



Climate Change – How can the Church Challenge Society?

Fabiola Blum, Castle Street member

Hi, I am Fabiola Blum, a member of this congregation in Castle Street. My background is in Environmental Studies and I work in the field of Biodiversity Conservation. Not sure if I will answer the question “How can the church challenge society” –but here I try and offer you some thoughts...

I would like to start with a reference to Jared Diamond’s book “**Collapse – How societies choose to fail or succeed**”¹, highly recommended reading! For now just a few pointers. Diamond sets out to examine some past and present societies that either collapsed or managed to survive in the face of severe environmental damage. It thereby gives us an opportunity to learn from these examples. I think it’s important to stress the element of “Choice” in the subtitle – that we as a society have it in our hands to respond in a successful way.

Climate Change poses big challenges to us. And although Diamond’s book is looking at wider ranging environmental issues than Climate Change only, his book very much applies to Climate Change issues...

Let’s look at the **Easter Island** example:

Easter Islanders formed a society on a very remote island, and as it turned out a very fragile environment. Competing chiefs had bigger and bigger statues built for themselves, and the commoners used trees and ropes made from bark for transporting these statues. The society as a whole seems to have been blind for far too long about the damaging impact of cutting down the trees – until it was too late...

The parallels with our modern world are quite striking. Aren’t we in a way a remote island in space?

Let’s look at our **climate change challenges**:

For **countries overseas**, Climate Change brings with it an increased likelihood of severe weather events, such as floods, droughts, crop failure. The challenges overseas are very much how to adapt to Climate Change – because the impacts are felt already.

Looking **closer to home**, the danger of flooding is not unreal in our part of lowlying England either. The Climate Change challenges at home here are:

- how we live,
- how food is produced,
- how we travel

¹ Diamond Jared (2005): Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, p. 79ff.

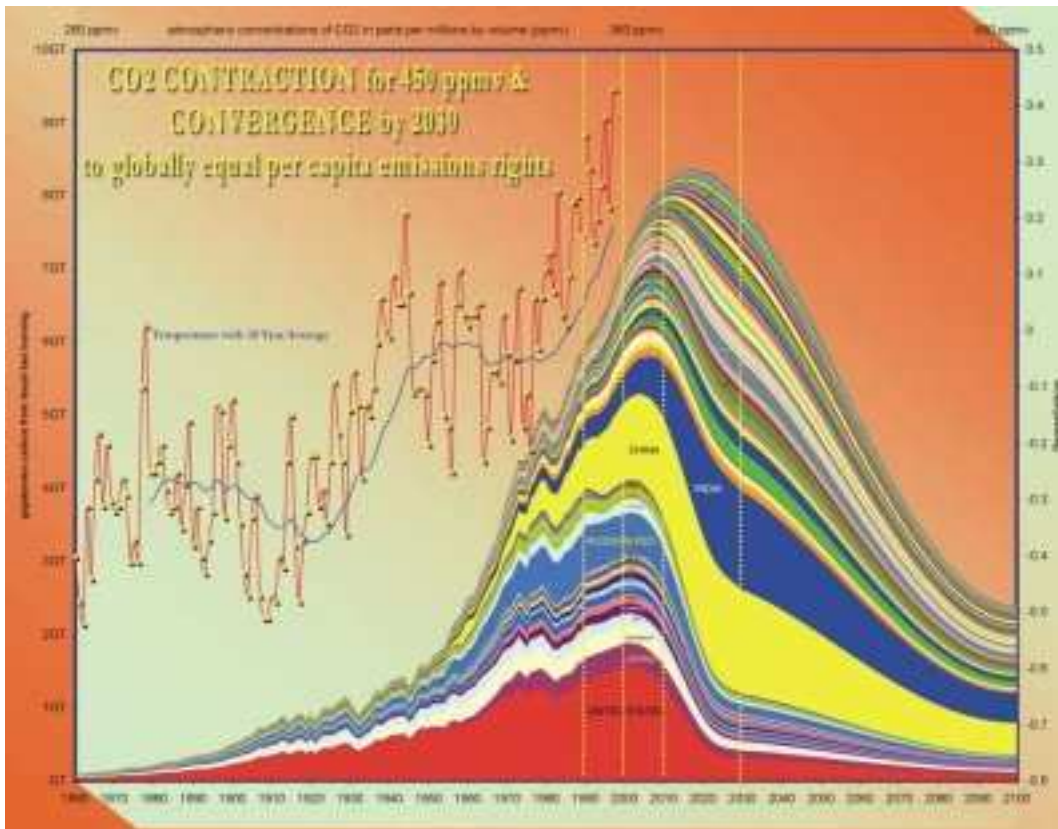


The challenges at home are very much how to mitigate Climate Change and how to bring down emissions.

