



ACT TOGETHER

Ashram Community Trust

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The world is our neighbour, this planet is our home and we are each others keeper.

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The Place of Wilderness within Ecotheology

"The fear of the Lord, that is the beginning of wisdom, and therefore belongs to the beginnings, and is felt in the first cold hours before the dawn of civilisation; the power that comes out of the wilderness and rides on the whirlwind and breaks the gods of stone.....the fear of the Lord, that is the beginning of wisdom; but not the end." G.K. Chesterton, Saint Thomas Aquinas. 1933

Wilderness has an important place in the Bible, both in a literal form as well as an allegorical role. The physical reality of wilderness was part of the formative experience of the tribal people that became the nation of Israel as they journeyed from slavery to freedom. After leaving the security of Egypt, the Israelites were confronted with the challenges of an uncertain journey through the wilderness. Three days into their travels, they were unable to find potable water and complained to Moses (Exodus 15:22-25). Soon after, they complained to Moses about the lack of food, even wishing they were back in Egypt again (Exodus 16:1-3). There were many further instances of the challenging experiences that the Israelites had.

Thus wilderness was a place of testing for the Israelites. It was also a testing time for Moses, a test which sometimes was more than he could manage (Deuteronomy 1:34-40). The Israelites needed to be continually reminded that it is God who has brought them through it all (Deuteronomy 8:1-5). Nevertheless, it was whilst in the wilderness that the laws which would govern the Jewish people effectively up to the present were promulgated (Exodus 20:1-17). Good things as well as challenges can come out of the experience of wilderness.



One of the ritual practices which emerged from the wilderness years was that of the scapegoat. This act of atonement for wrong-doing involved taking a pair of goats; one was sacrificed in the usual way and the other had the sins of the people laid upon it and it was then driven off into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:1-34). The awfulness of that crushing burden of sin, and of the bleak prospects for the cursed goat were captured well in the Holman-Hunt painting, *The Scapegoat*. Such imagery

simply served to reinforce the sense of dread that lingered on in people's feelings about wilderness.

Whilst the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land would have represented an end of their wilderness years, nevertheless even in the land of milk and honey, the wilderness was never far away, both geographically and spiritually. Shepherds and their flocks would have spent time in the wilderness and would have shared it with a number of dangerous wild animals such as wolves, lions and bears, as recounted by the boy-shepherd and future king, David (1 Samuel 17:34-36).

Many Old Testament prophets spent time in the wilderness, either through choice or to escape the murderous intentions of the people or the king of Israel. Elijah's ministry begins in the wilderness east of the Jordan River (1 Kings 17) and he flees from Jezebel into the wilderness south of Beersheba (1 Kings 19:1-8). Isaiah warns the Israelites that turning away from God would result in their cities becoming like a wilderness (Isaiah 64:10). The imagery of the wilderness used by the prophets would have instilled a sense of fear and foreboding in many of their listeners.

John the Baptist lived in the Judean wilderness and people came to hear him there (Matthew 3:1-2). Jesus also spent time in the wilderness prior to the start of



John the Baptist in the Wilderness

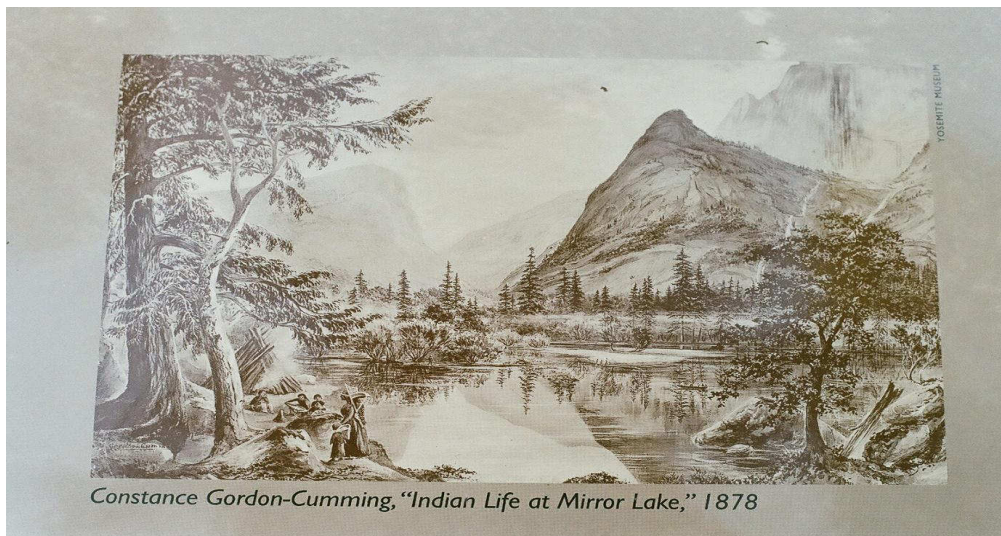
his ministry when he was tempted (Matthew 4:1-11). The wilderness in this case whilst being a challenging place for people to live, was not totally without means of support, as demonstrated by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4).

Not all the writings in the Old Testament necessarily invoke a negative image of wilderness. Psalm 104, that great hymn of praise to creation, places the wild places of the earth in the same frame as the agriculturally more productive areas. They all demonstrate the greatness of God as Creator. Psalm 8 is another expression of God's creative genius; however, whilst it gives humanity the status of being a little lower than the angels, in Psalm 104 we see humanity as a much smaller entity in the great tapestry of creation (Psalm 104:23).

It is important to recognise that in reading the word "wilderness" in the Bible, we are not necessarily talking about a single type of environment. The Hebrew word *midbar*, for example, denotes a region suitable for pasturing sheep and cattle (as in Psalm 65:12; Isaiah 42:11; Joel 1:19). Such areas still provide grazing for Bedouin pastoralists across the Negev today. The word *Jeshimon* means a "desert waste", as reflected in the song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:10) and in certain Psalms (eg. Psalm 68:7). The word *tziyyah* means "a dry place" as used to describe the Israelite time in the wilderness (Psalm 78:17; Psalm 105:41). The word *tohu* means a "desolate" or "waste" or "unoccupied" place (Deuteronomy 32:10, Job 12:24).

