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Brian Cuthbertson, Diocese of London



championing green initiatives with local churches.

Brian Cuthbertson, the Head of Environment and Sustainability at the Diocese of London, will retire at the end of this month.

Married to Zoe, 70-year-old Brian lives in south London and has been a great advocate for highlighting environmental issues in the national environmental network. He's worked at the Diocese of London since September 2008 and before that ran its Diocesan Advisory Committee and Redundant Churches Uses Committee.

The Church of England's Environment Programme team caught up with him to find out more about his great passion for taking care of God's creation and how his faith has helped him over the years.

What inspires you to care for the environment?

This feels like a holy calling for me. As Christians, we believe that the environment is God's Creation, but terribly marred by human activity. Of course, life has been much improved by advances in science, technology and medicine, but that has come at an escalating cost which we have disregarded for much too long. Too often we've taken into consideration only our own human interests (as we perceived them), not the wellbeing of other life and the conditions for life to be sustained, including our own. Most of all, humans have for millennia left God out of the equation, at least in relation to daily life – preferring to confine him within our religious observances, and even then seeking comfort or benefits for ourselves.

I give a lot of thought to what we mean when we say that God created the world. I have a scientific background from school days. My earliest career ambition was to be an astronomer (but my Maths wasn't good enough). I'm well aware of the Big Bang theory, of evolution, of predation and competition in nature (as well as cooperation and interdependence). But ultimately, where other than from God did everything find its origin? What is humankind, that God is mindful of us? To quote the late Stephen Hawking 'Why did the Universe go to all the bother of existing?' (I don't find his answers to that question at all satisfying!)

Yet this 'pale blue dot', as photographed from the far reaches of the solar system, is anything but insignificant. God has blessed it with a personal visitation by his Son. That too is past understanding. But let's not mess up this earth on which he trod.

What challenges you the most at the moment with climate change and the impact it is having?

Climate change, together with biodiversity loss and other interconnected threats such as waste in the ocean, is of course an unfolding calamity of unimaginable proportions. The impacts are complex, but more and more clear to anyone willing to accept what even Boris Johnson (a decade ago, in my hearing) described as 'an immense body of evidence'. We've got to the point now where the contribution of climate change to individual weather events can be more or less reliably assessed.

The main challenges I feel at the moment are how to balance our concern and efforts to contribute to climate change mitigation against other appalling events going on in the world; and in relation to both, seeking answers to the question 'Where is God in all this?' We face what looks like

apocalypse (maybe in the Biblical sense as well as that of common speech). But still we must persevere in doing all we can, however puny our efforts may seem to us. The motto 'Think global, act local', is as apt as ever. God has honoured us by entrusting us with this mission. By fulfilling it (with His help) we are somehow modelling God's Kingdom and new Creation.

What inspires you the most in the Church of England's ambition to be net zero carbon by 2030? Do you think this can be achieved?

Indeed I am inspired by this, especially by the astonishing sea change that's happened over the last 4 years or so. We have had the Shrinking the Footprint campaign since 2006, and the 'Church and Earth' report in 2009 (which I edited for Bishop Chartres, then lead Bishop), but action nationally on both of these was, shall we say, underwhelming. Resources were lacking, and the (sterling) efforts of some were retarded by an undertow of apathy and even resistance from certain quarters. It was depressing. Then with two significant synod motions in 2019 and 2020, which mandated the Energy Footprint Tool and then Net Zero Carbon, the whole picture was transformed. The Church of England seemed to wake up. There was a new sense of urgency, with resources to match. There had been several other key synod motions over the years, but they seemed to fall on stony ground. I think what was different by 2019 had a lot to do with the public mood around Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future and XR. If it were happening now, the effect might be different, with backsliding by the government and public anger against the tactics of XR and JSO. God moves in a mysterious way.

Can we achieve net zero? Could Jesus feed the five thousand?

How has your faith helped you in your work and your commitment to seeing Christians take action on climate change?

I believe that our ministry should be prophetic, in every sense of that word. The other day I visited a church in North London close to the heart of the Jewish community. That wasn't connected to current events, it was a coincidence, which oddly hadn't occurred to me till I got there and chatted with the Vicar. Yet the message I'd already prepared – before October 7th – was about Elijah and his activities recounted in 1 Kings 19, which a still small voice suggested I should speak about. I'm not suggesting we should imitate Elijah's actions, which were rather violent. My point was that like us, he was at times timid and fearful, and also like us, he wasn't the only show in town. There were other prophets, some unnamed, walking on and off the stage, saying and doing whatever they did. Yet centuries later, and perhaps ever since, Elijah came to be regarded as the archetypal prophet of Israel, commissioned by God to announce his purposes. I'll attempt no further explanation here of those times or of ours, but my point is, if we trust God and do what he expects of us, he can work wonders.

Tell us about some highlights from your role in the environment.

We waged a campaign in the Diocese of London against a third runway at Heathrow. This actually began in 2003, it wasn't then only about the environment, but about the broader impacts, especially as the project involved the demolition of St Mary's Harmondsworth. In 2009 I followed up with another report, which was about the climate change impacts. It was adopted in Diocesan Synod (against some opposition), and later by the

five London boroughs opposing LHR expansion.

Our efforts among other campaigners did have an impact, forcing London Heathrow to rethink. While not abandoning the project, they changed it a lot (including a reprieve for the church and some of Harmondsworth village), and at least some climate mitigation. Heathrow's Director of Strategy (who happened to be a former college friend with whom I travelled to Italy in 1974), came to Diocesan House to discuss with us. OK, so this was no more than a partial success. I remember saying to colleagues that something else would happen which would sink the project. I never foresaw the pandemic. That has at least kicked the issue into the long grass.

Also in 2016, we were approached on behalf of a delegation of council officers from a major Chinese city. They had spotted our web pages on the environment and climate change. A group of about 30 visited us, hosted by St Paul's Hammersmith. They wanted to know about our approach to reducing emissions from historic buildings! Our bilingual Powerpoint (with Chinese by my wife) was a knockout! For me, this shows how you never know where your influence may fall and take root.

Any advice to fellow colleagues working across the country to achieve this aim?

Persevere and don't lose heart. When you fall short (as we always do), re-group and re-cast your plans going forward. Be prepared to go on well into the 2030s. Even if net zero carbon is achieved, it will need to be sustained. Any offsetting should taper off as capital projects continue.

Aim for the highest technical proficiency. One of my faults is that I can seem too highbrow and professorial. Nonetheless I would advocate raising your knowledge base with background reading whenever time permits. Take deep dives into the issues and options for mitigation, applying these to the specifics of parishes and buildings and lifestyles.

But also have fun. This area of work is fascinating, in spite of the awfulness. It isn't a sin to enjoy it. I've also found I've got to meet some wonderful kindred spirits, in and out of church and Christian faith – in other faith groups, charities and NGOs, even in politics (which isn't all a cesspit).

And finally, what are your plans for retirement?

I'm not sure yet. It would be lovely to sleep for 100 days and nights, but I don't see that happening. I have health issues, but I want to rise above all that. There's stuff to catch up with at home and I want to increase local church involvement. Other options being explored...

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