion

‘Climate change is too important to be left to the environmentalists.’¹

Because climate change self-evidently has to do with the natural world, there is a tendency to look to the well-established Christian environmental movement for theological principles to contain it. Clearly, an approach to the climate crisis which calls for a just solution to an unjust problem is unlikely to sit comfortably in a framework that is geared more to conserving nature than to caring for people. But it is worth considering at this stage what environmentalists have had to say about global warming.

One initial problem is that environmentalism itself has not been given much attention by either Protestant or Catholic theologians. Indeed, it has often been regarded with a high degree of suspicion (see page 17). Where it is considered, it seems to be viewed as something of an add-on to the doctrine of creation. Perhaps for that reason, although there are now studies in creation theology that do have a New Testament basis, Christian environmental thinking is largely founded on a relatively few passages from the Old Testament, and lays a particular emphasis on human responsibility.

In the introduction to his excellent book *The Re-enchantment of Nature*, Alister McGrath draws attention to what he calls the ‘special status’ of nature.² He uses emotive terms such as ‘loss of respect’ and the ‘pillage’ of nature, and is critical of writers such as Lynn White who (not without reason) has blamed Christianity for promoting a view that nature exists to serve humankind.³ McGrath’s aim is to rescue environmentalism from some of the excesses of what he calls ‘highly eclectic, domesticated and sanitised versions of Eastern religions’ and to place ecological concerns firmly within Christianity. So what are the Christian environmentalists saying about nature, and how might this relate to climate change?

Nature reveals something of God

Genesis tells us that: ‘God saw everything that he had made and, indeed, it was very good’ (1:31). It is a very ancient part of Christian tradition that nature reveals something of God to humanity, in particular God’s goodness and beauty. Yet it is worth pointing out that this cannot happen without human beings: people are a constant presence, even if it is an unseen presence, in such theological statements about creation and the natural world. There is, for example, the idea conveyed above all in the Psalms, that nature reflects the glory and beauty of God. ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’ (Psalm 19). This beauty depends on human perception, and the Psalmist finds

emotions in nature itself that are human emotions. So in Psalm 104, which refers to the living things that God has created, we read: ‘When you hide your face, they are dismayed’. In the Psalmist’s view of creation, God’s action causes nature to react in a very human way.

In much the same way, as Alister McGrath has observed, our human view of the beauty of nature is not a perception of creation in its raw state. McGrath comments that: ‘The “natural” landscapes and vistas that Wordsworth so prized are actually the outcome of the human transformation of nature.’⁴ These landscapes, cherished, let’s say, as typically English and ‘unspoiled’, are the result of centuries of agricultural work that has somehow tamed nature, along with the occasional building, such as a nice old stone church. There’s nothing wrong with this: we just need to recognise that when we refer to nature and its conservation, we are acknowledging that nature is not complete in itself. It is perceived in relation to the human beings who live and work in it as well as to God the creator.

Even in the Old Testament, nature as we would now perceive it is not all good. The sea is the symbol of chaos. It is the deep that was covered in darkness before creation began (Genesis 1:2) and home to unspeakable monsters – ‘the dragon that is in the sea’ (Isaiah 27:1). It is only in the concluding chapters of Revelation that this is brought under control: ‘the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more’ (21:1).

So already we have to recognise that beauty in nature – even the beauty of God himself – is dependent on human perception, which in turn is culturally determined. The vision of nature in Genesis and the Psalms is an idealised one, and while it is undeniable that very many people do look at the beauty of nature and see in it the hand of God, this does not alter the fact that nature changes: it is not autonomous, and it is dependent on human beings for its beauty and religious significance to be perceived.

Stewardship

If there is one word that the majority of Christians would probably come up with when asked about the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, it is ‘stewardship’. This is not a biblical term. Genesis says that the newly created human species should ‘have dominion’ over every living thing (1:26); and there is the further detail in Genesis 2:15: ‘God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it’. These verses have generally been taken to be the basis for the idea that humans have a certain responsibility

Nature is more than just the object of human duty

to the earth, although there is little detail as to what form that should take, beyond the good agricultural practices set out, for example, in the Sabbath principles in Deuteronomy.

Integral to this is the idea that the land belongs to God and not to us: ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it’ (Psalm 24). At the beginning of Leviticus 25, God tells Moses on Sinai that he is giving the people of Israel their land, and follows this with a long list of instructions on how to look after it. Whether such a gift remains in the possession of the giver is a moot point. According to US theologian Paul Jewitt, since God made the world, ‘we live in the world as his tenants’,⁵ a statement which seems to downgrade the role of human beings in the created order, and conveniently overlooks the fact that tenants care much less for land or property than does an owner.

It is surely stretching the purpose of what used to be called the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16 (in modern translations he is more appropriately referred to as a ‘manager’) to see in it an allegory of God the Creator confronting humankind’s failure to care for the earth. Yet traditionally, theological statements about creation have tended to focus on a certain human duty that arises out of respect for God’s creation, alongside the response of worship that creation evokes. In this view, conservation has mainly been seen as a Christian duty, and one that is based on a fairly slight biblical foundation. And the natural environment has been viewed as something quite separate from human beings, with no real suggestion of any close interaction or interconnectedness.

Yet nature is more than just the object of human duty (with all the tediousness and possibly guilt that it implies) and it is

not solely a vehicle for God’s glory to be displayed. In fact, there has always been more to it than this in scripture. If we are willing to look, there are many examples of God working through and with nature to communicate with human beings: think of the rainbow after the flood, or God speaking to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3:3f), or the darkness that fell on the earth at the crucifixion. In general there is a much closer relationship between God, human beings and the created order than has generally been acknowledged by environmentalists. For Christians to take climate change seriously, we need to bring out this relationship of interconnectedness and set it at the heart of our faith.