Thus we are talking about a range of environments, but essentially those areas beyond the influence of arable agricultural and settled communities (Bauckham, 2010).

Modern studies of wilderness suggest that human influence has been so pervasive, that there is no such a thing as pristine wilderness. At best, one might claim that wilderness is a place with little human influence, rather than no influence, on its functioning and biodiversity (Scotney, 2014). The so-called pristine wilderness of Yosemite as perceived by John Muir, for example, had been farmed and hunted for centuries by native Americans long before the European settlers arrived (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019).



Constance Gordon-Cumming, "Indian Life at Mirror Lake," 1878

Yosemite



The Peaceable Kingdom

The image of wilderness is often invoked by the prophets when describing the consequences of disobedience by the Israelites (Isaiah 50:2; Isaiah 64:10; Jeremiah 4:26), whilst obedience restores the wilderness to full productiveness (Isaiah 44:3-4; 51:3). Images of the Kingdom of God frequently depict the restoration of order and productiveness to previously wild and (to humans at least) unproductive places (Isaiah 40:3-5; 43:18-21). Other images include the idea of the Peaceful Kingdom where the ferocious nature of wild animals is transformed into gentle coexistence (Isaiah 11:6-9) and which have been interpreted in the wonderful series of paintings by the American artist and Quaker Edward Hicks (1780-1849).

For many people, there still exists a deep-seated, primeval fear of wilderness, in that it presents a hostile and alien environment full of potentially threatening species and lacking the basics of civilised life. It is a reality that formed the setting for Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan; the listeners to that story would have known how hazardous the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho was, passing through wilderness that was the haunt of brigands, as well as wild animals. Tales from mediaeval Europe such as Red Riding Hood reflected the visceral fear that people had of dense forests which were home to wolves, bears, lynx and boar. Mediaeval art is full of depictions of wilderness as a terrifying prospect eg. Christ in the Wilderness (Moretto da Brescia, 1515-20), John the Baptist in the Wilderness (Giovanni di Paolo, 1454), Durer's Saint Jerome penitent in the wilderness (1496), etc.



St Jerome penitent in the Wilderness

However, some people viewed wilderness as a place of refuge, of sanctuary and of awe-inspiring beauty. The Essenes, in rejecting the relatively affluent style of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, found a place for their more spartan lifestyle in the Judean Desert. Their example may well have had an influence upon John the Baptist and on Jesus, for whom the wilderness was a place where they could be closer to God. The same principle was taken up by Anthony the Great (251-356CE) and other Desert Fathers who subscribed to the value of pursuing the ascetic life in the wilderness, free of the trappings of civilisation. By the fourth century, thousands of devout Christians had moved to communities in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts having renounced all worldly pleasures. Their experiences had a powerful influence on the development of the monastic movement as established by St Benedict (480-550) and others.

One of the early proponents of the wilderness movement in America was Henry David Thoreau, who left his comfortable town life of Concord, Massachusetts, and spent three years in a cabin in the woods. This experience led him to the belief that wilderness, rather than something that needed to be conquered, was essential to our well-being; it served as a necessary counterbalance to the materialism and urbanization of industrialized life. It was a place of self-renewal and contact with the raw material of life. "In wildness is the preservation of the world," he wrote (Thoreau 1854)

Nearly a century later, conservationist Aldo Leopold was moved to say: "In wildness is the salvation of the world." He also challenged the prevailing attitude to land management when he said: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." (Leopold, 1949). Leopold terms this the Land Ethic which "*simply enlarges the boundaries of the community*" to include not only humans, but also soils, waters, plants, and animals.



Euan in the Wilderness

This sentiment is echoed by the American farmer and poet, Wendell Berry, who stated: "*To live, we daily must break the bread and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.*" (Berry, 1991).

Another wilderness champion was John Muir, whose passionate defence of wild places in the mountains of California led to the establishment of the US National Park system. His sentiment "I'd rather be in the mountains thinking of God, than in church thinking about the mountains" (Gifford, 1996) is reflected in the ethos of the new Forest Church movement (Stanley, 2013), where worship outdoors in nature is seen as a way of making connections between our souls and creation, thus bringing us closer to the Creator.

Humans have spent most of their existence as hunter-gatherers, living off whatever the environment provided, with no modification of the environment by humans to improve its productivity. With the advent of agriculture, over 12,000 years ago, the potential for generating a surplus led to an erosion of that attitude. From now on, humankind sought to convert as much of the landscape into a place for the production of food and other resources for humans. The earliest forms of agriculture operated on a shifting basis, where small garden plots were cleared, farmed and then abandoned to be reclaimed by the wilderness (Rappaport, 1984). It was only when farming was accompanied by settlement that agricultural production became a permanent change. The advent of the Industrial Revolution two centuries ago simply accelerated that process.

Wilderness has been in retreat ever since. A recent study has shown that whilst humans represent 0.01% of the total biomass upon earth, our activity has reduced the biomass of wild marine and terrestrial mammals by six times and the biomass of plant matter by half (Bar-On, Philips & Milo, 2018). Humans account for about 36 percent of the biomass of all mammals. Domesticated livestock, mostly cows and pigs, account for 60 percent, and wild mammals for only 4 percent. The extent of conversion of the planet into a human biotic resource-generating function has led to the designation of this epoch as the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2006), accompanied by the sixth great mass extinction of species.

There has, however, been a growing appreciation of the practical value of various ecosystems, including wilderness areas, for the benefit of humankind. These benefits have been referred to as Ecosystem Services. Besides providing food, wood and other raw materials, species and habitats also provide essential services such as crop pollination, prevention of soil erosion and water purification, as well as aesthetic, spiritual and recreational services and of course climate regulation (<http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/Synthesis.html>). The recognition of these services has led to some protection of such ecosystems, this process is still essentially an extension of the utilitarian approach to earth resources – they are still viewed as being there to serve us rather than having intrinsic worth in their own right. Whilst the moral standing of sentient animals has become widely recognised in recent times (Regan, 1980), that principle has yet to be extended to include ecological communities and whole ecosystems.

How might these developments feed into a more serviceable ecotheology for our times?

