

## Hope

### Churches Together in Cumbria Environment Group

#### April 2008

As Christians we are called to be optimists and our hope must be practical. As religious environmentalists we want to save the creation on Earth. The present era is an age of anxiety, with prophetic scientists and informed journalists warning us about ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity, overpopulation and climate change. Eminent scientists, such as Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal and current President of the Royal Society, are writing about the possible extinction of the human race. The problems the Earth is facing and which humanity is causing are immense and even if addressed effectively in the near future will take at least a century to correct. Starting to change the way we are and live will have to begin now. Even so, the scientific consensus is that some climate changes are inevitable and that it is likely that it will be twenty to thirty years before actions taken now have measurable effects. Some scientists are already warning us that the feedback mechanisms for change are already in train, others say that the time before we *must* take action is at most eight years, some a decade and yet others fifteen years. The arguments seem to be “not if but when”. Do we have time and can the Christian, whose calling is to find hope at a time when scientific opinion is pessimistic, be optimistic for those future generations to whom this generation is indebted? Can we have a vision, not of eschatology and the end times, but of millennia ahead when creation will be rescued, renewed and fulfilled by human stewardship, when the Kingdom of Heaven will be found within and around us?

The experts at MIT published a report in 2005 entitled *Limits to Growth; the 30 Year Update*. This is a book about computer modelling of the planet's systems. They state that ‘many of the informed are infected with the deep cynicism that lies just under the ritual public cheerfulness’. They write **‘the third mental model says that the limits are real and close and in some cases below our current level of throughput. But there is just enough time, with no time to waste. There is just enough energy, enough material, enough money, enough environmental resilience, and enough human virtue to bring about a planned reduction in the ecological footprint of humankind; a sustainability revolution to a much better world for the vast majority. That third scenario might very well be wrong. But the evidence we have seen, from world data to global computer models, suggests that it could conceivably be made right. There is no way of knowing for sure, other than to try it.’** (pp 283-4 *LtG*)

For those of us who believe in God, we must recognise that God does not just call us to faith, but, like Christ, to action for the common good. We are called to share in and be stewards of God's creation of which we are part.

In his book *The Seventh Enemy*, Ronald Higgins suggests seven solutions: the seventh is a re-awakening to the religious. This he suggests people are doing; but not finding it in the traditional churches. Spiritual exploration is happening outside the religious establishment. ‘Terrible truths need not immobilise us. The tiniest kind of courage is rooted in realism. It refuses defeatism as firmly as it rejects unthinking optimism. For some it will lie waiting on the other side of despair. Our most vital need is consciousness, light on the reality of our situation global and individual.’

The optimism and hope we have lies in that climate scientists understand the situation and can diagnose the Earth's sickness. We know the cures and the contingencies: not all, for much is still to be discovered, but enough to make a difference. This knowledge is expanding and being researched as never before. New and ancient wisdom, with its formulation into new lifestyles, is a feature of what is being called a new age by many scientists. Paul Crutzen, the discoverer of the ozone holes, with others has named it the Anthropocene.

However homo sapiens is still in an interregnum between the old economic value systems that ignore the needs of the Earth, now failing, and new ones being born. This cannot be borne patiently because of the dangers that are threatening. We are now discovering ecological human values, secular and religious, that are based on science and truth, not because we are exhorted to believe and have faith. For the first time in history humankind

has a value system based on knowledge of the Earth. We know the goals we need to seek. We can have confidence that humanity, by its efforts, scientific, moral, religious and social could move towards a global self improvement and social improvement, secular and spiritual. We know how we could make a common good for the vast majority of people, not excluding the rights of the rest of creation. This moral transformation includes faith, hope and love, practically applied.

