

CREATION CAKE

It seems quite inexplicable to me that there are some Christians who claim to love and worship God, to be disciples of Jesus, and yet have no concern for the earth that bears his stamp of ownership. They do not care about the abuse of the earth and indeed, by their wasteful and over-consumptive lifestyles, they collude in it.

JOHN STOTT



Northern Ireland is a special part of these islands. From farming to fishing, golf to film locations, tourism to sites of special scientific interest and UNESCO world heritage sites, our land is closely linked to our livelihood.

Land shapes people and people in turn shape the land. A people's relationship with their land is an intimate thing and it's good stewardship is central to social wellbeing and justice.

This is a short prompt is asking this question of the evangelical Church in Northern Ireland – Are we living well in this land? It will seek to challenge and encourage believers to consider more deeply our relationship with this part of God's creation.

Christians believe God created the earth and gifted to human beings a key role in it's stewardship and care-taking. We have a real opportunity and responsibility to live in ways which care for and value the gift of creation.

There are already some positive signs that people are living less wastefully. For example, over the past

decade recycling and composting rates have increased considerably in Northern Ireland from roughly 5% in 1999 to around 40% in 2012-2013. That said, we have long way to go compared to some other European countries. Sweden recycles 99% of its waste and is continually working on the other 1%.

As Christians, everything we do, including our words, deeds and our attitudes towards creation, speak of our relationship with Jesus Christ. He is the one through whom the whole earth was created (Col. 1:15-16). As we continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, how we talk about, and treat His creation matters. It is an issue of discipleship, witness and justice - living well with our neighbours. With 27%¹ of the Northern Irish population going to Church once a week there is a huge potential that Christians here could play a key part in reshaping social attitudes and consumer habits in Northern Ireland.

So again we ask ourselves as part of the Church in Northern Ireland, is the way we are living here and now honouring God and our neighbour?

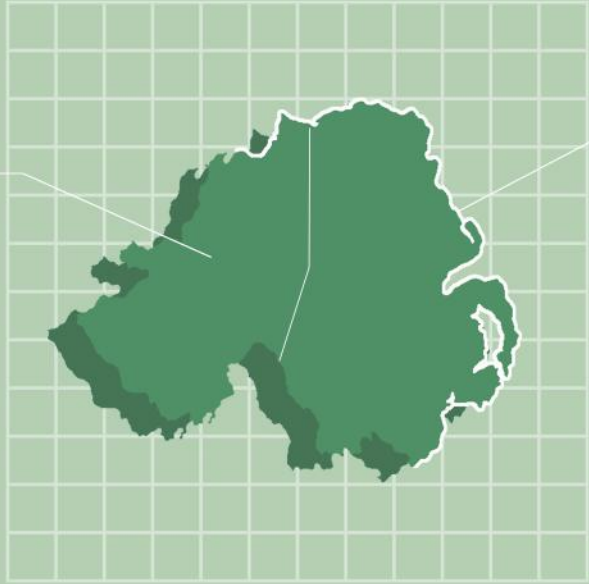
¹RTE BBC NI Cross Border Survey, Oct 2015, accessed at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/tv/nolanshow/RTE_BBC_NI_Cross_Border_Survey.pdf

INTRODUCTION





THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONTEXT



46.4%
RURAL LAND³

Of the rural land:
8% is covered by forest,
69% is used for agriculture,
88% is permanent grassland
and meadows.

334 MILES OF
COASTLINE¹

AREA:
14,130 KM²

RURAL POPULATION

Beyond greater Belfast and a few other larger cities and towns Northern Ireland remains relatively rural. A third of the population live in a rural area.⁴

CHANGES IN FARMING

Over the last 100 years, in many ways thanks to our own Harry Ferguson, there has been a clear shift in farming practices towards mechanization. There are currently 24,200 active farms in Northern Ireland but this has fallen from 31,000 active farms just fifteen years ago.⁵ We live in an era where local farming is subject to global market forces. European Common Agricultural policy and subsidies determine much local farming policy while farm gate milk prices have plummeted and are set thousands of miles away in New Zealand.