1. First, there needs to be a much greater *earthing* of our theology and liturgical practices. The Bible clearly identifies our earthly origins and destination [*For dust you are, and to dust you shall return* (Genesis 3:19, NKJV)], thus we need to ensure we retain a much closer connection to the earth throughout our earthly existence. The campaign to have Natural History as a core subject in the National Curriculum is the right step for helping create a more ecologically literate population. Likewise, proposals to include environmental teaching and learning in programmes of theological training make a compelling argument (Hodson & Hodson, 2021). This would improve the capacity for ordained people to not only understand the ecological crisis, but to help pastor people through the grief and anxiety of climate change and species loss and to guide a positive response to it.
2. Secondly; there needs to be a dismantling of the dominant European enlightenment paradigm of the control of nature. The current enthusiasm for the process of rewilding the landscape offers one example of this transition from domination of nature to working alongside nature. Early experiments in farming in a non-intensive, nature-friendly way indicate that both reasonable agricultural productivity and much improved wildlife communities can be achieved with massive reduction in the use of chemicals and heavy machinery (Tree, 2019). The main obstacles to this approach at present are the system of financial support currently favoured by governments, as well as the attitude of neighbouring landowners and the general public, who have been raised to believe in intensive industrial-style agriculture – the kind of agriculture that has contributed to the massive loss of species and habitats since the Second World War. Until we accept that we are part of the community of life rather apart from it, we will continue to be seduced by the mirage of progress and ever-increasing wealth. Rewilding could be one of the most powerful tools in countering the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss whilst still generating a sustainable supply of food.
3. Thirdly, our worship and lifestyles need to genuinely reflect the dictum that the earth is the Lord's. A thread of awareness of and care for creation needs to be present in every act of worship, not confined to the odd special Sunday once a year. Our buildings (churches and homes) need to be

symbols of our love of creation by being as close to zero carbon operating as possible – and we need to proclaim that to the wider world.

4. Fourthly, we need to work, worship and pray with people of other denominations, other faiths, and no faith at all. Regardless of our different beliefs, we all share the one planet. By making common cause with other people of good will, our collective efforts can have a greater effect than when we work alone.
5. Fifth, we need to recognise and affirm that God established a covenant with all that was created, not just humankind (Genesis 9:8-10, 12, 14-15, 16, 17). We need to honour that covenant in ensuring the survival of all creatures; and that can only happen if they have somewhere to live, just as all humans need a place to live. Being a member of the Community of all Creation and as followers of Jesus, we need to show love to our neighbour. And who is our neighbour? All members of the Creation Community!

We are the product of wilderness; we need to reconnect with wilderness and adjust our way of living to ensure that both wilderness and humanity not only survive but thrive. That should be a key element of our calling as followers of Christ.

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Euan McPhee

My Ashram Journey

In 2004 my work with schools brought me to Sheffield. I chose to live in Wincobank because of the nearby oak woods and Iron Age hillfort. I visited various local churches but did not feel at ease.



One day, not long after I had arrived, I noticed a small fete taking place at Upper Wincobank Chapel as it reopened after renovation. Walking up the path to look at the book stall, I met Inderjit Bhogal for the first time. He was standing in the doorway. He invited me inside and I knew this was where I should stop.

Inderjit told me the story of the chapel and showed me photographs of the work done by the congregation to restore the badly vandalised building. Built as a school in 1841 this building has become the place for local people to meet, to learn and to support each other. As the years have passed the village has been engulfed by housing developments including the notorious Flower Estate, and is now a disadvantaged suburb of Sheffield on the hillside north of the industrial Don Valley.

I started to come to the often very informal Sunday services at the Chapel, sitting at the back, listening to the random discussion and joining in the unaccompanied singing. Then, the following Spring I was invited to crown the May Queen and after asking the young people how I could help, I agreed to help them re-establish their youth club. I helped find the funding to complete the renovations with a new heating system, nicer toilets and a kitchen. In time, I was invited to become a trustee.

It was at Wincobank that I first met John Vincent when he came to lead the Covenant Service and Communion on occasions through the year. From the start he tried hard to recruit me into Ashram, but it was quite a few years later, when I went to Spital Hill one Wednesday to take John some Chapel paperwork that I stayed and partook of the Burngreave Banquet.

It was not long before I was a member of the Monday Gathering and regular host for meetings in my Wincobank kitchen. I was struck by the eclectic mix and range of life experience that the gathering brought together and found the evenings thought-provoking. Then Covid came and the world went online. It was a revelation to me to find a new layer of Ashram friends across the country and for the first time I began to see the bigger picture.

It was a short step to accept the place funded by Ashram, on the Urban Theology Unit course: Certificate of Discipleship Mission which gave me an introduction to liberation theology and some interesting new vocabulary. At first, I was perplexed and then frustrated by the sudden complexity of what had previously seemed so simple but as the Zoom sessions continued throughout the year the clouds began to clear.

It was refreshing to explore my own beliefs that had been built up from my earliest Sunday School days, through my teenage years in a church school, the influence of a radical young New Zealand vicar, early work in repertory theatre, with thoughts from some interesting new age friends and later research for multi-faith work in education. Through these years I had come to reject ceremony and ritual but increased my sense of spirituality.

My challenge was to identify the passages from the Gospel that had influenced my own life and use these as the foundation to develop my own mission project plan.

In the 1800s many eminent and widely travelled missionaries came to Wincobank Hall to meet Mary Anne Rawson. Now my own mission was to start there.



Beside the chapel there is a Victorian house that was built in about 1850 to attract a good schoolteacher and pastor to the area. It has seen many uses since then and is now in need of thorough renovation to bring it up to today's standards so that it can continue to be of service. If we can complete this project, we will have a base to develop further the community provision that we have already started, and offer a base for counselling and advice services for post pandemic life.

The prospect of a new community resource has attracted a group of immediate neighbours and other interested people with useful skills and new ideas. We now have the potential to draw in a more diverse group from the community who will become involved in chapel life.

So I wonder – how could we become a more welcoming place for strangers in need?

Because I have moved around this country so much, I still feel an outsider everywhere, so it must be even harder for those newly arrived from very different countries and cultures. I am at a point in my life where I do not know myself where I am going next or where I live being split between Sheffield and Liverpool but at least I am in my own country.