Dominion

In February 2007, one of the UK’s main terrestrial TV channels screened a programme called *God is Green*. Among those interviewed was a US millionaire who had made his fortune in mountain-top coal mining. A conservative evangelical Christian, he had no doubt that, for all the carbon emissions his activities caused, he was exercising a God-given right. In Genesis, he argued, God gave Adam ‘dominion’: nature is ours to control and exploit for our own benefit – an example of the attitude that provoked Lynn White’s hostility to Christianity mentioned earlier. In other words, the mining entrepreneur saw in Genesis a neat hierarchy: God – Adam – nature. There is no concept here of any kind of special relationship between human beings and the natural environment. This should not really surprise us. The biblical writer’s main interest, as far as relationships go, was in the relationship between human beings and God.

Why should churches care for the environment? (extract)⁷

Seven motivations for action

1. *We believe in God in three persons, God the Creator, God the Saviour and God the Sustainer... Our responsibility for the environment is a logical consequence of this belief.*

Environmental issues must be discussed at every level... The concept of caring for the

environment must become an integral component of all church education and training programmes.

2. *God’s concerns are for the whole created order, and so our decisions are taken in solidarity with other world regions.*

In particular we wish to open ourselves to the experience of people in other parts of the world, who often live a simpler lifestyle and use appropriate technologies.

A high quality of life is not synonymous with our own model of prosperity with its inherent waste of resources. 4. *The Earth belongs to the Lord and so we should respect the life of plants and animals.*

Church property and land should be designed to provide habitats for plants and animals.

6. *Jesus said: ‘I have come that you may have life in fullness’ but he did not say: I*

have come that you can live life in material excess.

Therefore we suggest that churches adopt the four principles:

– Reduce (eg reducing energy consumption by five per cent per year)

– Refuse (eg refuse to buy virgin paper products)

– Reuse (eg use china instead of disposable plates and cups)

– Recycle (eg recycle printer cartridges).

Some modern commentators have tried to distance themselves from the idea of human beings dominating nature. One example is Gerhard von Rad, who suggests that the concept elevates nature rather than subjugates it. Von Rad argues that with the creation of human beings, non-human creatures are given a new relation to God. ‘Because of man’s dominion [the creature] receives once again the dignity belonging to a special domain of God’s sovereignty.’⁶ While the details of this argument seem somewhat tenuous, it does at least have the merit of positing a relationship between God and nature, albeit a relationship that still depends on human mediation.

It is when the New Testament is taken fully into account that such arguments become unnecessary. As will be argued in the next chapter, the coming of Jesus into the world reveals his identification with the whole created order. Old Testament concepts of stewardship and dominion give way to what Moltmann calls ‘solidarity christology’ or, more simply, relationships of divine love.

Climate change and environmentalism

It is only in the last few years that Christian environmentalists have paid much attention to climate change. As recently as 1999, the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) published a statement (reissued in 2006) headed *Why Should Churches Care for The Environment?*. This sets out seven biblically-based ‘motivations for action’, but contains no mention of climate change or its effects in poor countries, and is generally unambitious in its aims (see extract in the box on page 7). Worryingly, developing countries appear to be seen here as an enviable model for simple living. And while ECEN is becoming much more active in encouraging churches to work on climate change and making links with development agencies, this document is not untypical of statements produced by a variety of Christian groups.

Where Christian environmentalists do consider climate change, they typically see it in terms of human disobedience: a collective failure to care for our world, coupled with the sin of greed in creating for ourselves polluting luxuries such as gas-guzzling motor vehicles and long-haul flights. This is necessarily an over-simplification. It is not generally made clear which biblical command is being disobeyed, nor is it obvious at what point human inventiveness and creativity became sinful. But while, to their credit, Christian environmentalists have been urging action to halt damage to the atmosphere, plants

and animals for some time, the human suffering brought about by climate change, and the injustice that underlies it, has to date not featured on their agenda. Trying to integrate this into an already flimsy theology risks creating a distraction from the urgent tasks of exposing environmental injustice and rectifying it.

Climate change and relational theology

‘When it comes to rich, high-polluting countries fulfilling their obligations, the difference between rhetoric and reality gets wider the deeper you go.’¹

Drawing largely on passages from Genesis and the Psalms, Christian environmentalism teaches us something about the relationships between God and humans, God and nature, and human beings and nature. It does not, however, show us anything about relationships between human beings themselves – which is crucial in discussing the unjust effects of climate change – or the interconnectedness of God, human beings and the natural world. And, hindered perhaps by an insistence on stewardship and dominion, environmentalism does not hint at the complexity of these relationships either. Yet it is this very complexity and this interconnectedness that theology needs to explore in order to tackle climate change, which has the potential to affect every area of our lives.

As suggested earlier, a theology of development that takes particular account of the relationships between human beings (rich and poor) and (sinful) injustices that lead to those relationships breaking down has its starting point not in the Old Testament but in the New. When we take into account as well the three-way relationship between people, God and the natural world, a New Testament theology of relationships is likely to be more appropriate to our understanding than an environmental theology that has its origins in the book of Genesis.

It is, after all, in the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, that we find the most profound statement of interrelationships. John tells us that Jesus came into the world that ‘came into being through him’ (1:10), and records Jesus’ prayer that his followers might enter into the relationship of oneness with each other and with God through his son (17:22-23). This is echoed in Paul’s vision in Colossians 1:20, where humankind takes its place among ‘all things, whether on earth or in heaven’ that are reconciled to God through the blood of the cross. Indeed, some theologians have taken this verse to mean that not only humankind but all of creation is redeemed by the cross. This approach requires that the environment be taken into account in theological discussions of the atonement (redemption).²

In addition, a theology that has its roots in the New Testament will necessarily express the resurrection hope that is at the heart of the Gospel, and will contain principles on which we can act, if we are to make that hope real to a suffering world.

Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*

A very helpful theological expression of creation and relationships is set out by Karl Barth in his monumental work, *Church Dogmatics*. Barth also has much to say on the subject

of community – a useful context in which to consider human interrelationships.

In summary, Barth takes the concept of covenant relationships between God and human beings (familiar to us from stories of the Old Testament patriarchs) and suggests that such a relationship existed from the moment of creation. For Barth, creation and covenant are inextricable, a relationship that finds expression in the incarnation. As he puts it: ‘The purpose and therefore the meaning of creation is to make possible the history of God’s covenant with man which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ. The history of this covenant is as much the goal of creation as creation itself is the beginning of history.’³

It is against this background that we are to see the relationship between people and God, and relationships between human beings. There is a oneness and an interconnectedness between people, creation and God that has been present since human history began. The model for this oneness can be found in the insistence of Barth and his followers that all three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – are present at creation and take part in the act of creation.

And it is surely in this context of relationships that we are to view human sinfulness. For sin lies in the breakdown of human relationships, revealed in the unjust distribution of resources which creates a chasm between rich and poor. Sin also lies in the loss of connectedness between human beings and the environment, which has brought about the crisis of global warming. And in all this there is, too, the breakdown of the relationship between us and God.

Barth’s ‘*life of the children of God*’

Barth first presents his view of the Christian community in volume I of *Church Dogmatics*. In essence he argues that people who receive God’s word are compelled to act in accordance with it. He understands human life as made up of *being* (its inward aspects) and *doing* (its outward aspects in fellowship with others). So ‘community’ is equated with action, which unites believers. While the Psalmist views creation as praising God, Barth suggests that human praise of God is to be found elsewhere: ‘No praise of God is serious, or can be taken seriously, if it is apart from or in addition to the commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Praise of God must always be understood as obedience to this commandment.’⁴

Barth’s insistence that Christian unity is centred on this commandment, and his conviction that love of one’s neighbour

‘No praise of God is serious, or can be taken seriously, if it is apart from or in addition to the commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”’

is not a matter of choice, provides a helpful formulation of the necessity for action that arises out of the interconnectedness of the whole created order. While his work on covenantal relationships offers a framework for describing the current climate situation, his emphasis on Christian love and action should inspire a movement for change.

Sin: the breakdown of relationships

As already discussed, when environmental damage is seen in terms of a failure of human stewardship, sinfulness is equated with human disobedience. However, other explanations of sinfulness have emerged, particularly in relation to climate change.

One approach is that offered by the Orthodox tradition. This view emphasises the beauty of God’s world above all. There is a natural harmony or equilibrium to the created order, and it is sinful to disturb that natural equilibrium. How do we know if we are doing that? The Orthodox reply is that we human beings have an instinctive knowledge: if we go down the route of ‘abusing’ nature we are sinners. A statement by the Patriarch of Constantinople in September 2006 puts it like this:

God instilled in every beneficial relationship between man and creation feelings of joy and pleasure. Furthermore,

Who is my neighbour? Life as an environmental refugee

One of the most worrying predicted consequences of climate change is the likelihood of huge numbers of environmental refugees. Bangladesh could lose up to 18 per cent of its landmass as sea levels rise and rivers flood, forcing millions of people to migrate in search of food, clean water and shelter. But this is not just a problem for the future: people are already living as environmental refugees.

Amina Begum and her family have already had to move three times, as their home has been pushed

back by the River Ganges. The river bank is rapidly eroding as more Himalayan snow melts each year, filling the river and leading to increased flash flooding. Up to half a kilometre of land is lost each year as a result.

‘We lived in Kaijertak for ten years but we lost our land to river erosion. When the erosion started, I was worried we’d lose the house, so we dismantled it and moved to Bagoyta. We were there for another ten years. Then we lost everything again. The erosion happened suddenly so we lost our house, too. Sometimes the land can

he imbued man with a sense of longing when in genuine need, and a sense of satiety to protect against abuse by excess. Man, therefore, is equipped by God with an instinctual awareness of the proper measure of things, of the difference between what is necessary and beneficial, and what is excessive and harmful.⁵

This ‘proper measure of things’ is what, in the Middle Ages, was seen as moderation. However, medieval writers did not see this as something innate, but more realistically as something to be worked at and developed.

Of all the world church leaders, Patriarch Bartholomew I has most forcefully articulated the perceived link between sin and environmental degradation. In 2005 he wrote that the dangers threatening the earth and the natural environment have been brought about by ‘the natural ramification of human acts but, mostly, by the moral consequences of human crimes’. He clearly states that climate change is a moral issue, although other commentators will be rather more guarded in their language. But what exactly are those crimes that have such a devastating effect?

Back in the Old Testament, Genesis 1 points to the sin of Adam, aspiring to be God by eating the apple of the tree of

just disappear into the river in the space of two hours.

Through a relative’s financial help, as well as some savings, we managed to buy a piece of land. The government gave us no help at all. And we were charged more than we should have been because we were in a desperate situation, so we had to take out a loan as well.’

Amina joined a local community organisation set up by Christian Aid partner the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB). They gave her a small loan to buy a couple of goats, and she has been able to expand the

family’s income by raising livestock. She comments: ‘Since we first lost our land to the river we never had enough food or clothes. But now we have much more food and better clothes and we have been able to install a latrine.’

