

Cross-Cultural Mission in a Time of Ecological Crisis

By David Gould

The ecological crisis

According to the UN Secretary General: “our planet is broken – humanity is waging a suicidal war on nature”. Recent reports have described the devastating impacts of climate change, the unprecedented loss of animal and plant species, the widespread pollution of land, oceans and atmosphere, the degradation of topsoil and so on. We are living in a time of ecological crisis.

In the last 30 years or more the worldwide Church has been exploring how it should respond to this crisis. One landmark event was the issue in 1994 of ‘An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation’, which was endorsed by church leaders worldwide. It emphasised that the earth belongs to God and that humanity has been given the Biblical ‘creation mandate’ to look after it. The Declaration recognised the ‘growing crisis in the health of creation’; the creator’s concern for all creatures; and that in Christ there is hope for all creation. In 2012 the World Evangelical Alliance and Lausanne Movement worked together to frame a [call to action](#) based on two major convictions: that ‘creation care is a gospel issue within the lordship of Christ’; and that ‘we are faced with a crisis that is pressing, urgent, and that must be resolved in our generation’. And in 2015 Pope Francis issued his encyclical [Laudate Si](#), ‘On care for our common home’. In it he said that the care of creation is a ‘spiritual issue connecting our beliefs, values and actions’; he examined what is happening to ‘our common home’ and ‘the human roots of the ecological crisis’; and he proposed ‘lines of approach for action’.

In this Briefing Paper we will look at some of the implications of this crisis for the mission of the Church.

Welcoming the stranger

In some of his JRI Briefing Papers and his 2011 paper on ‘Global Warming, Climate Change and Sustainability’ Sir John Houghton drew attention to the effects of climate change, including ‘environmental migration’. Since then the UN’s predictions of this have increased to ‘200 million or more climate refugees’ by 2050. Drivers for this migration include recent record-breaking climate change events, such as desertification in the Sahel, coastal flooding in Bangladesh, and extreme heat with high humidity, making parts of India uninhabitable. All kinds of environmental migration are monitored by the UN’s [International Organization for Migration](#); and the BBC and others have highlighted the plight of many of those affected, necessitating internal migration, especially to cities such as Karachi. These cities are already over-crowded and struggling with their own climate-related challenges, such as seasonal and long-term flooding.

According to the UN’s humanitarian office, [OCHA](#), people living in developing countries are at least four times more likely to be displaced by extreme weather events compared to people in developed countries. And now, in addition to internal migration, the pressures to migrate to developed countries with more temperate climates are growing significantly. The countries of northern Europe, Japan and New Zealand are among those least likely to experience severe adverse effects from climate change, while having contributed significantly to its causes. This is why this is seen as a [justice issue](#).



Countries such as Britain and New Zealand have long traditions of immigration; others, such as Japan, have the resources to accommodate immigrants, as well as the demographic incentive of a decreasing and ageing population. In these countries the churches can offer practical help with housing and other basic needs, as well as hospitality and other expressions of welcome that continue beyond the initial period of 'settling in'. This takes time; as one friend from Hong Kong said, "it is easier to move the head than the heart". This is illustrated by 'Tribute to an Immigrant', one of a series of sculptures in Marseilles by Bruno Catalano. Many of those having to leave very stressful situations will be grieving over the loss of their homes and will feel disorientated by all the challenges that come with moving to a new country.

So cross-cultural mission should no longer be primarily about a few missionaries going abroad; it should become a key part of the ministry of all Christians in Britain and elsewhere. To prepare for this we need to pray for gifted leadership, reflect on and teach Biblical principles that guide us in welcoming the stranger, and work with others to develop resources that enable us to put these principles into practice. A number of [Christian charities](#) are focusing on helping refugees and asylum seekers.

Moving from pioneering to partnering

As well as welcoming the stranger, we need to rethink our involvement with mission in other parts of the world. This will include contributing to indigenous Biblical church movements that are missional. As a church movement develops among a particular people group, the role of the missionary from abroad needs to focus increasingly on serving and partnering with indigenous church leaders, who will be best placed to define the kinds of help from others that will be most fruitful. These might include theological education, technical expertise and missional businesses.

In response to growing pressures to migrate, there will often be opportunities to help people to stay put – most people only leave their homes reluctantly, as a last resort. These opportunities include missional businesses that are self-supporting, while contributing effective responses to ecological challenges. One example is A Rocha's [ASSETS programme](#) in Kenya, a sustainable development programme based on eco-tourism. This helps to conserve an important remnant of a dry coastal forest, while providing scholarships for secondary education. Another example is the development of organic food production in poly-tunnels, to lengthen growing seasons in boreal regions and provide reliable sources of healthy and affordable food. This kind of initiative can also provide opportunities for Christian witness in places where evangelism is outlawed.

And increasingly there are opportunities for cross-cultural partnership on our doorstep. Evangelists are coming to the UK from many countries in the Global South. They have the calling, language skills and cultural awareness to build friendships and share the gospel with other migrants; but their work can often be helped by others providing complementary skills and resources.

Whole-life ministry

Developing missional businesses and engaging in effective support roles such as theological education require long-term commitment to a place and its people. But for them to be sustainable they should almost always be seen as temporary 'scaffolding', to be replaced by local leadership and resourcing. Other opportunities are best met by short-term or 'serial short-term' missionary engagement. One example of this is Ben, a UK-based waste management consultant who makes regular trips abroad to work alongside local evangelists and disciple-makers. As people come to faith, they often need training and sustainable employment opportunities. Ben's contribution focuses on developing local businesses that up-cycle waste materials, such as collecting waste

paper and turning it into fuel bricks, and making high quality soap products from animal offal and local plant-based scents.

