

DECEIVING OURSELVES: HOW WE FAIL TO ACT ON OUR  
KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

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*Synopsis: Evidence from all around the world shows us that our planet is facing climatic change. Floods and droughts, extreme weather events such as the hurricane in New Orleans and the ever-accelerating ice melt of the Arctic show us that the world's climates are changing at an unprecedented rate. Now there are fewer and fewer people questioning the human contribution to climate change and global warming. The evidence as gathered and peer reviewed by the UN's Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change points towards carbon emissions as a major contributor to global warming.*

*Until quite recently Christian Churches, by and large, had very little to say about environmental matters. Indeed the Christian religion has been accused by many, notably Lynn White Jnr, of being responsible for propagating the idea that humankind has of the God-given right to dominate the created order. Whilst that is a gross simplification of the situation, it is true that until the last 10-15 years Churches have done very little towards becoming aware of and reducing their own 'carbon footprint', teaching care for the environment to their congregations as part of a Christian lifestyle or lobbying government and business for action to curb carbon emissions.*

*Within the last ten years the situation has changed. At the Conference of 2000 the British Methodist Church adopted an Environmental Policy and a number of other churches have followed with similar policies their own. There is an ecumenical programme, the Eco-Congregation Programme, which encourages individual congregations to undertake initiatives to become more environmentally friendly and to gain an 'Eco-congregation' Award.*

*In Britain more and more people have become aware of climate change and its potential impact. All political parties have pushed environmental matters to the top of their priority concerns. Yet for all the acknowledgement that climate change is happening and having a serious impact on our world, very little is actually being done by government, the churches, businesses and*

*individuals to turn knowledge and attitudes into action which counts. What is the cause of this disjuncture between belief and action? The reason is that we do not want to change our lifestyle and so we indulge in massive self-deception and denial.*

*Has our Christian faith and our Methodist practice anything to tell us about how we might break through this disjuncture between thought and action so that we might take action to save our planet before it is too late?*

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Wherever we live in our world, we can scarcely be unaware of the increasing occurrence of what the meteorological world calls ‘extreme weather events’ – rain falling in torrential showers, hurricanes, heavy winds, extreme heat and dryness. In the last few months of this year we have experienced unprecedented levels of rainfall in many parts of the United Kingdom leading to floods. In Northern India and Nepal millions of people have been displaced by flooding over a vast area after torrential rain. At the same time parts of Australia are experiencing severe drought conditions and the viability of the agricultural economy in the Murray-Darling basin is being called into question. We have experienced in our own lifetime that these events have become more severe, more numerous and more sustained.

Climate change has always occurred throughout the history of our planet so the question has been, ‘are these current changes in our climate and these extreme weather events part of a natural pattern of climate change or are we dealing with something frighteningly new?’ ‘Is this accelerated climate change brought on, at least in part, by human activity?’

At the beginning of the last century no one imagined that human activity might have an impact upon the global climate. It was realised that human activity could have an impact at the local level, the micro-climate, through the cutting down of forests or the building of roads and housing but hardly anyone thought that humans could trigger worldwide climate change. Only with the advent of more precise ways of measuring the carbon dioxide content of the air in the 50s and 60s of the last century could the monitoring of the increasing levels and their relation to global temperature rise be tracked.

Still the dramatic changes in climate that we have seen in the last hundred years and more especially in the last 30 years are not, in themselves, proof

that human activity is a significant cause of global warming. For a long time people, both in the scientific community and people in the street, remained to be convinced that human activity was a major contributor to global warming. Over the last decade this issue has been tackled directly by the UN Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This is a unique team of over a 1000 scientists, drawn from all over the world, with expertise in different aspects of climate change. Indeed it is one of the biggest science-related endeavours in history. The IPCC does not carry out any research of its own (it has only few permanent staff) rather its role is to evaluate studies carried out by thousands of scientists around the world and to synthesise these results to aid policymakers in addressing climate change.