But the outlook is grim: ‘This place is only about one-and-a-half kilometres from the river bank, so one day it will be taken, too. Nobody can predict when it will happen, so we are saving money so that we can buy land somewhere else. The trouble is we can’t go too far because the land further away costs so much money.’

knowledge. Is this how we are to see industrialisation and globalisation – as humankind playing at being God? If this is so, it remains difficult to discern when the sheer human ingenuity and skill involved in creating aeroplanes or the internet ceased to be a legitimate source of wonder and became a matter of condemnation. Where did we go wrong and how should we have known before it all became too late? Is it not asking too much of human wisdom to expect us to understand the future consequences of our actions that until recently were unimaginable? In his film *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore quotes Mark Twain: ‘What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know. It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.’ We thought we knew there was no connection between human activity and our planet’s climate. We weren’t playing God: we just got it wrong.

Perhaps a better Old Testament source for understanding human shortcomings is in Genesis 4 and the sin of Cain – not this time a matter of mental aspiration, but an act of violence that results from the complete breakdown of human relationships. Interestingly, the medieval mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, saw this act as affecting all creation: ‘When Abel’s blood was shed, the entire Earth sighed and at that moment was declared a widow. Just as a woman without the comfort of her husband remains fixed in her widowhood, the Earth was also robbed of its holy totality by the murder committed by Cain.’⁶

In other words, creation and human beings are intimately connected in a special relationship. Hildegard’s view is very much from a New Testament perspective, her words reminiscent of St Paul’s in Romans 8, where he writes of human suffering being echoed by all creation ‘groaning in labour pains’. The suffering of one engenders suffering in the other, even when the natural world is not the direct recipient of human violence. This is seen most significantly in the New Testament at the crucifixion – the bleakest moment in human history – when darkness falls upon the earth.

Structural sin

‘Do not put your trust in princes.’ (Psalm 146:3)

There are many warnings in the Bible of what happens when individuals shift responsibility from themselves to society at large, in other words, when their relationship with God becomes somewhat flawed. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’

is Cain’s famous retort to God after he has murdered his brother (Genesis 4:9); in Psalm 20, the Psalmist warns of the consequences of trusting in the major social structures of the day rather than in God:

Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
But our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.
They will collapse and fall,
But we shall rise and stand upright. (Psalm 20:7-8)

So when in 2006 an Anglican bishop proclaimed that travelling by air was a sin, he did not receive much serious attention, possibly because even the most faithful Christians could not readily understand where personally they were going wrong and what they could do about it. However, if we switch our attention from individual actions to collective ones, the picture becomes much clearer.

John Macquarrie helpfully separates individual sin from what he calls ‘the massive and wrongful orientation of human society’. He describes the danger of this ‘structural’ sin as follows: ‘The collective mass of mankind in its solidarity is answerable to no one and has a hardness and irresponsibility that one rarely finds in individuals.’⁷

This is echoed by Jürgen Moltmann who warns that ‘the doctrine of the universality of sin can lead people to perceive a limitless solidarity.’⁸ Moltmann is also critical of Protestantism’s emphasis on the individual, which has led to a failure to recognise the importance of structural sin. In other words, if everyone else is doing something, the impulse to question one’s own behaviour quickly dies away and is replaced by a feeling of powerlessness: there’s nothing I can do that will change anything, so why should I bother?

Moltmann’s experience of living through the Nazi period in Germany lies behind his question: ‘How can unjust people become just?’ This question is relevant to climate change because we cannot simply repent of our acceptance of, and contribution to, structural sins of injustice, and be assured of forgiveness. We are also obliged to become just, to do what we can to heal our broken relationship with the natural environment.

Conclusion

If the climate change crisis is to be properly addressed, the concept of structural sin urgently needs to be highlighted. In relational terms, this means that while individuals seek to heal

Christian hope: where does it lie?

‘Forget about making poverty history. Climate change will make poverty permanent.’

Nazmul Chowdbury¹

their imperfect relationships with others and with the world around them, the breakdown of the relationship between society as a whole and the natural world must also be urgently addressed. Indeed, global warming and its consequences can only be combated satisfactorily if society in general, and its representatives in national government and international institutions in particular, take this on board. This lays a great responsibility on the Christian community as the active children of God to recognise the structural sin to which they have contributed, and a still greater responsibility on their leaders to influence other leaders in the society of which they are a part.

Love in action

The promise of the gospel is of hope and healing. And the ministry of Jesus shows us that this is not some kind of pious hope, but a very real offer of change for the better. Nor is it a promise for the distant future, for the afterlife: as the healing miracles demonstrate, it is a promise for the here and now.

So it is important that we understand the vision of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ in Revelation 21 as a promise for our time and for future generations. Just as the resurrection body of Jesus bore the marks of suffering, so our new earth will be scarred by irreversible damage: dried-up rivers, new expanses of desert, areas rendered uninhabitable by extreme heat. Yet we have the potential for healing. We can mend our relationship with the natural world by drastically reducing our emissions of carbon dioxide. We have it in our power to say ‘this far and no further’. The challenge is to find the will to respond, as our theology shows us we must.

For this reason it is worth going back to basics. In Luke 10, Jesus asks a lawyer how he understands the law, to which the man replies, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself’ (10:27). This is the crucial teaching underlying the parable of the Good Samaritan that answers the question: ‘Who is my neighbour?’ To love God is to love his creation. In the context of climate change, to love our neighbour is to care for the people we have damaged while we

were harming God’s creation, however unwittingly. ‘Do this,’ says Jesus, ‘and you will live’ (10:28).

Action is a key message of the resurrection. If we look at the gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, we see that in most cases their purpose is twofold: they convey the information that Jesus has risen from the dead, and they also command us to act: feed my lambs (John 21:15), go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19), forgive people’s sins (John 20:23). In other words, the hope of the resurrection is not something for us to keep to ourselves; we must pass it on to others, especially now the millions of people affected by poverty and global warming, by taking the necessary actions to address their needs.

