

The Bishop of Norwich, Graham Usher, was invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to lead the Church of England’s Environment Programme with a charge to lead bold, deliberate, collaborative action across the Church to tackle the grave existential crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. He took up the post in June 2021. This is a brief overview of his priorities in this role and answers to some frequently asked questions.



Why did you want to be lead bishop for the environment? What motivates you?

As a child I grew up with countryside around our village and had the freedom to explore the woods, hedgerows, and ponds, collecting and recording various insect and amphibian specimens. I went on to study ecological science at university. The sense of awe and wonder of God’s creation has never left me and I value spending time in wild places. I guess these places, or just a daily walk in nature, re-balances me and draws me closer to the God in whom I live and move and have my very being.

Most diocesan bishops take on leading an aspect of the national work of the Church of England and this role seemed a good fit. The role involves championing that aspect of the mission of the Church that seeks to care for God’s creation. Many Anglicans around the world, especially in the poorest places, are already impacted by climate change, yet the cause was not of their making – climate change knows no international borders. We are also seeing a huge loss in biodiversity which is deeply worrying not only because so much of our food production relies on insect pollination, but also because we are losing the precious breadth and wonder of creation. That can’t be as God intended, not least because throughout the first creation account in Genesis there is that beautiful repeated phrase, at the end of each day of creating, that ‘God saw that it was good’.

What are your priorities for this role?

My three priorities as lead bishop are focused on buildings, land and people. I want to develop our plans to get our buildings to net zero carbon and alleviate some of the blockages that get in the way – mostly getting permission and the challenge of funding; to enhance biodiversity on all church owned land; and to see the evangelistic opportunity of working with people around environmental issues – especially our young people who are often taking the lead in this area.

Why should environmental issue particularly concern Christians?

This video gives a good explanation.

Here are some of the most common questions that have come Bishop Graham's way.

What can be done about draughty church buildings?

In many ways, our historic buildings are exemplars of sustainability; still fulfilling the original purpose for which they were built, centuries later.

We know from our 2012 study that three quarters of the Church’s greenhouse gas emissions come from our schools, our busiest churches & cathedrals, and our offices: those buildings where the heating and lighting is turned on many hours per day and so the energy use is high. For these large buildings, or complex sites with multiple buildings, the solutions may include new technologies such as heat pumps and solar panels, alongside LED lighting and improvements to the fabric. Meantime, our thousands of smaller churches, used once or twice a week, need simpler and less expensive solutions such as maintaining roofs & gutters, fixing broken windows, installing pew heaters, and switching to 100 per cent renewable electricity.

Parishes can start by using the [Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon](#).

How achievable is Church of England’s net zero target for 2030?

I acknowledge the challenge! It’s not as simple as turning down a thermostat from some central office. It involves local decisions – and plenty of discussions by parishes about boilers or lighting – and how we most responsibly spend the resources given in faith by congregations. Each of these decisions, big or small, is a contribution to the worldwide impact.

To help achieve this, we have developed a [tool](#) to enable parish churches to use their energy bills to calculate their carbon footprint. Further tools are in development to allow easy carbon calculations for cathedrals, church schools, clergy housing, diocesan property, and from work-related travel.

Using data from church energy audits, we have developed a practical path to net zero carbon for churches to follow, supporting practical changes to improve energy efficiency and decarbonise buildings. We have also developed specific guidance for heating and energy efficiency, and we run a programme of webinars supporting churches to reach net zero carbon emissions.

A Routemap to Net Zero Carbon plan has been out for consultation and is being revised accordingly.

How can you manage church land more sustainably when you rent it out to tenant farmers?

My theological rationale is that we are stewards of God’s creation and so these historic assets should be managed in such a way as to maximise our care of the planet. I’m a keen believer in working in partnership with our farmers, sharing nature based solutions, and learning from those whose farms are already exemplars for the dual purposes of nature conservation and food production. We are already working towards this with other stakeholders such as the National Farmers’ Union, learning from the National Trust and the Duchy of Cornwall, as well seeking to bring change via government grants and incentives.

What about churchyards?

Churchyards are important for their habitats and as refuges for wildlife and plant life because they have not been developed or farmed for centuries. Most churches have some green space. And in some urban areas they are the only green ‘breathing’ space available for both wildlife and people. We estimate that 10,000 of our 16,000 churches have churchyards. That’s a precious resource which can make a significant difference to the biodiversity of the UK.