How can I bring any comfort to people whose sufferings are unimaginable to me, who have grown up with racism or deprivation?

The message of the Gospels is that we can transcend everyday problems if we can live by what Jesus said were the two most important commandments:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. ^[a] ³¹ *The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* Mark 12. 30 – 31

It is very easy for me to say this when I am not living on benefits, facing discrimination or deportation, but simple kindnesses can bring relief and improve conditions by increments – and it is a two-way process - I appreciate the kindness shown to me.

To sow the seeds of God's love we must cast the seed wide even if at times it falls on the stony path or amongst the rocks. (Mark 4: 3 – 20).

Sometimes the fertile ground looks overgrown and choked with other plants and weeds just



as people are swamped with troubles and challenges in their everyday lives. There is a

weeding job to be done here.



The word of God that falls upon the fertile ground will take root, thrive and produce grain. Even if only a small proportion of seed survives to germinate

and grow to fruition, the result will compensate for the lost seed. One plant produces many seeds that in turn will grow and multiply.

Sometimes the dry shallow ground needs watering with kindness and the choked overgrown ground needs clearing, the soil needs enriching banking up so that the young plants can survive. A little more seed may be needed on the bare patches.

Love can be gentle and caressing but it can also be tough and challenging. That is the hardest love. That is how Jesus loves. The examples he sets are challenging but it seems to me that the most important factor is positive engagement.

Jesus challenges us to act in a neighbourly fashion to everyone, including or especially, those who are unfamiliar, behave differently or look different. Especially when those people are vulnerable and at risk. Such neighbours are everywhere.

In every stranger we greet on the road, we greet Jesus. In every stranger we help we help Jesus.

The Sidney Carter song "When I needed a neighbour" says it all.

Who can we help? – we must open our doors wider and talk to people on the street. How can I help? I can only find out by asking.

We might not be able to provide everything, but we can signpost those in need to others who can help them when food is needed, clothing, better housing, and healing.

If I look in my toolbox, I remember that many years ago I was trained as an outreach youth worker.

My skills may be rusty, but I know can go to other people. They do not have to come to me.

Although I was born a Londoner and taught to mind my own business and leave others in peace, I can start conversations with people I have never met before although, because deep down I am often nervous of other people because I do not want to pry or intrude, to cause offence or may be its just that I don't want to show my ignorance, of which I have plenty.

I have been organising out of school activities for twenty years first as a youth worker, then as a teacher, then for the local authority officer. The young people from the youth club I helped restart in 2005 are now grown up and have been followed by waves of children including a Muslim Yemini refugee family who live nearby. They come to all our secular activities.

But I want to do more. I want to bring people together to support each other and empower them to be each other's neighbour. And I want to learn more from others as I continue my own jounery through life.

My mission project is not just about place it is about people, people wherever I am. I am not limited by place I am set free by opportunity. This is just the beginning.

Penny Rea

Scholarships

Ashram Community has donated £1000 to UTU to meet the fees of Ashram members who apply for them.

The year's fee is £200.

If interested please phone John Vincent on 0114 243 6688 or write to 7 College Court, SHEFFIELD S4 7FN

20121-2022 sessions are fortnightly on Mondays from 11th October, with agreed holidays

The Military and the Environment

The article which follows was originally written for Peace Lines, a series of short personal pieces related to Peace Promotion circulated to Quakers in the Manchester and Warrington Area. The responses of some of those who read it were that it needed wider circulation as Friends were surprised and disturbed that the military do have such a huge impact on the environment and that it has featured so little in previous UN Climate Change Conferences. It seems particularly shocking the military have been exempt from declaring their carbon footprint. The hope is that highlighting the seriousness of this may lead to COP26 addressing this and ensuring that in future the impacts of militarisation on the environment do not evade scrutiny.

In preparation for this article I stumbled across a Master thesis written in 2104/2015 at the University of Luxembourg. The statement at the beginning is very clear on the seriousness of continuing to ignore the impact of militarisation on climate change.

‘Regardless of whether it is during war or peacetime, the world’s armed forces consume enormous amounts of fossil fuels, produce immense quantities of toxic waste and have exceedingly high demands for all kinds of resources to support their infrastructures, all along being exempted from environmental restrictions and emission measurements. According to the treadmill of destruction theory, war is waged nowadays mainly for securing natural resources which are themselves being massively consumed in the process, thereby establishing a self-perpetuating cycle of destruction. Moreover, military spending diverts massive funding from climate mitigation and adaption initiatives. It seems obvious that militarism is closely related to climate change but unfortunately this connection has been hugely neglected, if not wilfully ignored’.

In 2003 in an article for Green Christian Bruce Kent expressed both surprise and dismay that the impacts of Militarisation on the environment have been so little highlighted. By the time of the pivotal Rio summit on Climate change such links as had been made seemed to have been lost. He cites how in the ‘Agenda for change’ document in a section on protection of the oceans there is not a word about military marine pollution. He points to the facts that military expenditure and the sheer number of conflicts do result in damage to the environment. His list which could be greatly extended includes; jet fuel used by military aircraft, land used just for training the military, nuclear warheads on the ocean floor, metals and rare minerals used by the military, leaking oil wells, defoliated forests, land wrecked with mines and

depleted uranium, rivers full of dangerous chemicals from bombed factories.

He argues that the connections have not been made at significant environment conferences mainly because: ‘the most powerful and militarised countries, wedded as they are to outdated notions of security based on individual state power do not want the connections to be made’.

This is why as we approach COP26 campaigns are now needed to get the military exemption from declaring their carbon footprint removed. Our Quaker Peace promotion group have recently signed these petitions asking that we stop. excluding military pollution from climate agreements and demand that military emissions be recognised in the COP26 deliberations.

<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/stop-excluding-military-pollution-from-climate-agreements-2/>

<https://ceobs.org/governments-must-commit-to-military-emissions-cuts-at-cop26/>

We also highlighted the comparative expenditure being allocated in the UK to military expenditure and addressing Climate Change at a vigil to mark Hiroshima. One of the placards read ‘Current UK spending. Does it make sense? £188bn on military (£8,467 a minute on nuclear programme). £24bn on Climate change’. These figures come from the website of the Quaker supported Global Campaign on Military Spending (N.B. the higher figures are both over 4 years).

