

Connecting the Dots: Our Lifestyles, Their Lives

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People are surprised by how upset I get when we, Baptist churches and organisations, use disposable plates or cups without pausing to ask what our convenience costs the world. People tell me to calm down: “What’s the big deal? The world won’t end because of a few throw-away cups!” Well, maybe it isn’t such a big deal *for us*, maybe the world won’t end *for us* . . . But, add up all the little conveniences we hardly notice anymore, and, cumulatively, it’s a massive deal, and a bad one, for other people and our world.

Our lifestyles, their lives

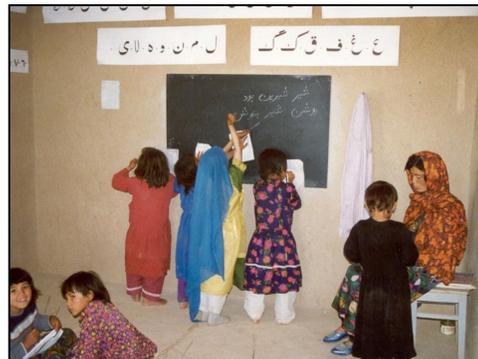
Until fairly recently, coal miners used canaries to warn of toxic gases. When the canaries stopped chirping, miners knew they had to escape. Today’s climate canaries include African pastoralists forced from their homelands by decades of drought, Nepali and Bengali villagers displaced by more severe and frequent floods, and island nations threatened by rising sea levels. Throw away cups distress me because I don’t have to connect the dots between our lifestyles and their lives. The connections are there in the faces and stories of climate canaries I met decades ago while evaluating projects for Tearfund Australia.



In Uganda, Charles Omuge spoke of dry skies and a father’s humiliation at living on charity. He spoke of faith, of hope and of repentance. Charles and his wife prayed morning and evening for God to provide. They asked what sin they had committed to deserve such dry skies.

In
Afghanistan,
Naseema’s

children refused to go to school because their hands and faces were dirty. Naseema assured them, “Don’t worry. Your teacher will understand. There is no water in her house either. Just remember: *Khuda meraban ast* (God is kind).”



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A village elder remembered grapes, pomegranates, and almonds, fruits his grandchildren have never tasted. There was a land that flowed with milk and honey – once.

In Southern Sudan, Charity Benjamin extolled the joys of motherhood. “It is a wonderful thing to grow food and

provide for our families. We must cultivate our gardens and we *want* to cultivate them. We are skillful joyful cultivators! But the weather is changing . . . We are now a little bit hungry two months each year.”



In Tanzania, Solomon wore a school uniform but no longer attended school. The water was so far away he walked all day to collect it.



I found listening to these stories difficult because I knew that I was not innocent. Every degree I turned the heater up in winter . . . Every time I drove to the gym (or to church) because I was too disorganised, too tired, or too busy to walk, cycle or catch a tram . . . Every time I ate takeaway or forgot reusable bags . . . Every time I travelled by plane . . .

In recent years, we have felt the groanings of creation much closer to home. Bushfires devastated the East coast, Tasmania and parts of Western Australia. Repeated floods wreaked havoc in parts of Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. Windstorms of a ferocity not previously recorded. Persistent drought elsewhere. This is exactly what climate scientists predicted: extreme weather events happening more frequently, with greater severity, and in more places.²

Cultural norms and ecological footprints: a challenge for discipleship

Our culture tells us that how we live doesn't matter. It encourages endlessly increasing consumption. There is so much we no longer think about: how much toilet paper we use; how spacious our houses really need to be; how few of our shoes and clothes wear out; how many toys are good for our children. We tell ourselves that we deserve treats: ice cream every week and chocolate when it isn't Easter. We are addicted, enslaved, to good coffee every day. We try not to think about the children and parents who harvest cocoa and coffee. Too often we

² Reliable information is available from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) <http://www.ipcc.ch/> and from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) <http://www.cred.be>

succeed. We have normalised extravagant travel: Why not commute interstate for work or fly interstate for a weekend? At \$200 return we can afford it. Why not celebrate a fairy-tale wedding overseas? How often do we pause to remember the true costs of our choices?

The prophet's words thunder down through the centuries, (Ezekiel 34.17-18, NRSV):

“As for you, my flock, says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, must you tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?”

Our ecological footprint refers to the resources required to sustain our lifestyle, both to produce the things we consume and to assimilate the waste we produce.³ Per capita, Australians have the thirteenth heaviest ecological footprints in the world—and our footprints have grown heavier fast.⁴ If all the world lived like we do, we'd need four planets to support us. While everything from disposable plates to bathroom renovations, mobile phones matter, three of our most ecologically damaging habits are plane and car travel, fossil fuel generated electricity, and the disposability of everything from food, clothes and coffee cups to IT, household appliances, buildings and infrastructure.



I have done more than my share of plane travel, most of it for humanitarian purposes. When I evaluated development projects for Tearfund and other agencies, communities invariably testified to the wonderful changes their projects made possible. Yet, if conversations continued long enough, they often identified weather conditions, competition for water and land, markets for agricultural produce, and armed conflict as the most significant factors impacting their lives.

