

The earth is heating up, but is there anything Christians can really do? Catherine Lerner investigates how to get past apathy, and change the planet.

We all talk about the weather. But the summer floods – the worst the UK had seen for years – meant it made the front pages of the papers more than anyone could have anticipated. Images of people stranded and homeless across the country – particularly in Tewkesbury – left a lot of people asking, “Why did this happen?”

While climate scientists have been reluctant to make the link between global warming and the summer’s catastrophic weather, it did bring home for many how we are at the mercy of the elements.

It might even serve as the ‘sudden jolt’ which Al Gore says is needed to make people aware of the danger. In his film ‘An Inconvenient Truth’, Gore uses the boiling frog metaphor (the contention that if you put a frog in boiling water, it will jump straight out, but if you put it in cold water and turn the temperature up little by little it will never jump out) to illustrate human ignorance towards global warming. In reality, there is little debate over whether the planet is heating up, and whether it is a problem.

“Climate change is the most severe problem that we are facing today, more serious even than the threat of terrorism,” says David King, UK government chief scientific advisor.

Most scientists do claim that it is due to human activity. The chief scientist at the Met Office, Prof. John Mitchell, says, “Human-induced increases in carbon dioxide (CO₂) are enhancing the greenhouse effect and amplifying the recent warming.”

The real question is what, if anything, can be done to halt it?

Is it down to individuals changing their habits? Low energy light bulbs and switching off stand-by buttons on TVs and computers at night are fairly straightforward, but what about other things? Should you choose paper or plastic bags (some forms of plastic take hundreds of years to degrade, but paper takes more energy to produce)? And should you turn off the air conditioning in your car (driving with the windows open uses more fuel)? Further to that, is individual action going to make any difference at all, or is the only thing which will make a difference some sort of global consensus and policy shift?

There’s a lot of confusion, which appears to have paralysed most of us into inaction. A recent Norwich Union survey found that nine in 10 people realised they should be doing more to be environmentally friendly but didn’t feel inclined to do it, and so told ‘little green lies’ to keep up with the neighbours.

More than half of people surveyed said they would be unlikely to alter their way of life despite pressure from the media, politicians and their children to be greener. “People are feeling a great deal of anxiety, irritation and fear that what they are doing is not enough or is wrong,” psychologist Corinne Sweet told the Daily Telegraph recently. “Their anger can lead them to give up altogether and then be wracked with green guilt.”

For churches, there is a further interesting dimension to the climate change situation, namely, is there a Christian imperative to act?

Eco-faith

There has been some interesting theological debate about what the Christian response to climate change should be. There are those who believe that having ‘dominion’ over the earth (Genesis) means we have the right to exploit the environment.

Other believers have voiced concern about environmental issues hijacking the faith agenda. “Our hope is that global warming alarmism would not become a defining or a dividing issue for evangelicals,” says Jim Daley, CEO of conservative evangelical group Focus on the Family. Daley was one of a number of prominent figures who wrote to the US National Association of Evangelicals asking them not to take any position on global warming.

“In our view, this is not a scientific issue that found political support,” Daley says. “It appears to be an effort by politicians and environmental activists to leverage a scientific issue for political gain.

“Think of it this way: if there’s a clear environmental problem with a clear solution and the cost is within reason – then let’s do it. But with global warming, it’s not clear what’s causing it, and it’s not clear that there is anything within our power to make a significant difference with respect to the earth’s temperature.”

This view is not as widely held in the UK, where support among Christians for combatting climate change is growing. Many claim that creation care is a fundamental part of the Christian message.

“Anyone who takes the Bible seriously as the Word of God will not fail to see the breadth of our human responsibilities outlined in biblical revelation,” says Dr Elaine Storkey, president of Tearfund. “The command to love God with everything we have is quickly followed by the command to love our neighbour as ourselves. A key part of loving God is to exercise faithful stewardship of the world God has made. A key part of loving our neighbour is not to harm them or exploit their vulnerability to climate change.”