Collin Tudge in his book *So Shall Ye Reap* suggests that the future is either dire or glorious: it is hard to be more precise. Starting with human diet he suggests an agriculture that could feed the world, but if we keep on with the present agribusiness we will fail. 'The stakes could hardly be higher....a world that could endure effectively for ever in peace and conviviality'. There are places on the planet which are demonstrating that despite economic limitations a good life can be found. Kerala, a rural Indian state where decisions and social policies are shared, looks to a Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), a Human Development Index (HDI) and importantly a Gender Development Index (GDI). They find the 'GNP' of the World Bank inadequate to describe their economy, poor though it is in monetary terms, but rich in education, longevity, health and quality of life and diet. Is this not the common good that humanity aspires to?

Two major reports were published in 2007. The first, *The Economics of Climate Change; The Stern Review* suggested that although the problems are pressing a solution can be found if we devote 1% of the global GDP to mitigating the effects of climate change. In the 4<sup>th</sup> *Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) 96% of the world's peer-reviewed scientists insist that we must mitigate our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Business As Usual is no longer an option. Humanity and the planet have a road map and a diagnosis that must be tested. A cure could be agreed. We know how to prepare for the resilience essential to a good future. Will short-termism, inherent self seeking and competitiveness prevent essential adjustments? It must be our hope that the deliberations of the world's nations at Bali (2007) will lead to new agreements that make the new century one of hope.

In 1986 the nations signed a treaty forbidding the manufacture of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). Scientists had discovered that these substances, thought inert under normal circumstances, were broken down by solar radiation once they reached the stratosphere and released highly reactive radicals which were depleting the essential ozone that screens the Earth from damaging ultraviolet radiation. Already ozone concentration was depleted by 25% from its original level and there were 'ozone holes' above the Arctic and especially the Antarctic in springtime. In the light of this knowledge action was taken through the Montreal Protocol and it is hoped that by the end of this century the thinning will have healed. That is a sign of real hope that, given a threat, the Earth's nations can work together for the common good.

Over ten National 'Wilderness' Parks have been established in the jungles of Gabon, one of the Earth's poorest countries. Here, and elsewhere where wilderness is under threat, organisations are being founded to protect it. The World Conservation Union, whose members include governments as well as NGOs, has set a target of protecting ten per cent of the Earth's land surface and many countries are approaching this, though there is a serious problem of enforcement, especially in developing countries. Organisations like WWF are supporting this initiative with funding. No Take Zones are being established to conserve the world's fisheries and whales are no longer hunted by most nations. E. O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist, thinks that, with luck, we might get away with only a 25% loss of species in what is now an extinction event, not seen on Earth for 60 million years, since the loss of the dinosaurs.

Since 1960, the human population of this planet has doubled to more than 6 billion. That is twice as many as is comfortable for the rest of creation. Much of this is not only due to birth rates but also to increased longevity. It has been suggested that human beings could live to 120 and longer, healthily and actively, and that we have the medical knowledge to achieve this. All around the planet, although not universally for a variety of reasons, human reproduction is dropping -- so much so that it has been suggested that by 2100 the human population could reduce to an ideal 3.75 billion, if we can surmount the bulge of having more elderly and eliminate the gap between the few rich and the numerous poor. Given that reduction, human life could be healthy and good for all humanity and for all creation, if the transition of the next century can be managed. Can humanity prepare

itself for the inevitable mega changes? In this the religious would seem to have an important responsibility to promote secure and stable populations. This has been achieved by states and nations of what is now termed the Fourth World such as Kerala and Tikopeia.

The coming century offers the greatest challenge that intelligent humanity has ever faced. The future can be the failure of the human experiment or its success. We know that static brittle systems, largely economic, are bound to fail, whilst complex adaptive systems can include long term resilience and renewal. Humanity has the knowledge to solve these problems and create these new lifestyles. There is an urgent need for a technical and social and spiritual revolution, which we could achieve. Individually all we can do is small and simple, but collectively, in community and communities of communities, we could achieve a common good. Even more can be won if all the rich and developing nations of the world have the goodwill to work with each other in peace for the revamping of our civilisation for a sustainable low carbon future. The solution that integrates the responsibility of the individual with global action is that of *Contraction and Convergence*. This policy suggests an agreement on per capita carbon allowances on a global basis. It proposes a reduction to an allowance of 2 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per person by 2100 or sooner. Carbon would effectively be rationed globally and the policy would allow the richer countries to contribute to poverty eradication as well as climate change by a process of global equity. Then humanity could steward a new glorious wilderness, a restored Garden of Eden. Can the religious take up the challenge of this stewardship to which we are called, or are we selfishly and carelessly to squander the gifts we have been given? We know how to cure the planets ills and we could benefit from so much more. This is our hope and it is attainable.