As the IPCC is a consensus-seeking body, it is actually quite conservative in its statements. In 1995 in the Second Assessment Report this sentence appeared:

*“The balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate change.”*

By the Third Assessment Report in 2001 the evidence had sharpened;

*“There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities”*

In February 2007 the IPCC published its Fourth Assessment Report and it states this:

*“Carbon dioxide is the most important greenhouse gas. The global atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide has increased from pre-industrial levels of about 280ppm (parts per million is the ratio of greenhouse gas molecules to the total number of molecules of dry air) to 379ppm in 2005. .... The primary source of the increased atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide since the pre-industrial period results from fossil fuel use with land use providing another significant but smaller contribution.”*

In the face of greater scientific unanimity and with the occurrence of extreme weather events in so many places, there are fewer and fewer climate change sceptics. The attitude of the US administration has changed over recent years. Hurricane Katrina was a wake-up call and this has been

followed by Al Gore influential book and film, *The Inconvenient Truth*, and the bold policies of Arnold Schwarzenegger in California. The Australian administration, another influential doubter in the climate change debate has also changed its tune under pressure from people affected by the protracted drought in the Murray Basin. Climate change and environmental issues in general have been forced to the top of the political agenda in this year's election.

2007 has seen Sir Nicholas Stern touring the world explaining his report on the economic costs of climate change, the Live Earth concerts in a whole range of world cities, governments and would-be governments 'greening' their policies and businesses claiming their green credentials. A whole new vocabulary has come into common usage – 'carbon footprint', 'offsetting', and 'emissions trading' and 'tipping point' Not a day goes by without there being articles in our newspapers and features on our television screens dealing with climatic issues. If there are people in the developed world who are unaware that global warming is the most serious issue facing humanity then it is really true that they are living on another planet.

Where have the Churches been in relation to these issues? This is not the place to trace in detail the attitude of Churches to the environment over the last two millennia and across the very varied expressions and contexts of the Christian faith in different parts of the world. To do that with integrity would be the work of years. Here we can only pick up on some major trends, recognising that this is inevitably partial and simplistic.

For most of human history and still in many parts of the world in our day, human beings have sought to live in harmony with the created order, the environment in which they have to survive. Indeed one can say that only recently in human history has the 'environment' been externalised in this way as something separate from 'our way of life'. Farmers, animal keepers, fishermen and hunters and gatherers all have a symbiotic relationship with the world around them. The survival of the people and the thriving of the natural environment were one and the same thing. The missiologist, Martinus Daneel in Zimbabwe has done some interesting work in relation to African Indigenous Churches and the centrality of their relationship to their local environment in their worship and witness.

It is really only with the changes occasioned by the Enlightenment and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the 'western' world that humankind begins to look upon the natural world as a source of raw materials to be exploited rather than as a home in which to live in harmony.

As Randy Maddox has said in his paper for this Institute Lynn White Jr's attack on the Christianity and the Church relates to this industrialising period when the Biblical imperative towards human stewardship of the earth was squeezed to the margins as over-confident human beings asserted a role of domination and exploitation of the natural world. It is true that this worldview has had a great influence in churches and through them to the wider society. White saw western society as dedicated to the exploitation of nature with Christianity providing the rationale and modern science the tools. White was roundly criticised by church people at the time, 1967, but his views also changed over time and in dialogue with church people. He went on in a subsequent paper, '*Continuing the conversation*' in Ian G Barbour, '*Western Man and Environmental Ethics*' to state that 'religious values are fundamental to the dynamics of cultural and social change.' In later essays he acknowledges the potential for a Christian perspective to generate a comprehensive environmental ethic.

If the dominion/exploitation view still exists and influences opinion it is possibly only within the most resistant parts of Right wing, Evangelical religion in the USA. The Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones has had many encounters with Christians from this section of the American Church in recent years and speaks at length about it in his '*Faith and the Future of the earth*' lecture.

In his experience some right-wing Christians have equated environmental activists with extremists. Their scepticism of science and scientists comes not only out of the environmental debate but also out of disagreements around evolution and over genetic engineering. For some evangelicals because the Bible says that one day the world will end in a ball of fire, there is a feeling that it should be milked for all its worth while it is there. Others believe that anything that hastens the 'end-times' is to be encouraged. How sad it is that attitudes such as these have been current in the very country that contributes most seriously to the global warming emissions. Bishop Jones sees theological opinion in America shifting as instanced by the 86 evangelical leaders who signed a declaration about global warming in the

New York Times last year. Nevertheless, according to Bishop Jones, the battle is not yet won.