In other words, hope for the future – both the future of the earth and the future of the millions of poor people to whom it is an increasingly fragile home – lies in the action we take now to heal and restore relationships. For Christians this means repenting of both structural and personal sin and acting accordingly. A restored relationship with God must entail a change in relationship with others. In the context of climate change I have stressed that this means restoring our relationship with those who are vulnerable to its effects. But once we take structural sin into account, it must also include the relationship between us and our immediate society, in order for that society to mend its own relationship with those who suffer, with the natural world and, ultimately, with God.

Greenhouse development rights: a shared response to the climate crisis

EcoEquity and Christian Aid are jointly developing a new approach to the global climate regime called greenhouse development rights (GDRs). Grounded in climate science, this approach asks: ‘What do we need to do to have a good chance of preventing a climate catastrophe?’ The response is that global emissions must peak within the next decade and then start racing downward. It is too late for the slow, measured,

incremental approach that most nations of the North would favour.

The GDRs approach is designed to recognise the urgency of the climate crisis while embracing the fundamental right to human development. It acknowledges that the North cannot impose any obligations on the South which would siphon resources away from poverty alleviation. A climate protection regime will only succeed in engaging poor countries if it helps them focus their energies on human development rather than mitigation.

The GDRs approach calls on rich countries to provide the resources that would allow society to move to clean, efficient, low-carbon economies. It allocates obligations to nations according to their responsibility (their historic contribution to the climate problem) and capacity (their ability to dedicate resources to the problem).

Based on complex calculations, this approach imposes parallel obligations on developing countries. Recognising that there are vast intra-national disparities in wealth (India and South

Africa, for example, are home to some very rich as well as some very poor people), it calculates national obligations in a manner that is sensitive to this income structure.

GDRs is intended as a reference framework – a standard of comparison between what is happening and what is urgently needed. It demands commitments from nations above and beyond what they currently seem inclined to accept, and illustrates just how costly this change is going to be.

For more information on GDRs, visit www.ecoequity.org

Despite the heritage of their work overseas, the major Christian denominations are failing to make the link between climate change and development.

There is little doubt that such change will be costly. There could be no resurrection without crucifixion. The double imperative of reducing our own carbon emissions and enabling the developing world to continue to develop will affect personal lifestyles in the global North in a way undreamed of by previous generations. Healing relationships means engaging in unpopular and demanding action and adopting a wholly new way of looking at things, as the greenhouse development rights project, outlined from the previous page, makes clear.

For there to be true hope, this needs to be experienced in the lives of individuals as well as, perhaps less tangibly, in their communities and wider society. While we may feel more comfortable in directing action and resources towards individuals – it makes us feel good if we can see we are making a difference – this must not be at the expense of the national, international, and even global actions that need to be undertaken in the current crisis.

Hope must also become part of our own lives in a new way. Our hope, and that of future generations, lies in our will and commitment to reduce our own carbon emissions and do whatever is in our power to improve the lives of the poor people and communities who are suffering now as a result of the emissions we have each been responsible for in the past.

In terms of an everyday understanding of hope, this does not sound particularly hopeful. And it is worth constantly reminding ourselves that the task ahead will be very costly. But we should ask ourselves whether Mary was lacking hope when she took the infant Jesus to the Temple for purification, only to be told by the priest, ‘This child is destined... to be a sign that will be opposed... and a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (Luke 2:34-35). Hope flourishes in the most difficult of places.

If it is a key message of Jesus’ resurrection appearances that we in our actions are the bearers of hope, what form will those actions take in the current crisis?

Climate change and the churches

While all the major Christian denominations have had something to say about climate change, none of them have been particularly forceful in saying it. There has to date been no papal encyclical; no very public attempt to influence world opinion by heads of the major churches; and no call for justice for the poor that has echoed outside its own constituency. Some of the major churches have recognised, either implicitly or explicitly, that their calls for action need to be based on

integrity: they must show that they are changing themselves before attempting to change others. However, all too often they get stuck at this point. It is certainly easier to create lists for church members that deal with ways of cutting their own emissions (eg, install low-energy light bulbs, share lifts to church) than it is to produce a clear policy on global warming and call on their leaders to advocate that policy internationally. Yet as already argued, both must happen if the crisis is to be addressed and both must happen if the Christian voice is to be heard and listened to attentively.

It would be helpful if the churches could unite behind a single message, not least because this would ensure that they convey the message more effectively to those who need to hear it. Yet in a publication by the Australian faith communities,² no fewer than nine of the 16 chapters were concerned with the different views and approaches of nine Christian denominations or groups. It seems that where the churches are not silent they are reluctant to surrender their individuality. Whether or not this is a fair comment, the question that each of them must answer honestly is concerned with the message of the hope they are presenting for the restoration of justice, and the healing of relationships – between rich and poor, humans and creation, human beings and God. Just what are the churches doing on this? And what are the chances of them doing it together?

The Roman Catholic Church: a eucharistic theology

While much Roman Catholic writing has focused on the environment rather than climate change, there have been some discernible undercurrents warning of future problems. In 1977, Pope Paul VI’s message for the fifth Worldwide Day of Environment called for ‘a conversion of attitude and of practice so that the rich willingly use less and share the earth’s goods more widely and more wisely’. The Pope’s biblical point of departure was Genesis 1:31 (‘God saw everything he had made and behold it was very good’) and he quoted one of his own speeches about a two-way relationship between human beings and creation: ‘The environment conditions in an essential way the life and development of man and... man, in turn, perfects and ennobles his milieu by his presence, his work and his contemplation.’³

Papal statements in particular have drawn on the theology of the Eucharist to express these relationships between humans and creation. At the end of Pope Benedict XVI’s statement on the Eucharist in February 2007,⁴ there is a paragraph entitled

‘The sanctification of the world and the protection of creation’, which reminds Catholics that ‘in giving thanks to God through the Eucharist [they] should be conscious that they do so in the name of all creation, aspiring to the sanctification of the world... The relationship between the Eucharist and the cosmos helps us to see the unity of God’s plan and to grasp the profound relationship between creation and the “new creation” inaugurated in the resurrection of Christ, the new Adam.’

