



The death of hope?

This article was written by John Anderson and first printed in the *Methodist Recorder*. It explores the tension between hope and despair at the heart of the climate crisis, as well as how Christians might respond.

We Christians face the future. We are bringing in Christ's kingdom on earth. We have faith and hope. But the world about us is quietly despairing and soon will noisily lament.

For it is now accepted that climate change is happening. Rather than comfortable 'global warming' which might lead to sunnier summers in Britain, people are realising that a more realistic description of climate change is "global heating."

Fire-ravaged forests in Russia, Alaska, Australia and the USA will take years to recover. Even in damp Britain, devastating fires left famously moist moors seriously damaged. For example on the wildlife-rich Smithhills estate, near Manchester 200 hectares of Woodland Trust land, including the very first plantings for the Trust's flagship Northern Forest have been irretrievably burnt. Their peat burned for six weeks killing innumerable frogs, toads and newts. One British firefighter said this summer: "This is climate change in action."

The warmed sea is rising globally 3 mm a year. The devastation seen in North and South Carolina was made worse by the increasing violence of hurricanes because of rising sea temperature and by the storm surges which are accentuated by the sea level rise. The major US Navy base on the eastern seaboard at Norfolk, Virginia is gradually being inundated. These facts are now common knowledge. Uncommon knowledge, however, is the fact that there is no end in sight for the increasing temperatures and rising sea level.

Adaptation is occurring. Sophisticated flood alerts are in place in rich countries. Seawalls are being raised. Drains are being

re-blocked on upland Yorkshire farms to hold water back from surging downstream to flood York yet again. In Bradford I have seen a one metre high wall quietly erected round an electricity substation so that this vital infrastructure is not taken out of action when the local beck floods again. In Russia, Greenpeace is training volunteers to spot fires in their vast forests before they become raging infernos.

I have been at a water engineers' conference where all their talk was on how to adapt our infrastructure to deal with future floods. At the end, in despair I rose and said that it was impossible to adapt to an ever-rising sea-level and ever more violent downpours of rain. We cannot raise the dykes for ever; finally they will be overtopped.

The only long-term answer is to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to mitigate climate change, not attempt forlornly to adapt to the inexorable. Mitigation trumps adaptation.

As Christians we believe in God the Creator, the evolver. Made as the only creature which has the consciousness of how we are affecting the integrity and continuance of God's wonderful world, we can see what needs to be done and can do it. Our mistake has been to think that we can fashion the world for our own benefit. Yet the Bible is clear: we are tenants of God's earth; we are gardeners of our globe. In Matthew 20:1 and Luke 20:9 Jesus tells parables of the vineyard in which God is the landowner. In Genesis 2:15 we read: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." In other words, we are charged to care for the earth for our God. Moreover, as Sir John Houghton, the former Director-General of the Meteorological Office said: "In dedicating to humans the care of his creation, God has not left us to do it on our own." He sent Christ, Houghton said. So we have hope, not despair.



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We are not constrained by the need to win votes in the next election or make our bottom line balance. We speak words of eternity. We do actions of everlasting significance. To try to

adapt is to fiddle with the controls of an earth running away driven by a myopic and power-mad driver, the human being. Mitigation of global heating is our calling. The Qur'an puts it well in Surah 55: 3-9 when referring to our role as part of the Creator's purpose: "Keep the balance with equity."

As Leo Tolstoy famously said, "What, then, must we do?" Significantly, he wrote: "Property is the root of all evil". So we must preach and act to show that the earth is not our property. Every action of us as individuals and corporately as a church must be to help preserve the God-created biodiversity of our globe and to do this by reducing the emissions of carbon dioxide: as Christians we should not just ask how much does this action or product cost in money but how much in addition does it cost the earth in carbon dioxide emissions.

We can use only renewable electricity; we can move on foot or by bicycle or use public transport (except aeroplanes) wherever possible. We can grow as much food as we can, especially fruit trees which absorb carbon dioxide and emit oxygen as well as producing food. We can act so that we take as little as possible from our Lord's Earth and give it as much as we can.

This means moving beyond the shy greenery of the church to influence the proud world, establishing eco-groups such as Friends of the Earth, and by supporting Greenpeace. We can install photovoltaic panels, not only on our own buildings but also on local schools.



Members of Baildon Methodist Church, for example, have initiated such actions by helping to raise £13,000 to install solar electricity-generating panels on a nearby primary school, and by helping to establish and maintain a local community orchard where the fruit and berries are available for all to pick and use. Members of the church are also taking part from Resurrection Day to Ascension Day in 2019 in a discussion based on "Tenants of the King", an excellent small group study published by Operation Noah.

Bradford North Circuit has sent a Memorial to the Methodist Conference supporting the divestment of Methodist money from fossil fuel investments such as those in gas and oil. The Circuit now asks every church at each March Circuit Meeting to bring replies to the two questions. "How have we this year reduced our carbon dioxide emissions as individuals?" and "How has our church this year reduced our carbon dioxide emissions?"

Our faith and hope is undimmed: we express this through love of this world as an emanation of God's love for the whole cosmos. We are not trying to save life in this world for scientific or human-centred reasons; we are worshipping our God by reverencing all creation. We are one bright thread in the tapestry of creation designed and woven by God. We rejoice with enthusiasm in our calling.

