**Theological Principles for the ‘Care for God’s Creation’ Environmental Priority**

**of the Diocese of Durham**

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***Core principles:***

***The environmental dimensions of Christian mission – our ‘Care for God’s Creation’ priority – arises directly from our core Christian theology of God’s work in creation and salvation, and the mission of the Church:***

1. **Creation** is God’s work, the overflow of his goodness, the outpouring of his love, and it is good. God creates to share his love. Creation is an act of love, for the good of others whom God chooses to lovingly create and nurture. However, this does not mean that creation belongs to us: it is God’s. (Gen. 1.1, 31; Ps. 24. 1-2)
2. **Sin,** all that disrupts and frustrates God’s good purposes in creation, affects not only the relationship of humanity with God, but also our relationships with one another and with the created order – our environment. (Romans 8. 22-23) Sin in all its forms is “vandalism of shalom”, wrecking God’s good creation.
3. **Salvation** involves the restoration of creation itself and of good relationships between people, between them and God, and between them and their environment. (Isaiah 61. 1-4; 65. 17-25) The fulfilment of God’s salvation involves the coming of the Kingdom of God. As we pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, we recognise that humans clearly have power to affect the well-being of earth hugely. This power needs to be understood not as a right over creation, allowing humanity to do as we please with the earth, but as a responsibility to look after all that is created – as good stewards – for its King, maker and true owner. (Genesis 1.28) The Kingdom of God will only be partially realised before the return of Christ the King (Colossians 1. 15-20; Revelation 21. 1-8, 22 – 22.6).
4. However, in this time between the times, the **mission** of the church is to work towards the coming of the Kingdom and the fulfilment of God’s good purposes in creation in all dimensions. All that is unhealthy is to be healed, as far as possible, now; all relationships that are disordered are to be restored, as much as possible, now. This means that mission must embrace evangelism, church growth, loving service, the pursuit of justice and the safeguarding of creation. Furthermore, the church’s understanding of each of these elements of mission must be developed on the basis of their inter-relationship: we do not properly understand evangelism or loving service if we think they can be pursued without developing a Godly relationship with the earth. Similarly, a Christian environmentalism that diminishes the need for acknowledging the Lordship of Christ and the development of discipleship is out of balance.

The Care for God’s Creation priority of the Diocese of Durham is therefore a core aspect of our mission, and is related to all other aspects of mission.

***Commentary:***

***1. God’s Good Creation***

1.1 **Creation** is God’s work. God is love, and creation is the overflow of that love. Although we are accustomed to recognise God’s perfect love in the salvation of the world, by sending Christ (1 John 4. 9-10), God’s essential nature has always been that of perfect love: God is love (1 John 4. 17). The relationship between the Father, the Son and the Spirit is one of perfect love (John 17. 20-26; this is a love Christ prays his disciples will share between them so that the world may understand that the Father sent the Son: love in practice reveals the very nature of God).

1.2 It is not that creation is the work of the Father, and salvation the work of the Son: **creation is part of the one perfect work of God the Holy Trinity, designed to bring into being others who will share God’s love** for eternity. So, Paul can say that all things were created by and for Christ (Colossians 1. 15-17), and John writes that everything that has been made was made through Christ, the Word (John 1.1-3). The point is that the universe is thrown into being by God as an outpouring of the very nature – perfect love – of God. Love wants to share the joy: so God creates, that others may share God’s life, goodness and love.

1.3 This matters, because care for the environment is care for a creation which exists only because God so loved the world that he created it from nothing in the first place, and then loved the world so much he gave himself (in the person of the Son) to save it. In the one work of creation and salvation, God gives of God’s self. Let us be clear: the world is not God’s body; however, its very existence is an act of his love. If, then, God loved the world into being, how is that understanding informing how we treat the earth?

1.4 Because creation is God’s good work for God’s good purposes, **it is also good** (Gen. 1.27). It is not something neutral or insignificant. Matter is not evil, though it can be corrupted. How is the goodness of God’s creation informing how we treat it?

1.5 Furthermore, while creation is a loving gift of God, that does not mean that the world belongs to us: “**the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it**” (Psalm 24.1). How are we treating something that belongs to another, especially when that Other is God?

