

GENERAL SYNOD

DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION: ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Background Paper from the Southwark Diocesan Synod

Background to the motion:

1. This motion arises from a challenge by a 23 year old member of the congregation at St John's Waterloo: the parish contains the UK headquarters of Shell and she questioned the Church of England (C of E)'s engagement with the fossil fuel industry. A motion was passed by Lambeth North Deanery for Southwark Diocesan Synod. There, an amended version was passed. The motion does not seek to consider how the church might respond to Government and international policy, and neither does it consider the question of disinvestment in detail. It recognises that decisions on investment remain with the NIB's. But if it is passed it will enable the C of E to have a more coherent and stronger voice in the run-up to the next major climate conference in Paris in 2015, and we will also be clearer in our encouragement to local churches and congregations to take action.
2. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has recently published the first instalment of its Fifth Report.¹ It details the physical evidence; it explains that on the ground, in the air, in the oceans, global warming is 'unequivocal', adding that it is extremely likely [95% confidence] that human influence has been the 'dominant cause' for global warming since the 1950s. It explains that a pause in warming over the past 15 years is too short to reflect long-term trends; it is likely that the 'missing' heat is going into warming the oceans. If we continue as at present, the concentration of carbon dioxide is projected to increase to 650 parts per million (ppm) by 2100, compared with a maximum of 280 ppm over the last 600,000 years. This correlates to an average temperature rise of between 4 degrees and 6 degrees Celsius.
3. Many do not realise that we are currently on course for catastrophic global warming within the lifetime of our grandchildren. According to Bishop David Atkinson, referring to the work of Professor Kevin Anderson,²

3.5 degrees, which is beyond dangerous, is quite possible on present trends. The absolutely crucial point is not what our rate or amount of emissions will be in 2050, or even 2020, but what is the *cumulative amount* of emissions between now and 2050.
4. Price Waterhouse Coopers Low Carbon Economy Index 2012 '*Too late for two degrees?*'³ argues that there will need to be radical transformations in the ways the global economy currently functions, a rapid uptake of renewable energy, sharp falls in fossil fuel use or massive deployment of carbon capture and storage (CCS), removal of industrial emissions and halting deforestation.' However, CCS is currently extremely expensive, and substantial doubt exists over its viability.
5. Why does this matter for Christians? The Archbishop of Canterbury has said: 'The present challenges of environment and economy, of human development and global poverty, can only be faced with extraordinary Christ-liberated courage.'⁴

¹ <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg1/#.Usqis2RdWA0>

² Professor Kevin Anderson, <http://www.slideshare.net/DFIDofprofessor-kevin-anderson-climate-change-going-beyond-dangerous>

³ <http://www.pwc.co.uk/sustainability-climate-change/publications/low-carbon-economy-index.jhtml>

⁴ <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/our-buildings/shrinking-the-footprint.aspx>

The Fifth Mark of Mission is:

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

In 2005, the Church of England General Synod motion commended the MPA Report *Sharing God's Planet*, and agreed

...in order to promote responsible use of God's created resources and to reduce and stabilise global warming, [we] commend to...the producers of material and energy systems, safe, secure and sustainable products and processes based on near-zero-carbon emitting sources.

6. The C of E *Shrinking the Footprint* (StF) campaign followed, firmly rooted in Synodical decisions, stating that 'The Church is committed to a carbon reduction target of 80% by 2050, with an interim target of 42% by 2020.' The Church of England Report, *Church and Earth: 2009 – 2016 The Church of England's Seven-Year Plan on Climate Change and the Environment*, did not come to General Synod, but was endorsed by a number of bishops. It suggested 2020 as a date by which the Church could have in place a portfolio that is clearly sustainable, and which is 'towards dis-investment' from fossil fuel extraction and supply companies.

Theology and Ethics

7. The 2012 Ash Wednesday Declaration *Climate Change and the Purposes of God* published by Operation Noah and signed by, among others, the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Bishop of London, included these statements:

Continuing to pollute the atmosphere when we know the dangers, goes against what we know of God's ways and God's will... For our generation, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels has become essential to Christian discipleship.

8. Genesis 1 and John 1 place humanity at the pinnacle of creation, with the responsibility for stewardship of our world. The story of the Flood expresses this relationship in terms of God's covenant with humanity and 'every living creature that is with you, for all future generations'.⁵ Colossians 1 and Romans 8 connect the cosmic Christ and the created order: 'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'⁶ As humans, part of the created order, we have a responsibility to live out the love of God for God's creation.
9. There is a clear ethical imperative. The rich world has produced by far the larger proportion of the gases which cause climate change; but 'it is the poorest of the poor in the world, and this includes poor people even in prosperous societies, who are going to be the worst hit.'⁷ And we have a responsibility to future generations. Having reviewed various technological and economic options for mitigating and adapting to climate change, Professor James Hansen, formerly climate scientist at NASA, wrote

The basic matter, however, is not one of economics. It is a matter of morality – a matter of intergenerational justice...Our parents honestly did not know that their actions could harm future generations. We, the current generation, can only pretend that we did not know.⁸

⁵ Gen 9.12

⁶ Col 1.17

⁷ Rajendra Pachauri: <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/12/the-inequality-of-climate-change/>

⁸http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2011/20110505_CaseForYoungPeople.pdf

10. Some commentators believe that the relief of poverty through the provision of low-cost energy is a greater ethical responsibility than the mitigation of climate change. Current debates in the UK are focusing on the cost of the move to renewable energy for the poorest in our society. But the long-term effect – particularly on the poor – is likely to be so huge that all necessary steps to reduce the risks and move to a low-carbon economy should be being taken now.
11. The challenge is political as well as ethical. The timescales involved are longer than the democratic cycle; the costs of moving to a low-carbon economy are perceived by many as high and are therefore unpopular, and after the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen conference, much of the impetus for change was lost. Climate change sceptics and lobbying bodies have been effective in sowing public doubt. The present government is unlikely to live up to its early commitment to be ‘the greenest government ever.’