Our churchyards are being surveyed as part of a Church of England project to create a free digital map of every grave and feature in every churchyard in the country, which will help to manage their biodiversity too. We also encourage everyone to get involved with the [Churches Count on Nature](#) annual wildlife audit event each June which contributes to the National Biodiversity Network database.

In the Diocese of Norwich, which I serve, we have been working in partnership with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust for over 40 years and many of our churches join in initiatives with conservation charities such as Caring for God’s Acre and A Rocha UK.

What’s your view on the Church divesting from fossil fuels?

I hold a nuanced view on this. I supported divestment with our diocesan funds in the Diocese of Norwich, as we do not have the resources to engage with the oil and gas companies with which we currently have shares. At the same time, I also support the National Investing Bodies* policy of engagement, as agreed by General Synod. This policy of engagement is bringing change to boardrooms and industry practice, using measures regularly updated by the Transition Pathway Initiative, established in partnership with the Church of England National Investment Bodies.

The National Investing Bodies are [working towards divestment by 2023](#) from all companies which are not aligned with the Parish Climate Commitments, and I note that they divested from another 20 companies in January 2022.

* The NIBs are the Church Commissioners for England, the Church of England Pensions Board and the CBF Church of England Funds, managed by CCLA Investment Management.

What does the Church have to say about global repercussions/actions?

This is absolutely a global issue and the richer, more industrialised countries have a duty to all who are suffering from the effects of climate change. I’m fully behind the renewed commitment from COP26 to mobilise \$100 billion every year in climate finance to support less wealthy nations, and the UK – along with other rich countries - must play its part.

Climate change is a worldwide problem which has local consequences. And it can only be solved with a worldwide effort made up of local initiatives. Climate breakdown is already impacting disproportionately on the world’s poorest. Climate migration, food and water scarcity, and extreme weather events will only increase as our planet warms.

Moral duty begins with seeing the other person made in the image of God, wanting to be and do to them how I would want people to be and do to me, knowing that Jesus calls me to love God and love my neighbour.

What would you say to a climate sceptic?

First look at the reputable scientific data and reports, such as that from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The care of creation is part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ and is central to the five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion. Many of our Anglican sisters and brothers, especially in poorer parts of the world and low lying island communities, are being seriously impacted by the daily realities of extreme weather events, rising sea levels, crop failure and biodiversity loss. Responding is not an option for the ministry of the Church but an imperative for the mission of the Church.

What would you say to a young person who thinks the Church is not relevant on these issues?

We shall not reach this younger generations unless we engage with the issues that they are so passionate about. They look to the church to be credible in what it is saying about the environment, climate justice and biodiversity loss. We need to be good news to all and that means it’s about all of our lives; it’s not an either or. Responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies is part of our mission, part of our expression of what it means to be a Christian. And I want to ensure the voices of young people are heard by the Church, and their actions witnessed, as they have much to teach the whole Church, and wider society, about how we should care for our single island planet home.

What do you do in your own life, to live more sustainably?

One action I undertake in order to share our connection with wider creation, within the ministry entrusted to me, is to give a hazel sapling to each person I confirm as a symbol that disciples of Jesus are called to be stewards of creation. I do this also because Mother Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century mystic, held a hazel nut in the palm of her hand and three truths were revealed to her about all that God has made, “The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; the third is that God looks after it.”

On a practical level I am now using renewable electricity in my home and offices, and for many [driving miles](#), try to take public transport where possible, and recycle and compost as much as possible. For the few flights I need to make, I offset the carbon emissions with Climate Stewards I’m also working at Bishop’s House to convert the ancient gardens back to an organic system and working with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust to improve the biodiversity in the garden. We are already seeing orchids emerge having changed our mowing regime and new species of insect are being found.

Biography

Bishop Graham is the lead bishop for the environment. He studied ecological science at the University of Edinburgh and theology at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, before training for ministry at Westcott House, Cambridge. He has maintained an interest in biodiversity and landscapes, chairing the Forestry Commission’s Forestry and Woodlands Committee in the Northeast and being a Secretary of State appointee to the Northumberland National Park Authority when Rector of Hexham. He is a Church Commissioner, with a particular interest in enhancing the biodiversity of their housing, farming and forestry assets. He is a member of the Anglican Consultative Council and has written two books *Places of Enchantment*; *Meeting God in Landscapes* and *The Way Under Our Feet; a Spirituality of Walking*.

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