



## MAKING VIRTUE OUT OF NECESSITY

### Energy, inflation, environmental degradation and the call for simpler living

Evert van de Poll

**“Europe has dodged an energy apocalypse this winter, economists and officials say, thanks to unusually warm weather and efforts to find other sources of natural gas after Russia cut off most of its supply to the continent. Natural gas suppliers in recent months have increased their stocks at a time when they’re usually being drawn down ...[but] the gas that is now imported from other countries is far more expensive than the ‘cheap’ Russian gas before 2022.”<sup>1</sup>**

As the war in Ukraine continues, the cost of fossil fuels and cereals are likely to remain high. The International Energy Agency (IEA) warns that we should not get overconfident, and that Europe could still be left short of gas for next winter. The IEA calls for a strong push on renewable energy and efficiency measures to reduce energy consumption in homes, transport, and industries, calling such steps “vital to head off the risk of shortages and further vicious price spikes in the future”.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, high prices for gas, oil and electricity are eating away at company earnings and consumer spending power and leading to higher prices of transport, food and virtually all commodities.

## EDITORIAL

### HIS Mission

At the 2010 Lausanne Cape Town Congress, Old Testament scholar and missiologist Chris Wright called the delegates to abandon the idolatry of power, pride, popularity and wealth and to return to humility, integrity and simplicity: H.I.S.

This edition of Vista considers what a Simple Lifestyle means in today's Europe. Evert van de Poll traces the dimensions and the development of this idea in recent Evangelical thinking.

Danny Webster and Philip Powell reflect on what living as Christians means in times of economic crisis.

Alex Vlasin presents some unique research on what Central and Eastern European evangelicals think about creation care and Jo Appleton reviews the websites of Evangelical Alliances to see what resources on climate change and creation care are (or are not) to be found.

This edition of Vista concludes with a review of Bruce Nicholls recent book "From Groaning to Liberation".

May all of this spur us on to be more authentically HIS people on HIS mission.

*Jim Memory*

This has set off a Europe-wide spiral of inflation with two-digit percentages that we haven't seen since the energy crisis in the 1970s. For many people, it is difficult to make ends meet, because wages and salaries are not keeping pace with inflation, and because of higher interest rates – the classic response to inflation.

### **Threefold response of governments**

In response, Governments are adopting a threefold policy of (1) subsidising energy costs for households and businesses by capping the prices, (2) stimulating the reduction of energy consumption through incentives and publicity campaigns, and (3) accelerating the shift from fossil fuels (oil, gas) to renewable sources of energy (water, wind, and solar).

The 'energy transition' policy also includes the promotion of electric vehicles of transport, but scientists and activists as well as 'green' parties are not so happy with this. While admitting that electrifying every car would considerably reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, they point out the generation of extra electricity causes more pollution, alongside the huge environmental costs of extracting minerals and producing batteries for all our electronic devices. Moreover, shifting the mode of energy production does not solve the basic problem of affluent societies, namely their overdependency on energy consumption, be it electric or fossil.

**“The energy and cost-of-living crisis is intrinsically linked to the ecological crisis that we are facing at the same time”**

As for nuclear energy, there is a huge debate among politicians and in society. Proponents think that it could solve the energy crisis and argue that it reduces climate change because it does not produce green-house gases. Opponents point to the unsolved problem of nuclear waste which is an enormous risk for centuries to come. This illustrates how the response to the energy and cost-of-living crisis is intrinsically linked to the ecological crisis that we face at the same time.

### **Ecological crisis**

Like the Covid crisis of the last few years, the current energy crisis and the cost-of-living crisis can be overcome once the situation changes, for example with the end of the war in Ukraine.

The ecological crisis, however, is structural and therefore far more profound. We are dependent on an excessive take from the natural environment that far outweighs its capacity to renew itself, causing pollution, the irreversible loss of biodiversity, climate change, rising sea-levels, loss of land, extreme weather conditions, ecological migration, and so on. The list is long.