We are facing a serious **dilemma**:

- If only the eco-minded change their behaviour – that won't bring emissions down enough
- We haven't got much time to bring about the changes.
- Politicians are scared to show leadership and enforce climate friendly behaviour for all if this is only backed by a minority
- We can convince politicians and fellow citizens by building a "critical mass" of people who demand incentives and binding rules for all
- The society as a whole (or a large proportion) needs to back Climate Change policies, actions and regulations - then the issue will get tackled in a cross cutting way! The Climate Change Bill is a great start, but it should also influence transport policies and should make politicians rethink airport expansions.

A **helpful framework** for tackling Climate Change worldwide is the concept of **Contraction and Convergence**, developed by the Global Commons Institute.



Source: Global Commons Institute, <http://www.gci.org.uk/briefings/ICE.pdf>



This is the one and only complicated graph in the presentation. The graph is adding up emissions of all countries and projecting them over time into the future, the UK is a very pale blue colour and hardly distinguishable from Germany. But the important thing behind the graph is the underlying idea.

We need to bring overall emissions down to a sustainable level (“Contraction”). There needs to be an overall limit to emissions, and going above this would be extremely dangerous.

To do this it seems fair to allow all people on earth equal proportions of emissions, which means, in the medium term timeframe all emitters reach towards a similar emission level per capita (“Convergence”).

This means:

- The current high emitters need to bring their emissions down a lot,
- lower emitters can still increase emissions
- In some cases emissions will go up above the sustainable level and then down again

This framework provides a strong ethical/justice basis and a good vision of what we should be aiming for!

This is what **Rowan Williams** says about Contraction and Convergence: ... “The Churches can give their backing to Contraction & Convergence publicly and unanimously because at its core, it is just. It appears Utopian only if we refuse to contemplate the alternatives honestly.”²

Contraction & Convergence also gets backing from the World Council of Churches, Christian Aid, Tearfund who are all quoted in a recent publication about Contraction & Convergence and the Carbon Countdown Campaign with the aim to bring Contraction & Convergence into an international post Kyoto agreement.³

Carbon Footprinting can illustrate the differences in per capita emissions. British citizens currently emit on average 9.62t per CO₂ per year, compared to citizens of El Salvador (0.96t) and of Mali (0.09t). To reach a sustainable level, we need to bring down our emissions to 1 t, a tenth of the current level, ideally by 2030.

So far I have given the big picture with a vision where we need to go. The “simple answer” how to achieve this is through a combination of:

- improved and
- applied technology and
- lifestyle changes.

In practice, to reach this means, there are millions of little (and big) things needed, on all kind of levels. I will use the remaining time to give some examples.

² The Global Commons Institute (2008): Carbon Countdown. The Campaign for Contraction & Convergence, p.28, available on <http://www.gci.org.uk/>

³ *ibid.*, p.30f., available on <http://www.gci.org.uk/>



So, how can the church challenge society?

I would like to suggest that there is a role for

- Individuals,
- Groups & congregations and
- Church organisations as a whole.

First, we need to make ourselves clear the **urgency of Climate Change** as a justice issue and communicate this. The Bishop of London has spoken out publicly against Climate Change and called climate damaging behaviour like driving a big car a sin. In a way that's a great step, but there is a fine line between challenging people in a way so they may come on board and causing guilt and creating resistance which isn't helpful...so, maybe we shouldn't use strong words like sin, while still conveying the urgency of action to bring people on board.

For the **action of individual church members** there is lots of material available of what individuals can do, examples are CAFOD's living simply⁴ campaign, Tearfund's My global Impact,⁵ A Rocha's Climatestewards⁶ to name just a few. Groups and Congregation giving each other support, can play a big role.

And **church organisations** as a whole can help by **providing resources and material**, by **campaigning** and through **direct support for those suffering** from Climate Change. I met a pastor from Nigeria at a conference a while ago, and he was surprised that the church could play a role in the local community about Climate Change – as people there very much had the perception that Climate Change is being dealt with by experts... I think it is very important that the church takes side with the people worst affected and supports them in tackling Climate Change impacts– I wonder if we could adapt the approach of Liberation Theology to Climate Change, securing livelihoods with the people affected in their local communities?

