



THIRD EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL ASSEMBLY

Sibiu, Romania

4 – 9 September 2007

Document/Dokument/Documento

130-07

Care for Creation as part of the Christian lifestyle

Keynote presentation by Dr Isabel Carter

God's joy and pride in his creation

Reflections from:

- Genesis 1:31
- Psalm 19: 1-6
- Psalm 104
- Job 38: 4-41 - Morning stars singing for joy

Our stewardship of this precious creation:

Undoubtedly humankind has made many advances in our understanding and care for creation: National parks, understanding of biodiversity, preservation of seed banks, agricultural techniques, numerous species preserved and saved from extinction, but that counts as very little against over two centuries of consumption and growth based on fossil fuels. In recent years what has become the 'normal' way of life in the 'developed' world threatens the foundations of our existence.

Can an increasing number of the environmental challenges we are facing be described as environmental crises?

Climate change has led to an increase in overall world temperature of 0.8 °C – against a global average of 15 °C. All predictions are that this steady increase in temperature will continue as we continue to release more greenhouse gases. Such increases are out of all proportion with anything seen during the previous 10,000 years.

The measured and detailed IPCC predictions include:

- Overall increase in temperatures
- Gradual rise in sea levels – due to ocean warming and ice melt
- More intense hydrological cycles – resulting in, for example, more intense rainfall in N Europe, drought in Southern Europe.
- No likely increase in the number of hurricanes – but likely to be more severe – more reaching category 4 or 5.

These are the trends. It is generally impossible to claim any one incident is 'due' solely to climate change.

And if we consider some of the recent headlines:

- In the UK there have been two periods of serious flooding this summer with lives lost and 50,000 people affected - homes damaged, water supplies cut off.
- In Southern Europe there have been two periods of oppressive heat and drought which have led to deaths, damage to infrastructure – particularly transport, water shortages and here in Romania the potential loss of half the grain harvest
- During the monsoon season in Asia this year; in China 119 million people were affected by serious flooding in several provinces. Hundreds have died. In India – the annual July monsoon has brought flooding in 10 states affecting 13.7 million people. Over 1000 confirmed dead and half a million homes damaged or destroyed. Also in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sulawesi in Indonesia – 30,000 affected and 80 people killed.
- The recent Hurricane Dean (1st of this years season) in Belize, Mexico, Jamaica – has resulted in damage to 90% of banana plantations.

And looking back a little – the 2003 heatwave over much of Europe – caused 30,000 deaths (Rough Guide 50,000) - after days of consistent high temperatures. We also have vivid memories of the impact of Hurricane Katrina in the USA in New Orleans in 2005.

These events are evidence of the trends that scientists have predicted, though we cannot claim any one isolated event is proof of climate change due to the natural variability of the climate. The IPCC reports are highly recommended reading, providing measured and detailed information.

Temperatures in the polar regions have been consistently higher by 2-3 °C than the global average increases. The Antarctic ice sheet is breaking up. The melting of the Greenland ice sheet (predicted to disappear in 1000 years – now revised to 300 years) would mean 7 metres of sea level rise around the world.

At present despite all our individual efforts to modify our lifestyles, there is no apparent change in the inexorable increase of CO₂ each year. So when is there sufficient evidence? No one can stand up and say "this is it" – because of the inherent variability of our climate. But surely we can put the jigsaw pieces together ourselves?

This is humankind's biggest experiment – but there is no control. There is no second chance to try again and do better next time.... No plan B. And yet – the prevailing attitude remains – let's wait and see... Certainly in UK the press delight in stirring up controversy – denying that cc is behind recent events and giving far too much coverage to a handful of sceptical scientists.

Can technology be seen as a sufficient and effective solution?

We have seen huge advances in all kinds of renewable energies and technologies:

- Solar power
- Wind power
- Biofuels

Many have yet to be developed to their full potential such as tidal power, carbon sequestration, and the dimming of the suns rays.

There is no doubt that if these technologies could be rolled out into around the world – much of the fossil fuels we now depend upon could be replaced. For example the German 'Passivhaus' provides real excellence and innovation in terms of insulation and low energy usage.