According to Tearfund, the world’s poorest people have contributed least to our changing climate yet they are hardest hit by the effects. It estimates there could be 50 million environmental refugees by 2010 and 150 million by 2050 as a result of climate change.

“Indifference to climate change is not only to reject God’s call to stewardship, but to show indifference to neighbour love, for millions of the world’s poor will suffer today through environmental changes,” says Storkey. “Rising sealevels, erratic weather conditions, coastal erosions and lack of water are all partly effects of human irresponsibility.”

Offsetting the cost

So, if reducing our carbon emissions does become a priority – what is the best way to go about it? Climate Stewards, a branch of international nature conservation organisation A Rocha, has plenty of simple, practical advice on its website about things you can do to cut your personal contribution to CO2 emissions from insulating your home properly to taking your own bags when you go shopping.

It goes further than that, suggesting that you offset the emissions you are responsible for. Carbon offsetting means mitigating your greenhouse gas emissions by paying towards tree planting or associated schemes.

“Reducing CO2 emissions is slow, but you can offset immediately,” the Climate Stewards website reads. “Voluntary offsetting slows down climate change and reduces the impact on the poor, who are most at risk. Offsetting reminds us that climate change is our responsibility and creates a self-imposed incentive to reduce our emissions. Offsetting demonstrates to politicians that we are serious about wanting action on climate change.”

Celebrities and politicians have bought into this concept very vocally and a growing number of blue chip companies and airlines as well as government departments, are also signing up to such projects. Organisations, too, are backing Climate Stewards. Tearfund, for example, seeks to do everything possible to reduce its carbon footprint but, as a development charity, acknowledges that some travel is unavoidable. “We reached the decision that from April 2007 we would offset all international air travel for staff with the Christian offsetting company Climate Stewards,” says Tearfund’s advocacy director Andy Atkins. “In addition to the projects they run, we are encouraging them to develop renewable energy projects in the developing world.”

However, carbon offsetting is not without its critics. “Carbon offsetting is better than nothing,” says Nick Spencer, a director of Christian thinktank Theos, who cowrote a book for SPCK and the Jubilee Centre on climate change, “but to me it smacks of medieval indulgences. We can carry on sinning but we can buy time off in purgatory. The schemes which invest in sustainable projects are better than those that plant trees, but really it is better not to fly.” In fact, some tree planting schemes have actually caused more damage. The 10,000 mango trees planted by the band Coldplay to offset the release of its second album, for example, have died. Giving trees the right amount of nutrients and water to absorb CO2, in some locations, can cause more pollution.

Brendan Bowles, co-founder of Climate Stewards, says, “We ensure the trees we plant are an indigenous species so that they protect the land and create a good habitat for local plants and animals.” Climate Stewards’ tree planting is planned to meet international standards to support local communities via improved employment and food security, as well as absorbing carbon dioxide and safeguarding biodiversity.

Eco-warriors or eco-worriers?

When the truth hits home about the planet heating up, it is easy to panic. But the good news is, it’s not too late to do anything. “If we stop emitting carbon dioxide now, the effects will continue but they won’t be as devastating as if we don’t,” says Nick Spencer. “The challenge could be minimised. Lives could be saved. “If one room of a house is on fire, do you give up and say there’s no point in calling the fire engine?” What will be absolutely key to addressing climate change is a shift in political will. “The government is unlikely to take these tough decisions urgently enough unless the public urges them to do so,” says Andy Atkins. “So we

encourage our supporters to join us in putting pressure on our leaders [as well as] cutting their own emissions.”

“People model the right way of living,” adds Brendan Bowles. “You can compare society to a shoal of fish – the shoal moves as one but there is no leader. We can see this in how society works; people copy each other. Think of a speaker giving a presentation and yawning – the whole audience ends up yawning too.”

