

Climate change, a new prophetic ministry for Anglican Religious?

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<http://www.mucknellabbey.org.uk/soul-food/articles/climate-change.html>

In early 2009, there were a number of articles and letters in the Church Times about the decline in the Religious Life in the Church of England.¹ At around the same time, there was an article about the plans of the Anglican Benedictine community of monks and nuns, formerly based at Burford Priory, to build a new environmentally-friendly monastery.² And both the Guardian and the BBC News website reported on the move of the Catholic Benedictine nuns of the Conventus of Our Lady of Consolation from Stanbrook Abbey to their new green convent.³ Can we draw a link between these?

Climate change, along with the related issue of peak oil, is the most serious issue we face. That it is caused by human industrial activity is beyond reasonable doubt. The burning of fossil fuels and intensive agricultural practices are causing increased concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and hence global temperature rises, increasingly erratic weather patterns, drought, flooding, spread of human and animal diseases, and pressure on native species.

It is scandalous that the developed world is culpable for climate change, while the impacts are mainly felt in the developing world. For example, the people of the Carteret Islands, near Papua New Guinea, are soon to be evacuated – officially the world's first evacuation of an entire people as a result of anthropogenic global warming.⁴ In Bangladesh, production of rice and wheat is projected to drop by 8% and 32%, respectively, by the year 2050.⁵ A UNEP report concluded that the conflict in Darfur was driven by climate change and environmental degradation,⁶ and many areas of the world are expected to experience increased water stress as the century progresses.⁷

The recent financial crisis could be mild compared with the possibility of wars over water in the Gulf and South Asia, or a collapse in our food production and distribution chain, or the movement of millions of environmental refugees. Drastic cuts in carbon emissions are needed if we are to keep the rise in global temperatures below 2°C, which is what scientists say is necessary to avoid runaway climate change and the worst impacts.⁸ At the climate negotiations at Copenhagen, our national leaders failed to take the necessary decisions, so it is now up to individuals and local communities to take responsibility. The times are urgent, but it is not too late to take action; there is still hope. In the words of Tennyson: "Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."

Climate change is a symptom of the break-down in our relationship with God – how can we worship the creator when we are systematically destroying the creation? – and with our neighbours across the planet. As Christians we have an imperative to take action in our own lives and to press for wider action, to build communities of hope. In exile, Jeremiah reflected on the causes of the downfall of the house of Israel, and concluded that it was because the people failed to worship Yahweh. Instead of obeying Yahweh's laws, they idolised wealth and power, and enslaved the land and one another. Jeremiah read exile and ecological collapse as the consequences of sin

and idolatry (Jer 9:10-14).⁹ Where are today's prophets who can speak truth to power, who can show by their actions the right path?

In the run-up to the Copenhagen negotiations, politicians urged faith leaders to use their power to influence and educate to encourage their followers to take action on climate change.

Ed Miliband, the UK Secretary of State of Energy and Climate Change said: "Tackling climate change is a cause that unites people of all faiths. Each generation holds the planet in trust for the next and to fulfil our obligations to these future generations, we must succeed in getting a fair and ambitious agreement. We need the voice of all the world's religions in the coming weeks as we approach the Copenhagen summit."¹⁰ And UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said: "The world's faith communities are among the oldest and most enduring of institutions. You can - and do - inspire people to change. As we take the final steps on our journey to Copenhagen, that inspiration is critical."¹¹

The world is crying out for inspiration, and yet, as Barry Orford wrote in the original article in the Church Times on Religious Life in the Church of England:

"Among religious themselves, there appears to be a faltering sense of direction and purpose, accompanied by an increasingly inward-looking and self-referential approach to community life. One detects in some communities a reluctance to face squarely the questions: "Have we a reason for continuing to exist?" and "What is our particular charism, the mark printed upon us by our founder which declares God's special vocation for us?"

"The result can be a temptation to seek a corporate identity by retreating into a rigid adherence to "our way of doing things", or to adopt a more congenial self-perception. We see the latter when communities that were founded for apostolic work decide, in the absence of obvious work to do, that they should now become monastic or contemplative, even if this flies in the face of their given charism."

Francis J Moloney, in his book *Disciples & Prophets*,¹² argued that the function of the Religious Life is prophecy, and the vows are the means of living out that function. Moloney was writing from a Catholic perspective in the early 1980s, reflecting on renewal of Religious Life following the Vatican II council, but his reflections are still pertinent for Anglican communities today. He wrote:

"Vatican II laid down three criteria to be used in the renewal of Religious Life: a return to the Scriptures, a return to the charism of the founder, and a reading of the signs of the times.

