

Creation Matters

SMALL GROUP NOTES

Introduction

These sessions focus on how we can better care for God's creation. They are a mix of bible studies and practical reflections on our lifestyle, so may be a little different from the small group sessions we normally do.

- Session 1: Why should Christians care for creation?
- Session 2: Christianity and climate change
- Session 3: The Land and Sabbath
- Session 4: Our attitudes to animals
- Session 5: Using your LOAF – making sure your trolley witnesses to your faith
- Session 6: Summary social (optional)

Each session follows the same structure:

- Icebreaker
- Worship – suggestions for spending some time worshipping God
- Word – unpacking God's word on the topic
- World – thinking about how to apply what we've discussed in our own lives, and praying for the world

The sessions can be used as a short series, or you could pick one or two as stand-alone sessions. The first session, on why Christians should care for creation, is an important foundation for the other sessions, but if your group already have a good understanding of that, the others will work on their own.

At the end of this document we suggest some places where you can get further information about these topics.

Session 1: Why should Christians care for creation?

Icebreaker:

- Where's your favourite place on earth? What makes that place special for you?

Worship:

Depending on what your group feel comfortable with, either read aloud Psalm 96 or sing together 'How great thou art' (O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder

http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/r/religious_music/how_great_thou_art.html

And/or 'From the highest of heights' (Indescribable)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eK4NqGqmVt8>

Spend some time speaking out praise to God who created the universe

Word:

Read Genesis 1

- What do we learn about what God thinks of his creation in this passage?
- Why do you think "And God saw that it was good." is repeated so often in this chapter?

Read Psalm 24:1; Psalm 50:10-12; Deuteronomy 10:14, Leviticus 25:23, Colossians 1:15-16

If the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, how should that affect our attitude to the earth, and living creatures?

Re-read Genesis 1:26-28 (try a few different translations, including *The Message*, if you can), and Genesis 2:7 and 15

- What do we learn about the relationship between humans and the rest of creation here? What role did God give us?
- What are the implications of humans being made both "from the dust of the earth" and "in the image of God" for our relationship with the rest of creation?
- If we are created in the image of God, what should our 'rule' over living creatures look like? How did Jesus model ruling?

Read Matthew 22:35-40

- How do the day-to-day decisions we make that affect our environment relate to these two commandments?

World:

Over the coming week, use <http://footprint.wwf.org.uk/> and pray about what you can do to better show your love for God through how you treat His creation. If it feels overwhelming, start with one step. Next week, share the action(s) you've decided to take with the group, and encourage and pray for each other as you make these changes.

Consider organising a small group social event somewhere you can spend time in the beauties of nature (maybe a walk or picnic?)

Share any prayer requests, and pray for each other

Session 2: Christianity and climate change

Icebreaker

- How did you find doing the footprint calculator? What was your score? Were you surprised by the results? What action have you decided to take?

Worship

- Read Psalm 19 together

Word

Introduction

Last week we looked at why Christians should care for creation. This week we're going to focus on the biggest environmental threat we face: manmade climate change.

Climate change is happening, and it's caused by humans

The following text is an extract from Christian Aid's 2014 report on the Global Theology of Climate Change:

"Climate change is happening. The impacts of conventional industrialisation and the burning of fossil fuels have meant an unprecedented rise in the amount of carbon dioxide in the air we breathe (now at its highest level for 800,000 years), and our planet is warming. This means that there are already more extreme climate events, rising sea levels, more floods in some places, droughts in others, and radical threats to life. This is happening because of human activity. This truth, though some still deny it or question it, is well evidenced, with more than a 95% degree of scientific certainty.

As Rowan Williams (former Archbishop of Canterbury) said: '...for millions of people around the world, living with this sense of fragility is nothing new. Far from being a vague threat in the distant future, a warming world is very much a present reality, with global temperatures already having risen by 0.8 degrees C since before the industrial revolution.'"