CHANGES IN CONSUMER DEMANDS

Alongside this in Northern Ireland, changing consumer markets have resulted in almost all crop production reducing dramatically while livestock numbers have increased.⁶

From 1915 to 2015 the amount of cereals produced dropped from 149,000 ha to 33,000 ha while the number of cattle increased from 784,000 to 1.6 million. The agri-food sector is now Northern Ireland's largest manufacturer employing 27,000 in food and drink processing and a further 47,000 in farming.

1. worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/northernireland/uknilandst.htm
2. ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rural-development-2014-2020/country-files/uk/factsheet-northern-ireland_en.pdf
3. *Ibid*
4. nirsra.gov.uk/publications/default.asp3.htm
5. *Ibid*
6. daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/agricultural-census-ni-june-2015.pdf

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S,
 AND THE FULLNESS
 THEREOF; THE WORLD AND
 THEY THAT DWELL THEREIN.
 PSALM 24:1



WHAT IS CREATION CARE?

Creation care is about looking after the world around us. For Christians it is part of our commission to be good stewards of God's creation.

Creation Care simply means treating the earth with respect because it is the Lord's creation. It is about honouring and pursuing God's shalom, the flourishing of life and right relationships with God, other people and the earth around us. God is not greedy, selfish or wasteful and these characteristics should not be found in his followers in how we treat His creation.

The Church is already exploring this issue, but it remains on the margins rather than in the main stream of Christian witness and discipleship in Northern Ireland. Like many other issues, it has been labelled and politicised. In some Christian circles, it is dismissed as a concern of 'liberals' and a competitive threat to resources the Church could put into more explicitly sharing the gospel.

We believe this is a false dichotomy. Christians are absolutely called to proclaim with words the good news of Jesus. We are also called to Christian discipleship and witness and acts of mercy, self-control and justice. Creation care is not a competitive threat to the gospel but a complementary way of life which seeks to honour God and His creation and steward resources well for ourselves and others.

OUR RESEARCH SHOWS:



96% of evangelical Christians agree that human beings have a God-given responsibility to take better care of creation and the the environment



91% of evangelical Christians agree that the Bible teaches us to pray and struggle for economic and social justice



81% of evangelical Christians agree that greed for material possession is one of the greatest sins of our time

The Bible begins with the declaration, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1) This sets Christian belief apart from a worldview where the earth's origins lie in cosmic chance.

The Bible also records God's reaction to His creation. Five times God announces that it is good. The fact that God created the earth and declares it to be good gives external worth to it and to everything that dwells within it.

Within God's creation, a special dignity, purpose and value is gifted to humanity who are made in God's image.

God is in perfect relationship with Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Humanity reflects this relational image. When the creation of the earth is complete, including humanity, the text sums it up saying 'and God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good'. The first Sabbath is notable in that it was when God rested having completed his initial creative work, and all creatures are were in harmonious relationships with God and each other. (Tom Wright).

However humanity and the rest of creation were not created just to rest. Work is a good gift from God given to humanity - we were charged with working the earth. Proper use of God's world does not mean no use, leaving everything undisturbed and in its original form, but rather stepping out in creativity and cultivating God's world in ways that give God glory and aid human welfare.