Yet there are considerable problems – largely due to economics. These are relatively expensive technologies at present which are not yet available in large enough quantities. Until fossil fuel prices rise significantly, investment will continue to be limited. The potential of providing solar power to homes across Africa is enormous – but where will the funds come from?

Technology probably will indeed provide many of the answers but not within the short time scale that we have available. We need to share, network and above all, pour in funds for renewable technologies – but time is not on our side.

Sir John Houghton, former co chair of the IPCC committee says we now have 9 or 10 years until we reach 'tipping point' – the point at which we are committed to over 2°C increase in temperature. Until now the debate between politicians has generally been a trading of the 'possibles' – we can reduce our emissions by 10% or 15%... within so many years. But that is not the real debate. Surely the real debate is not what we can afford – but what is sustainable for this fragile earth.

We are living through 0.8°C – and it is often not pleasant. It is hard to imagine the impact of 2°C. This is where there is general agreement between IPCC Scientists, the Stern Review and environmental and campaigning groups:

We must not exceed a 2°C increase in global temperature or life as we know it is likely to change beyond all recognition.

An ethical Christian response

Throughout the bible we find ethical values, teaching us essentially to love our neighbour. There are numerous examples:

- Concern for our neighbours Exodus 22:1-15
- Laws about justice – Exodus 23: 6-9
- Defending the rights of the poor – Psalm 82
- Protecting the vulnerable – Exodus 22: 22-24
- Securing justice for the poor – Psalm 140: 12
- Genuine care about injustice – Isaiah 58:6-9
- Warnings against complacency – Amos 5:11-15
- Good news for the poor – Luke 4:14-21
- The good Samaritan - Luke 10:25-37
- Redistribution of wealth – Acts 4:32-35
- Protection of widows and orphans – Acts 6:1-7

These are not new to us – we know these teachings and we struggle to put them into action in our own lives. But have we translated these commands into action regarding climate change?

One of the most sobering concerns regarding climate change is that it is a truly global issue. We live in one world and greenhouse gas emissions spread around the world. Though it is the rich who have contributed overwhelmingly to climate change, it is poor people who are suffering most from the impacts:

- 1/6 of the world's population in the industrialised North produce 55% of CO₂ emissions.
- 1/6 of the world's population in the South produces 3% of CO₂ emissions

At present 1/6 of the world's population in the South lack access to safe water – this figure is likely to rise significantly as global climate changes.

The implications for poor people around the world are stark with increasingly severe and more frequent floods, droughts, sea level rises, cyclones and hurricanes. The predictions are that there will be 150 million environmental refugees by the end of the century. For example, there are 10 million people in Bangladesh and 25 million in China living below 1 metre of sea level. Where will they go?

Poor people have made little or no contribution to the problem of climate change and yet they will suffer the most severe consequences.

As Christians we should be leading the way, by example, by our teaching – and with love and compassion.

The challenges to our lifestyles?

Greenhouse gas emissions began rising after the industrial revolution. In the UK we are using up 3.1 planets worth of resources. Europe as a whole uses slightly less than this average. Nevertheless Europe's carbon footprint is 2.5 times the global average.

The New Economics Foundation in the UK have done a lot of research into life satisfaction – clearly demonstrating that life satisfaction is not linked to consumption. Middle income countries are generally happiest. Extremes of wealth and poverty generally do not bring contentment.

Most people are aware of the need to make changes to their lifestyle but few are prepared to make substantial change unless supported or forced to by economic factors or political will. Politicians find it extremely difficult to introduce radical change for fear of the backlash. Their vision is largely short term and based on the need to maintain economic stability and development, with an eye on the next election.

Marches Energy Agency has produced a carbon credit card. Their personal carbon allocation, based on implementing the theory of contraction and convergence, is 1.8 tonnes of CO₂. In UK the average UK citizen is currently accountable for 12.5 tonnes of CO₂ E a year. This provides a focused and helpful reminder of what our personal goals should be.

We do need to examine our personal lifestyles, our own carbon footprint. However, we need more than this. We need strong and supportive governmental policies to enable us to do much more than make minor adjustments. Some strong leadership in Europe here – Sweden comes to mind.