Thomas Homer-Dixon suggests that catastrophe is inevitable, but he does suggest how recovery could be achieved if communities are prepared. The inherent stresses within our global society, the inevitable political, social and atmospheric quakes are experiences where we need to be resilient. He suggests four actions:

- reduce as much as we can the underlying stresses
- cultivate a prospective mind which can cope with surprises
- boost and localise the overall resilience of critical systems such as energy and food supply networks
- be prepared to turn inevitable breakdown to our advantage.

Resilience has been a Christian calling from the earliest days, one of spirituality combined with sacrifice, preparedness and action. Now there is a moral calling to all religious to seek a practical faith and hope.

The Axial Age (1600-220 BCE) was a time when humanity discovered or evolved human compassion: a spiritual change, not a physical one. Today the world of the eco-hero is seeking a new compassion, perhaps a new 'Age of Enlightenment', not only for fellow human beings but also for the whole of creation, by becoming stewards for our Mother Earth. This movement is driven by peer-reviewed science, by concerned scientists who are the contemporary prophets, and the concerned and informed religious. It may even lead to a new 'church of the future' not yet fully understood. The Axial Age put selflessness, spirituality and compassion at the summit of their agenda, transcending human greed, suffering, exploitation and violence, leading to a new enlightenment. Could it be that at this critical time in Earth's history we are discovering or evolving a new depth of compassion and a new understanding of the divine, far more than homo sapiens? The beatitudes (Matt 5.1-12) and the commandment 'love your neighbour as yourself' ring in our ears and stir our minds in new eco-directions towards a new way of living. If homo sapiens applies this compassion to all life and the Earth, could humanity seek and achieve a glorious new age for the whole of creation? There is no alternative but to 'try it'.

Christ calls us to hope and as Christians we follow Christ's practical example. Christ sacrificed himself for us and for future generations. We need to be prepared to make sacrifices and become resilient for change to benefit future generations and serve God's living planet to whom and to which we are indebted. 'What remains is faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13). We know how to apply these gifts in a way not given to previous generations. Humanity needs to 'try it' by reconciling ourselves to and making ourselves resilient for the Earth. Humanity is called to serve God the creator of all and seek the promise that is now evident within creation. The gift we have is that we know, not all, but enough to see what must be done.

According to the Christian creeds salvation is given, but what follows is being and doing. It is a faith in a Gospel of action with contemplation, discipline giving freedom, of heroism and goodness, action with non-violence, confession and reconciliation. It is a creed of sacrifice and prayer, one of belief and question, of seeking, learning and pilgrimage. It is above all one of compassion. Christians follow a calling to serve, lead and give wherever wisdom directs us. This faith is personal yet also of community and caring for others, including caring for creation. We believe in a God who is love incarnate, whose immanence challenges us, through our spirituality, knowledge and faith, to the creative stewardship of God's creation in this new age. The vision we have must be both short and long. This vision of our stewardship is our inspiration and our hope.

The environmental movement is critical to our survival. It is now the largest global grass-roots movement *ever* and includes over 2 million organisations and over 20 million individuals. It is a social justice bus as well as an environmental bus for the two cannot be separated. It began with Thoreau and Muir, and continued with civil rights organisations and the green organisations we see today. It is secular and religious, scientific and communal, and includes economics and spirituality. It is complex. However the peoples of the world, perhaps inspired and scared (we need to be both), are rising as never before. 'What guides us is a living intelligence that creates miracles every second carried forward by a movement with no name.' (*Hawken*)

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