<https://demilitarize.org.uk/infographics/> (includes useful monetary infographics)

<https://demilitarize.org.uk/uk-nuclear-weapons-spending-2020/> (links to a report by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN))

The impact of militarisation on food production and distribution has been observed for centuries. The impact on climate change is only now beginning to be recognised. Measuring the impacts is just the first step. How is it to be addressed when as is made clear in this document: NATO and climate change: how big is the problem?

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-57476349> the long lifespan of ‘defence’ equipment means the military has locked itself into fossil fuels for many years to come

The obvious and wisest thing to do is jettison the weaponry and focus on our real security needs.

Sandra Dutson



As I rode out one mid-summer morning..... my experience of the Big Ride For Palestine

The sun smiled on around 200 cyclists gathered on College Green in Bristol on Thursday 29 July 2021; another Big Ride for Palestine was about to get under way. Every summer for the last eight years, people of all ages and abilities have joined together to raise awareness to the plight of the Palestinian people and to raise money for children's projects in Gaza.

This year's ride from Bristol to London went via Swindon, Oxford and Luton before arriving into London on Sunday afternoon, 1 August. The MECA (Middle East Children's Alliance) project being supported this year is the building of a recreational park in Rafah, to provide a safe place for children traumatised by bombing and siege to be able to take part in cycling, football, basketball, tennis and walking. The emphasis is on providing activities for women and girls.

Shepherding over 200 cyclists through the centre of Bristol and out into the countryside was a challenge. The organisers had a good number of cyclists who acted as leaders and back markers as well as "human signposts" at tricky junctions, to make sure we did not lose anyone! There were also a number of dedicated cycle repair cyclists and first aiders to help out with punctures and other mishaps. Breaks were arranged for coffee, lunch and tea along the way, often provided by supportive local communities.

Each day's ride was around 45 miles, and accommodation was arranged for us at Premier Inns or Travelodges in each town. However, the meals were provided by local mosques in each community – and they were delicious! There was a rally on arrival in each town with local dignitaries or activists welcoming us and helping to spread the message of the need to bring about freedom, justice and equality for all in Israel-Palestine. For me, the more moving experience was to be enjoying the company of a several dozen Palestinians on the ride itself. The entry into Luton was amazing, as it seemed that every other car was sounding its horn in welcome as we rode in, and residents and shopkeepers stepped out of their doors to wave in greeting!

The Big Ride organisers are at pains to point out that they are not antisemitic but are simply anti the Israeli Government policies, including the illegal occupation of Palestine and annexation of East Jerusalem, settler colonies in occupied territories and discriminatory citizenship regarding Palestinian people. To quote the Big Ride's own declaration:

"The Big Ride is opposed to all forms of racism including Islamophobia and Antisemitism. We welcome the 2021 Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism which makes clear that fighting for the rights of Palestinians, which will often involve criticism of Israel and its policies, is not antisemitic."

As Desmond Tutu said: *"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor"*. The 2018 Citizenship Law in Israel is effectively introducing a form of apartheid not dissimilar to that which once prevailed in South Africa.

So far, the amount raised for children's projects in Gaza stands at over £90,000, exceeding last year's total of £60,000. The only downside of the whole trip was the fact I had to miss the final rally at Mile End in London's East End; Peeling off at Barnet, three of us from Cornwall cycled to Paddington to be able to get the last through train to Cornwall at 17.00. Which meant missing hear Alexi Sayle address the rally! But at least the 10

trains were running on time and I was able to get home to my own bed by Sunday night, tired but triumphant from an excellent ride for a worthy cause!

Next year? Hmm! We'll see!
Euan McPhee



The park and playground built by MECA with support from the Big Ride for Palestine
<https://www.mecaforpeace.org/heartwarming-visit-to-our-playground-in-khuzaa-gaza/>

A Prayer for the Women and Girls of Afghanistan

“God of Justice and Mercy,
Hear my cry;
Hear the wail of my sisters.
See our lives in disorder,
Our dreams of peace and security in the
dust. . . .
We are cast aside by the powerful.
Our strength ebbs with each sigh of despair.
Stress is our constant companion,
We watch our world crumble
and can only weep.
But You, God, can give us strength.
You can nourish our souls and
revitalize our minds.

You can touch us with Wisdom,
Banish sorrow from our brows. . . .
You have granted Wisdom to
women of ages past.
You have healed the sick and
brought forth life from the old.
You have raised up the lowly and
felled the powerful.
You have been just and sure.
With Your aid, we waver no more.
We stand up in faith and praise. . . .
For You are the God of Grace,
Mighty in Justice and Mercy.

— adapted from “Psalm of Wailing Women” by Diane Kessler
in [Lifting Women’s Voices: Prayers to Change the World](#)

Ashram connections – chapter 2!

In the Spring 2021 edition of Act Together I wrote a little account of the various and varied occasions recently when I had come across other Ashram members in a number of different contexts. I now have a couple more to record, but before that I must report on the only response I have had to my request at the end of the article for “answers on a postcard” to the question “Is Ashram, though small in number, still on the front line in a variety of contemporary issues?”

The postcard came with a picture of a French postman striding purposefully through the weather to celebrate the Journée du Timbre 1950, so yes, it was from the Hendersons in Dordogne, and here are the thoughts of Jacquie and Donald:

We think Ashram is still in the ‘front line’ & has an incredibly fantastic variety of people – pacifists, vegans, shepherds (us!), political campaigners, social activists, practical people, theologians, philosophers, inspiring story-tellers, all witnesses of the Kingdom.