"We must not go back to these [founder] figures and absolutise their times, the problems they faced and the solutions they offered. We must *rediscover* [his italics] the prophetic element in their lives and repeat that same phenomenon in our own times and in the light of our own problems."

Each Religious community's Rule of Life is, and would continue to be, firmly founded on the Gospel. But I suggest that communities consider the "sign of the times" that is climate change as a key criterion for their ministry today. Each order would need to consider how community and vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (poverty, stability and conversion of life in the case of Benedictines) could be prophetic in this context. Depending on whether communities are contemplative, apostolic, or mixed, their prophetic ministry would vary, from quietly showing to the church and the world the quality of their life, to speaking out as prophets and working to build wider sustainable communities.

Community could speak to the fragmentation of our society; increasing numbers of single person households and the resulting increased energy consumption and pressure to build houses on green-field sites; our individualism and independence, evidenced by the bias to private rather than public transport; our lack of consideration of future generations and the web of creation.

Poverty could speak to excessive consumption and the modern definition of a human being as a 'consumer'; inequality between and within countries; climate injustices, when the rich developed world is the cause of climate change and the poor developing world is suffering the effects, when the rich can adapt to the effects but the poor cannot afford to, and when the rich try to prevent the poor from aspiring to their own standard of living.

Chastity could speak to the break-down in relationships and increasing lack of long-term commitment; the inability to provide creative love; the misrepresentation of choice as freedom; the need for what Archbishop Rowan Williams calls "lives of continence and poverty".¹³

Obedience could speak to the increasing disregard for morality and ethics; our over-confidence and arrogance in thinking that we in charge of our own destiny; our frantic searching for 'technological fixes', so we can avoid making uncomfortable changes; our power games and unhealthy institutions.

With respect to the charism of the founder, St Francis shines the brightest light on our relationship with the rest of the natural order. The Benedictines have a history of environmental stewardship, prompted by the Rule of Benedict's emphasis on humility, stability, and frugality.¹⁴ Anglican communities, founded by members of the Oxford Movement in the mid 19th century, can point to education or some form of care for neighbour as the charism of their founder. These are not inconsistent with a new prophetic ministry in climate change. First, education of the churches and the world is a priority in the areas of climate justice and in sustainable and community living. And secondly, our neighbour now includes the web of relationships across the whole planet. Many of the Victorian pioneers worked to provide the amenities of life – such as lighting, drainage, transport and trade – where they were needed. The earth is the underlying provider of all amenities – breathable air, fresh water, food, processing of pollution, energy – and these are all under pressure, and in many parts of the world need preservation and restoration. Many communities based in the UK have houses or links in areas of the world affected by climate change, and of course there are many other Anglican communities based all over the world. The poorest of the poor need a voice, and UK communities could use their contacts in developing countries to empower local communities, and fight in the UK for climate justice.

In *Finding the Treasure*,¹⁵ Sandra Schneiders describes levels of charism of the Religious Life. The first-level charism is fundamental call to Religious Life itself; the second level is the call to contemplative, apostolic or mixed ministry; and the third level is the ministry of the individual order or community. "This is why the actual type of ministry of a Religious congregation might change in changed circumstances without disrupting the fundamental continuity of the charism."

Then, "the fourth level is that of the individual members who bring into the community their particular gift." This is where working in climate change could provide flexibility, and enable each community to develop its ministry according to gifts available, develop new gifts among the members, and include the older members.

Ideas, in no particular order:

- Creative liturgy, prayers

- Research, reflection and writing
- Preaching and teaching on the issues
- Working with the local community, for example with local eco-groups
- Gardening, practical skills, green technologies, etc
- Poetry, music, painting, sculpture, etc
- Letter-writing
- Maybe even direct action!

The elephant in the room for many communities is of course their buildings. These are often unsustainable, both environmentally and because many communities have fewer members than in the past, and offer little flexibility (especially if subject to Listed Building Consent or the interest of National Amenity Societies). One courageous option would be perhaps to sell the existing buildings and rebuild elsewhere, following in the steps of Stanbrook, Burford, and the Community of the Holy Cross, Rempstone.¹⁶ Alternatively, the Community of the Resurrection is building a new eco-friendly monastery on site, and converting the monks' old living quarters to flats.¹⁷

The media interest generated by the move of the Stanbrook community partly reflects the uneasy fascination of the world with the Religious Life, as described by Dr Williams in his Easter Sermon 2009.¹³ However it also provided an opportunity to engage with the world and raise the profile of the Religious Life. It would be hoped that the discovery of an overarching prophetic ministry in climate change could also lead to a renewal of the Life and proper affirmation within the church.

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