

The Anglican Communion and the natural world – an interview with David Shreeve

About the interviewee

David worked in public relations before co-founding The Conservation Foundation in 1982. He continues to be its Director whilst also being the Environmental Adviser to the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England.

About the questions

The questions were posed by Patrick Curry (Editor-in-Chief) via email in September 2018.

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Keywords

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Q: Is there an official position of the Church of England or the Anglican Communion worldwide regarding how the natural world should be treated?

A: Well, for starters there's the Bible, but then thanks to Wikipedia I gather there are some 340 Christian denominations just in the UK and some 34,000 worldwide so that gives a number of opportunities to find various interpretations of the word. The principal position is the 5th Mark of Mission: "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth" (<https://is.gd/AH74Ks>).

All five marks of mission have been developed by the Anglican Consultative Council since 1984 and have been widely adopted as an understanding of what contemporary mission is about. The marks were adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1996, and many dioceses and other denominations have used them as the basis of action plans and creative mission ideas.

Q: A related but slightly different question: how do you think Anglicans have the potential to play a positive role in countering the human-caused ecological crisis?

A: Anglicans come in many different shapes and sizes and it should not be assumed that they all sing in the same way from the same hymn sheet. However, the majority would share a concern for the care of our planet. There have always been Anglicans with a very real concern for the environment. The trouble has been that in the past the subject has not been considered 'mainstream' by many in the church, but it can hardly be

ignored now that environmental issues have such a high profile throughout the media and in all our lives. Membership of Anglican churches is still considerable – more than environmental organizations and political parties and so a force to be reckoned with. Mobilizing them may not be easy, but the Church of England is in every community and whilst the banks and post offices and pubs are on the decrease, the Church, in some form, remains – a unique network with its Bishops in the House of Lords representing the whole of the faith community which gives them the opportunity to guide and influence the powers of the land.

Q: Given the ubiquitous gap between theory and practice, what do you think might be done, in terms of practical measures, to bring the latter more in line with the former?

A: The Church has its programme of festivals which happen every year and most can have an environmental issue associated. Harvest is an obvious one. The Church had a very successful Plastic Free Lent in 2017 attracting international media coverage; whether this will develop or whether concern for plastic pollution starts to wain no-one can tell, but it is likely to remain on the Church's environment agenda. One of the strengths of this annual cycle is that issues can be incorporated according to current needs and demands. And new ones can be added – Creationtide is something developing in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches to bring environmental concern and awareness into their services, prayers and studies from 1 September to 4 October (www.creationtide.com).

Q: I'm aware that there is a document (which so far as I know hasn't been superseded) laying out the official position: *Sharing God's Planet* (available at <https://is.gd/Y9Wlqm>). Part 2 is on biblical and theological models. Would you describe and assess for us which of them are the most vibrant or promising now? Have there been any new developments since 2005?

A: There has been no update as such, but since 2009 much has happened on the website front and so www.churchofengland.org environment contains much of what any update would contain. And there have been other developments. Investment colleagues have had considerable success in influencing other investors and those who they are invested in. There is now an active Working Group involving Bishops and Environmental Experts meeting regularly to manage the Church's environmental programme. Considerable progress has been made in encouraging churches to use green energy and projects are encouraged involving interfaith activities – concern for the environment is something which all faiths share.

However, the environment has to compete with all the considerable amount of issues in which the Church is involved. And at times individual issues will take precedence – investment and divestment, food-banks, assisted dying, same-sex marriage, immigration, etc., etc. Any could be tomorrow's headline, sermon, radio feature or prayer.

Church-going can provide for a social need, a sense of community, a lone spiritual need or a combination of all of these and more. It is probably not a reason to create a wildlife garden, plant a tree, recycle newspapers or fit a solar panel, but there are churches doing all these and more. Many churches are understanding the links between gardening and physical and mental health and are using their spaces for therapeutic gardening. We all know that you don't have to be a Christian to be environmentally aware, but churches can help and encourage, and by joining with others of their own and other faiths, their combined efforts can make a communal contribution to help inspire both those involved and those who may take notice. ■

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