However, by its very nature, this theology does not allow for the fracturing of that relationship. For Catholics, Christian hope lies in just glimpsing the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21, thanks to our Christian lives that are ‘nourished by the Eucharist’. In this constant striving towards perfection, climate change could be seen as an unwelcome distraction, which may explain why the issue tends to be treated independently of this theology. Pope John Paul II, for example, appealed to the stewardship argument in referring to the need to protect the natural resources of Oceania, while at the same time taking care not to offend business interests. In 2001 he wrote: ‘It is important to recognise that industry can bring great benefits when undertaken with due respect for the rights and the culture of the local population and for the integrity of the environment.’⁵ This is a view that the climate change crisis should surely have radically altered.

Catholic bishops seem to be treating climate change as an ethical issue, rather than a theological one. While this should encourage concern for the vulnerable people affected by the crisis, in practice the main emphasis tends to lie elsewhere. For example, the Catholic bishops’ ‘position paper’, presented at a climate change conference in Australia in 2005, sets out some of the science and predicted consequences of climate change and includes a list of 20 ‘ethical principles for the environment’. Poor people are not mentioned until number 19 on the list – ‘The richer nations have an obligation to dismantle structural forms of global poverty and to help poorer nations experiencing social or environmental problems’ – while principle 20 refers to future generations who ‘should not be robbed or left with extra burdens, for they have a claim to a just administration of the world’s resources by this generation’.⁶

Not surprisingly, the message that climate change is affecting the world’s poorest people does not seem to be filtering through very effectively to the laity. A letter in *The Tablet* in March 2007 deplores that fact that ‘the environmental movement has become synonymous with climate change’. The writer pleads for recognition of the loss of species and habitats

that, she claims, has ‘nothing to do with burning fossil fuels but rather with our lifestyles, our sheer numbers and our greed.’ The letter concludes: ‘So if you doubt the science behind climate change, then that is fine, don’t believe it.’

Finally, a conference held in Vatican City in April 2007 called for a papal encyclical on the subject. But according to the press office, the main message to come out of it was that ‘God wants believers to be green’ and again theological concerns and the interests of the poor appear to have been downplayed. Other publications and speeches by Catholic leaders have, on occasion, drawn attention to the challenges facing developing countries, but this has usually been on an ad-hoc basis and in the context of ethics rather than of theology. Michael McCarthy, environment editor of *The Independent*, has called on the Catholic Church to wake up, criticising its leaders for treating the environment as ‘a quality-of-life issue’. He concludes: ‘As the environment becomes a life-or-death issue for the world, the Church is going to find itself overtaken by the historical process, helpless and uncomprehending, just as it was by socialism, just as it was by fascism.’⁷

The Orthodox Church

As already suggested,⁸ the Patriarch Bartholomew I has been the most outspoken of Christian leaders on the subject of climate change. Much of what he has said reflects the ascetic ethos that is integral to Orthodox Christian spirituality – as we can see in this comment from a reflection on ‘transformation’:

In learning to give up, we gradually learn to give; in learning to sacrifice, we essentially learn to share. So often our efforts for reconciliation and transformation are hindered by an unwillingness to forego established ways as individuals or as institutions, by our refusal to relinquish either wasteful consumerism or prideful [*sic*] nationalism. A transformed worldview allows us to perceive the lasting impact of our ways on other people, especially the poor, as the sacred image of Christ, as well as on the environment, as the silent imprint of God.⁹

In various documents over the last ten or 15 years, the Patriarch and others have emphasised the need for repentance and have advocated a solution to environmental problems that lies in ‘the liturgical, eucharistic and ascetic ethos of the Orthodox tradition.’¹⁰

The language of these documents is typically very emotive.

Interestingly, healing is a key theme¹¹ although the ‘healing of community’, and therefore of relations with the poor, is treated separately from ‘healing of the earth’. So while the real problems of social justice are not ignored, there seems to be a constant move towards abstraction, moving the focus onto a higher plane of sin, repentance and divine grace. In short, while the Orthodox teachings may be a source of spiritual inspiration, they are not necessarily conducive to action.

A specific statement on climate change illustrates this tendency to the abstract:

There is a close link between the economy of the poor and the warming of our planet. Conservation and compassion are intimately connected. The web of life is a sacred gift of God – ever so precious and ever so delicate. We must serve our neighbour and preserve our world with both humility and generosity, in a perspective of frugality and solidarity alike.¹²

There is much that other denominations can learn from the great Orthodox tradition of spirituality, not least the ‘spiritualising’ of contemporary issues. But that does, I suggest, need to go hand-in-hand with a much more explicit call to action, if its eloquently expressed desire for change is to be realised in our world.

The Protestant Churches

The Protestant Churches as represented in Britain and Ireland have produced a variety of responses to the climate change crisis that have mainly focused on care for the immediate environment, along with an Old Testament-based environmental theology. Unlike, say, the Catholic Church, the major Protestant denominations have encouraged action at a local level, for example through schemes designed to persuade churches to monitor and reduce their fuel bills, such as the Church of England’s ‘Shrinking the footprint’ scheme, and the work of the Eco-congregations movement. There remains, however, an urgent need to move people’s thinking on from environmental projects such as care of churchyards, however admirable these may be, to a thorough awareness of the implications of climate change for poor people.