*‘The positive shift in evangelical opinion among some leaders and the negative reaction within the wider evangelical community demonstrates that there is still a furious debate taking place in America.’*

At the other end of the theological spectrum the World Council of Churches (WCC) was at work on its Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Programme from the early 1980s until the World Convocation at Seoul in 1990. This sought to hold together concerns about the environment with the task of bridging the enormous economic gulf between the rich and poor worlds. This was a holistic approach to the world’s problems and sought to introduce the idea of sustainability and sustainable communities, later taken up more widely and drained of meaning.

*‘The integrity of creation has a social aspect which we recognise as peace and justice and an ecological aspect which we recognise in the self-renewing, sustainable character of natural ecosystems.’* (‘Now is the Time’ The final document of the World Convocation on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, WCC 1990)

Moreover, the Convocation asserted, nature has its own integrity expressed in God’s creative activity.

In the midst of these differing theological approaches what, then has been the attitude of the Methodist Church in Britain been in recent decades towards environmental issues? Environmental issues, in so far as they were addressed at all began to be part of the concern of British Churches in the post Second World War era when ‘development’ issues in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific became a separate and a separately funded part of the Churches’ work, distinct from mission initiatives. Christian Aid – the charity of the British Churches which began after World War Two in response to the issue of refugees and displaced people in Europe, gradually spread its concern worldwide. It responded to emergencies by giving relief aid but also worked on improving agriculture and land management in general in many parts of the world and in promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Methodists worked through Christian Aid and subsequently set up their own Relief and Development agency (MRDF). Water supply and agro-forestry were two significant emphases in MRDF over the years and environmental

issues were at the heart of this work. Educational materials were produced by MRDF not only to help congregation members become aware of environmental issues in other countries but also to alert them to the impact of their own lifestyles on other people and places.

In the late 1990s there began to be calls for the Methodist Church in Britain to take environmental issues more seriously in the ordering of its own life. These calls came, largely, from individuals who had been involved in social responsibility concerns over the years, and who were involved in other groups working on environmental issues and wanted to see a higher profile for those issues within their church. At the Scarborough Conference of 1998 a Notice of Motion was brought by a small group of people based mainly in the North east of England, asking that the Church draft an Environmental Policy. There was no resistance to this on the part of the central staff of the Church (the Connexional Team) charged with formulating a policy, rather the reverse for it was much better that an initiative such as this came from the floor of Conference rather than that a Policy be brought to Conference in a top-down manner by the Connexional Team.

The Secretary for International Affairs (Jennifer Potter) was charged with overseeing the development of the Policy and she worked together with the group who had initially brought the proposal. In order to root our work in the ordinary life of the churches, the major meeting for drafting the policy was held in a tiny, rural church in North Yorkshire which had never hosted a Circuit or District consultation before let alone a Connexional one. A draft policy was worked on and then sent around for response to those across the Church known to have interest or expertise in environmental issues as well as to ecumenical partners.

Comments on the draft were largely positive although some wanted to make its provisions far more prescriptive. Others, while broadly supportive asked how small and under-resourced churches could take on what they saw as 'yet another burden'.

In Conference when the Environmental Policy was debated the major criticism was that the policy was too weak. While this was acknowledged, the drafters felt that, at the outset it was more important for the policy to be accessible and helpful for the majority of churches.

The introduction to the Policy (see Appendix) related it closely to one component of the stated mission of the church, ‘caring for the earth’ – *‘the policy seeks to identify principles to assist the Methodist Church in translating into action its affirmation that mission includes ‘caring for the earth’ in the life of the Church at national and local level.’* Turning affirmation into action was a central purpose of the Policy.

Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Policy give the theological basis for the Methodist Church’s stance on caring for the earth, stressing the stewardship entrusted to human beings in the Biblical creation stories. Drawing on the inclusive nature of Wesley’s understanding of grace and redemption, the whole creation is seen within the ambit of God’s saving and restorative love.

The rest of the policy dealt with specific areas of environmental concern – energy and water, waste, materials and resources, the natural and the built environment and travel and set objectives for churches to follow. It urged Methodists to work with others – both within the churches and outside, to make use of existing resources to help in the task of raising awareness and to involve themselves in local initiatives.

Churches were urged to link up with the ecumenical Eco-Congregation Project to help them turn aspirations into action. This Project was a joint venture between the churches and a government sponsored environmental agency called Going for Green. In this project churches were asked to conduct an environmental audit of all their activities and then embark on a process aimed both at making their operations more environmentally friendly and at raising the profile of environmental concerns in the worship prayer life of the Church. Under this scheme participating churches worked on a variety of things – sourcing recycled paper, improving the heating and insulating system of the church, introducing car share schemes, providing community recycling facilities, distributing energy efficient, long life bulbs and many other things.