Quite something to live up to! So I’ll just mention two more of my own recent experiences, beginning with the yccn (Young Christian Climate Network) relay to Glasgow for COP26. I think I probably first heard about this ‘pilgrimage’ from Christian Aid, but I get loads of emails from them so didn’t immediately look into it. But then I heard from two other Ashram members, I’m not sure in which order, about the plans that were being made in their own areas, and they could hardly have been further apart – Euan in Cornwall, Sandra in Eccles. So I eventually checked the yccn website for a detailed map of the route and was amazed to discover that it was due to pass through Staines High Street, about 50 yards away from the church that I attend every Sunday. I registered the church to meet and greet the walkers for rest and



refreshments before they did the final two miles of the day to reach the church in Ashford (Surrey) where they were to spend the night. It was a time, at the beginning of August, when things were beginning to open up somewhat from the Covid point of view, so there were sufficient people from the church prepared to help with refreshments and such like, and the minister kindly rearranged a planned meeting so he could join us and hear from the walkers as they ate their Traidcraft biscuits. The

volunteer helpers were all impressed with the commitment of the young (and a few older) people and we were all so glad to be able to feel part of the campaign/pilgrimage. I also joined the actual walk for the



next day myself, going from Ashford to Twickenham, as that involved a rather long and boring section around the outskirts of Heathrow which I thought would not attract many extra pilgrims.

This next Ashram connection which I am about to recount will not be difficult, I suspect, for most readers to identify before they get to the end of the paragraph, so here goes. During the last week in August Peter and I were invited to use our younger son’s house in Matlock for a short break while he and his family were on holiday in Scotland – an offer not to be turned down, even though it meant feeding and cleaning up after the four chickens they had recently adopted. On most days we undertook a challenging walk up and down very steep and stony tracks, but one day was spent looking around the very historic old town of Wirksworth. The bus delivered us to the Market Square where I spotted a very impressive-looking Fairtrade shop which I obviously needed to investigate. Fortunately there were no other customers at the time, so I was able to find more about the business from the man behind the counter. I was amazed to hear that it had been in operation for 36 years, run by himself and his wife, not so amazed to see the expression on his face when I asked whether he remembered Campaign Coffee! The conversation ranged over a variety of topics till it reached the point where he said that he knew quite a number of fairtraders particularly in the North East. So of course I replied that I knew a very committed one by the name of.... Yes, you’ve guessed it, Jenny Medhurst - to which his response was “Oh yes, we know her well,” and as this was Tuesday 24 August I was able to say that I would be meeting Jenny on Zoom that evening and could pass on his regards.

Maybe other members and friends of Ashram have experienced ‘connections’ similar to mine that they would like to share with us all some time.

Linda Marshall

Water and Methane

Despite many letters to the organisers of COP 26 Global Warming Conference in Glasgow in November, vegan caterers and vegan menus are not being used. Yet animal food production and consumption is a very big contributor to global warming. To omit that from efforts to slow global warming is going to risk a failure to deal effectively with this problem

Beef is a very excessive user of water in its production from farm to fork. Salads are low in use of water. Methane is a dreadful accelerator of global warming. Almost all animal farming accelerates methane emissions, with production of milk and beef products being the biggest factors in this. Extinction Rebellion built a flimsy bamboo barricade at an Arla dairy foods and milk distribution centre. Their point is that Arla needs to switch production to plant liquids such as oat and European soya, to reduce the impact on global warming

The Water footprint of a Turkey sandwich (Water Footprint of Food (from the internet "FoodPrint")) is 162 gallons, comprising of 1 Leaf of Lettuce-2 gallons of water, 2 slices of bread-24 gallons of water, 2 slices of cheese-32 gallons of water, 1/5th lb of turkey-104 gallons of water.

Water footprint of Eight Common Food Items ("Water Footprint Calculator"(from internet)) -

Steak (beef) 6 ounces - 674 gallons,
Hamburger-1 (including bread, meat, lettuce, tomato)-660 gallons,
Ham (pork) 3 ounces-135 gallons,
Eggs- 1 egg-52 gallons,
Coffee-- 1 cup-34 gallons,
Wine --1 glass-34 gallons,
Salad (includes tomato, lettuce, cucumbers)-1-21 gallons

A simple slice of pizza ("**Water Food Nexus**" (from internet)) with 3 ingredients-flour, tomato and cheese, a single pizza requires 333 gallons (1,260 litres) of water, enough to fill almost ten baths.

"Water footprint network" (from the internet) litres per kilo-

Sugar crops--197	Milk---1020
vegetables--322	eggs---3265
Starchy roots--387	Chicken meat---4325
Fruits--962	Butter---5553
Cereals---1644	Pig Meat---5988
Oil crops--2364	Sheep/ goat meat---8763
Pulses---4055	Bovine meat--- 15415
Nuts---9063	

Alternative ideas

Vegan butter is on sale now, and many cheese substitutes. For those seeking to reduce saturated fat consumption, anything using coconut fat/oil or cashew nuts is high in saturated fat like cheese and butter. Meat free Mondays, being vegan in January, eating meat just once a week, or once a month, using European sourced soya yogurts and soya liquids, vegan sausage rolls, eating Beyond Meat burgers, eating more legumes (peas, beans, lentil, chickpeas), are all ways of reducing our impact on global warming. I hope each reader will attempt at least one alteration to what they eat and drink to lower their impact on global warming.

Cerys Brangwyn, Dornoch, Sutherland, Scotland

What REALLY Matters?

It is very true that often we don't really appreciate the importance of something until it is taken away from us and I discovered certain aspects of going to church which mattered greatly to me.

Although we have been holding services in church since October 2020 (originally just once a month but more often since June) I did not attend at first - I felt it was too soon. I know others were attending and were very grateful to be able to do so but I stayed away.

Then on the Sunday before Christmas I decided to attend. I was really looking forward to it as it has always been important to me to attend church at Christmas-time (even when I stopped going regularly for 17 years I still went to a service close to Christmas). However, I admit that I did not enjoy the visit this time. For me, church services are about the shared experience and all the restrictions there had to be because of Covid made it feel quite alien—the wearing of masks, everyone sitting in separate pews, no chance of a chat before or after the service and, worst of all, no singing. Not being allowed to sing the carols felt completely wrong and until then I hadn't realised how important that was to me. I confess that I found I didn't miss going to church but I DID miss not having the shared experience of worship that I was used to. I went home close to tears and decided that I would not attend a live service until things could be more normal.

I have viewed some of the zoom or recorded services (and participated in some too) and these have been very well done, but they don't replace getting together in church for me.

When I learned that singing was now allowed again I decided to try again. Yes, we still had to wear masks (but this has now become much more a part of everyday life) and we still sat in separate pews etc but being able to sing together made the experience much more of a shared one.