Tackling climate change is a matter of justice

"Climate change is a global justice issue. Although it does, or will, affect us all, those who will bear the brunt of predicted changes are the poorest people in the world. They are the ones who are, even now, losing their land to the sea, whose low-lying islands are disappearing below the waves, whose crops are not growing well and who are more vulnerable to diseases like malaria.

It is in the low islands of the Pacific and in the coastal areas of Bangladesh that rising sea levels are becoming most evident and having impact already on people's lives. It is among the farmers of Malawi and Ethiopia that changing weather patterns are already having a huge impact on crop production and on the stability of communities. It is among the rural communities of Bolivia that the erosion of glaciers already causes dangerous water shortages, and among those living in poverty in the Philippines that a terrifying typhoon, the strongest recorded storm ever to fall on land, has already destroyed lives. The truth is that these are the people who are least responsible for these changes. "

Throughout the Bible God speaks of the importance of justice, and protecting the vulnerable (the orphans and widows). (see **Isaiah 1:15-17**). Tackling climate change is an opportunity for us to do that.

- What message does it send to others if the Church and Christians aren't seen to care about climate change?
- What message would it send to others if the Church took a leadership role in responding to climate change?

Repentance and healing the land

Climate change is such a big issue, it's easy to think it's hopeless. But that's not the case. Action now could help minimise the impact of climate change to manageable levels.

“Continuing to pollute the atmosphere when we know the dangers, goes against what we know of God’s ways and God’s will. We are failing to love not only the earth, but our neighbours and ourselves, who are made in God’s image. God grieves over the destruction of creation and so should we. Repentance means finding creative, constructive and immediate ways of addressing the danger. It happens when God’s Spirit enables a change of mind and change of heart, prompting a turn from past wrong and a decision to change direction. For our generation, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels has become essential to Christian discipleship.” (Taken from <http://operationnoah.org/articles/read-ash-wednesday-declaration/>)

Read 2 Chronicles 7:13-14

- How do you think this passage might be relevant to how we as Christians respond to climate change?

How it can be tackled

"We need to limit global temperature rises to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, thus keeping within reach the call from the most vulnerable to limit warming to less than 1.5°C. This means, for example, keeping more than two thirds of known fossil fuels in the ground, unburned. If we keep going as we are, by burning fossil fuels and keeping emissions at current levels, temperatures will have risen by between 2.5°C and 5°C as soon as 2100, which would have unprecedented and devastating impacts.

But we could choose instead a low-carbon future, and set fair carbon reduction targets for all countries. We could prioritise improved energy efficiency and invest in renewable sources of energy. We could give much more support to those who are already suffering the impacts of change. And we could make sure that developed countries bear the weight of change while low-carbon and sustainable development can happen in the least industrialised countries.

This is all possible. We really are able to lift the poor out of poverty without increasing greenhouse gas emissions overall. Achieving this will require more ambition from governments and the private sector, more changes to individual lifestyles as well as a major shift in public opinion. It will take a vision powerful enough to inspire resolute action. "

Tackling climate change requires us to change how we live. It requires sacrifice - we may have to give up some of the conveniences or indulgences that our Western society says we are entitled to.

- If we took tackling climate change seriously, what sort of changes in our own lives would we make?
- Which of these changes would you find hardest?

Read Romans 12:1-2

- How might this passage help us when we're thinking about how we should respond to climate change as individuals?

“God is just and requires justice in response from us. This justice applies to poor communities already suffering the devastating consequences of climate change, to future generations, and to all other creatures. The prophets put economic behaviour at the forefront of their call to justice. The primary driver of human induced climate change is the belief that prosperity depends on limitless consumption of the earth’s resources. Today, the challenge is to seek a different, sustainable economy, based on the values of human flourishing and the well-being of all creation, not on the assumption of unlimited economic growth, on overconsumption, exploitative interest and debt.

