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Mission and Creation Care for Christian Disciples

Group Study & Discussion

Gospel presence:

The purpose of the Church, the Body of Christ, is to present Gospel values to a world which is out of step with its Creator. Is your church doing this, and in what ways?

Read 1 Peter 2:1-11

We are called to be counter-cultural, presenting light and truth, and modelling new possibilities in relationship with God. How might we become a foretaste of the coming Kingdom, presenting God's *shalom* (well-being)?

Changing the world:

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said: *The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.*

What are the first steps that your church can take in:

- caring for creation
- demonstrating sustainable living
- helping the community to flourish
- taking a stand for justice in the world?

Afterthought - setting our agenda:

Social change begins with personal change, but wider structural change only comes about when people come together and work for justice. The church's contribution is to build communities, committed to Christ through worship, prayer and service of the poor, who will bring about transformation.

Mission and Creation Care for Christian Disciples

John Weaver, who is the Chair of the John Ray Initiative - connecting science, Christianity and the environment, and who has recently helped Tearfund in exploring their theology of mission - offers five studies for small group discussion. These are designed to challenge our understanding of Christian discipleship and encourage us to practice sustainable lifestyles including the care of creation.

The focus of these studies is to mobilise congregations and churches in living out the mission of God and to see individual lives, communities, and the environment flourish. A core feature of this is to challenge congregations and communities in the UK to change their values from individual consumerism to justice and sustainability both locally and globally.

We will explore the nature of God as creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life and creation, whose relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is characterised by love. We will find that God the creator is in a covenant relationship with the whole of creation, which he brought into being. God created it; God ordered it; God loved it; God was pleased with it (Genesis 1). In Genesis 2 we find that God created a world of relationships: our relationship with God, with each other, and with creation; and in Genesis 3 we see the breakdown of each of these three relationships as the result of human free-will, which desires the power and control that belong only to God. Fallen human beings ignore God's covenant and God's purposes resulting in violence, broken relationships, and the environment mismanaged and destroyed.

After the rollercoaster ride of obedience and rebellion that marks the Old Testament history of God's people, Christ comes to redeem relationships with human beings and the whole of creation (John 3:16). This is made possible through the Cross (Colossians 1:15-20). Christ calls people to follow him (Mark 8:34) and work for the establishment of God's Kingdom (Matthew 6:10), through the power and direction of the Holy Spirit that he sends to us (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7-11, 13-14).

We live between the Cross and Christ's second coming, when God will renew the whole of creation, and all relationships will be redeemed and restored (Revelation 21:1-4).

In the following five discussion starters:

- renewing our understanding of mission;
- the call to care for creation;
- the challenge to sustainable lifestyles;
- a biblical approach to economics;
- the Church's role as an agent of change;

we will explore a biblical mandate for our call to follow Christ.

These five studies are jointly offered by JRI and Tearfund, and can be freely downloaded from either website: www.jri.org.uk or www.tearfund.org/campaigns.

5. The Church as a Change-maker

Getting started:

Where do you feel the church (locally and globally) has been an agent of change (for example, in the areas of mission, creation care, sustainability and economics)?

Jesus taught us to pray *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven*

Discuss how this prayer does or does not show itself in our daily lives and the programmes of our church.

Evangelism:

I often hear people say in response to an address about the environment or climate change, 'but surely we are here primarily to spread the Gospel and not get distracted by these other issues.' How would you answer this response in the light of the first four studies in this pack?

Read Matthew 25:31-46

According to Jesus' parable, on what is God's judgement of our lives based?

It is true, as Paul says (Ephesians 2:8) that we are saved by grace through faith, but then Paul continues to state what we are saved for (Ephesians 2:10).

Do the words of St Francis of Assisi help? *Always remember to preach the Gospel and if necessary, use words.*

Discuss together the ways in which these thoughts help us to remember who we are, what we are, and why we are here.

Rich Christians:

Read Luke 4:18-19

If Jesus came to bring good news for the poor, how do rich Christians get into the Kingdom of God?

Luke recounts five stories about rich people in Luke 10:30-37; 12:13-21; 16:1-12; 16:19-31; and 19:1-10.

How do these help us to answer the question of rich Christians and the Kingdom of God?

Ethical business:

Harvard Business School 'Class of 2009' drafted a voluntary pledge, the MBA Oath (<http://mbaoth.org/>), to 'create value responsibly and ethically.' It begins:

As a business leader I recognize my role in society.

My purpose is to lead people and manage resources to create value that no single individual can create alone.

My decisions affect the well-being of individuals inside and outside my enterprise, today and tomorrow.

Is this a useful suggestion for an ethical and sustainable approach to business decision making?

Afterthought:

Draw up 'an oath' for a similar approach to your church's decisions.

1. Renewing our understanding of Mission

Getting started:

Try a word association game. I say 'mission' and you say?

If I suggested that our care of creation was an essential part of the mission of the Church, what would you think?

Our mission is focused on Christ:

Read Colossians 1:15-20.

This is an early Christian hymn. Compare this with John 3:16. Who and what is redeemed through the Cross?

Our whole life is our worship of God:

Read Romans 12:1-2.