One of the churches which piloted the Eco-Congregation materials was situated in a remote dale in County Durham. From their local Water Board they obtained plastic ‘hippos’ for people to put in their toilet cisterns to reduce the amount of water used for each flush. The congregation members undertook to distribute these to every household in the community. Not only were the ‘hippos’ well received but it was found that many residents were amazed at the Church’s commitment to an improved environment and this

gave rise to many conversations about Christianity and the motivation to get involved with such issues. In other words, quite unexpectedly, this became a mission opportunity.

Churches that successfully completed the Eco-congregation programme were visited by two independent assessors who had experience and expertise in environmental matters, one from the church community and one from an environmental body or local authority. Churches which were able to demonstrate that they had made change both in their practical life and their worship life were given an award.

The very first church of any denomination in the UK to gain this award was the Methodist Church in Evesham which has subsequently gained it for a second 3 year period. Is it purely coincidental that this Church is sited right next to the river, has a history of being flooded and in the recent floods had its basement full to the roof with water? (See the Methodist Recorder for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> August)

How successful has the Environmental Policy been in moving the Methodist Church in Britain from words to action? The picture is patchy. If a cross-section of British Methodists were asked about the Policy a large number, I fear, would not even be aware that there was such a thing. The number of churches completing the Eco-congregation scheme has not been great. Many which have done so have had an impact outside the church in the local community as great if not greater than within the church and circuit. Committed, dedicated individuals have been the driving force in all cases and many have achieved really significant changes in attitude. The Property Schedules, which each church and circuit have to complete now, include a question about how the church has taken the Environmental Policy forward. A small group of heating engineers within the churches have worked on research for energy efficient forms of heating for the distinctive style and use of church buildings. The Methodist Headquarters building has switched to green electricity. Sermons with an environmental perspective are preached more frequently and there has been a number of very good new hymns on environmental themes.

At this year's Conference in Blackpool there was a renewed focus on the environment in the report, 'Caring for Creation in the face of climate change. The report reminded Conference-goers and the church at large of the words of the 2000 Environmental Policy – *'we are called to be partners with*

*the rest of creation and co-partners in the ongoing creative and renewing activity of God.'*

The 2007 Report emphasised the impact of climate change on low-lying and poverty-stricken areas of the world. Huge 'footprints' adorned the Conference Hall walls showing the enormous size of the average British footprint in contrast to those of people living in Africa and Asia. The Report was sceptical of the British Government's hope of reducing carbon emissions by 60% from the 1990 levels by the year 2050. It urged people to adapt to a low carbon economy and think deeply about their lifestyles.

*'If we are called to "live more simply in order that others may simply live" our response to God's covenant relationship with all creation should cause the church to be active in the call to address climate change.'*

Church members were encouraged to become involved in the climate campaigns of Christian Aid and the ecumenical Operation Noah initiative which urges lifestyle change for people in Britain.

Not much progress in 7 years! While this campaign and the organisations behind it should be affirmed and given all encouragement, it all remains rather too vague, too distant and too theoretical.

The lack of significant progress on the part of the Methodist Church and other churches is not, by and large a failure of commitment. The churches show just the same tendencies as government, businesses, international organisations and even deeply green non-governmental organisations – there is a disjuncture between words and actions, between rhetoric and serious efforts to change the way we do things.

It is not only Christians or people of other faiths that have come to realise that the environmental challenge we face is not at heart a technological one or a management exercise. The challenge is a deeply moral one, a deeply theological one.

To quote a recent article by the Bishop of Thetford in the Church Times:

*'Global warming is changing more than climate. It is changing our relationship to the planet. Nature is no longer a given: we are becoming 'weather-makers', and this affects the rest of creation. This poses fresh*

*questions about our place as humans in the natural order, the purposes for which we live and act.'*

How perceptive Al Gore was in his choice of title for his book, '*An Inconvenient Truth!*' The majority of people, governments, and churches know the truth, do not disagree with the findings of the UN panel and cannot ignore the evidence of their own eyes and yet they do relatively little to cut their carbon emissions or to move towards a less damaging lifestyle.

The Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, is an evangelical Anglican and a relatively recent 'convert' to the cause of climate change. In a recent lecture, *Faith and the Future of the Earth*, quoted earlier he introduced his theme with some important comments.

*'I think that it's important to preface any talk about the environment with a simple confession that we are all hypocrites.'*

He then goes on to confess that despite his passion about saving the earth from environmental disaster, he travels by budget airlines quite a lot. Jones' candid confession mirrors that of the articulate and passionate environmentalist George Monbiot, who in his recent book, '*Heat*', makes his own confession, '*and which of us can really claim to live as we urge others to? Most environmentalists, and I include myself in this, are hypocrites. I know of a British climate-change campaigner who spends her holidays snorkelling in the Pacific – and she does not get there by bicycle.'* So while we might enjoy criticising the entertainers who travelled to the Earth Live concerts in their private jets, its not quite that easy to externalise all problems at a convenient distance away from ourselves.

Bishop James Jones goes on to quote Sir Crispin Tickell, a former British Government advisor on the environment, from a lecture he gave entitled '*Climate and Life: Change and Diversity*' where he said, '*the bridge between science and politics, thought and action, has rarely looked more fragile.'* The really frightening thing about that comment was that it was not made this year but in 1991! In the intervening 16 years we have had much clearer evidence of the fact of climate change and more experience of its impact and yet it is as true now as it was then, there is a deep chasm between the rhetoric and the resolution to act strategically.

The Public Opinion Research Group, Ipsos Mori, recently conducted a survey on the perspectives of the British public – on the way they think and behave in relation to climate change which has been published under the title, *Tipping Point or Turning Point?* 88% of those surveyed believe the climate is changing, 46% think it is mainly caused by humans and 41% that it is caused by humans and natural processes together, 70% believe that if there is no change the world will soon experience a major environmental crisis. Yet these same people continue to externalise climate change to other people, places and times. Most of those surveyed consider climate change a problem for the future and believe that neither the threat of climate change nor the benefits from addressing it will impact on them personally.

In one sense these people are right to think that the major impacts of climate change will happen elsewhere. Indeed they are already happening. The population of the tiny, low-lying atolls that make up Tuvalu are already seeing their land disappear beneath the rising sea level and are having to be repatriated to New Zealand and Australia. As the geographer, Doreen Massey, said in an interview on BBC Radio 4 at the beginning of this year – we have allowed our industry to collapse, thus reducing our carbon emissions and yet we still demand those goods which we import from elsewhere but we do not want to count the emissions produced in making those goods as our own. We are happy to criticise the pollution levels in China but not to admit that much of it is on our behalf.

Whilst it might be tempting to lay the blame for this failure to get the global warming message across on the government or the media, it is clear that there is more to it than that. There is an epidemic of mass denial – affecting the media and government as well. People do not want to think of what a change in lifestyle or personal sacrifices might mean. Many people desire at one and the same time to avert a disaster brought about by climate change and yet still want to exercise all the rights and freedoms to which they have become accustomed. For others there is a complete psychological resistance to the whole issue – they do not want to think about it – it is too difficult, too demanding, too challenging to contemplate.

John Lanchester, a contributing editor at the London Review of Books (LRB) in a recent review of the latest IPCC Assessment Report, the Stern Report and new books on climate change finds himself in the ‘don’t-want-to- think-about-it category’.

*'I just don't want to think about it. This is not an entirely unfamiliar sensation: someone of my age is likely to have spent a couple of formative decades trying not to think about nuclear war, a subject which offered the same combination of individual impotence and prospective planetary catastrophe. Global warming is even harder to ignore, not so much because it is increasingly omnipresent in the media but because the evidence for it is starting to be manifest in daily life.'*

George Monbiot speaks of the government's double-think about climate change policies. On the one hand there is the commitment to reduce carbon emissions and yet through weak resolve conflicting policies are followed, for example, the Department for Transport still insists that airports plan to double the number of flights by 2030 and that 4, 000 kms of new roads must be built. In 2006 a policy was announced to have all new homes 'zero-carbon homes by 2016 but this will not happen because the very same Government Department has forbidden local authorities to undertake experiments with zero-carbon homes. This sad litany could be repeated for energy generation, waste disposal and a whole range of policies. What is the problem? Can government ministers and civil servants not see the dilemma into which they have driven themselves?

