



# FUTURE SHAPE



Caring for God's creation

*Mission studies for ministers on creation care*

## 6 Creation care is world mission

***“If we are serious about bringing ‘shalom’ into being, that wonderful Hebrew concept, which incorporates justice, the integrity of creation, positive peace-making, wholeness, community, restoration and reconciliation, and which Jesus called ‘the Kingdom of God’, then we must accept our God-given responsibility for the whole of creation and see ourselves as bringers-in of that glorious vision of hope.”***

*(Jo Rathbone, National Co-ordinator for Eco-congregation)*

### NOTES

***“It took evangelical Christians a long time to wake up to the fact that the Bible calls us to be socially responsible. I hope and pray that it does not take as long to realise that the Bible also calls us to be environmentally responsible. Too much is at stake and the time is very short...”***

*(Tony Campolo)*

### A. Setting the scene

In this final study we're ending where we might well have started. The theme of this session could easily have been the introduction to the whole series. Creation care is world mission. Well, of course, you'd expect BMS World Mission to say that, wouldn't you? Yes, and you'd be right but there's a lot more to it than that. Creation care means world care. *Environmental concern* means *world concern* – essentially, inevitably and always. There is no real commitment to the environment without commitment to the whole world, a world where countless millions live in grinding

poverty and we have it within our power to make a difference to their lives as well as to our own; a big difference and a positive difference, all in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. That's world mission, and creation care is part of the way we put it into practice. Even the most local expression of creation care keeps the world in its sights if it wants to be meaningful to itself and credible to others.

And it's exactly the same with mission. It is a seriously introspective form of local mission which fails to see itself as a

practical out-working of world mission, missing the point that we have to think global whenever we act local. Our first calling as disciples of Jesus is to world mission, from which we have to decide where and how we put that calling into action; servants of Christ Jesus, called to be apostles, and set apart for the gospel of God (cf Romans 1: 1). "World mission is... the first and most obvious feature of early Christian praxis." (Wright NT, *The New Testament and the people of God*, p 361)

To put it in one sentence: if we accept creation care as integral to mission, we leave ourselves with no option but to engage with the whole world in the totality of its need before a creating, sustaining and saving God. And that might prove to be seriously evangelistic for all sorts of people who would want to be part of a living community which embraces a world mission life-style with a prophetic commitment to the environment as one of its key features.

*"It is impossible to really know Jesus and be indifferent to the plight of the poor."*  
(Hughes with Bennett, *God of the Poor*, p1)

## B. Snapshots from the world

In this section, we offer a random series of stories and comments from around the world. These will help us to see how some of the poorest peoples know very little about the issues of creation care but others know that they have their part to play. Equally, some writers on mission are now insisting on an environmental focus, while others seem blissfully unaware. There is, without doubt, a more comprehensive missiological basis for our conclusion but even this cursory and illustrative glance in the direction of Africa and Asia will leave us with no option but to approach creation care in the same spirit of sensitive humility and willing partnership which have become essential for every other aspect of world mission.

### 1 Bangkok

At the end of October 2007, the Asian Society of Missiology met in Thailand for its first international conference. Thirty nine Asian and five non-Asian missiologists from such diverse countries as Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States – together with 11 observers – met to consider "*Asian Mission: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.*" They concluded by adopting eight affirmations all of which are powerful in what they affirm. For example, affirmations 1 and 5:

- ☐ "*We affirm that our mission as the people of God is the proclamation of the good news of reconciliation through the atoning death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.*"
- ☐ "*We affirm our interconnectedness as we face the deep challenge of globalisation, and as God's children living in this unique era we acknowledge its remarkable opportunities for mission.*"

### 2 Bangladesh

Questioned in July 2008 about the outcome of the Bangkok conference, a couple of mission workers in the south east of Bangladesh gave a not entirely unexpected response: issues of creation care simply don't appear on the radar of the Bangladeshi people, despite the



fact that their country is one of the first and most serious casualties of climate change. In other words, the plight of Bangladesh has to be our concern before it can be theirs because we are better informed, more influential and our carbon footprints are much bigger than theirs. In the name of world mission, we have to accept an environmental agenda for which the subsistence needs of indigenous people are as serious as the loss of rainforests and global warming. In the provocative words of Felix Wilfred, an Indian theologian: “Jesus is relevant to Asia, not because the bulk of the Asian masses are non-Christians, but because they are poor.”