I will look at some of the things just mentioned in more detail.

We are basically faced with the task to **permeate society** to bring about the change that's needed. I find the idea of being sourdough and mustard seeds a helpful metaphor for this task.

David Ballard, a Climate Change and Action research expert, came up with the following formula⁷:

Awareness x Association x Agency = Attitude & Behaviour Change

⁴ <http://bigdeal.cafod.org.uk/action/liveit/livesimply>

⁵ www.tearfund.org/mgi

⁶ <http://climatestewards.net/>

⁷ quoted in New Economics Foundation (2008): NEF report The response of Civil Society to Climate Change



Association can mean:

- e.g. encouragement from friends and family
- Being part of a community based programme

Agency is the felt sense of being able to do something meaningful in response to Climate Change. In a way this explains why the guilt trip won't be very successful...

If one of the "A"s is missing, there will be no resulting attitude and behaviour change.

This highlights the importance of meaningful options for action and support by others.
Getting together in groups always helps.

In the UK there are between 2,000-4,000 community based initiatives working on Climate Change (2007 estimate figures from New Economics Foundation)⁸

- About 8% faith groups
- About 15 % have paid staff, which means we might run into capacity issues, as time and effort of volunteers is limited.

The challenge in many groups is to reach beyond the white middle class people. I would like to mention a really exciting project – the Akashi Project⁹ – which was started in Cambridge a couple of years ago to reach these underrepresented groups, in particular faith groups and other ethnic groups.

As a **congregation**, we can look at our climate change impact and improve the congregational carbon footprint in creative ways. A helpful resource for this are eco-congregations¹⁰. Another idea is to start an exchange with partner congregations overseas.

Some congregations might already have partner congregation, others might develop such links, e.g. to countries in which congregation members have roots and connections. Wouldn't it be interesting to start a dialogue about climate change impacts? And about different perceptions of basic needs? We might well be able to learn from each other...

I mentioned the **role of church organisations in providing resources and material**, such as study and discussion material, e.g. for lent and harvest, and educational material, e.g. theatrical plays for young people.

If you now start asking yourself where to find all these resources, "Operation Noah", a Christian umbrella campaign exclusively focussed on Climate Change, provides a good resources section¹¹ on their website with videos, study material, liturgical material etc.

⁸ ibid.

⁹ www.akashi.org.uk/

¹⁰ www.ecocongregation.org

¹¹ www.operationnoah.org/resources



Church related organisations also have a strong **role in campaigning**. There is a broad range of church related campaigning organisations¹². I suggest we need strong public messages in the media through these organisations. Operation Noah is relatively new and I hope to hear them get louder in leading the debate on Climate Change...

Many of these organisations have come together under the umbrella of the **Stop Climate Chaos Coalition**¹³, a powerful network of a whole range of organisations campaigning against dangerous climate change. I suggest we join into these campaigns and bring the work of these organisations more to the centre of our church work.

I want to finish with a **quote from Jared Diamond**, the author of "Collapse": "Those of us who are religious can further multiply our power by developing support within our church, synagogue or mosque. It was churches that led the civil rights movement, and some religious leaders have also been outspoken on the environment, but not many so far..."¹⁴

The good news is this quote is already about 3 years old, and since then more church leader have spoken out for the environment and against Climate Change, but they can probably still become more... Speaking out in support of encompassing global concepts such as Contraction and Convergence, challenging materialistic lifestyle choices, exploring ways how we can turn and become an eco-just society, taking side with the worst affected groups in overseas countries and also with the worst affected groups here at home, helping them to secure their livelihoods in the face of climate change in liberation-style theology - adapted to Climate Change...

...so that we may have and contribute towards a truly liberating Easter experience in this challenging time
...rather than finding a future like Easter Island!

¹² for example A Rocha - <http://climatestewards.net> , CAFOD - www.cafod.org.uk/climate-change, Christian Aid - www.christianaid.org.uk/issues/climatechange/index.aspx, Christian Ecology Link - www.christian-ecology.org.uk , Eco Congregation - www.ecocongregation.org , Methodist Relief and Development Fund - www.mrdf.org.uk, Operation Noah - www.operationnoah.org , Speak - www.speak.org.uk , Tearfund - www.tearfund.org/Campaigning/Climate+change+and+disasters

¹³ www.stopclimatechaos.org

¹⁴ Diamond Jared (2005): Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, p. 558