What can we do, as Christians?

12. Our potential responses fall into three areas: institutional, corporate and individual.
13. *Institutional responses:* The investment issues are extremely complex, lying on the cusp of political and long-term economic policy and in the context of the NIB’s fiduciary duty to obtain best value. But the church could use its power as a large investor to take a lead. We note that the EIAG is undertaking a review of its existing advice to the National Investment Bodies on climate change. We are very grateful for the part the NIBs play in the mission of the Church. However, there is already in place an ethical policy covering a wide range of ethical issues, including climate change which makes clear that maximizing income is not the only priority.
14. The growing international campaign to encourage disinvestment from companies which extract or sell fossil fuels, led by Bill McKibben and 350.org in the USA and Operation Noah’s ‘Bright Now,’ campaign in the UK, is based on the work of the Carbon Tracker Initiative.⁹ It concludes that to have a reasonable chance of staying within a global 2 degrees rise in temperature, the world can only afford to emit about another 530 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. We are currently burning more than 30 gigatonnes globally per year (which at current rates gives us less than 18 years)¹⁰. The current world economy is valued on stock portfolios that depend on nearly 2,800 gigatonnes of carbon from proven oil, gas and coal reserves that have not yet been burned.
15. Disinvestment is seen as a way for investors to send a clear signal that the move towards a low-carbon economy is urgent and necessary. It is also seen as a response to the risk of ‘stranded assets,’ – the argument made by Lord Stern¹¹, among others, and there is increasing confidence in low-carbon investment portfolios. Around the world many organisations, including all five Anglican dioceses in New Zealand and the Quakers in the UK, have taken the decision to disinvest.¹²
16. Some people respond to the call for disinvestment by encouraging investors to engage with fossil fuel companies so that they reorder their priorities and reduce their emissions. Others recommend disinvestment, initially, from very high emission practices – for example, coal and tar-sands – with a proposed time-frame for moving to a low-carbon portfolio.

⁹ <http://www.carbontracker.org/>

¹⁰ Mike Berners-Lee and Duncan Clark's: 'The Burning Question' (Profile Books 2013)

¹¹ <http://www.carbontracker.org/wastedcapital>

¹² <http://350.org.nz/five-anglican-church-dioceses-lead-the-way-in-fossil-fuel-divestment/> ,
<http://www.quaker.org.uk/news/quakers-disinvest-fossil-fuels>

17. The Church Investors Group – the membership body for church investors of which the NIB’s are significant members – has already produced a document ‘Climate Change and Church Investors – Framing the Debate.’¹³ A positive step would be if the EIAG’s review has clear recommendations on short, medium and long-term investment policies. These might include continuing engagement with companies, initial disinvestment from high-emission practices and moving towards a sustainable portfolio with investment in low-carbon and renewable energy companies.
18. *Corporate responses:* Responsibility for the C of E’s action over sustainability and climate change falls between the Cathedral and Church Buildings Council, Mission and Public Affairs, the Diocesan Environmental network and individual Bishops. Investment responsibility within the NIBs lies with them. The Bishop of London chairs the *Shrinking the Footprint* (StF) steering group, but there is no other lead bishop on environmental matters. Engagement in issues of sustainability across Dioceses is patchy, even though concern for the environment is high on the agenda of many members of congregations.
19. *Shrinking the Footprint* is the C of E’s national campaign to enable the whole Church to address in faith, practice and mission the issue of climate change. It was launched in 2006 following General Synod’s motion encouraging all dioceses and parishes to reduce their energy consumption with the overall aim of an 80% reduction by 2050. StF has a network of 40 Diocesan Environment Officers (DEOs), almost entirely voluntary and a Bishops’ Environmental Group of 45 members. Regular links are kept with the Anglican Communion Environmental Network and a number of faith-based and inter-faith environmental organisations. The StF team consists of only two people - a part-time consultant attached to MPA and 70% of a post (environmental policy officer) based in Cathedrals and Church Buildings plus support from Communications.
20. The Church of England urgently needs clearer communication about responses to climate change and clearer strategic thinking for a sustainable future. A sensible way forward, which has been discussed with the StF steering group, would be to put that group on a surer Synodical footing. The re-formatted group would report to Archbishops’ Council, with membership drawn from all three Houses of Synod and the councils MPA, CBC, CFCE and, perhaps, Education. It would have the specific remit of coordinating and developing the C of E’s strategic and local response to climate change, working closely with EIAG and with international groups including the Anglican Communion Environment Network chaired by the Archbishop of Cape Town. An episcopal member of that group could convene the DEO's network, to ensure clearer communication between central bodies and parishes.
21. *Individual responses:* Diocesan Environmental Officers and individual members of the C of E are already very actively involved in these issues. Keenly aware of the urgency of the situation a growing number of church members have become involved in direct action against climate change. A strengthened response from the Church of England will support those members already involved and encourage others to make links between the climate crisis and responsible discipleship. This is both a missional and a pastoral opportunity.

Canon Giles Goddard
Southwark

¹³ <http://www.churchinvestorsgroup.org.uk/>