### 3 Africa – African churches

In the second book of his renowned ‘future of Christianity’ trilogy, *The new faces of Christianity: believing the Bible in the global South*, Philip Jenkins comments, “In addition to their struggle for human rights, African churches in particular have demonstrated a keen awareness of threats to the environment and the urgent need for activism”. Jenkins highlights the work of John Mbiti who has been one of the leading African theologians for many years. Mbiti has urged African Christians to develop their theology of the land “and in some areas, environmental consciousness has become highly developed.” (Jenkins, *The new faces of Christianity*, p 148).

Ironically, in view of the recent trauma of the country, Christian-based ecological movements have thrived in Zimbabwe and Jenkins draws on other writers to describe some of the religious ceremonies of African independent churches which demonstrate their environmental commitment.

*“Some 50 bishops of various African independent Christian churches sprinkled holy water on ground that was soon to welcome tree saplings... When villagers confess their sins, they are encouraged to include offences against the land. One woman nursing a baby says: ‘I’ve cut a*

*living tree without planting one to replace it.’ An old man admits to clearing natural vegetation in order to grow crops on river banks. Another man confesses ‘I failed to manage contours on steep land.’”*  
(Jenkins, *op cit*, p 149)

### 4 Africa – A Rocha Kenya

A Rocha Kenya is working with the local community in the vicinity of the Arabuko Sokoke forest, the last substantial area of coastal deciduous rainforest in Kenya. The forest contains a number of globally endangered species of mammal and bird, for which this is their last refuge. Forest cover overall in Kenya has fallen dramatically in the last 20 years with a consequent impact upon the climate and upon rainfall in particular.

The work with the community involves developing tree nurseries to replant areas which have been felled and discourages further tree clearance. Staff from A Rocha visit local primary schools to educate the children on the need to conserve and to care for the natural environment. Scholarships are provided for children going on to secondary school, and these are funded by two small eco-tourism projects and by a partnership with a local hotel. Villagers are taught more efficient ways of cooking which means less charcoal is burned.

This is complemented by work with the local church leaders who are taught better ways of farming to share with their congregations.

The project has resulted in greater protection for the Arabuko Sokoke forest, both in reducing poaching of wildlife and the illegal chopping down of trees. At the same time, the increase in eco-tourism and the bursary fund have provided local communities with a means of funding secondary school education for children from villages around the forest. Thus the local communities now see benefits from preserving rather than destroying the forest.

### **C. What, then, shall we say in response to this?**

Does not a conviction that creation care is world mission lead us to accept a big responsibility for those peoples of the world for whom the challenge of survival on a daily basis is so great that they neither understand environmental concerns nor believe that they are in any position to influence the debate or contribute to its resolution?

The truth is that their carbon footprints are much smaller than ours. Their travel, their domestic consumption of electricity, their diets, their clothes and the total impact of their lifestyles on the environment do far less than ours to accelerate global warming and climate change. And yet the way we live affects them, and the consequences of climate change hit them more immediately and more seriously than they hit us.

However inadequate our response, we at least understand that we are responsible for the environment. Energy conservation, pollution control, the protection of endangered species and reduction in deforestation are undoubtedly desirable goals but millions of people in many parts of the world are so pre-occupied with the issues of daily survival that a long-term environmental vision or a more appropriate

environmental lifestyle would seem to them a luxury beyond their wildest dreams.