***2. Sin / fallen-ness: Vandalism of Shalom***

2.1 God’s perfect, loving purposes in creation are frustrated by everything that is unloving – greed, selfishness, hatred, possessiveness, destructiveness and more. **Sin** is a short-word for the complex and perverse reality that people do things which damage others, themselves, and creation, both in deliberate and malicious ways and also ignorantly and unintentionally. These things disrupt our relationship with God. Of course they do, because God is love: to act in unloving ways is to reject his goodness and good purposes. If we are to have a robust theological understanding of care for creation, we need to recognise that at the root of the problem lies a refusal to love. Indifference to God’s good creation involves a refusal to love God with all our being. It also involves a refusal to love other people, because harming creation harms them. Theologically, then, the environmental crisis is caused by sin. To use the striking phrase of theologian Alvin Plantinga, sin is “vandalism of shalom”, a wrecking of God’s good creation and God’s good purposes in creation.

2.2 Some of this is **callous and deliberate**: exploitation of the earth in a non-sustainable way can arise because of a knowing refusal to balance the use of the earth’s resources with a proper concern for their renewal and/or for the fair sharing of them. People need work, and companies need a level of profit to continue; but do companies audit their environmental and social impact, and do both business and government leaders accept that to live today in a way that threatens peoples’ welfare tomorrow is not acceptable? Sometimes there is a conscious, knowing refusal to accept responsibility here, a knowing vandalism of shalom.

2.3 Some of this problem may stem from **background beliefs and justifications** which need questioning. Some believe that the Judeao-Christian tradition itself has contributed to this crisis because of the idea of humanity being given “dominion” over the earth (Genesis 1.28). Certainly there has often been an explicit understanding that nature / the created order is simply available to humanity to provide for our needs, and indeed our wants (without any recognition of the beauty and inherent value of God’s good creation or the impact on others of irresponsible consumption).

If this understanding of the earth is combined with an idea that this world is passing away and that the salvation of the soul beyond it is all that is of significance, this creates a theological attitude towards the earth in which sustainability has no obvious place. If the physical world is simply stage on which the play of soul-saving is acted out, it has no **inherent value**. Some Christians believe this; others seem to prioritise evangelism over all other elements of mission in a way that suggests this is an operative belief, even if not an explicit one. However, if we are to develop a healthy ecological missiology, we surely need to say that theologies in which the earth is merely a quarry or an escape-room are bad theologies, with bad consequences for the earth. This question may need discussion between Christians, and there may be a spectrum of views on it; discussing the potential environmental implications of different theological emphases here may be important. (See further 3.6 below.)

2.4 All this leads to **the disruption of a healthy, holy, mutually beneficial relationship between people and their environment**. We live in ways which have negative impacts on our environment: we pollute; we destroy natural environments through unsustainable approaches to logging, farming, meat-production, fishing and mining; we are over-heating the atmosphere through our CO2 production. The resultant habitat loss is having a devastating effect on many animal and plant species. Relationships all round have become disordered, and we do not know what we do: we do not yet know the full impact of this – even the full impact on us. Like all sin, what is done in ignorance or greed starts as self-serving; however, it is actually not only negative for others, but becomes self-destructive too. The actions which cause climate change are already rebounding on humanity, although it is the poor who suffer first, of course. It is perhaps not surprising that the devastating Covid-19 pandemic began (we believe) with the first transmission of the disease to a human being in a live animal market of a kind which would not exist if people had better ordered relationships with other species.

***3. Salvation: the Redemption of All in Christ***

3.1 In contrast to this broken-ness and disorder, **salvation** is about living a life characterised by goodness, health, well-being and right relationships. This state of peaceableness is captured in the biblical concept of “**shalom**”. Word-pictures of shalom are painted often in the book of Isaiah ((e.g. Isaiah 11. 1-9; 35. 1-10; 61. 1-4; 65. 17-25), where people live in harmony with one another, God and their environment. This state of well-being is by definition mutual – it only exists in and through rightly-ordered relationships: shalom is never possible for some at the cost of others’ peace. The peaceable kingdom is always about mutual health, where right relationships themselves are part of the very goodness of shalom, and these relationships restrain us from exploiting one another. Shalom is also inconceivable without a respectful, sustainable relationship with the earth.

