

Nobody can deny that climate change awareness has grown significantly over the past years. It is now no longer a niche interest, but everybody's issue, writes The Bishop of Norwich, Graham Usher, following his appointment as Lead Bishop for Environmental Affairs.

The Bishop of Norwich on a garden bench

Diocese of Norwich

Many individuals have made changes, large and small. Plastic usage is decreasing, electric cars are on the up, and organisations see reducing environmental impacts as a core strand of their corporate social responsibility.

But it never quite feels as though we are going fast enough.

Faced with worrying headlines and worst-case scenarios, a natural response can be guilt and despondency. Perhaps this is why some would rather simply deny there is a problem at all. It can feel like too much for us to deal with. And, acting alone, it probably is.

The strength of the life of the Church is in its communities both local and global. We recently received a wake-up call when a [survey](#) by Tearfund showed only one in 10 young adult Christians said they felt their church was doing enough to engage with the issue of climate change.

Having accepted the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury to lead the Church of England's Environment Programme, I want to amplify the prophetic voice of the young, and empower the leadership they show in this area, but they cannot do it alone and we can all do more.

To be part of this kind of sustained change, as individuals and as communities, we need to feel that what we are doing is part of a global movement that can really succeed.

So, what can the Church of England do about climate change? And why should Christians see this as a part of their witness?



For in Him all things were created

The great hymn of praise to God in Colossians 1.15-20 uses prepositions - 'in', 'through', 'for', 'before', 'together', 'to' - to give emphasis to everything being connected in Christ and through Christ to all dimensions of creation. Everything is in view, as far as the eye can see and beyond; flora, fauna, geology, wind and ocean currents, distant stars and furthest galaxies are wrapped in Christ. God's purpose in Christ is to bring to wholeness not only humanity but the entire created order.

The Gospels are full of stories of the growth of seeds, the choking of thistles, the beauty of lilies and the fruitfulness of trees. Jesus noticed and so must we. We have the privilege and responsibility to care for the earth and to tread gently on it. At the heart of our response must be actions to prevent the opposite from happening. This will take courageous decisions.

Those decisions could be local – for example a church switching to a green electricity provider, or national, such as bold Government policy to increase sustainable power generation and subsidise green heating technology. We cannot expect these decisions to be taken on a wide scale if all of the cost must be borne locally. National and local policy must align.

The Church of England can use its connections to drive this agenda, ensuring that thousands of local decisions needed to shrink our own carbon footprint and ensure our buildings remain places of welcome and hospitality.

I will be encouraging everyone to prayerfully engage with this part of our Christian discipleship and to ask questions of their church and community leaders, as well as members of parliament, as to what is being done to help remove barriers to green adaptations.

In many cases there are already win-win – for example [green electricity tariffs](#) are now often the cheapest available and if all churches switched to them, we could cut our footprint by nearly a quarter.

Flooded fields and buildings

As Anglicans, the care of creation is a key part of the [Five Marks of Mission](#) which describe the role of our worldwide Church in the fostering of Christian discipleship. We are part of a global network, and hear first-hand from our sisters and brothers in Christ from regions where climate change is not an abstract phenomenon, but something which is displacing communities, causing crop failure and increasing loss of life through extreme weather events.

Alongside global warming, we must not forget the risks posed to biodiversity. Anybody watching Sir David Attenborough's recent series A Perfect Planet cannot have escaped a burning feeling of injustice evoked, not least by the warning that half of the species on earth could become extinct by 2050.

Combined together, our churchyards are the size of a small national park. With biodiversity threatened on a global scale, we can show the way by encouraging portions of [churchyards to be managed as meadow](#) to help create a diverse habitat for local species of plants and animals, and to offset emissions by investing in reforestation further afield. All these steps can make a difference.

The coming year gives an opportunity to increase momentum and for the UK to use its hosting of the G7 and COP 26 to make a global statement that we intend to lead by example. Christians, alongside people of other faiths, intend to play their part by encouraging practical changes at local and national levels, but also as local and global advocates for far better care and justice for God's gift of creation.

Bishop of Norwich's bee hives

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What we can learn from the Coronavirus pandemic

Following a year of the Coronavirus pandemic, we have now all experienced a major global event which has dramatically altered our way of life. We have learnt of the emotional, financial and human cost that has gone with that, and it has been very difficult. Yet many commentators suggest that this will be miniscule in comparison to the effects of climate change and biodiversity collapse.

As individuals we have learnt that practices such as travelling long distances for business and frequent flights, previously unavoidable, can now be reduced as virtual meeting technology has advanced.

And globally, the expedition of the development and roll-out of safe vaccines is a huge testament to human endeavour when we are aligned behind a common goal. It is important that the benefits now being measured in the UK can swiftly be widened to the global community through schemes such as Covax.

We can change with speed when we have to.

And now we need this kind of global response to the climate crisis if we are to protect our island planet home; no less urgent – no less committed. We have a narrow window where it is not too late to act.

In the coming weeks, as buds on the trees I planted last year burst with fresh leaves and my bees start to build up their colonies, I will be renewed in awe and wonder at the beauty and intricacy of God's creation. Being in nature always brings me hope.

As Christ's people, following in his ways of loving God and our neighbours, we all have a role to play - as individuals, churches, communities and as nations. Our actions matter to God because they enable our neighbours either to diminish or to flourish. With sustained meaningful steps forward we can all be part of a global movement to turn the situation around, and to be the generation which, when faced with our biggest test, chose the path of hope for all creation.

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Read more

- [The Church of England's Environment Programme](https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/stories-and-features/courageous-decision-making-needed-tackle-climate-change-says)

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