We have all had to learn different ways of doing lots of things over the past 18 months, much of which has been enabled by modern technology. Some, I know, have found it very hard to adjust and I sympathise with them but for some people the changes have actually been an improvement.

For example, I appreciate still getting a weekly delivery from Tobermory Stores and overcoming my reluctance to use online tools such as Zoom has enabled me to participate in meetings and conferences that I probably wouldn't have travelled to even before Covid.

More importantly though, I have learned to recognise the things that really matter to me, such as singing together in church, or having friends round for coffee or a glass of wine or for a meal. I've also realised the importance of keeping in touch and now make sure that I speak on the phone every week with both of my sisters and I maintain regular contact with my godson and with friends that live some distance away, including those where we'd lapsed into just an occasional contact at birthdays or Christmas. It's the little things that can mean so much.

What have you missed and what *really* matters to you?

Lorraine Jones

from Liz Urben

In an edition of The Tablet (a Catholic journal) last year, there was an interview with Sr Anna Mary House OP, a Dominican nun, who mentioned of her time at Birmingham in the 1980s:

"I got very drawn into general life. Once a week, I helped out at Ashram Acres, cultivating Asian vegetables, and at Christmas we made 240 mince pies without animal fat and took them to their party."

A Reflection for Act Together

I sit by the lake in Handsworth Park as they prepare for a children's event for the Autumn Equinox and Hobbit Day, Bilbo and Frodo's joint birthday. I celebrated my birthday on September 4th in the Yorkshire Dales and Birmingham. They put a stuffed owl in a tree representing the Wisdom of the Elders, like John and Margaret, Helen. A Glow in the Dark insect like a dragonfly to represent Hope.

There is a future for Ashram. I like John's idea of Community Action Theologians and a Mother House to be an Oasis for Ashram and a Refuge for the Broken and on the Edge. I have set up a House of PRAYER and attend church in a yurt at Newbiggin House and we have had an induction of Angie as a URC minister and a book launch party as a community celebration. A Festival at Barnes Close in May 2022.

So I remain a semi-detached hermit in my Poustiana ie Hermitage in my flat. Queer Pride this weekend and Street Art and Flatpack Film Festivals in Digbeth. So please pray for me and send me postcards. I collect them and like reading your messages and words of wisdom. I look forward to the Autumn Gathering and maybe a Hug or two if it's safe. Bless you and keep well, safe.
Shalom John Barnabas, A House of Prayer. Amen.

Action on climate change is in our hands

At a meeting with 6 coffee co-ops from Rwanda and Uganda last week I heard of recent floods where 22 people had drowned in an area farmed by just over 1000 people. They know all too well that the climate emergency really is an emergency and it isn't fair. The producers of our favourite foods have done the least to cause this crisis (the average person in Cote d'Ivoire where our cocoa is grown has a carbon footprint 17 time smaller than the average British person) but they are already on its frontline.

Extreme weather is ruining farmland, more common plant diseases are destroying harvests and in many areas rising temperatures mean some crops simply will not grow any more. The farmers I met are trying to mitigate the changes by planting shade trees, harvesting water, mulching, and using bio-gas and are able to do so thanks to the extra money they earn through Fairtrade. Their work urgently needs scaling up to have a bigger impact, but the wealthiest nations, including the UK, are still failing to deliver on funding promised ten years ago to support communities in low-income countries.

It's really important that the politicians at the COP26 Climate Summit listen to those living on the frontline, and understand that it's not a faraway problem - it affects us all.

Will you make sure that their voices are heard by adding your voice to the thousands of other people in the UK on their petition at www.fairtrade.org.uk/be-fair . Tell global leaders it's time to **[Be fair with the climate promise](#)**.

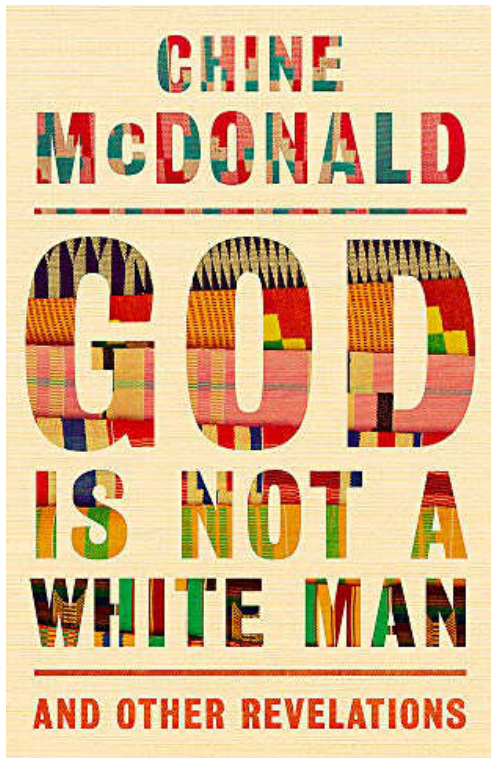


Corporate courts threaten climate action

Fossil fuel companies are using corporate courts to sue governments for taking action on the climate emergency. They are an obstacle to a clean energy transition and to achieving climate justice.

Wealthy nations are being sued for £18 billion of lost profits, for phasing out coal power, banning coastal oil drilling, halting fracking and cancelling the tar sands pipeline. Economically poor countries are being deterred from taking climate action through fear of being sued. Find out more and sign the petition asking the Government to reject corporate courts at

<https://act.globaljustice.org.uk/don't-let-corporate-courts-block-climate-action>



God Is Not a White Man (and other revelations)

by Chine McDonald; [Hodder and Stoughton; 2021; ISBN 978 1 529 34907 8]

There is no sense in which China McDonald is from a disadvantaged background. Although born in Nigeria, she grew up in leafy suburbs in England. Her father is a doctor, becoming a consultant before she left home, and her parents made sure she attended the best schools. Her teachers encouraged her to make the most of her academic ability, and she read theology at Cambridge University. After university she achieved her ambition of becoming a journalist, and having worked for the Evangelical Alliance, now holds a senior position for Christian Aid and regularly contributes to Thought for the Day and other BBC religious programmes.

But she is a black woman. This book is an account of her experience of growing up, and living as an adult, in what she calls “white spaces”, and much else besides. The first five chapter headings gave an indication of what it is about.