To seek justice for all, for present and future generations, our authorities must encourage and enable all people to live fairly and sustainably. Acting justly requires us to hold our governments and corporations to account." (Taken from <http://operationnoah.org/articles/read-ash-wednesday-declaration/>)

- As well as making changes in our own lifestyles, how can we "defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow"?

World

Spend time praying to God, seeking forgiveness where your actions have had a negative impact on Creation, and praying for God to heal our land.

Pray for each other as you embark on making any changes to your lifestyle in response to what you've learnt in the last couple of weeks.

Take action: call on your bank to stop funding fossil fuels

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/campaigns/climate-change/the-big-shift>

Session 3: The Land and Sabbath

Icebreaker

What is a typical Sunday like for you? What would an ideal Sunday be like?

Worship

Read Psalm 104 together, and/or sing "Great is your faithfulness"

Word

In the first session of this series we read Genesis chapter 1. Let's look now at what God did after creating all living creatures, including humans, on the sixth day.

Read Genesis 2:1-3

- We know that God does not grow tired, so why do you think the Bible records that God rested on the seventh day?
- Is the creation of humanity, or the day of rest the climax of the creation story?

Read Leviticus 25:1-7, and 18-23

- Who (or what) benefits from this law being kept?
- Why do you think God sets these rules for his people?
- How easy do you think it would have been for the Israelites to keep the Sabbath year every 7 years?
- Besides providing rest for the people, the land, livestock, and wild animals, keeping the Sabbath year would require the people to trust in God's provision, and being content with less. How easy do you think you would find this?

Read Leviticus 19:9-10

- Who benefits from this law being kept? (*the poor, and probably wild animals as well*)
- Why do you think God sets these rules for his people?
- Do these laws have any relevance to our lives today?

In the middle of the twentieth century, farming in the UK became intensified, with hedgerows being ripped up, and increased use of herbicides and pesticides. This has had a devastating impact on many species, including on the pollinating insects on which many of our crops rely.

The people of Israel did not always follow God's commands, and throughout the Old Testament the land acts as a spiritual barometer.

Read Hosea 4:1-3 and Isaiah 24:5-6

- To what extent do you think the ecological crises we're facing are a result of failure to obey God's commands?

Read Matthew 12:1-13

- What does this mean for how (or whether) we as Christians should observe the Sabbath?

World

- Do our lives demonstrate our trust in God's provision?
- Are we content with 'just enough', or are we always pursuing more material things?
- What impact does that have on our relationship with God, with other people, and with the rest of creation?

Pray for each other, and for those who do not have enough to meet their basic needs.

Session 4: Our attitudes to animals

Icebreaker

Describe a memorable encounter you have had with an animal

Worship

Depending on what your group feel comfortable with, read aloud Psalm 148 and/or sing together *All Creatures of our God and King*

Word

We learnt at the beginning of this series that God saw that what he had created was very good. We also discussed what it meant to 'rule', in God's image, over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and every living creature that moves on the earth. This week we're going to think about how we as Christians relate to the other creatures God created. Over the years, some Christians have come to see Creation as made for man to enjoy, with other animals only having value if they feed or serve humans.

Read Genesis 1:28-31

- What picture does this paint of how humans and other animals related to each other before the fall?

Read Genesis 8:1, 15-17 and 9:8-17

Remember that it's not just animals that can serve or feed humans that God tells Noah to bring onto the ark.

- Who does God make his covenant with?
- What does this tell us about God's attitude to animals?

Read Jonah 4; Matthew 6:26-27 and Matthew 10:28-29

- What do these passages reveal about God's attitude to animals?

Read Romans 1:20

- In several passages in the Bible, including some of the ones we've just read, God uses animals to teach us. Has God taught you anything through animals?

God's good news is not just for humans. The other week we saw in Colossians 1 vs 15-16 that all things had been created through Jesus and for him.

Read Colossians 1:19-20 and Romans 8vs19-21.

