

Global warming and the Christian

In a recent Guardian article, Sir John Houghton, the former Chief Executive of the Met Office and Chairman of the Scientific Working Group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, compares the phenomenon of global warming to a weapon of mass destruction. He argues that, as the average global temperature increases, this will lead to larger and larger swings in the global climate, resulting in increasingly frequent and intense droughts, floods and windstorms, as well as a steady increase in mean sea level. This, Sir John argues, has led, and will continue to lead, to numbers of casualties and fatalities on a par with those that would result from the use of weapons of mass destruction, with the effects falling most severely on vulnerable third world communities. He goes on to urge western governments to take action to curb global warming through a significant reduction in the production of greenhouse gasses, and, through the development of internationally agreed principles, to ensure that the cost of such actions is equitably shared by all countries.

It is now agreed by nearly all scientists working in the field that global warming is occurring, and average temperatures are expected to rise by somewhere between 1.4 by 5.8 degrees Celsius over the next 100 years. There has been much discussion in recent years as to how much of this is due to natural variability in the earth's climate, and how much of this is "anthropogenic", but it is now generally accepted that much of this change is caused by human activity which results in the production of greenhouse gasses. The primary greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide from industrial activity, power generation and transportation. Those who disagree that there is a human factor in global warming are increasingly those from outside the scientific community who appear to voice their disagreement for political or corporate reasons, as witnessed by some of the letters the Guardian received in response to Sir John's article. However computer modelling using some of the most advanced models of the global climate are now showing that the temperature rises observed over the last few years can only be explained by assuming a contribution from human activity.

The consequences are indeed as alarming as Sir John implies. Whilst it will never be possible to say that an individual drought or storm event is due to global warming, the increased frequency of such events, which are already becoming apparent, will impact in a disproportionate way on those communities which are least prepared to withstand them; those in the large mega-cities of informal housing in the developing world that are ill equipped to withstand the effects of winds and floods; those in low lying areas close to sea level which will become uninhabitable; and those in areas that are already only marginally viable for agriculture and will become less so as the frequency of droughts increase.

So in the light of problems of such enormity, what should be the Christian response? In theological terms scripture gives a number of broad principles that can be of use. From the early chapters of Genesis and elsewhere in the Old Testament, the principle of stewardship emerges – of humanity as the guardians of the earth's resources. From here it is only a small step to the more modern, but increasingly accepted notion of sustainability – that human activity should be sustainable on a long-term basis. The Old Testament prophets speak profoundly of the need for justice at all levels, particularly for the most vulnerable. In the New Testament the primary principle that is of use is that which Jesus and the apostles so often emphasise – "neighbour love". In twenty first century terms this needs to be interpreted on a global basis. Our activities and lifestyle have an effect on those in different parts of the world whether we like it or not, and the principle of neighbour love suggests that these consequences should not be ignored. Taken together these principles suggest that Christians should be doing all they can to reduce those activities that lead to global warming, mainly the production of greenhouse gasses, and actively engaging with what is probably the greatest challenge facing humanity today. The primary task of the church is of course to bring the good news of God's love and redemption to a needy world – but Christians can hardly do that

consistently if our actions and lifestyle are helping to bring about the appalling effects of global warming. In the words spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Christians are called to be “salt and light” to our society and beyond, and I remain optimistic that serious Christian engagement in activities to reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses would give a significant prophetic message, that could act as a catalyst for major societal change.

In the UK the production of greenhouse gasses comes, in very broad terms, from industrial and domestic sources, from service industries (including agriculture) and from transport. The graphs below show the overall production of carbon dioxide from 1970 to 2000, which can be seen to be steadily falling, and the percentage produced by each of the above sectors. The overall fall is encouraging, but the rate of fall, even if repeated on a world-wide basis, which it is not, would not be sufficient to halt the increase in global temperatures. Also it can be seen that while there is a steady fall in the percentage of total emissions produced by industry, and those for the domestic and service sectors percentages are more or less constant, the proportion produced by transport (mainly private road transport, which is notoriously inefficient in comparison to other forms of transport) is rising. Indeed this percentage rise also represents an increase in absolute terms of 87% over the 30-year period, and suggests that greenhouse gas production from private road transport is out of control.

As a response, I would suggest that the church, at diocesan and local level, should be involved in an audit of its activities on this regard. At diocesan level do the structures of the church actually encourage the use of private road transport? Are diocesan events at locations that can be reached by public transport? Can diocesan offices be reached by public transport? Do diocesan financial arrangements give an incentive for local churches to use, perhaps more expensive, “green” suppliers of electricity? Does ministerial deployment assume the necessary use of road transport in pastoral work? At the local level the nature of individual church life needs to be considered. Are energy saving methods being used to reduce the energy consumption of buildings and plant (with due acknowledgement of the difficulties that result from imposing such methods in historic buildings)? Again are church activities so structured that the use of the private road transport is not necessary? The rural and urban situations are different in this respect of course, as the lack of public transport in rural areas makes private transport more necessary. However this question could be particularly challenging for large eclectic urban churches that draw their congregation from a wide area – is this type of church structure actually a demonstration of “neighbour love” in its broadest sense?

But whilst the church as an institution can properly ask and ideally take action on such questions, the most significant change must come from a change in the lifestyle of church members. And here we are all, to some degree or other, in a cultural and arguably spiritual sense, bound by the assumptions of the society in which we live. The type of lifestyle that would result from a logical working out of the principles of stewardship, justice and neighbour-love in the area of global warming, is a radical one. It would involve decisions on where we live, in order to reduce our transport needs, and how we live, in order to reduce our energy consumption significantly. If a significant number of Christians adopted lifestyles that positively address these issues, they would indeed be a prophetic witness both to society, and to the wider church. And the latter is, I believe, of importance. If in some way a significant proportion of the Church of England could adopt such a prophetic role, then its international influence could be enormous – particularly on the churches in the USA. Because it is, of course, the USA that is far and away the largest, most profligate producer of greenhouse gasses. If US Christians, who are perhaps the most culturally bound of all Christians, could be persuaded to adopt radical lifestyle change, then major society change in the US in this regard would be a possibility, to the massive benefit of the world community.

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