So, if sin is “vandalism of shalom”, salvation is about the restoration of shalom.

3.2 If a wrong kind of attitude to the earth was promoted by the concept of “dominion over” creation, a right relationship might better be characterised by the idea of “**stewardship**”. This expresses the truth that the earth is the Lord’s, not ours, and that all things which seem to be ours – ours to have, to keep or to give – actually come from God in the first place (1 Chronicles 29. 10-14): these things are held on trust, and we are stewards of them, not owners.

3.3 It may be argued that Genesis 1.28 does say that humans are told to “rule over” other creatures. Very well: in that case, I want to suggest that we consider this as, at least in part, **a leadership question**. What kinds of leadership does the Christian faith call for? Domineering, dominating, and oppressive ones? We are recognising increasingly that fruitful leadership is characterised never by the simple exercise of power over others, but by respect for, attentiveness to, service of and collaboration with others. In the church we acknowledge a call to servant leadership, a leadership that recognises the value of the other and seeks their good – even while trying to achieve certain purposes – and which is explicitly Christ-like. If humanity is called to some kind of dominion over / stewardship of the earth, in which we have significant power over creation, how should the principles of Christ-centred servant leadership inform this relationship?

3.4 The responsibility we hold here is clear, and weighty: humanity has the power to affect the earth dramatically for good or ill. Many other species are clearly hugely intelligent, and can communicate in complex ways, including whales, dolphins, and the four ape species. None, however, have the capacity to destroy the earth, whether gradually or suddenly. We do. This underlines the fact that our “leadership” over the earth is in fact (like all leadership) more about **responsibility-for than rights-over.**

3.5 Therefore, dominion is a dangerous concept unless informed by a Christ-centred vision for all relationships, especially those involving authority. Stewardship is a positive model. Stewardship is often described as being based on three principles:

* The **earthkeeping principle**: as the Lord keeps and sustains, us, so we are to keep and sustain his creation. Instead of a sense of entitlement we are called to responsibility.
* The **Sabbath principle**: just as we thrive only with a cycle of work and rest, so does nature. Instead of relentless work and consumption we are called to rest and restraint, and to let this pattern shape our relationship with our environment.
* The **fruitfulness principle**: enjoyment of the earth’s fruits and resources must take place within a pattern that allows the earth to be renewed, and so continue to be fruitful. Instead of an asset-stripping approach to the planet we are called to ongoing investment in it, even if that is sometimes (in the short-term) costly.

To go back to our initial image of creation as the outpouring and overflow of God’s love, seeking to share love with others: this love can only be received truly if it can also be shared. An unsustainable way of living grasps creation as a possession in a way that takes it away from others, now and in the future; a sustainable one receives and shares creation mutually as a gift. Dominators rarely check that the fruits of their domination are being shared equally, especially with the meek and the weak; stewards just might check how their treatment of the earth is affecting creation and other people.

3.6 It might be argued that a careful management of creation is needed for purely pragmatic reasons: the earth is the vehicle we have been given to travel in for now. We have to keep the old car running for as long as it is needed rather than over-rev the engine, and lead it to breakdown before its usefulness is over. Still, when God’s purposes are fulfilled, we will enjoy an eternal spiritual life, released from the constraints of the physical: the car was just a tool, of no value in itself.

However, **Christian theology suggests something much more positive about physicality** than this. We are trespassing in the territory of mystery here – as Paul acknowledges (1 Corinthians 15. 51), when he speaks about the impossibility of our present flesh and blood inheriting the kingdom, while arguing that we will have new bodies capable of doing so (15. 35-58).