Jesus' death was not just about reconciling humans to God - it reconciled "all things" to God. As the 1998 Lambeth Conference concluded that "*the redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ extends to the whole of creation*"

- Is the idea that Jesus came to reconcile all things, not just people, to God, new to you?

World

"For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins" (Patriarch Bartholomew)

- Do you agree with this?

Many animal species are threatened by human activity. Globally, 1 in 6 species are at risk of extinction due to climate change, with others at risk due to habitat loss, changes in farming, pollution and other causes. It's easy to think of this as a remote problem, but the 2016 UK State of Nature report says that more than half of species have declined since 1970, and 13% of all UK wildlife is either threatened with extinction, and 2% is extinct already. Earlier this year Surrey Wildlife Trust published a report on the state of Surrey's wildlife. That report states that 11.5% of species historically found in Surrey are now extinct in the county. Another 4% of species are threatened with extinction in Surrey, 3% are near threatened, and 14% are declining.

- How do you feel about the possibility that there may soon be no blue whales or rhinos?
- What do you think a Christian response to this is?

If you have a garden, balcony or windowbox, you can help some of the species that are struggling. Surrey Wildlife Trust and the RSPB have lots of advice on how to make your garden more wildlife friendly.

In Genesis we learn that the first job God gives Adam is to name the creatures God had created - the first example of the science of taxonomy. Jesus also tells his disciples to study the birds of the air. Studying God's creation can reveal glimpses of God's character. And you don't have to be a scientist to do this. There are lots of different citizen science projects that use data gathered by volunteers to help understand more about animals and how to protect them. This doesn't have to be a big time commitment - the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch requires an hour once a year. There are some links in the further information section if you'd like to find out about opportunities to get involved.

In many parts of the world, people who work to protect rare species risk their lives. According to The Guardian, 145 environmental defenders have been killed so far in 2017 (as of 25 September) while protecting their community's land or natural resources
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2017/jul/13/the-defenders-tracker>
Pray for those who work to protect God's creatures both here in the UK and abroad.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference resolved that *"human beings are both co-partners with the rest of creation and living bridges between heaven and earth, with responsibility to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of all creation"*

- Will you do anything different this week, as a result of what we've discussed?

Thank God for the amazing diversity and wonder of his living creatures.

Session 5: Using your LOAF: making sure your shopping basket witnesses to your faith

Icebreaker

If a top chef offered to cook you anything you wanted, what would you ask for?

Worship

Read Psalm 65 and /or sing Praise God from whom all blessings flow

Word

What stories that involve food can you remember from the Gospels?

There's a lot of mentions of food in the Gospels. Jesus shares meals with his disciples, performs miracles to feed thousands of people, and when he appears to his disciples after his resurrection, he asks them for something to eat. The Pharisees criticised Jesus for eating and drinking more than they thought a prophet or teacher should. Some Christians fall into the trap of thinking God is only interested in our spiritual welfare. But if we look at Jesus' life, we can see that's not the case.

Read Matthew 6:25-34

- What does Jesus say should be our priority? (vs 33)
- Is Jesus saying that food doesn't matter?
- We're told not to worry about food, and to trust in God's provision. Does that mean that it doesn't matter how the food we eat is farmed and made?

Read Isaiah 58:1-5

- Why does God say he has not answered the prayers of the Israelites?

Read Isaiah 58:6-11

- What does God want from the Israelites?

Read Micah 8:6

- How might this be applicable to what we buy when we go food shopping?

World

If we want to make sure that our shopping basket witnesses to our faith, we need to make sure that what we're buying doesn't depend on people or the environment being exploited and damaged. We should use our LOAF: buying local, organic, animal-friendly and/or fairtrade goods wherever possible.

