

## CLARE BRYDEN

brydenclare@gmail.com [www.cbryden.me.uk](http://www.cbryden.me.uk)

### Green, not grandiose

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CHRISTIANITY has a rich theology of living with respect for creation. But it seems that a secular organisation, the Transition movement, is leading the way in advocating radical change in our way of living and relating. Christians are joining the movement, but we have much more to contribute.

The Transition movement had unlikely beginnings as a student project. Rob Hopkins, a teacher of sustainable agriculture in Kinsale, Ireland, set his students the task of developing a solution to the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil. Peak oil is the point at which the global production of oil begins to decline because of dwindling reserves. Even conservative estimates see this as fast approaching, probably within the next ten years.

The students developed the idea of an “energy descent plan” for Kinsale, which charted the transition over several decades to a sustainable local economy. So appealing was this that the community became involved, and the town council adopted the plan.

Moving to Totnes in Devon, Mr Hopkins, with others, developed Transition concepts, which resulted in the “unleashing” of Transition Town Totnes in 2006. There are now more than 300 Transition initiatives worldwide, roughly half of them in the UK, and many in the United States and Australia, with a scattering across Europe, Asia, and South America.

In Transition communities, interest groups are formed around areas such as energy, food, transport, recycling, or rediscovering practical skills. They try to understand the resources of the neighbourhood, develop a vision for the area, and start projects, often working with other community groups or local government.

For example, an energy group might develop neighbourhood renewable-energy schemes and promote efficiency: Bristol Green Doors, from Transition Bristol, is organising a weekend in September to showcase 50 homes retrofitted with energy-saving measures. Others seek to encourage growing food, for example in allotments. One idea is gardenshare, a scheme that matches owners of underutilised gardens with people who want to grow their own food.

AT THE heart of the Transition movement is a vision of communities taking ambitious but achievable steps together towards sustainable living, challenging a culture of excessive consumerism and social disintegration. The priority given to relationships, celebration, and encouragement marks it out from other environmental groups, and might explain its steady growth.

“It gives me hope when the reality presented by the media is so grim,” says one woman, who runs the Transition Cambridge storytelling group. Others talk of a sense of purpose and optimism replacing despair. To develop a less energy-intensive way of life requires a reassessment of our

values. Many, however, see it as an opportunity to build a better society. Mr Hopkins has described it as a collective adventure, in which we learn to be materially leaner, yet inwardly richer.

Although not aligned with any religious or political ideology, the Transition movement clearly has parallels with Christianity. Transition recognises that outer change is not possible without inner change. There are many “Heart and Soul” groups, which address the psychology of making changes and keeping on keeping on. Furthermore, the problems that Transition is trying to address — consumerism, climate change, and peak oil — are symptomatic of a deeper separation from God and neighbour: what Christians call sin.

Both Transition and Christianity are looking forward to a new reality, whether envisioning a more sustainable society in 30 years, or working to bring the Kingdom of God. Both are motivated by hope.

Transition communities are creating their own stories and visions. The Transition Handbook, a practical guide for the movement, describes many imaginative exercises, which are used to paint a compelling picture of a more sustainable world. One involves small groups walking through a housing estate and imagining it in 20 years’ time, as an exemplar of low-energy, localised living, describing the food being grown there, how energy is produced and used, the design of the buildings, and the sounds and smells.

IN THE Church we could also apply our faith imaginatively in order to encourage action. We could tell stories of how in the future churches have again become the focal point for communities; how we have reclaimed the outlook of the Church in Acts, sharing our resources and caring for those who are in need; how we could use the buildings to host markets, or provide power from solar panels. Schemes such as garden-sharing or a church allotment could be a first step towards this.

The Transition movement includes people from a range of spiritualities, but churches should neither fear that, nor be anxious about working with a group in their area. Many individual Christians are already involved in Transition initiatives, and some churches have strong links. For example, Ottery St Mary Parish Church, Devon, has been working with Sustainable Ottery for three years, hosting exhibitions of sustainable groups and businesses, which attract more than 500 people at a time.

Despite its rich eco-theology, Christianity often has a negative image within the green movement, and the Church cannot pretend that it is in the ecological vanguard. Yet, motivated by our worship of God as creator, sustainer, and source of salvation and grace, we have much to contribute. Exactly what a transformed society would look like remains to be seen, but planning for a different kind of future is a spiritual task, and we are surely called to take part.

*Dr Clare Redfern is part of the “Hope for Creation” project run by the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion and the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics in Cambridge.*

*Clare Bryden has been working for Exeter diocese’s Shrinking the Footprint campaign, and is a member of Transition Exeter. [www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)*