In Christian salvation, the physical is not dismissed: Christ clothed himself in our flesh to save us. The incarnation hardly diminishes the physical; it hallows it. Furthermore, Christ’s defeat of death was not achieved by his spirt surviving the death of his body or escaping from his physical form, but by a physical, bodily resurrection. (We would surely resist any attempt to reduce resurrection to the survival of Christ’s spirit or soul while his body stayed in the tomb.) The gospel is not that Christ moved directly from crucifixion to ascension, from the tomb to heaven, but that he died and was raised in a form where his flesh was real, physical, touchable. Based on this, Paul does indeed argue that those who are in Christ and who die will be raised, and not just in spirit, but “raised a spiritual body”. The vision of future hope in Revelation is of a place, not just a new spiritualised “heaven”, but “a new heaven and a new earth”; a new holy city has been prepared, where “the dwelling of God is with human beings, and he will live with them.” (Rev. 21. 1-3)

All this is important, because it needs to affect the way in which we understand the value of the physical – our own physicality and that of the earth. The Christian tradition includes strands in which the earth is seen as simply disposable. (2 Peter 3.10-13 is a key text to discuss here, as it is often read to suggest the disposability of creation.) Both incarnation and resurrection seem to speak against this view, but how has it affected our attitudes to creation, and the tending of the earth now? This again is an area we may need to discuss if we are to see how our views of salvation may affect our views of creation, and therefore of the ecological dimensions of Christian mission. There may be differences of view and emphasis between some of us here.

3.7 The issue here is partly that our picture of salvation may be too small: the cosmic reconciliation of all things created in Christ envisaged in Colossians 1. 15-20 surely includes the raising of all who are in Christ. However, it is not limited to this. If **salvation embraces the whole of creation**, how should that inform our Christian attitude to creation – and the role of ecology in mission – now?

This brings us to mission:

***4. The Mission of the Church and Care for the Earth***

4.1 In salvation-history terms, we live in the time between the times: Christ has come, and his salvation is active in the present; Christ will come again, and the Kingdom will be fulfilled. The church’s **mission** takes place in the interval between these two times. Through that mission we will not ourselves bring the fulfilment of God’s redemption of all things perfectly now; however, the vision of the way things should be and shall be gives us our direction about how God wills us to live in the present.[[1]](#footnote-1) If all things will be reconciled in Christ, if salvation is about the restoration of life in all its fullness, mission aims to achieve the nearest thing to shalom possible in the present. Mission must therefore be concerned with every dimension of life.

4.2 In seeking to understand this practically, we are served well as Anglicans by our “**Five Marks of Mission**”:

“The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
3. To respond to human need by loving service.
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”

4.3 **The mission of the church cannot be reduced to any one of these parts**, because salvation – as we have seen – is wholistic, leading to a fulfilment that embraces all things. God does not lack ambition, and his eternal purpose is for the whole creation brought into being by, for and through Christ, to be reconciled in Christ. God’s purposes are frustrated if people are not in relationship with him, so the good news must be proclaimed, and baptised disciples need to be nurtured. God’s purposes are frustrated if people are in need – especially needs which really could be met if love was exercised by other people (those who already possess resources which, if used and shared, could make a difference). God’s purposes are frustrated if people are not in just and right relationships with one another, especially if injustice and violence destroy his intended shalom for all. And God’s purposes are frustrated if people are living unsustainably, dishonouring his good gifts in creation and harming the earth and one another, especially the poor – and it is nearly always the poor who suffer when the earth is not safeguarded and sustained.

4.4 Furthermore, not only are all dimensions of this wholistic mission vital, but they are vitally inter-related; **no one mark of this mission can be rightly understood unless all are pursued and all are held in a mutually-informative relationship**. If any one aspect is omitted from the overall mission of the church, or if the connection of these elements is not appreciated, the church fails to witness to the wholeness of redemption in Christ, and reflects incompletely the all-encompassing nature of God’s salvation. (Matthew 28. 16-20; 2 Corinthians 5. 17-20; 1 John 3. 16-18)