The factors constraining these communities' lives and endangering their futures are all local manifestations of complex global processes. All, in one way or another, involve climate change and economics. All, in one way or another, involve us. Thirty years ago, we didn't know about climate change. Now we do. If we were blind, we would not sin. Now that we see, our sin remains. Fifty years ago, we didn't anticipate the ecological, social and spiritual consequences of consumption-driven market capitalism. Now, whether we are prepared to admit it or not, global and regional inequalities are increasing as more and more of the world's resources are channelled to produce products and services for the wealthy few.⁵

³ <https://www.britannica.com/science/ecological-footprint>

⁴ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/ecological-footprint-by-country> Graphs, charts and further details are available from World Wildlife Fund's *Living Planet Reports*: <https://livingplanet.panda.org>

⁵ Economists call this the 'deepening of capitalism.' Ankie Hoogvelt laments that despite mounting evidence to the contrary, many people continue to assume that capitalism can, in principle at least, expand indefinitely to provide opportunities for all, alleviating poverty and improving living standards for most of the world's

We love giving to those less fortunate than we, yet find the other side of the economic equation more difficult: How much are we taking away? Few people plan to grow rich at the expense of the poor. More often, quite against their will, they are caught up in structures and systems that benefit some more than others. Similarly, nobody sets out to cause climate change. Yet, whether we like it or not, our choices do change the world. Put bluntly, people like us cause climate change and poor people suffer the consequences. When it comes to love and justice, how we live matters much more than what we give.

Creation care in congregational life

What we do as the people of God gathered in God's name has immense symbolic and sacramental significance. Our ordinances of communion and baptism, our celebrations of marriage and confirmation, and our weekly readings, prayers and liturgies are acts of remembrance, commitment, anticipation, and hope. They remind us of what God has done for us and of what God will yet do. They remind us of who we are and to what we are called. The symbols, words and rituals change us. We drink and eat, use water, exchange rings, listen to words and speak them: this body, this blood; this woman, this man; this baby, these parents; this life, this world. Even as we participate, we become more fully the people of God, gathered and sent out, blessed in order to bless, commanded to love each other as God loves us, to love our neighbours as ourselves, and to love our enemies as neighbours. We make promises that we fully intend to keep yet in which we do not always succeed. We commit ourselves in sincerity, joy and hope despite the very real possibility of failure.



This is why thoughtless consumption distresses me more in the church than anywhere else. The contrast between the beautiful things we profess and the careless things we do is unbearable. We don't even wait for the Sabbath to end. We trample the needy and bring ruin to the poor with words of worship still on our lips (Amos 8.4-6). How can we claim to worship God if the way we gather and the way we worship extinguishes the lives and futures of people God loves? Even when we fail to care for creation in our individual lives, we must do better in our life together.

inhabitants. Now that we are pushing up against the absolute limits of the earth's resources, the reality is that supply can no longer rise to meet demand—when some people take more, others have less. See, Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World* (London: Palgrave, 2001); *Intervention as the Management of Exclusion* (London: Open University, 2005). Reliable information about inequality can be found in the World Bank's *World Development Reports* (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr/wdr-archive>), the United Nations' *Human Development Reports* (<https://hdr.undp.org/>) and Oxfam's *Inequality Reports* (<https://www.oxfam.org.au/what-we-do/economic-inequality/resources/>)

Liberated through repentance: walking more lightly on the earth

Living simply needn't squeeze the joy out of life. Solomon and Naseema testify that walking long distances, or being uncomfortably hot or cold, won't kill us. Charity Benjamin reminds us that life can be lived abundantly with very little. Some 'joys' cost money, are as fleeting as coffee's aroma, and do lasting damage. Other joys are priceless yet cost nothing, last longer, and build a better world: salt, yeast, light. For most of us, leaving the car at home, eating less chocolate, and keeping Sundays special are life-affirming acts. Such practices help us resist false prophets that tell us it is all too hard, or not worth it, or that nothing we do makes a difference. As followers of Jesus, God calls us to do justice, love mercy and tread lightly on the earth. In today's world, loving our neighbours requires nothing less.

Seven practical creation care practices

1. *Embrace small things immediately.* Reduce, re-use, recycle. Choose 100% recycled, locally manufactured toilet paper. Turn down the heater. Enjoy eating and drinking from durable vessels. Enjoy fair trade coffee, tea and chocolate. Install No Junk Mail stickers on church letter boxes and do the same at home. Switch off lights and appliances and switch to 100% renewable energy. Enjoy local, low-impact holidays.
2. *Create cultural change within congregations and communities.* Resist the individualism and extravagance so rampant in our culture. Make washing dishes an act of worship. Don't even think of celebrating communion with disposable cups! Worship close to home and walk, cycle, use public transport, or carpool to and from church, encouraging others to join you. Practice ecological disciplines during Lent even if you struggle to maintain them all year. Talk about creation care, learn with and encourage each other.
3. *Rediscover creation care in the Bible.* Explore the principles of Sabbath and Jubilee. Remember eating manna in the wilderness and discuss parallels today. Spend time with Jesus' parables about money and business (earthly stories with *heavy* meanings) without reducing them to allegories for spiritual things (earthly stories with *heavenly* meanings).
4. *Restore kingdom ethics to discipleship.* Reflect on lifestyle and other decisions in the light of the Gospel. What social and ecological consequences do our personal and collective actions have for God's good creation and other peoples?
5. *Make mission holistic.* Explore missional opportunities in your neighborhood. Travel less often and stay longer. Celebrate and support the missional endeavours of local communities rather than taking the lead from afar.
6. *Purchase well.* Consider the social and ecological consequences of production, transport, trade and disposal: land use, raw materials, work conditions, production processes and pollution; packaging and freight; fair trade and repairability. Everyone and everything matters to God.
7. *Invest wisely.* Are our superannuation and other investments invested in ways that care for creation and love our global neighbours? At the very least, ensure that any church investments align with church vision and (e)mission statements

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Canary in coalmine, Ivan Ellis via the Museum of Cannock Chase, UK.

'I have a dream' mural, Unmitigated Audacity Productions (Andrew Aiken and Julee Pryor), Newtown, Sydney, 1991. Photographer unknown.

Other photos, Deborah Storie, Tearfund Australia