

Low-carbon life: Helping churches go green

Feature in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

Chris Goodall's book [How to Live a Low-Carbon Life](#) (Earthscan, 2007) was described by New Scientist magazine as "the definitive guide to reducing your carbon footprint ." Goodall, a Brit who has an MBA from Harvard Business School, works for a software firm in England and is active in politics and environmental issues, especially in the Oxford area. He is working with several churches in the United Kingdom to help them analyze and reduce their environmental impact. He also runs the Web site lowcarbonlife.net.

Tell us about the work that you are doing with churches.

A year ago I did my first carbon footprint analysis of a parish church. I measured the total usage of natural gas for heating and the electricity use for running the church and its office. I told the church that it was paying far too much for its gas and should be able to get a much better deal. I also tried to show that travel undertaken by worshipers was more significant in carbon terms than the energy used to run the church itself. And the annual ski trip to Switzerland was a large component of that travel!

In September 2007 I started working with two Anglican bishops whose duties involve a huge amount of travel across their dioceses. They are always on the road. Among other things, they want to experiment with setting up temporary offices in different parts of their dioceses and working from these bases. This will cut their amount of travel, and the travel of those visiting them. In a sense they will become more local to their priests and parishes.

I suspect that as global warming becomes more and more obvious, we will all have to become more local, traveling less, buying things made nearby and working closer to where we live. An astonishing percentage of all emissions comes from personal travel in one way or another.

Can you cite two or three specific things churches can do to reduce their carbon imprint?

The most obvious item for churches to address in the United Kingdom is heating systems. Our churches, being very old, are often extremely difficult to heat. Parishes need to think about whether it makes sense to install an energy-efficient boiler or to add insulation.

A second thing to look at is the electricity used when equipment is kept on all the time. In the Oxford church I looked at, the sound system was kept on during the entire week. It was consuming a lot of electricity even though it was actually being used only a few times a week. Substantial savings were possible.

Third, almost all lighting in churches can come from energy-efficient (compact fluorescent) bulbs. These bulbs last a lot longer than ordinary lights, so one additional advantage is that you don't have to go through the inconvenience of changing them as often.

As for patterns of travel: Can people share cars? Can a minibus be used to pick people up? A Christian community might actually be strengthened if it encouraged people to share cars to get to church.

Any specific lifestyle changes to recommend?

I worry about being too prescriptive. I try to give people the information they need (usually in terms of excessively detailed numbers and facts!) rather than dictating what families or businesses should do. I will say that flying is a great problem. We travel huge distances, and the emissions from aircraft are more destructive than those from cars.

Of course, what we all need to do is to live simpler, less heavy-footed lives. I worry all the time that consumerism—the endless cycle of getting and spending—is destructive both to the planet and to the soul. If we lived our lives more in our local communities, whether church or secular, we would be richer in spirit and more in tune with God's earth.

What spiritual and religious resources do you use to work with churches in regard to these issues?

Actually, there is only one Christian commandment that we need to remember: love thy neighbor as thyself. We have gradually woken up to the realization that our own actions—such as consuming and traveling—contribute substantially to climate problems elsewhere. I just read in the newspaper about a government minister in Lesotho in southern Africa who said that summer temperatures in his country were rising inexorably and droughts were becoming more frequent. For an agricultural community, this is disastrous. We may never be certain, but it is at least a reasonable hypothesis that these climate changes are a consequence of rapidly rising levels of greenhouse gases. Our actions in the richer parts of the world are adversely affecting the ability of people in the poorer parts to survive. No Christian mindful of the need to “love thy neighbor” can possibly be anything other than ashamed of this. It is a failure of Christian duty not to take action.

Can these efforts take the form of a gracious invitation rather than a legalistic, joyless endeavor?