“If three million Christians all switch to renewable energy and sign a petition saying so, that is a powerful message which will encourage change,” adds Spencer. Their message is that Christians can make a difference. Many would go further, and say there is an imperative to act. The Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, Rt Rev James Jones, has drawn similarities between climate change and the abolition of slavery. He argues that future generations of Christians will look back and be amazed that we were so complacent over global warming, just as we find it hard to believe that 200 years ago many Christians failed to oppose slavery. Some have even argued that not to act damages Christian witness in the world. Sir Ghillean Prance, worldrenowned botanist and commentator on environmental issues, claims that many churches have lost young people to the New Age movement because of the neglect of rich teachings on care for creation and social justice.

“Jesus asks us to take up our cross daily and follow him,” says Elaine Storkey. “Today, taking our cross might mean deliberately cutting back on waste, on energy consumption, on pollution, on self-centred living. But if we are to be real witnesses to Christ in a needy world, we surely cannot live any other way.”

Following last month's feature on climate change, Ruth Dickinson visits two churches which are determined to take better care of God's creation.

You could easily be in the middle of the countryside. All Saints Church in Wokingham actually serves a town on the commuter belt but it retains all the feel of a country parish, which once upon a time it was.

It helps that on the day of our visit it's a clear, sunny day, with bracing air and Autumn leaves on the ground. It's the perfect day to appreciate the old church and the churchyard.

It's not a treasure which has gone unappreciated among its 200-strong congregation either – who all weathers, all year round have made the effort to look after their spiritual home. "We're trying to turn the grounds from a liability to an asset," says Rev David Hodgson, the rector, several times over the course of the meeting. It's their catch phrase – they all gently mock their churchyard, but they obviously all deeply care about it.

In fact, it's their immediate surroundings – the church and the churchyard – which have provided much of the inspiration for All Saints' congregation to get all fired up about green issues.

Caring for God's creation

"It's all to do with creation," says Joan Watts, one of the church's so-called 'green apostles'. "Everything we do in life is to do with God's creation. People just don't stop to think that."

Listening to how Joan has energised and encouraged the congregation to take an active interest in the environment is quite inspiring. "It was hard in the beginning," she admits. "There were some people who didn't see the point of it. It took a long time, but I think now everyone is on board."

'Getting everyone on board' from those sceptical beginnings has been a bit of a process. Key in inspiring the congregation seems to have been what has come from the pulpit. David preached a number of 'creation time' services at church. There was a seven week period leading up to one world week in October, during which he preached on different aspects of creation care. He used visual imagery in worship and special flower arrangements. "We were trying to bring creation care inside church on a Sunday morning, we were trying to bring awareness of creation into our worship," he says.

One of the more interesting of these was a service for the blessing of animals. "It was quite noisy – there were a lot of dogs barking and howling – the music seemed to set them off," says David, "but it does have a serious side to it – we were looking at the deeper respect for all of life of God's gift."

The church became an eco-congregation two years ago. This means it passed an independent assessment and undertook different environmental initiatives which are spiritual, practical and community focused.

Some of the things All Saints has done to get the award are highly visible – such as the new building which was designed to be as environmentally friendly as possible. 'Cornerstone' is a thriving community centre. Among other things, it was built on a steel frame and designed to make the maximum use of natural light. All Saints also employed a landscaper to advise them on reviving the churchyard.

The old, wooden and concrete fence has gone, and all the local cubs and some church members spent time planting shrubs and bushes instead, which will encourage wildlife. As we take a tour around the churchyard, and they show me hedgehog boxes, the compost heap, new trees they've planted, the birdboxes and talk about the stories behind each thing (the compost is bagged up and given out to members of the community, the birdboxes were made by the unchurched youth group) you realise that becoming an eco-congregation has not just had an effect on the external appearance of the church building and the churchyard, it's had more profound effects on people too.

David says, "It hit home one evening at a [parish] council meeting when someone said to me, just as an aside, 'I use those low-energy lightbulbs now because of what you said.' It has started to come home to people." "It's brought the congregation together," adds Joan. "Everyone in the church has got to talk to different groups [in the church]. When you think everyone has got those talents. Everyone has got something that they can contribute, something that they can do."

"In the future we're going to focus on one aspect of something and try to get the younger people involved," she adds. "It's time for the young people to take a lead on a few things – after all, it's their future we're trying to safeguard."