THE BIBLICAL STORY

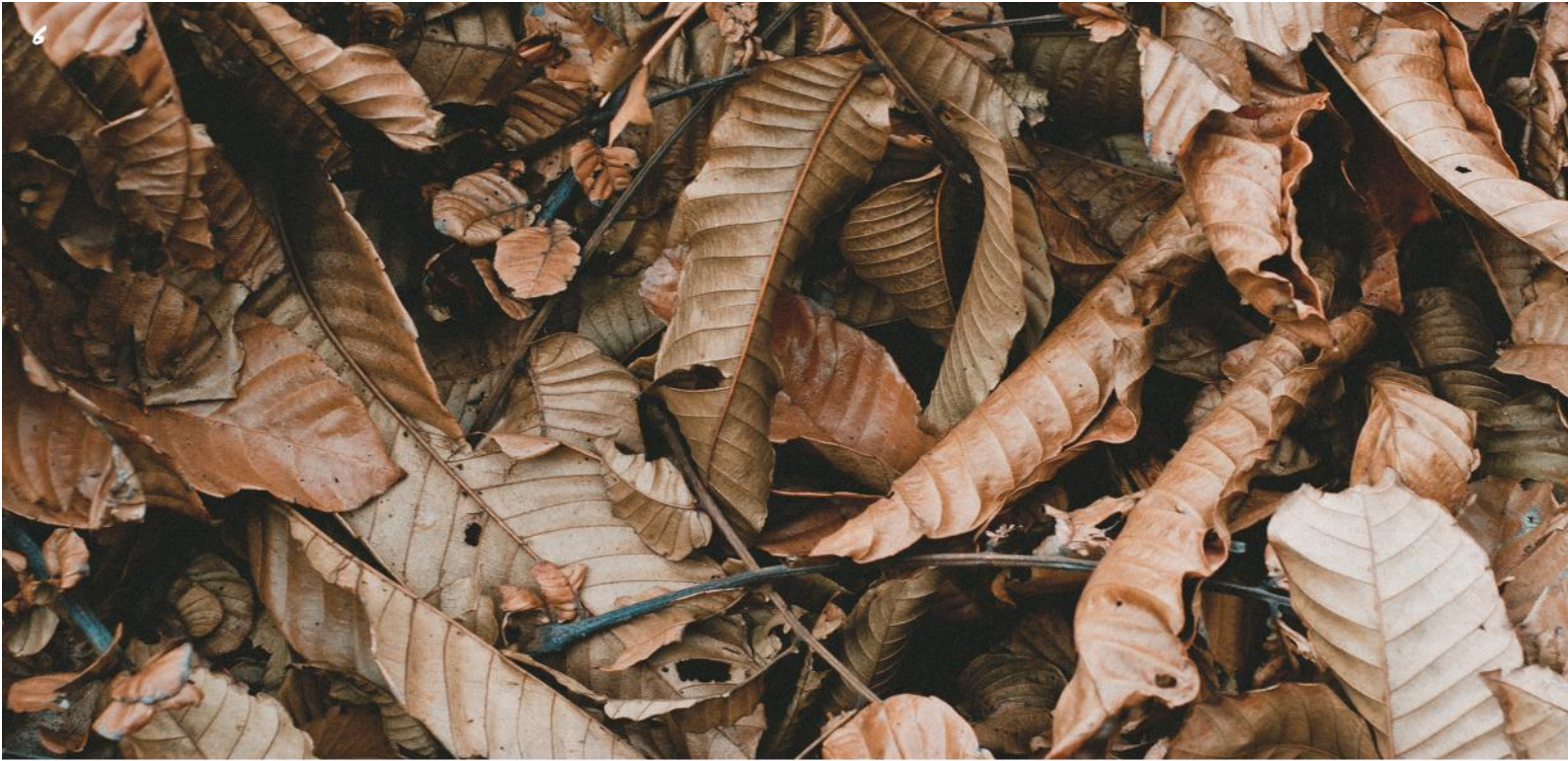


Land ultimately belongs to God. When tended to properly by people, land benefits creation and bears witness to the Creator.

God made people and relates to them in love. God made people in His image from the dust of the land, and set people to work on and steward the land.



People are made for worship and work, gifted with God's creativity and commissioned to cultivate the land.



THE FALL

At the fall, a destructive cycle began. The breakdown of humankind's relationship with God had drastic effects on all relationships - among people, between people and with the rest of creation (Gen 3:14-19).

The unequal distribution of resources, inequality between persons, murder and exploitation all have their root in the fall. All around us, we see examples of how humanity's play at independence from God has wrought untold damage on our world, and we can recognise our part in this. Attempting to overthrow the reign of the King of Creation only to then try and replace Him with cheap idols, can only lead to misplaced desires and a distorted world. This is a far cry from God's original proclamation over His world - that it was good.

Even in the face of sin, however, we still see God's redemptive relationship with the land. It plays a prominent role in His covenant promise to the children of Israel, and when God speaks to the people on land and property, equity and fair distribution are stand-out principles. Among the Israelites, every community had an allotment of land, to sustain and be sustained by. Rest and justice are key concepts, both in the institution of the Sabbath for people and the Sabbath for land (the requirement that land lie fallow every seven years - Exodus 23:11). God's commands around jubilee whereby the land was returned to the original family owners would prevent the growth of huge inequalities, enslavement and debt. God is clear that there is a right way in which land must be used, in which animals should be treated, and by which humans will thrive.