This need is illustrated by the information on the home page of the Methodist/URC Environmental Network’s website, *Creation Challenge*.¹³ This network invited people to complete the following sentence: ‘Environmental issues are important

to me because...’, and published five responses. The first is simply: ‘...there will be no planet left otherwise’; and while three respondents used the word ‘stewards’ or ‘stewardship’, none made any reference to justice or poverty.

The Methodist Church has, however, produced an environmental policy which highlights relationships. For example:

Christian mission includes sharing in putting right the relationships within God’s creation that have gone wrong, and growing towards the balance and good stewardship envisaged in the biblical vision of the world as it is meant to be.¹⁴

Hopefully, this will be expanded to reflect the very real concern for social justice that has characterised Methodism in recent years.

In 2005 the Church of England published its *Sharing God’s Planet: a Christian vision for a sustainable future*.¹⁵ A substantial part of this is given over to a selection of biblical and theological material that is considered relevant to environmental issues. Interestingly, the report quotes Luke 4:18-19 as an example of the prophet’s call to speak out, but the crucial detail of good news for the poor passes without comment: ‘It is a prophetic role to speak of the beauty and goodness of creation; to make people see things as they really are; and to free the earth (in this context) from the oppression of exploitation, ignorance and plunder.’¹⁶ While the writers go on to state, somewhat presumptuously, that ‘Christians are key to the salvation of the earth’, it is unfortunate that this report fails to draw on the concerns for justice and solidarity with the poor that are central to Christian belief.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite the heritage of their work overseas, the major Christian denominations are failing to make the link between climate change and development. Consequently, most official statements and calls to action are focused on local environmental initiatives. While the churches are clearly well placed to convince a significant number of individuals and communities to change their ways, and so contribute to a reduction in carbon emissions, they are missing a trick when it comes to highlighting the effect of climate change on poor communities (who are after all part of the worldwide church). In other words, they are failing to use their prophetic voice to make a difference where it really counts.

American evangelicals: a change of heart

In an article published in June 2000, John Jefferson Davis examined what he called the ‘ecological blind spots’ in evangelical theology. He looked at 20 theology texts, published by evangelicals since 1970 (mostly in the US), to see how much space was devoted to environmental concerns under the key headings of ‘creation’ and ‘atonement’. He found that while around one-third of the texts had some reference to creation science, only one per cent discussed the implications of the doctrine of creation for environmental concerns. His conclusion was that even after Lynn White’s 1967 criticisms, when many evangelicals began to pay more attention to environmental issues, ‘a significant minority of evangelicals... remained (and continue to remain) indifferent toward or even hostile to environmental concerns.’¹⁷

An important contributing factor to this neglect has been the traditional evangelical stress on personal salvation, which has no place for non-human creation. A further, arguably more important, factor that Davis does not mention is the conservative evangelical emphasis on the literal truth of Scripture. Thus, until very recently, US evangelicals in particular have clung to the notion that they have a divinely appointed right to do what they will with the earth in their exercise of ‘dominion’. A further view – although one which is losing ground – comes from the dispensationalists, who claim that the end of the world is near, so there is no point in worrying about environmental degradation. In 1981, James G Watt, President Ronald Reagan’s first interior secretary, argued before Congress: ‘God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back.’

However, there have been some much-publicised changes of opinion among the so-called Christian right, as people come to understand more about global warming and its likely impact. In October 2005, the National Association of Evangelicals, which boasts a membership of some 30 million Americans, adopted a ‘call to civic responsibility’, that emphasised every Christian’s duty to care for the planet and the role of the government in safeguarding a sustainable environment.

Nonetheless, there remains a deep suspicion of environmentalists. While evangelicals are open to being good stewards of God’s creation, they believe people should only worship God, not creation. This may sound like splitting hairs. But evangelicals don’t see it that way. Their stereotype of environmentalists would be Druids who worship trees.¹⁸

For this reason the term ‘creation care’ has been adopted by evangelicals. It is becoming increasingly widespread, and enables evangelicals to differentiate themselves from the ‘liberals, secularists and Democrats’ that the word ‘environmentalism’ means for them.

However, as Davis’ work underlines, evangelical theology has a long way to go before it incorporates creation care in any systematic way. Yet while most Americans have focused on the concept of stewardship in their arguments for caring for creation, the vulnerability of poor countries is not going unnoticed. Revd Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network is reported as saying that the strongest moral argument he made to fellow evangelicals was that climate change would have disproportionate effects on the poorest regions in the world. And he continued: ‘Christ said, “What you do to the least of these you do to me.” And so caring for the poor by reducing the threat of global warming is caring for Jesus Christ.’¹⁹

Given the influence that US evangelicals have on conservative evangelical congregations around the world, their changing views are important. It is also imperative that more of them should take on board the development issues around climate change and use their undoubted influence in the US administration to bring about change.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical networks

It might be argued that international ecumenical bodies are better placed than national churches to deal with climate change, as they are more able to appreciate its impact worldwide. However, this is not a sound argument for several reasons, not least because Christians regard themselves as members of the (worldwide) body of Christ, and subscribe to the Pauline teaching that when one member suffers, all suffer with it (1 Corinthians 12). Nonetheless, it is the WCC, particularly through its former climate change coordinator Dr David Hallman, that has done most to integrate the vulnerability of poor communities into its statements on the crisis.

Justice, in terms of inequitable sharing of resources, features prominently in WCC communications on climate change, even though their theological underpinning remains firmly rooted in the creation stories of Genesis. However, the WCC appears to lack the resources to make its message heard sufficiently loudly.