Monbiot in the preface to the 2007 edition of *'Heat'* make a telling point, *'governments have no interest in challenging our illusions. If their aspirations and our aspirations diverge too widely, they will lose elections. They won't take real action until we show them that we have changed.'*

Is the situation hopeless or can Christian theology and Christian practice offer some hope for a bridging of the chasm of denial that prevents us from translating awareness of the problem of global environmental change into action to slow it down and mitigate its effects?

It is not just Christians or people of faith who recognise that the problems we face challenge what it is to be human and ask challenging questions about the meaning of our life on this earth.

Jonathan Porritt, a well known environmental campaigner in Britain and Chair of the Government's Sustainable Development Commission has said, *'some kind of spiritual commitment or religion in its true meaning (namely the reconnection between each of us and the source of all life) is a fundamental part of the transformation ecologists are speaking about when*

*they speak of what needs to happen to our attitude to the planet on which we live.'*

Again Mark Maslin, a Reader in the Environmental Change Research Centre at the University of London writes in similar terms,

*'Global warming is one of the few scientific theories which make us examine the whole basis of modern society. It is a theory that has politicians arguing, sets nations against each other, queries individual choices of lifestyle and ultimately asks the questions about humanity's relationship with the rest of the planet.'* (Global Warming: A Short Introduction)

The Draft Climate Change Bill recently published focuses on the need to reduce carbon emissions. Eamon O'Hara, an Irish Policy Advisor at the European Union maintains, in an article on the BBC Climate website, that this focus is missing the point.

*'Is it not time to recognise that climate change is yet another symptom of our unsustainable lifestyles, which must now become the focus of our efforts?.... Living a more sustainable lifestyle does not have to be a burden, as some people fear? It could be a liberating experience to participate in creating a better world. After all, how good do we really have it at the moment? How many people are tired and weary of modern living? The endless cycle of earning and consumption can be exhausting and does not necessarily bring happiness and fulfilment; can we do things differently, and better?'* (BBC website)

None of these quotes come from people with a specifically Christian commitment and yet their words and their yearnings are profoundly spiritual. A clearer articulation of the Christian understanding of creation and the Christian hope for ongoing recreation could strike a chord in many beyond the usual reaches of church pronouncements.

Christians need to speak more clearly about the Biblical concept of the created order (instead, one might say, of fighting over the literal interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis) – and of the understanding of the interdependence of the whole created order, the natural world and the human inhabitants. Even Margaret Thatcher, not always the most loved Prime Minister especially by some in the churches, had an understanding of

the relationship of people and the earth when she commented ‘all we have is a tenancy with a full-repairing lease.’

The Christian emphasis on quality of life is also a message many need and want to hear in our time. Abundant life – not as possessions and consumption but as relationship to God and to others, time for conversation, for enjoying God’s world of nature, music and art.

The Christian Gospel sees all human beings as created in God’s image, all deserving of the abundant life promised to his followers by Jesus. One humanity on one earth – which demands that we look at our planet as one home for all its inhabitants in this generation and in coming generations. Justice and a fair distribution of resources are not only a Christian imperative but are in the self-interest of all the world’s inhabitants.

Even having said all of this, it does not make it easy for rich, developed world people to make changes in their lifestyles.

John Wesley urged his listeners ‘to flee the wrath to come’ – it was not a global environmental crisis he was talking about but the divine judgement upon their lifestyle. For new converts to his movement it was not easy to make changes in their life. Wesley realised that it is not easy for individuals to stand out against the prevailing social trends. They needed help to move along in their pilgrimage. So he encouraged people to come together in small groups – in their bands and their classes where education and mutual encouragement and challenge could take place in a supportive context. Might these methods have something to say to those who try to work on ways to shift people in our own time from an unsustainable way of life?

At times when many people speak with despair and fear about the future of our planet, Christians have the responsibility to bring a gospel of hope. We must work against people falling into paralysis and surrendering to fatalism. Our hope is grounded in the belief that ultimately the world is in God’s hands. This is not a cheap hope which allows us to do nothing but a hope that liberates us from the compulsion of the ideologies of growth and progress. Hope is perhaps one of the most important contributions that the Christian Church can make in the present crisis of climate change.

‘If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sin, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and

cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ (I John 1:8-9) Therein lies our hope and the strength to give hope to others.

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