The Old Testament Prophet Hosea records the word of God to His people. The abandonment of faithfulness, kindness and the knowledge of God has dire effects on the people's relationships with each other and the land.

'HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD, O PEOPLE OF ISRAEL! THE LORD HAS BROUGHT CHARGES AGAINST YOU, SAYING:

"THERE IS NO FAITHFULNESS, NO KINDNESS, NO KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN YOUR LAND. YOU MAKE VOWS AND BREAK THEM; YOU KILL AND STEAL AND COMMIT ADULTERY. THERE IS VIOLENCE EVERYWHERE - ONE MURDER AFTER ANOTHER. THAT IS WHY YOUR LAND IS IN MOURNING, AND EVERYONE IS WASTING AWAY. EVEN THE WILD ANIMALS, THE BIRDS OF THE SKY, AND THE FISH OF THE SEA ARE DISAPPEARING."

HOSEA 4: 1-3

HE IS THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD, THE FIRST BORN OF ALL CREATION. FOR BY HIM ALL THINGS WERE CREATED IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE, WHETHER THRONES OR DOMINIONS OR RULERS OR AUTHORITIES – ALL THINGS WERE CREATED THROUGH HIM AND FOR HIM. AND HE IS BEFORE ALL THINGS AND IN HIM ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER.

AND HE IS THE HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH. HE IS THE BEGINNING, THE FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD, THAT IN EVERYTHING HE MIGHT BE PREEMINENT. FOR GOD IN ALL HIS FULLNESS WAS PLEASED TO LIVE IN CHRIST, AND THROUGH HIM GOD RECONCILED EVERYTHING TO HIMSELF. HE MADE PEACE WITH EVERYTHING IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH BY MEANS OF CHRIST'S BLOOD ON THE CROSS

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

JESUS & RECONCILIATION

We see clearly in Colossians 1 the role of Jesus in the creation of the world and it's redemption. The world was created through Jesus and redeemed by his death and resurrection. Jesus, the saviour of the whole world, came so that people can live in new restored relationships with God, others and the world around us. The original purpose of creation, shalom, can be restored to that of the first Sabbath. Shalom is complete restoration and healing; the curse of sin and separation is gone. Relationships are again intact; and we are fulfilling our role as God's stewards, in obedience and worship.

REDEMPTION & RENEWAL

The story of humanity begins first with God and his desire to create, give and love. It starts with humanity placed in a garden. It is idyllic: untainted by sin and brimming with potential.

In a bold statement of God's approval of human innovation, Revelations 21 depicts the new earth as a city coming out of heaven from God. The family of God has been expanded to include people from every tribe, nation and tongue. God once again dwelling with humanity in the new creation. Even within a variety of different eschatological views, we believe that God made this earth and Jesus is returning to it as Judge and King. There will be complete restoration and recreation. God will once again dwell with his people in the new heavens and the new earth.

THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT IS NOT JUST THE STORY OF GOD'S LOVE FOR HIS PEOPLE AND THE REDEMPTION OF HUMANKIND THROUGH CHRIST. IT IS THAT, BUT IT IS ALSO THE STORY OF GOD'S LOVE FOR EVERYTHING HE HAS MADE.

SCOTT SABIN
PLANT WITH PURPOSE



HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

1 WORSHIP

When we see God's handiwork we are moved to worship. The Psalms in particular point us towards this, showing us how creation manifests God's glory, wisdom and power. In fact, in Psalm 148, the psalmist calls on creation itself to praise the Lord:

PRAISE HIM, SUN AND MOON,
PRAISE HIM, ALL YOU SHINING STARS!
PRAISE HIM, YOU HIGHEST HEAVENS,
AND YOU WATERS ABOVE THE HEAVENS!
LET THEM PRAISE THE NAME OF THE LORD!
FOR HE COMMANDED AND THEY WERE
CREATED...
PRAISE THE LORD FROM THE EARTH,
YOU SEA MONSTERS AND ALL DEEPS.

2 ENJOYMENT

Throughout God's word, we are reminded of the joy He has in His creation. In the book of Job, God asserts His authorship of creation and makes clear His delight in it (Job 39 - 41). Creation is good and to be enjoyed not simply used as a means to an end.