A lot of the projects which the church has undertaken – from redoing the hedgerow to going on wildlife walks – have involved other members of the community who would never normally get involved in church life. This is much more than little old ladies, bird boxes, recycling, compost heaps, new fences, even new buildings and landscaping.

Every single one of their projects has had many offshoots – and as you listen to the them talk about the impact on the congregation and on the community, you can't help but be inspired about all the things which could be done in churches everywhere. Joan's only word of caution though, is to take it steady. "I made the mistake of trying to do everything in the beginning, but you should try and do one small thing and see where it goes from there," she says. "Any church can do that."

Big ideas in West Worthing

Five years ago, West Worthing Baptist Church didn't even have recycling bins. Now, the congregation is seriously thinking about getting solar panels on the roof. "I still can't believe it might happen," says minister Hazel Sherman, "but there's a number of grants available to us. We've had a company in to have a look, they've given us a quote and it seems quite possible."

It's been a journey for the mediumsized Sussex church. I visit just a few days after they have become an ecocongregation and together we're going over the things they have achieved. "Because it's made up of some small pieces, it doesn't feel to us as if we've done a lot," says Elizabeth Clark, one of the members of the ecology committee. "But looking at it like this, I suppose we have really. Things like recycling are now just an accepted part of church life. You just end up doing it naturally. I've spotted people taking tins out of the bin and putting them in the recycling, and almost unconsciously turning the lights off. It's ongoing all the time – we're not making a fuss about it, we just get on and do it."

Humble beginnings

It all started when the church was without a minister. Baptist Union moderator Alec Gilmore – who was temporarily overseeing the church – organised a few small groups, one of which was the ecology group. "The ecology group started off by looking at the fact that God made the world and made us the stewards of it," explains Marie White, another champion of the green cause in West Worthing. "That helped to focus on why ecology is important. Then we looked at what we should be doing and what we should be helping other people to do." Things moved pretty quickly after that. The church installed recycling bins which are now well used by church members and the wider community.

They held a bulb-planting day in the local recreation ground, and got the youth group involved in painting a mural in the church. Last Autumn they organised an ecology fayre which attracted all kinds of people from the local astronomical society to the horticultural society.

Just like in Wokingham, the church also looked at involving creation care in worship. They all agree that looking at the theological justification for being environmentally-friendly has inspired other people in the church, some of whom were initially sceptical. "Some people say, 'What has this got to do with church? We should be doing God, what has this got to do with the gospel?'" says Marie.

"There was this age-old fear borne out of the idea that there's something called the social gospel and something called the real gospel," adds Hazel. "People felt uncomfortable and thought we might be introducing the 'social gospel' and not encouraging people to be Christians anymore. There is some residual feeling of that – but that may be a generational thing."

People have slowly come around to the idea, and everyone in the congregation has bought in to the idea of being environmentally friendly to some degree. "You know how people get critical before they get supportive?" says Hazel "That's kind of been happening. People have noticed some things about the way the church is run and said, 'That's not very ecological is it?' It was a dig, but it means they've taken the ideas on board."

There is still some residual doubt amongst members though. "I think it's more about guilt," says Hazel. "That's been a real challenge for us – how do we talk about ecology without making people feel guilty about what they're not doing?" This was both the starting point and the ongoing challenge for the congregation at West Worthing – to focus on what they are doing rather than what they are not, and then find ways to build on it. "And anyway, we haven't arrived," says Marie. "We see eco-congregation award as a little milestone on the journey. The plaque stands as a challenge to us. It's to remind us we've got a long way to go."

Earth bound

For both these ordinary small town churches, the green awakening has been a journey and is a continuing ongoing process. They all talk about the next thing they're going to do – the next plan, the next project, the next challenge. It feels more of a case of reining the ideas in than losing momentum. You also don't get the sense that they have abandoned the gospel in favour of becoming eco-warriors. Not only has becoming eco

congregations enriched their appreciation of God's gifts of life and creation, it's given them the tools to apply this in a very real way where they are. It's brought them down to earth.