Yet there are repeated calls at major climate change conferences for faith communities to speak out, and the international and scientific communities are very open to hearing ethical issues discussed. There is an urgent need for a communications strategy that will enable world Christian leaders to speak out on climate change, injustice and poverty.

Ecumenical networks that are working at the national or regional level tend to be environmental networks that have incorporated climate change issues into their activities, as is the case with the European Christian Environmental Network mentioned on pages 7-8. However, in practice this does not work well, because the established environmental concerns remain the priority – albeit in the context of global warming – and the needs of people, particularly those in developing countries, is for many a step too far.

Conclusion

Where, then, does hope lie? Karl Barth's vision of a human being in the community of the church is of someone who is 'united in society as an individual with the whole Church, related, of course, to God, but in God to others'.²⁰ The challenge for the churches is to confront their understanding of relationships: to consider not only their members' relationship with one another and with God, and by extension, with the worldwide church, but also relationships with society in its widest sense: from local community to national government, and from local individuals to the so-called international community – especially its weakest and most vulnerable members.

If building relationships between Christians has been a struggle in the past, how will the churches establish much wider and more demanding ones? The fourth IPCC report stresses the importance of moving away from local, individual responses:

Voluntary actions [by corporations, local and regional authorities, NGOs and civil groups] may limit GHG emissions, stimulate innovative policies, and encourage the deployment of new technologies. On their own, they generally have limited impact on the national or regional level emissions.²¹

A global problem demands a global response. So where are the Christian leaders in all this? All too often they have focused on local issues and internal structures. Now is the time to put those structures to good use, to enable the Christian prophetic voice to be heard around the world.

Working together effectively is probably the greatest challenge facing the churches today, and, it is suggested, one they have barely begun to address. If Christian hope is to be translated into action, the churches must move and move quickly.

Conclusion

Abdoulaye Diack from Senegal, featured on page 4, has undergone a remarkable transformation. He used to cut down trees for construction, to make charcoal and to feed his cattle, and he admits that: 'I am among those who have destroyed the land'. Now he is a crusader: he has learnt about the importance of trees in helping to prevent drought and is anxious to pass this knowledge on to his community. 'When you plant one [tree], even just one, you are reviving. I hope that the seed we are planting today will help to bless future generations.'

Abdoulaye is a living parable of what it means to live with climate change, and offers a good example of how the relationship between human beings and the environment may be healed. The aim of this report has been to set out a theological basis for action and to indicate where Christian hope may be found in the face of impending catastrophe. That hope lies in the transformation of human activity at every level, to restore and heal relationships between human beings, nature and God.

One of the biggest challenges for Christians today lies in how the churches can work together, not in isolated joint events, but in a continuing and deepening commitment to combat climate change as it affects the world's most vulnerable people. Congregations need to be better informed and act accordingly, while church leaders must be supported in making the Christian voice heard in places where it matters.

Al Gore comments in *An Inconvenient Truth* that 'political will is a renewable resource'. That is not true of Christian will: we cannot simply replace people when we do not agree with their views. Hearts and minds must be changed, so that the lives of the poorest people may not simply be saved but ultimately transformed. Only then can we say with St Paul, 'in hope we were saved' (Romans 8:24).

Endnotes

The injustice of climate change

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2 A calculation by the Dutch agency Kerkinactie puts average Western European emissions at 12 metric tonnes *per capita* per year, compared with less than one metric tonne for a Zambian family (and 24 metric tonnes for an average US citizen).

3 In 2005 Niger was at the bottom of the Human Development Index and Norway at the top. The bottom 24 countries were all in sub-Saharan Africa, a region that is extremely vulnerable to climate change.

4 Juan Mayr Maldonado, Foreword to *Up in Smoke? Latin America and the Caribbean*, Third report from the Working Group on Climate Change and Development, August 2006.

5 *The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*: summary of conclusions, HM Treasury, 30 October 2006, page viii. Available online at: www.hm-treasury.gov.uk

6 IPCC, *Fourth Assessment Report* (Working Group III, 4 May 2007), paragraph 27.

7 Based on a Christian Aid internal report, May 2006.

8 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: a universal affirmation* (Munich, 1991), trans M. Kohl, SCM Press, 1992, chapter VI, sections 1-3.

9 'Justification' is the theological term used (particularly in the phrase 'justification by faith') to indicate the process by which God declares that sinners are saved.

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1 Comment by a delegate to the World Social Forum in Nairobi, January 2007.

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3 Ibid. McGrath cites White's article 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis', *Science*, Volume 155 (1967), pp 1203-1207.

4 Ibid, p 134.

5 In *God, Creation and Revelation: a Neo-Evangelical Theology* (1991) quoted in John Jefferson Davis, 'Ecological "blind spots" in the structure and content of recent evangelical systematic theologies', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43/2 (June 2000), p 281.

6 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (9th ed), SCM Press, 1972, p 60.

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3 Karl Barth, translated by Edwards, Bussey and Knight, *Church Dogmatics III, 1: The Doctrine of Creation*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1958.

4 Karl Barth, translated by GT Thomson and Harold Knight, *Church Dogmatics I, 2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1955.

5 Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch, Protocol No 856, 1 September 2006.

6 Matthew Fox (ed), *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works*, Bear & Co, 1987, p 54.

7 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (revised ed), SCM Press, 1977, p 262.

8 Jürgen Moltmann, translated by M Kohl, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, SCM Press, 1992, pp 126-128.

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1 Quoted in Christian Aid's *The Climate of Poverty: Facts, Fears and Hope*, May 2006, p 34.

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‘Working together effectively is probably the greatest challenge facing the churches today and one they have barely begun to address. If Christian hope is to be translated into action, the churches must move and move quickly.’

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