

COVER



CARING FOR CREATION

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As some churches celebrate harvest thanksgiving, Thomas Baldwin looks at the relationship between faith and the stewardship of the world.

"And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (Genesis 1:28, AV)

IN an interview with Radio Times in 2009, Sir David Attenborough, probably our most famous naturalist, despaired of 'that basic notion that the world is our oyster, that we have dominion over all things, that they are here for us'. Asked where the notion came from, he replied: 'The Bible, of course.

Genesis, chapter one'.

To the list of accusations levelled at religion by secular critics, you can add environmental destruction. The Green Bible, an edition of the New Revised Standard Version which emphasises passages relevant to environmental issues, was greeted by one blogger with 'You won't find a more dishonest book anywhere'.

"Reading the Biblical texts in a particular self-interested way, they have been taken to mean that we – humankind – have control of this planet to do with as we wish," admits the Rev Trevor Jamison,

environmental chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland.

"Actually I think we are looking at a human problem not a religious problem as such: at the time Europe industrialised we were looking around for justification for why it was okay to exploit the world in this way, and we used the religious one."

It is part of Trevor's job to provide a theological rebuttal of such arguments, to demonstrate not only that Christians should be interested in environmental issues but that they can bring a unique perspective beyond that of secular groups.

"You can go back to the same texts and make a very different argument as to why religion should be very deeply concerned about the environment," he says. "The word 'dominion' used in Genesis actually means 'responsible'.

"We have to be realistic. As humankind we do wield more power over the environment than other species. But if someone says to you 'stay in my house, treat it as your own' that doesn't mean you are being given permission to trash the house.

"There are also important elements in Christianity that push us in the direction of caring for the environment. We understand it's God's creation, something God loves. If God loves it, so should we.

"We know Jesus tells us to love our neighbour, but how can we love our neighbour if we damage his life in the way we treat the planet?

"The Good Samaritan is a parable about widening out people's understanding of our neighbour. Our neighbour includes anyone on this planet, and I think there's an argument that non-human species should be at least regarded in a neighbourly fashion as well."

Eco-Congregation is a multi-denominational organisation that encourages churches to consider the environment in their worship, buildings and community work.

Trevor, a United Reformed Church minister, spends a lot of time spreading that message in churches, as well as writing (resource material for Creation Time – September 1 – October 4, when ecumenical bodies have encouraged churches to focus

on the environment – is available on the Church of Scotland's Starters for Sunday website as well as the Eco-Congregation site).

"Some people are under the impression it's just about buildings – insulation and solar panels and so on – which of course we'd encourage, but it's more than that," he says.

"Some congregations can get a bit paralysed if they have got a huge energy-inefficient Victorian edifice. One Church of Scotland minister said to me his congregation's ministry to the community was to warm the town every time they turned the heating on!

"We encourage congregations to undertake a church check-up that takes a look at the life of the church, in terms of worship and spirituality, buildings, finances, grounds, decision-making but also outreach into the wider community.

"It could be in the spiritual area – putting on special services concerning the environment, making sure worship includes the creation perspective in prayers and hymns.

"It can be practical things – people put in bird boxes and community gardens in the church grounds. Perth Riverside had a little bit of waste ground which the junior church seeded with wild flowers. That sort of stuff.

"And reaching out into the community is important, both in terms of wider impact on the environment and also as a church for churches to get involved in the community, around an issue that people in the community are talking about – including people in the younger generations that churches are challenged to engage with."

There are other groups involved in

practical conservation efforts – among them A Rocha, a Christian organisation which originated in Portugal. In the UK, they are involved in several projects, including (with the independent Clay Community Church in Glasgow) the Clay Pits of Possil Park. Here, a project is underway to transform the former industrial site, now an urban wilderness, into a local nature reserve.

The organisation's UK website points out that much of what has gone wrong with the environment is down to human activity, and that the Bible warns of the ecological consequences of sin:

"There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land... Because of this the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away." (Hosea 4: 1-3, NIV)

Further, it argues that it is 'a fundamental part of what it means to be human' to look after God's creation, and that to do so is to play our part in fulfilling the prophecy that, when Jesus returns, the world will be renewed:

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Revelation 22: 1-2, NIV) ■

www.ecocongregationscotland.org
www.arocha.org.uk