1 God Is Not a White Man – but as a child in white evangelical churches, this is the picture she had in her head when she prayed.

2 Love Is Not Colour Blind – but she is married to a white Englishman.

3 Africa Is Not a Country. This describes her struggle to rediscover and take pride in her Nigerian roots, and also deconstructs the one dimensional view of Africa so often portrayed not only in the media, but by aid organisations, including the one she works for!

4 The Sisterhood Is Black and White: Beyoncé, Bodies and Betrayal. This covers white superiority in the women’s movement, and the huge importance of the singer for black women, especially Christian ones. The significance of Beyoncé’s 2016 album *Lemonade* had entirely passed me by.

5 Education Is the Path to Liberation but it can be tough being one of only a handful of black students at Cambridge University at a time when none of the academics was black.

Her personal spiritual pilgrimage runs from predominantly white evangelical churches, through Black Pentecostal churches to Greenbelt and speaking in St Paul’s Cathedral. She is not entirely comfortable anywhere, but has many interesting observations on what is referred to these days as intersectionality.

The book has only just been published, and was written during the pandemic, so there are frequent references to recent events like “I can’t breathe” and the Bristol statue. There is also quite a lot of history which I didn’t learn at school but from Black History Month. It should be required reading for all white men like me who never really notice how much of the world is arranged to massage the egos of people like them, and make everyone else feel inadequate. But perhaps wait for it to come out in paperback, or get it from the library; it’s quite expensive as a hardback.

Ian Parker

Securing ACT's future

The sale of Glossop Road provides a welcome boost to the community's finances. To secure the future of Ashram Community Trust, sustainable governance is also needed. Its activities and direction are decided by the whole community. Trustees are appointed from the membership to ensure that the trust's legal obligations are met. The constitution assumes that trustees will serve for six years, with one retiring and one being appointed each year. The current trustees have served for between seven and nine years and there has been a vacancy for a trustee for at least five years.

We need to bear in mind the capacity within the community to undertake this role when we plan for the future. If we employ someone to manage our properties, that person will need managing. If we hold and disperse funds, we will retain obligations to the Charity Commission.

If you have been a member of the community for at least two years and are interested in finding out more about standing as a trustee in October, talk to one of the trustees.

This was written at the request of the Andover Street House Committee. It comes from me as an individual, and not as a representative of the trustees.

Helen Davies

Buildings and Proceeds

continuing “Active Theologians” from the Spring 2021 Act Together

Pippa Thompson's idea of “Active Theologians” can go alongside the use of buildings as a financial resource. The finance is then the “good news” produced both by the project building base and also by the practical witness work.

Samuel Wells in “A Future That's Bigger Than The Past” (Canterbury Press 2019) tackles the present problems of churches by urging them to go into business. He says start “catalysing Kingdom communities” in Churches. He outlines three methods for us in “Minding God's Business” (pp78ff)

1. Instrumental

Undertake a legitimate trading activity that has no direct social impact, make a profit, and then transfer that profit to other activities that do have a direct social impact, whether simply the sustainability of the congregation and its building, or such mission projects as it pursues.

2. Exemplary

Undertake a trading activity that has no direct social impact, but seek to do so in an exemplary way, paying good wages, having a minimal environmental footprint, using locally generated resources, promoting fair trade practices, and so on, while transferring profit to the activities mentioned under (1) above

3. Social

Undertake a trading activity whose profit return is evidently secondary to the indirect social impact sought.

John Vincent



Young Christian Climate Relay from Plymouth G7 meeting to the COP26 Summit in November, passed through Stockton-on-Tees. Jenny holds one end of the Christian Aid banner, and John Boyd (Valerie's son) holds the CCA banner outside Town Hall at the start of the 15mile walk to Trimdon. I did the first 6.5 miles (in two hours!) before leaving to attend the service to commemorate the life of George McDonald from our NE Ashram branch.

To the left of the Town Hall is the Castlegate Shopping Centre designed by the corrupt architect John Poulson and built on the site of historic buildings and ginnels connecting the High Street to the river. Frank fought this development and that of a dual carriageway between the Centre and the river. Many local residents still mourn the loss of the old coaching inns and the character of the widest High Street in the UK. Now Stockton Council is being praised for its plans to knock the Centre down and build a boulevard over the road to reconnect with the river and make the town centre a leisure destination...



Members and Associates

We invite anyone interested to request details about becoming a Member or Associate from the membership secretary, Sandra Dutson:

smdutson@btinternet.com

Members and Associates are listed in the 7-day cycle Community Prayers

Projects and Commitments

Ashram Press – Radical Christianity, Gospel Study, Discipleship, Community

Study and Research- projects on Community and related issues

Homeless and Asylum Seekers - Residence and Community for people in need

Multi-faith - mutual activities and projects open to all faiths

DATES

2021

October 8-10 Ashram Weekend Frodsham

2022

12th February 2022 in Sheffield Houses and Projects meeting Meeting

HOUSES AND PROJECTS

For current information about Houses and Projects in Sheffield please contact

John Vincent

T: 0114 243 6688

E: ashramcommunity@hotmail.com

BRANCHES

All Members and Associates are attached to one of five regional branches. Please contact secretaries if you would like to know more about meeting or events. The branch secretaries are the local contact points for the Community.

COMMUNITY

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Ashram Press: 7 College Court
See Website www.ashram.org.uk for publications

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Act Together editor: Jenny Medhurst
medhurst@phonecoop.coop
Articles for the Spring 2022 edition needed by Easter Monday

Contributions from members / associates who do not attend national Community events are especially welcome!

Secretaries

Midlands – Chris & Lorraine Smedley
Tel: 0115 9288430 – Meetings temporarily suspended.

East – A46- Twice Yearly meetings

London – Linda Marshall –01784 456 474
Saturday Meetings – Monthly currently on Zoom

North-West – Josie Smith -
ashram1967js@gmail.com
Meetings bi-monthly on Zoom

Sheffield – Tamara Donaldson – 0791 092 2462

North-East – Jenny Medhurst Tel: 01740 630475

Community Zoom meetings fortnightly – Pippa Thompson – 07918 757068.