For example, I am by background a low-church evangelical. I learned first that salvation involves a right relationship with God, made possible only through the cross and resurrection of Christ. This possibility of salvation demands my response to be actualised: will I turn from conscious sin and take Christ as Lord and Saviour? (Marks of Mission 1-2). I then learned, however, that this turning itself demands a recognition of my part in injustice (Mark 4) – and am learning that it requires a recognition of my part in the environmental crisis we face (Mark 5). Have I turned from sin and to Christ, if I don’t care about a sister or brother in need (1 John 3. 16-18; Mark 3), including those denied justice? No. Have I repented if I don’t care about brothers and sisters whose homes and livelihoods will disappear if the sea-level rises another 5 millimetres? The answer is, “Of course not.” Of course, if there was nothing I could do – or, more accurately, that *we* could do – about that sea-level rise, that would be one thing. However, the scientific consensus tells us clearly that this is not the case: my actions, our actions, including the insulation of our homes, choices about transport, travel, consumption, food, heating, and more, make a difference. Love in action, following repentance, will make a difference to the climate crisis. Such love is itself the response God has been seeking from all eternity to his own love, the love which threw creation into being – at least, that has been the argument of this reflection.

4.5 We are learning that **an account of the church’s mission which disregards our response to the climate crisis will not ring true** to many, including younger people. This points to our need in the Diocese of Durham to ensure both that **all four of our diocesan priorities are given due weight, and (like the five marks of mission) are also only understood in relation to one another**.

It would be easy to think that mission is primarily about “growth”, and it is possible for our language to sometimes suggest this is the case. If mission is not about all four priorities, they should not be priorities. We will have work to do in sketching out the relationships. Some initial thoughts on some ways in which the environment priority may be related to the others:

**Children and youth** do indeed seem to understand the wholisitic nature of mission readily. If environmental concern is perceived to be merely bolted on, not integrated fundamentally with our proclamation of the gospel, church growth, what we teach about discipleship, and our tackling of poverty, they will conclude their voice has not been heard.

**Tackling poverty** is, of course, directly related to environmental concerns: as noted, the poor will generally suffer the effects of the climate crisis more than others and sooner; the poor lack the resources to mitigate the impact of environmental issues upon them. The health of the planet in all critical dimensions – including climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution, soil depletion, etc. – is directly relate to the provision of the food, shelter and other human needs: God has provided, but we are not sharing his provision fairly, and are destroying the very mechanisms given by God through which that provision can continue sustainably. Increased scarcity will hurt the poor first and most.

**Growth** may seem lees clearly related. However, if we really have a kingdom theology, where salvation is about God’s rule and (under that just gentle rule) the well-being of all people and our planet, any attempt to bring people to faith which is divorced from care for creation lacks integrity. For people who are environmentally aware and active, any Christian mission divorced from environmental concern will convince them that the church is morally bankrupt in the domain of life about which they care the most. This will be hugely negative for Christians whom God has called to lead on ecological issues. Similarly, for those who are not yet disciples, yet whose ecological concern means they are “not far from the Kingdom of God”, any evangelism which is tone-deaf about the planet will be disastrous. The possibility of integrating our evangelism with ecological concern is therefore a huge opportunity, and will become a threat if we fail to do it.

4.6 This wholistic understanding of mission is based on our vision of the renewal of creation in the redemption of all things in Christ. The renewal of creation is ultimately something only God can bring fully to effect, in the future. However, **God looks to those made in his image to co-operate with him in the present in the process of renewal**, so that the measure of healing that is possible now may be achieved. (Archbishop Rowan encouraged us to see mission as “finding out what God is doing and joining in” in order to understand Fresh Expressions of church; this perspective on mission surely helps us understand its ecological elements too.) This will be for the good of all living in the present – a greater measure of shalom for more will result – and that present renewal and restoration also foreshadows the new creation, the bringing to perfection of creation that is to come. Environmental harmony now points to, and is a witness to, the Kingdom that is to come, which the church prays for daily: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth.” In the diocese, we believe that the church is being called to greater agency here, in prayer and action.

4.7 The world is not the body of God, physically. The church, however, is the body of Christ, and three reflections on this follow:

First, **through this body, Christ touches the earth now, when his mission is pursued**. So, the church must concern itself with doing the things Jesus did for the liberation of all (Luke 4. 18-21); this has to now include environmental concern, seeking a better relationship with the earth, with the church seeing a clear responsibility to change and to act here.

Second, **being the body teaches us about mutuality**: where one hurts all are harmed (1 Corinthians 12. 14-27); we are to share what we have out of our abundance for others in need (2 Corinthians 8-9). Environmental concern might perhaps most practically begin with learning about brothers and sisters in need because of environmental issues. We are not one body if those who can care for others in need do not (especially if our actions are actually, in part, causing others’ distress).