How many kinds of mission?

Jesus's ministry of word and deed described in Matthew 5 to 9 led to the missionary activity of his disciples described in Matthew 10. This and other texts have led some to distinguish between various kinds of mission. In 1984 the Anglican Communion formulated the 'Four Marks of Mission' (proclamation, discipleship, social action and justice), to which it added a fifth mark in 1990, '[To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth](#)'. In his recent book 'The Great Story and the Great Commission' Christopher Wright simplified these five marks to three (building the Church, serving society, and ruling over and caring for creation).

But is there some single aim that should motivate these various marks of mission? In his book 'Let the Nations be Glad', John Piper suggested that worship should be seen as the motivation for all mission. He wrote that 'missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't.' The worldwide Church should seek the glory of God that comes from people of every nation, tribe and tongue worshipping him. Rightly understood, worship should be an overflowing of our enjoyment of God. Piper quoted CS Lewis: 'We delight to praise what we enjoy, because praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment'.

Why then are we here? God has placed us on earth to glorify him.¹ This means worshipping him and seeking to make him known to all people through our words and deeds. Our worship need not be confined to separate 'holy' places – Jesus spoke of the true worship that can take place anywhere.² By worshipping God together in creation – in fields, woods, gardens, city parks and so on, we can encourage one another in our appreciation of the creator God. 'In order to be faithful to a truly Trinitarian account of the relation of God to the Creation, it is necessary to acknowledge the sustaining presence of the Spirit of life to all species and in all habitats and ecosystems'.³ Rediscovering the immanence of the Creator in all creation will help us follow the creation mandate⁴ to care for the the earth and all living creatures, so that they too glorify God as he intended. How does this work?

First, all creatures glorify God by simply being what he made them to be: 'The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (Psalm 19:1). Paul applied this thought to all creation: 'since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...' (Romans 1:20). Many Christian writers have explored this theme. In the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa wrote about a created universe 'willed by God and the joy of his wisdom', a 'harmonious ordinance', a 'marvellously composed hymn to the power of the Almighty'. Luther taught that 'God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars'. And John Ray wrote about 'the wisdom of God manifested in the works of creation'.

Second, God's creatures glorify him by filling the earth: 'Holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts – the fullness/filling of all the earth is his glory'.⁵ So the filling of the earth with abundant life brings glory to God. It follows that if we spoil some part of creation we will detract from its role of glorifying God. How then should we view the growing number of species that are critically endangered or that have already become extinct through our neglect? As well as losing parts of creation that we have learned to use and enjoy, we should also remember that God delights in and cares for all his creatures, even those that we don't yet know about and those that we think of as providing no benefit to us. I shall never forget hearing the teeming cacophony of life in a remnant of tropical forest, and the contrasting silence in the surrounding scrubland that had been logged out.

¹ See Isaiah 43:7; John 15:8, 21:19; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Peter 4:11; 1 Cor. 10:31; Romans 3:23

² John 4:21-24 and see Acts 7:48; 17:24

³ Michael S. Northcott: 'Place Ecology and the Sacred' p.27. Bloomsbury 2015

⁴ Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15

⁵ Chris Wright's translation of Isaiah 6:3 – see his article: '[Creation, Gospel and Mission](#)'

And third, the various parts of creation glorify God by worshipping him! John tells us in Revelation 5:13 that he heard 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them' praising God and the Lamb. John emphasises that he heard all the creatures in every kind of habitat joining in this worship. This fulfils Psalm 150:6: 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord'. Other passages tell us that even the inanimate parts of creation, such as the hills, rivers and trees, are called to worship the Lord. Isaiah wrote that 'this will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign that will endure forever'.⁶

A new epoch for the mission of the Church

So bringing glory to God is the role of all creation, not just people. But perhaps this has often been lost sight of in the mission of the Church. For instance, David Bosch's magisterial overview of the history of mission⁷ makes almost no reference to the non-human creation. He does however define mission as 'participating in the missio dei. Witnessing to the gospel of present salvation and future hope we then identify with the awesome birth-pangs of God's new creation' (p.510). At the heart of David Bosch's thesis is the idea that there are paradigm shifts in the theology of mission which run through a succession of six epochs in Christian mission history. Bosch stressed that 'in each paradigm shift there remains a creative tension between old and new and the agenda is 'reform and not replacement'. Now the integration of creation care into the mission of the Church can be seen as the seventh epoch.

This seventh epoch of mission builds on Bosch's missiology of witnessing to the gospel of salvation and eternal life; but it also requires a rediscovery of the Biblical teaching about the purpose and future of creation. Some see the earth as being simply the temporary context or 'environment' for human flourishing. But suppose that we are part of an inter-dependent web of life in which each part contributes to the well-being of the whole; and suppose that the earth, with all its habitats and creatures (including humans!), is important to its creator, and that he has appointed us to care for it so that it glorifies him as he intended? Should not this God-glorifying role of the earth and its creatures, both human and non-human, provide the unifying motivation for the mission of the Church?

⁶ Isaiah 55:12-13. See also Psalms 96:11-13; 98:7-9; 103:22 and 148

⁷ David Bosch: 'Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission' Orbis Books 1991