

# The Church and the climate crisis

IN February, I taught an online short course at Wesley House on the topic of "Preaching Good News into the Climate Crisis". We covered the preaching task, climate change science, ecological ways of reading the Bible and how to deploy these elements in preparing sermons. For the final session, I took up the challenge of teaching on hope in this age of anthropogenic climate change. This was by far the most difficult topic I taught – in a time of climate breakdown, where can we find hope? And how can we preach hope into this climate crisis whose outcome is all but determined by the emissions made over many decades and our way of life into which we were born and can barely imagine altering as much as we must?

## Hopelessness

The issue of hope is a life and death matter. More people than we may realise are suffering from eco-anxiety or eco-nihilism. Given the state of the planet and the current and projected effects of climate change some people have lost hope in our shared future. Some people have decided not to have children – with echoes of the hopelessness found in the dystopian film "Children of Men" (2006), where women can no longer get pregnant. Why bring children into this world without a future? To some people, say, this may seem like a fair question, but children can be bea-



**Wesley House**  
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cons of hope and a new generation may find better ways of living with other creatures than current generations have.

Tragically, others have committed suicide based on their assessment of the climate crisis, which is, in the worst case, a doomsday scenario with not enough being done to avoid catastrophic effects for human civilisation. With people making such decisions about their own lives based on their beliefs about future climatic scenarios it should be beyond doubt that we are facing an important pastoral issue related to the central doctrines and practices of our faith in Jesus Christ.

The young are the most affected, probably because they are most powerless in society and have the most at stake. The Church fails them unless it shows that congregations and denominations are active in treating their concerns with the utmost seriousness.

Last year "The Lancet" published the results of a study that surveyed 10,000 young people from 10 countries about their attitudes to climate change. More than half of those surveyed reported feeling afraid, sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless and guilty. Asked to rate govern-

mental responses to climate change, in general they were negative about prospects for positive government action. Young people feel betrayed and dismissed when they try to talk about their feelings. The study says that protecting the mental health and well-being of young people against climate anxiety is possible, requiring those in positions of power to recognise, understand, and validate the feelings of young people. The overall impression of the study is that adults and their institutions around the world are failing young people by not doing enough about climate change.

Having read this study, the question that occurred to me was whether our churches are taking the climate anxiety of children and adults seriously. To do so would require nothing less than acknowledging that the world has changed,

we have changed and are often in denial of these basic facts. Young people need to be heard in church and their concerns treated with the utmost importance, otherwise the Church will condemn itself to irrelevance once again and could be legitimately accused of irresponsibility on this most important challenge.

## Voice

One positive step in this direction was the Climate Justice for All initiative of the World Methodist Council that involved young Methodists from around the world giving voice to their climate concerns at COP26 in Glasgow. Important as this is, it is just as important to give voice to young people on climate issues in local settings. Faced with exclusion from many spaces, it is my hope that our churches can be incubators of the next generation of hope-filled climate activists and policy makers that do what it takes to look after God's creation.

Our people, young and old, need hope in the face of cli-

mate breakdown. Part of the cause of our ecological breakdown is our materialistic, capitalistic, individualist society. In such a society, where people are increasingly isolated from one another, especially with Covid-19, it is difficult to sustain hope for the future. Hope is best sustained in the collective actions of many to overcome threats to society. In other words, it is practically impossible to maintain hope as an individual virtue, but is it easier to maintain a hopeful perspective when acting to improve things together with others in groups, collectives and even mass movements? Hope for causes that one cares about is much easier to maintain if thousands or millions of others join in action around that cause.

This perspective on hope poses a challenge for the Church and its theology – which has cast hope as one of the theological virtues based on 1 Corinthians 13.13: "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." This hope has traditionally been for hope in

one's salvation in Christ. Unfortunately, this ultimate hope can lead to a lack of concern about the state of the planet – after all, some Christians say, aren't we to escape this world and go to heaven? Such an approach, however, shows contempt for those who are currently suffering the consequences of climate change and those who will in the future.

While our hope in Christ's salvation remains what we might call our ultimate hope, in an era of climate change we need more than this hope to drive responsible action. Hope must be extended beyond our ultimate hope in God restoring this world and reconciling all things. That is not to make something other than Christ our ultimate concern, but to allow for penultimate hopes in this world. This is not simply about our well-being and survival, but about concern for God's other creatures and our neighbours, whom we love alongside our primary love of God.

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