Third, **in this body there are different gifts and different vocations**. The eye cannot say to the hand, “All we need is eyes.” Similarly, those with particular callings and gifts within the overall mission of the church must resist the temptation of thinking their part of that mission is the only or most important part. Evangelists have a bad habit of thinking only evangelism is mission; Christians with a burden to see loving service promoted and injustice challenged can be dismissive of evangelists. Again, those who now hear God’s call to safeguard the integrity of creation need to remember this is part of mission. All of us need to recognise that none of us understand evangelism, loving service, challenging injustice or safeguarding creation correctly unless we see each in the light of the others, and all as part of the one work of God’s salvation which the church’s mission as a whole serves; within this mission we have been given different vocations and gifts.

***5. From Theological Principles to Mission in Action: some Questions and Suggestions***

5.1 Within this overall mission, we are indeed discerning that the church is currently being called to repentance and action in relation to the environment. **In enabling the churches and Christian people of our diocese to hear this call and respond, what might some of the issues be?**

5.2 We will need to **help people think through some of the theological issues** identified above about how ecology is related to salvation and mission. Have members of our congregations been enabled to ask and think through questions like:

* what is the role and status of the created order now and in God’s eternal purposes?
* how is environmental concern related to salvation, and therefore to mission?
* is physicality merely for this life, and eternity a purely spiritual realm / what is our future resurrection hope? And, as we do indeed have a resurrection hope, what does that tell us about the value of the material creation now?

5.3 We will also need to help people think about **how we read and use the Bible with ecological interests in mind**. Liberation theology demanded that every use of the Bible be interrogated from the perspective of the poor: whose reading is this? Is the perspective of the poor informing it? What are the implications and consequences of this reading for the poor? Feminist theology asks the same questions in relation to the voice, status and dignity of women. Over the last year we have been challenged to hear black theological perspectives afresh in our reading. Can we now try to consciously take on the discipline of interrogating our theology from an ecological perspective?

For example, can we help one another to develop the habit of always asking how scripture is being read from an environmental perspective? So, whenever scripture is read and commented in within a church or diocesan meeting, can we ask if this interpretation has attended to (or ignored) ecological questions? Whenever someone preaches, have they asked ecological questions of their reading and their message in preparation? Whenever PCCs face questions about their buildings, have these been considered from the point of view of mission, informed by scripture, and have ecological issues been considered within that thinking? Not every discussion or sermon will be principally about the environment, but making sure environmental concern is regularly part of our reading and our use of scripture in the life of the church is the task here: is a Godly care for creation sitting on our shoulder and informing us as we read and teach the scriptures?

5.4 All this will be particularly challenging, because the Church of England is about to ask everyone to listen to multiple perspectives on questions of how we understand gender and sexuality issues theologically, while we are also trying to become more attentive about race. That is a lot of questions – and a lot of lenses to look through – at once. However, the climate crisis will not wait for us to resolve other questions first, however vital they are. Continuing Ministerial Development events might help resource us for the task of bringing ecological readings of scripture to every use of it in diocesan, church and church school life; senior staff messaging will be important here too.

5.5 It will be important for people to be able to **readily** **apply a comprehensible theological framework** to enable these readings. I have tried to use one such framework here, locating ecological questions for the church’s mission in a straightforward creation-sin-redemption-mission framework. Without such a framework, people may struggle to read scripture ecologically, or ecological concern may be isolated from the core elements of Christian belief and other aspects of mission. Does it matter what reasons drive a change in our environmental behaviour? At one level, pragmatically, no; at another, yes, very much – if faith and discipleship are to be related to everyday life. So, I suggest developing and sharing a readily useable approach to developing a Christian mind (Romans 12. 1-2) about ecological matters should be a high priority here.