Local: helping community and neighbour. Purchasing food from local and regional sources means less climate-damaging food miles, less lorry traffic, fewer new roads and runways, support for the local economy and local farmers and regional variety. Local food often comes with less packaging than food from the supermarket. In Dorking we're lucky to have Foodfloat, selling locally produced food with minimal wasteful packaging. Buying local also means eating more seasonally.

Organic: caring for God's earth. Organically grown food avoids the use of synthetic, oil-based fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides. If we eat organic food we will reduce our exposure to residues of antibiotics and pesticides. It uses less fossil fuel energy, avoids the very large nitrous oxide emissions from fertiliser manufacture and builds up carbon in the soil, removing it from the atmosphere. Instead of synthetic fertilisers, organic farming relies on composting, crop rotation, animal manures and solar powered clover. It also gives other creatures a chance. Many industrialised

farms are deserts for wildlife, which is why birds traditionally associated with farmland have declined so much in the last 50 years.

Animal-friendly: We looked last week about what our attitude to animals should be. We know God created them and cares for them. And while the Bible does allow us to eat meat, that doesn't give us an excuse to treat God's creatures with cruelty. Those eating food produced from farm animals need to do everything possible to ensure those animals are treated humanely. Avoid eggs, dairy products, meat and fish that have been produced using intensive farming methods and long distance lorry transport. Beware of confusing labels: 'Farm fresh' and 'Country Fresh' are often used to sell factory-farmed products. They say nothing about animal welfare. Look for 'free range', 'outdoor reared/bred', or, as a first step 'RSPCA Assured'. Organically reared animals are subject to the strictest welfare regulations. Livestock is also a major source of greenhouse gases. By reducing the amount of meat (particularly beef and lamb) and dairy that we eat, we can reduce our carbon footprint.

Fairtrade: There will always be food that cannot be produced in quantity in north western Europe, including bananas, citrus, cocoa, olives, sugar, tea and coffee. Buying these fairly traded foods means that workers who produce the food get a fair wage and better working conditions. Farmers in the UK also need a fair price for their produce. Too often, prices to farmers don't even cover the cost of production. Thousands of coffee, tea and banana workers and farmers are living in poverty. Act justly by looking for the Fairtrade symbol.

- Local, organic, animal-friendly and fairtrade food is often more expensive than the alternatives. This is straightforward when you have plenty of money. But what do you do when money is tight?
- What else can we do to make sure that the food we eat doesn't damage the earth or the people who make it?

Thank God for the food we eat

Optional summary session

At the end of this series you may like to have a summary session, perhaps sharing some 'LOAF' food, or going for a walk together, and reflecting on the last few weeks. Questions you may like to discuss include:

- Has this series changed the way you think about anything?
- Have you made any changes as a result of the discussions over the last few weeks?
- What have you found hardest to understand?
- What have you found hardest to act on? What makes it hard?

St Paul's Action on Climate and the Environment is an informal network of people in the church who seek to care for God's creation. If you'd like to receive occasional email updates, sign-up to the email list http://eepurl.com/cn_O8z

Further resources

General resources

- A Rocha <http://www.arocha.org.uk>
- Planetwise (by Dave Bookless, published by IVP, ISBN-978-1-84474-251-6)
- Sustainable Faith: A green gospel for the age of climate change (by Nicola L. Bull and Mark McAllister, ISBN 978-1-291-90020-0)
- Jesus and the Earth (by James Jones, published by SPCK, ISBN 0-281-05623-4)
- Green Christian <http://www.greenchristian.org.uk/>

Session 2: Christians and climate change

- Operation Noah <http://operationnoah.org/>
- Christian Aid report on the Theology of Climate Change
<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/song-of-the-prophets-a-global-theology-of-climate-change-november-2014.pdf>

Session 4: Our attitude to animals

- Sarx <http://sarx.org.uk/>
- RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch <https://ww2.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/>
- British Trust for Ornithology <https://bto.org/volunteer-surveys>
- People's Trust for Endangered Species <https://ptes.org/get-involved/surveys/>