This is very difficult. I did a TV interview recently in which the journalist said in response to one of my comments, “I feel my shoulders drooping.” A world addicted to easy gratification will find it very hard to change its behavior. I have tried to argue that self-restraint, a virtue almost forgotten in the Anglo-Saxon world, is a way forward. But to people brought up on the idea that happiness comes from consumption, it is no use pretending that self-restraint is easy. We need a very substantial cultural shift across the entire more-affluent world. Though we see some signs that this is taking place, it simply isn’t happening fast enough to hold down greenhouse gases to levels that the planet can cope with.

If religious groups—Christians, Muslims and others—get behind an antimaterialist creed, we do stand a chance. The faiths are the only organized bodies around the world that might have the influence to make this happen. A simple, holy life in which people are not tied down by the weight of their possessions is perfectly compatible with happiness and joy.

What role do you see the market playing in encouraging the needed changes? Can the market work on behalf of environmental progress?

Any businessperson will say that businesses do not create markets, they simply respond to customer tastes. This is good: it means that mass markets of consumers can change what is produced. If we demand local organic food, then a properly

functioning capitalist economy will deliver it. If enough customers say that they want electric cars with very low emissions, the car companies will provide them. This is why I have emphasized that what we need most is not government action. Nor should we hope that corporations will deliver climate-friendly goods and services. The initiative needs to come from us. Joining together in big enough numbers, we can change what the economic system produces.

We tend to think of natural resources as resources that need to be used by us or else they will be used by someone else. What other models can we use for understanding our relationship to the planet?

Well, a new model has arisen, hasn't it? Thirty years ago, we thought of the earth as a vast open mine with limitless resources. The actions of humankind were seen as barely scratching the surface of a stable and unchanging ecosphere. Increasingly science is telling us that we are living our lives as though the resources of three or four planets were available for us to extract. We realize that our lives do affect the earth's climate in substantial and unpredictable ways. We are waking up to the fact that half the species on earth may disappear within a hundred years. In some ways, this new realization is very useful. The old view that humankind could endlessly dominate and exploit the natural world was profoundly unchristian. It gave us a sense that we—selfish, exploitative creatures that we are—were in charge. We are not.

Here is the briefest of outlines of another model of thinking about our relationship with the natural world: God placed us here among the abundance and beauty of the earth. God gave us the responsibility for stewardship of the planet. This means looking after its atmosphere as well as its soils, its forests and its water supplies. Instead of seeing our lives as dominated by the extraction of material things from the world, what about seeing our life's work as leaving the planet in better health than when we arrived—improving soil quality by using organic, less intensive agriculture, increasing forest areas to help maintain water supplies and extracting more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than we put in? We would get our life's satisfaction from knowing that we were part of a movement to nurture God's creation, not progressively to exhaust it.

In a recent issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Curtis White declared that religion or "spirit" and not science is the best resource in environmentalism. We have to reorder our fundamental relationship to the planet, and science, he

said, cannot help us to do that.

I agree that a spiritual awakening is an absolute necessity. But I am concerned about the antiscience elements of the environmental movement. I think that many environmentalists feel, with some justification, that science has implicitly promulgated the view that all human problems can be solved by technology. This has led us, they think, toward the making of false gods.

But we need science more than ever. Climate-change problems have put us in a very deep hole, and we need all the help that we can get to scramble out. Science is useful, just as economics is useful, when it is subservient to our spiritual direction.

What about the idea of carbon exchanges? Is that an option for, say, people whose work involves frequent travel?

Carbon “offsets” are the modern-day equivalent of the indulgences of the medieval church. I see people handing over their \$10 and thinking that somehow that money goes directly to reducing emissions somewhere in the world by an amount equivalent to the emissions connected to their airplane flight. It doesn’t.

But it is worth using the right kind of carbon market. I tell people in the UK that they should buy certificates from the European emissions exchange. If I buy a ton of emissions on this exchange, it means that another polluter somewhere in Europe has to reduce carbon dioxide emissions correspondingly. This is a good example of how a system invented by economists can be very helpful. In particular, I suggest that UK people buy these certificates through a nonprofit Oxfordshire company, called EBICo, run by Christians.