Nef recommend a return to a 'wartime economy'. Drastic changes are needed in terms of insulation for our homes, consumption patterns and transport. However, for Christians there

are some real positives to draw out – sharing products, sharing transport, supporting local events, local food production and being good neighbours. We need to be optimistic rather than apocalyptic. There is a real need for media coverage that provides positive role models – certainly in the UK there is overwhelming emphasis on consumption, fashion and carelessness.

The business community claim that such changes would ruin the economy. However, ignoring climate change will arguably do even more economic damage. (Stern Review 2006). Such changes will also open up completely new areas of development – notably in renewable energies and sustainable technologies. But advances in IT are also likely to bring many benefits for relatively low carbon inputs including virtual travel, virtual experiences and general excellence in communications such as improved video conferencing and communicating.

Limits on carbon consumption need to be led by what is sustainable by the planet rather than by what governments believe is achievable.

Conclusion - What is our contribution as Christians and Churches in addressing environmental problems?

Climate change is not an environmental issue – though thankfully environmentalists have been raising awareness of the issues for decades. By giving climate change a green or an environmental label, it makes it easier for us to shake off responsibility. Climate change needs to be mainstreamed. It is an issue of human rights and of justice; it is a political issue; an issue of economics. It is an ethical issue that we as Christians need to take responsibility for.

It will also become increasingly an issue of political stability; political leaders are ultimately responsible for dealing with the impact of climate change - whether from the floods we've experienced in the UK, or the heatwave, drought and loss of crops experienced here in S Europe this summer. Who got the blame for Hurricane Katrina?

This is ultimately an issue of human survival for life as we know it. Whatever happens with climate change, human life will continue but it may not be in ways or in numbers that we would like to envisage. Societies can and do crumble. We have a tendency to believe our civilisations are stable and secure – but we have numerous examples of civilisations that crumbled, often very fast - the Mayan civilisation or Easter Island. Our societies are often more fragile than we would like to believe. Blockading fuel stations in the UK in 2000 brought the UK to the point of collapse within 5 days.

Who will take the leadership? What will future generations say of us? Did they not know? Could they not understand, Why did they do so little, so late?

I attended last years climate change conference in Nairobi. Thousands of the world's political leaders unable to move forward – still trading in what is likely to be achievable in terms of reducing carbon emissions and making little or no progress in finding a viable alternative to Kyoto which expires in 2012.

Europe already has many positive examples of cooperation, trading, sharing and supporting newer members within the EU to help with their development. Some European countries,

notably in Scandinavia and Austria are leading the way with renewable technologies. This is an area where we are already providing leadership and we could provide committed leadership in tackling climate change.

We have looked today at the overwhelming evidence that climate change is occurring; we have looked at the alternative technologies; we have looked at the ethical imperatives in caring for the poor and bringing justice. What is God's will in all this? What is His way forward? We have a number of biblical promises such as Psalm 104, Genesis 6:9-13, 8:13-22 and Deuteronomy 33: 26-29. We can think back to His pride in Creation – the Morning stars singing for joy.

Let us take the initiative and say ENOUGH!

We have only one, infinitely beautiful, varied and fertile earth. So precious in God's eyes. Like the morning stars that sang for joy at creation, let us too cry out, burning brightly. We can stand together in unity in the light and love of Christ to say – ENOUGH!

Europe's religious leaders could take the lead. We have the capacity to mobilise our churches, to speak out and bring enormous pressure to bear on our political leaders. We can do this if we put all our energies and focus into this. We have just 9 years.....

During the working groups – I suggest we need to come up with 5 or 6 clear statements of purpose. Here are some thoughts to help initiate discussion:

- CC Christ centred, church led – motivated by love
- CC Creation's capacity – rather than economic possibilities
- 2 less than 2°C – not what we can achieve but what the earth can sustain.
- 2 less than 2 tonnes CO₂ emissions per person
- CC Carbon commerce - trading systems that are equitable and just and geared to supporting adaptation in poorer countries. Poor people are creditors not debtors
- CC Church Champions within each church to mobilize and support at the grass roots – equipping church members to hold their governments to account.

We have to stop sacrificing the earth on the altar of consumerism. We can lead the way. We will lead the way!