5.6 Within this, questions and challenges will arise about how we do use scripture. For example, at Harvest we may rehearse promises from scripture about the goodness of creation and Gods provision through it. As we do this, we need to recall that the texts of scripture were written at a time when the human population of the earth was perhaps 300 million, 1/26th of our current 7.8 billion; carbon in the atmosphere was around 278 parts per million, and is now 67% higher, at 417; the human impact on natural habitats then was negligible, and is now huge. **What difference does this make in our reading today of texts written then about creation and God’s provision for humanity through the created order?** This is not an impossible question, but one that needs to be asked consciously if we are to read and theologise responsibly. Otherwise, Harvest (for example) could be an occasion when we deceive ourselves about sustainability with false reassurances: if we are compromising the very fruitfulness of the earth promised in biblical texts, we should not repeat those promises blandly without recognising this problem. Harvest could instead be used as an opportunity to recognise the ways in which we are currently closing the open and generous hand of God, and hear God’s call to repent, so that his promises may yet be fulfilled. There are very real questions about how we use scripture here in liturgy, preaching and prayer, and how we allow it to both reassure and challenge us.

5.7 One of the huge challenges of this priority will be **the translation of the call to ecological concern into specific actions** which we are asking people to see **as part of mission**. We will disagree about some of these, and also face complexity in understanding them.

For example, it seems clear to some that coal must now be phased out of electricity-generation as part of our response to the climate emergency; Christians in our remaining local coal industry may not yet agree with that (witness recent campaigns in Northumberland, County Durham and Cumbria against new mines).

It seems clear that oil must be replaced by electricity as the fuel source for our cars – and the UK government has taken steps to promote this change. However, electricity itself needs generating and storing. The complex reality here includes the fact that storage needs batteries; the huge increase in demand for lithium for these batteries is leading to a new, rapid degradation of the environment in parts of Portugal, Chile and elsewhere. In the drive for “white oil” – lithium – for the rapidly expanding electric vehicle market, huge mines have been created in wilderness areas. These are hardly in themselves an environmental blessing.

It seems clear that flying is a huge CO2 generator. However, some fragile environments and species rely on ecotourism for their survival (financially and politically). If the Arubuko Sokoke Scops Owl ceases to exist in its only location on the coast of Kenya, that would be vandalism of shalom; if the only way to protect its environment is for people to fly to see it (as ecologist friends who have worked for its survival tell me), some other vandalism of shalom is also involved. This is again complex.

5.8 Because the whole environmental crisis we face seems overwhelming, **one temptation is to despair**. We, however, are **called to hope** (Romans 5. 1-5; 8. 18-25), and to seek the actions that give hope shape. Hope is not optimism, which can permit denial. But it will be important to develop this priority with an appropriate Christian hope.

5.9 Another possibility is that we will **feel simply condemned**: the embracing of this priority means asking us all to see that our actions are part of the problem; it may be harder to articulate ways to change that people believe will make a difference (given the complexity just discussed). Condemnation breeds hopelessness, a sense that nothing better is possible. In so far as my actions vandalise shalom, if I simply feel guilty and cannot see a way to forge a creative response born of repentance, that can lead to despair; people in despair tend not to find new and positive ways of living. People who know that they are forgiven do, and an important key to developing Christian environmental awareness, knowledge and action must surely be to ensure that in all this a message of grace is maintained. If all we achieve is to make Christian people feel guilty, we are unlikely to effect change. People change not when we feel bad but when we know we are loved, and that love beckons us to change whatever is unloving in our lives. We will learn – theoretically and practically – in a stumbling way here, and we need to create the space for one another to do that. There will surely be the need for much grace between us as we learn how to agree, disagree, learn and act together here. Eco-shaming each other will not help!

5.10 Therefore, **the enormity and complexity of the crisis are challenges to be faced, not reasons to evade the call.** There is a striking encouragement to pray about this call and challenge, and all the as-yet-unforeseen steps we need to take, combined with a promise of the forgiveness that unlocks people to really change, in 2 Chronicles 7. 13-14:

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

*Rick Simpson, December 2020 / April 2021*

1. Francis Schaeffer (writing before language became inclusive, in 1970), expressed this well: “On the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation, the Christian who believes the Bible should be the man who – with God’s help and in the power of the Holy Spirit – is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then. It will not be perfect, but it must be substantial, or we have missed our calling … we should exhibit a substantial healing here and now, between man and nature and nature and itself, as far as Christians can bring it to pass.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)