3 WORK

GOD PLANTED A GARDEN, BUT THEN PUT ADAM IN IT TO WORK AND TAKE CARE OF IT'
GENESIS 2:15

As His image-bearers, God instructs Adam and Eve to act as His representatives in creation, calling on them to populate the earth. He endows them with authority to rule and steward His order and to create culture. Our working relationship with the land is vital to our wellbeing as a community. The work that God blesses people with doing forms part of their worship, as is reflected in the Hebrew word *adovah*, which unites these two concepts.

4 STEWARDSHIP

Creation was created. It did not happen by chance. It is under God's ownership and He gifts to us it's use for our home and work. It is ultimately not ours to own or destroy. This leads us to stewardship not exploitation. Made in the image of God we are cultivators, creators and carers within His creation.

5 SACRIFICIAL LIVING

"Live simply so that others may simply live."

Elizabeth Ann Seton

There is not enough land in the world for everyone to eat meat everyday - we simply cannot sustain the cattle. Knowing this should challenge our consumption. There may be products or brands out there which we simply cannot consume in conscience because of the exploitative way in which they are produced. At various points within the biblical narrative, the connection of people with land is emphasized.

Among the ways in which we can honour that connection is to use land and consume in ways that benefit not just ourselves, but wider society. This could be as simply as buying local sustainable food, honouring our farming neighbours and understanding where our food comes from. In doing so, we put our money where our mouth is, and we subvert the self-centredness of the prevailing trends around consumption in this part of the world.

6 WITNESS

Is there something distinctive in the way that we talk and act when it comes to consuming and creation care that points to Jesus? How are our lives different to the lives of unbelievers around us? We care about creation because God cares for it. We bear witness to Him by the way we act towards creation.

7 DISCIPLESHIP & OBEDIENCE

John Stott has frequently talked of 'selective discipleship', saying it is 'choosing those areas in which commitment suits us and staying away from those areas in which it is costly'. Are our attitudes to stuff, land and our consumption biblical?

8 JUSTICE

AND THE KING WILL ANSWER THEM, 'TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE MY BROTHERS, YOU DID IT TO ME.'
MATTHEW 25:40

Western post-industrial Christianity often has a very pragmatic view of creation, believing solely that 'it is there for our use'. The abuse of creation that is fueled by greed often leads to injustices and inequalities for the world's poorest and most vulnerable. This is true in terms of flooding and desertification through to structural inequalities in trade and debt arrangements.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to value people over products, relationships over rights, community over consumerism. This is radical discipleship, living differently to the culture around us, loving our neighbour as ourselves. The ability of the poor to feed and clothe and educate their children and even to survive is related to how we consume. Choosing ethically produced where the producer obtains a fair portion of the price can go a long way in helping them provide for their families. This has knock-on effects for education, healthcare and prosperity.





PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

OUR HOMES

Use sustainable forms of energy

Switch off appliances when not in use

Purchase ethically produced goods

Consume less and buy items of greater quality

Recycle as much as possible

Reduce the amount of driving you do by walking, cycling or car-sharing. Utilise public transport when possible.

PRAY

That we would share God's heart for His creation

LINKS
globalstewards.org/ecotips.htm
operationnoah.org

OUR CHURCHES

Integrate creation care into biblical teaching

Make our church as fair trade and environmentally friendly as possible even by making small changes such as reducing the use of disposable cups etc.

Affirm God as Creator in worship

Make a community garden on Church property as part of your outreach

Adopt a park or stream for the youth or Sunday school to tend and take care of

PRAY

That creation care would form a part of your witness to your community

LINKS
arocha.org/en/
ecochurch.arocha.org.uk
operationnoah.org/resources/church-resources-climate-change-reading/

OUR CULTURE

Contact your council and find out what environmentally friendly initiatives you can be involved with.

Be a catalyst for change. 45% of the population in Northern Ireland are church-goers. This market share holds great potential to make difference in consumer habits and environmental care

Get involved in local & overseas creation care projects

PRAY

That we would be known for care and compassion in how we consume

LINKS
tearfund.org/about_you/campaign
christianaid.org.uk
Department of Environment:
doeni.gov.uk