How do these words challenge the way we live?

Are our lifestyle choices and our care of creation part of our worship of God?

Living in right relationships:

The Bible story begins with the centrality of relationships in creation.

Genesis 2 shows us the relationships that God desires; with God; with each other; and with creation.

Genesis 3 describes the 'Fall' through which human rebellion and the human desire to play God leads to a breaking of these relationships.

Read Matthew 22:37-40

What does Jesus call us to do in repairing these relationships? Paul affirms that creation 'groans' as it waits for us to get our relationship with God fixed - to behave in a Christ-like way (Romans 8:18-23).

Following Jesus:

Read Mark 8:34

How does this invitation that Jesus offers challenge our relationship with other people throughout the world, and our care of creation?

In his book, *The Challenge of Jesus*, Tom Wright challenges us to live as if Jesus has already returned. If we embraced this challenge how would it affect our personal lives and the collective life of the church?

Afterthought:

Try the word association game again. If I say 'mission', what do you say now?

Turn these thoughts into a prayer for your local church.

4. Biblical economics

Getting started:

What do we think about when we hear the word economics?

What shapes our own family budget; our pay, salary or pension; credit and debt?

How do churches, companies and governments address profit and loss?

What difference would it make to our individual, our church's, our community's, and our country's economic plans if we saw these as channels of Christ's redemptive love, and God's desire for justice and the well-being of creation as a whole? (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

God's created rhythms:

Jonathan Sacks, when he was UK Chief Rabbi, expressed the vital place of the Sabbath for Jews:

On the Sabbath, we do not work, nor are we permitted to employ others to work. All relationships of hierarchy and dominance are temporarily suspended, one day in seven. During the six weekdays, we think of ourselves as creators. On the seventh, we become aware that we are also creations - part of the natural world order, whose integrity we are bidden to respect. The Sabbath is thus the most compelling tutorial in human dignity, environmental consciousness, and the principle that there are moral limits to economic exchange and commercial exploitation. It is one of the great antidotes to commercialization and commodification.

Companies, corporations, and communities:

Development that is sustainable is not based purely on profit. What other factors do you think should be involved in business and community activities and decision-making in order for them to be described as sustainable?

If human flourishing (characterised by creativity, productive lives, responsibility, fruitful relationships, and a generosity of spirit) is factored into corporate management or community government, how would decision-making be affected?

Afterthought:

Read Micah 6:6-8

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Turn these verses into a personal prayer, and a prayer for your church to pray together.

2. The call to care for Creation

Getting started:

What does care of creation mean to you? Is this something that you consider to be important and/or to put into practice?

Ownership and stewardship:

Who owns the land? Who owns the oceans? Who owns the air?

Read Psalm 24:1

What can we conclude? List the ways in which human beings are polluting or destroying creation.

Read Genesis 2:15

What can we conclude?

God's first Covenant:

Read Genesis 8:22-9:17

God's first covenant is with the whole of creation, which reaffirms God's initial creative act, which saw the whole of creation as good (Genesis 1). We live within this covenant - what are God's promises and our responsibilities?

God's principles for the care of creation:

- Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3; 25:1-7)
- Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-34)
- Gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-16)

These give three principles for farming and food production: sharing – with the poor; caring – for the earth; and restraint – of power and wealth. Jubilee was intended to protect the small householder and also served to establish an economic practice for redeeming the land and the people.

But creation is still in a mess: there are imbalances in the world food system, there is unfair trading, and a growing industrialization of agriculture, which is destroying the environment.

Is it possible to take a Sabbath rest, for example, in the extraction of fossil fuels, and not begin to engage in fracking?

God's plan to redeem creation:

God's desire in Christ is to redeem the whole world (John 3:16), and he calls us to play our part as disciples of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Claire Foster, Chief Executive of the Ethics Academy and Senior Adviser at the St Paul's Institute for 21st Century Ethics observes that we wear ourselves, and the land, out by constantly rushing. There is nothing that works against a green lifestyle more than being in a hurry. Too much of a hurry to ponder shopping choices. Too much of a hurry to walk rather than drive. Too much of a hurry to cook. Too much of a hurry to grow food. Too much of a hurry to sleep properly and give the world a rest from our self important busyness.

Afterthought:

What can we resolve to do: personally; as a church?
Write a prayer of confession and petition.

3. Sustainable lifestyle

Getting started:

When did you last buy a new car, a new TV, a new mobile phone; and how old was the one it replaced?

How do we respond to A Rocha UK's 'three Rs' of waste: reduce, re-use, recycle, and then add a fourth - refuse to buy it in the first place?

In the image of God:

Read Genesis 1:26

In what ways can we understand ourselves to be in the image of God?

What is God like?

What are we like - be honest?

Our individual discipleship:

Read Matthew 5:3-16 (cf. Luke 6:17-26)

In what ways is the Mennonite author, Donald Kraybill, right to describe this as the mandate of an upside-down Kingdom?

Dave Bookless challenges us to live a sustainable lifestyle not out of fear, duty or guilt, but out of love: for our neighbours; our fellow creatures; future generations; and at the deepest level for God.

Discuss with each other the ways in which you do or could act to make your life more sustainable.