In conclusion, creation care is world mission because our lifestyles here affect the poorest people everywhere and because our relationship with the land where we live and with the places we impact in a globalised world is part of our relationship with God. We care for creation, not only because its abuse has serious consequences for the poor but also because all things are made by and for Jesus Christ. They hold together in him and are in potential reconciled to God through his death and resurrection. We are to care for people and for creation because that's what God does.

*"Any error about creation also leads to an error about God."  
(Thomas Aquinas)*

### **D. For worship and prayer**

#### **A prayer**

*"Father in heaven, it is time you came.  
Our time is running out and our world is passing away.  
You gave us our life with one another.  
We have wrecked it by declaring war against one another.  
You gave us trees and forests.  
We have cut them down.  
To the bird you gave the spring and to the fish the rivers.  
We have silenced the spring and polluted the rivers.  
To the work of your creation you gave balance.  
We have upset it and therefore come to grief.  
Come, Creator of all, renew the lifeless face of the earth.  
Despite our unhappiness, give us hope for your Day when,  
at peace with every creature, we can laugh and praise you."*

*(Jurgen Moltmann, published anonymously in D Cremer, Sing me the song of my world, St Paul publications, Slough 1981)*



## A thought

*“Truly Christian environmental action is in fact also evangelistically fruitful, not because it is any kind of cover for ‘real mission’ but simply because it declares in word and deed the Creator’s limitless love for the whole of his creation (which of course includes his love for his human creatures) and makes no secret of the biblical story of the cost that the Creator paid to redeem both.”*  
(Wright, *The mission of God*, p 419)

## A song of worship

*From the highest of heights to the depths  
of the sea  
Creation’s revealing your majesty.  
From the colours of fall to the fragrance of  
spring,  
every creature unique in the song that it  
sings.  
All exclaiming:*

*Indescribable, uncontainable, you placed  
the stars in the sky  
and you know them by name. You are  
amazing, God.  
All powerful, untameable; awestruck, we  
fall to our knees  
as we humbly proclaim. You are amazing,  
God.*

*Who has told every lightning bolt where it  
should go?  
Or seen heavenly storehouses laden with  
snow?  
Who imagined the sun and gives source to  
its light  
yet conceals it to bring us the coolness of  
night?  
None can fathom:*

*Indescribable, uncontainable, you placed  
the stars in the sky  
and you know them by name. You are  
amazing, God.  
Incomparable, unchangeable; you see the  
depths of my heart  
and you love me the same. You are  
amazing God.”*

*(Laura Story, additional lyrics by Jesse  
Reeves © 2004)*

*“The whole theology of salvation and the responsibility to promote God’s justice in the world are held together... by Paul’s high Christology and by his grand vision of the eventual renewal of all creation, the bringing of God’s healing justice to bear on the cosmos as a whole.”*  
(N T Wright – Bishop of Durham)

*“Choice is personal – impact is global.”*  
BBC Panorama, 18 February 2008

*“For God so loved the world...”*  
(John)

**For some practical suggestions for action by government, the local church and the individual, see the small group material associated with this study.**



## Books referred to in the course of this study:

Hughes, Dewi with Bennett, Matthew, **God of the poor: A biblical vision of God’s present rule**, Authentic 1998  
ISBN: 978-1-1-85078-297-1

Jenkins, Philip **The next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity**, OUP 2002, rev 2007, ISBN: 978-0-19518-307-8

Jenkins, Philip **The new faces of Christianity: believing the Bible in the global South**, OUP 2006 ISBN: 978-0-19530-065-9

Jenkins, Philip **God’s continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe’s religious crisis**, OUP 2007 ISBN: 978-0-19531-395-6

Wright, Christopher JH **The mission of God: unlocking the Bible’s grand narrative**, IVP Academic, 2006 ISBN: 978-0-83082-571-4

Wright, N T **The New Testament and the people of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 1** SPCK 1993  
ISBN: 978-0-28104-593-3