In this respect, the Covid crisis had the very positive effect that it drastically reduced transport, causing far less damage to the environment. In fact, in 2020, the 'expiration date' was postponed by more than a month. However once the crisis was more or less over, people in Europe (and elsewhere) resumed their pre-Covid way of life as much as possible.

The European consensus is that governments should counter the ecological crisis by introducing stricter norms of emissions, prohibiting damaging substances, promoting public transport, and subsidising energy-saving investments and ecological building methods, etc. The European Commission in particular is working hard to implement these kind of measures.

But realistically these policies alone will not stop the process of natural deterioration and climate change. For example, while climate change conferences aim to reduce global warming to 1.5 degrees by 2100, experts say a rise of 1.5 degrees will happen in a few years.

### **A negative message or a challenge to make long term changes?**

In response, we cannot escape questioning our affluent way of life. Even in these times of crisis, Europeans are affluent in comparison with a large part of the world, and many aspire to our lifestyle. But our lifestyle is not sustainable.

We hear that we should drastically scale down our demands for energy and material resources. The energy and cost-of-living crisis has already compelled the larger part of the population to cut their expenses, to travel less, and to downgrade their living standards. In so doing, they are effectively reducing their ecological footprint. But what will we do once inflation is low again and the economy recovers? This depends on how we perceive the current crisis: as a negative setback, which it certainly is for many people, or more than just that, i.e. as a challenge to rethink our mode of living and make long-term changes.

Faced with our overdependency on energy, we can now see more than ever the need to bring lifestyle and our economies in line with the ecological imperative of sustainability.

### **Virtue out of necessity – creation care**

I would suggest that we see the current crisis as a circumstance we can learn from, to respect and protect the natural environment instead of exhausting and overexploiting it. In Christian terms this is the virtue and in fact, the mandate and Biblical command of creation care, i.e. to keep the balance between ‘tilling’ and ‘protecting’ the earth (Genesis 2,15). In other words, keep the balance between exploiting natural resources and protecting nature.

This implies that we should develop a simpler life-style, with respect to our material demands. I use the relative word ‘simpler’ as there is not an absolute standard for everyone in this area, rather becoming less consumerist, less demanding on natural resources, less destructive for eco-systems.

### **Creation-conscious lifestyle, values recovered**

Green movements and Christian environmental groups, have advocated this for decades and we can learn from their research and experience. For example:

- Systematically ask the question before buying something: do I really need this?
- Prefer collective modes above individualised modes of transport.
- Reduce the number as well as the use of electronic devices.
- Reduce consumption of meat (1 kg of meat costs 7 kg of cereals).
- Choose local food produced without chemicals. As more of us use ‘bio’ products, greater demand will make them more affordable for many.
- If possible, live close to your workplace, share luxury goods with others who cannot afford them, encourage collective ownership of materials used only occasionally.

Much more could be mentioned. Developing a creation-conscious way of life in keeping with the cultural mandate in the Bible, helps us to recover immaterial values, such as the importance of ‘being’ and ‘sharing’ over and against ‘having’, to know the peace of mind of being satisfied with what we have, and to rediscover the value of gratitude towards the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

It is interesting to see how today’s adherents of a minimalist view of consumption also emphasise these things. Their idea is to live happier by doing more with less. Less furniture, fewer clothes and fewer types of food during one meal, less time in the workplace to have more time for ‘other things’. While they often take their inspiration from Asian religions and philosophies of life, the idea in itself is not dependent on them. It is quite compatible with Christian principles.

### **Comeback of the call for simple lifestyle**

All of this sounds strangely familiar to older Christians who have heard the call to a simpler lifestyle which was so prominent in the Evangelical mission movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In those years, Christians were called on to intentionally adopt a modest lifestyle in terms of possessions, consumption, travelling and material comfort, because of three imperatives:

First, the Biblical call for social justice. This implies that the rich share their material goods with the poor. The rich should spend less on themselves and give away more.

Second, the demands of discipleship. Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus, who is not only our Saviour but also demonstrates a model of how we should live as people who are saved by grace. In his teaching, Jesus had much to say about wealth and poverty, material possessions, giving, and helping people in need.

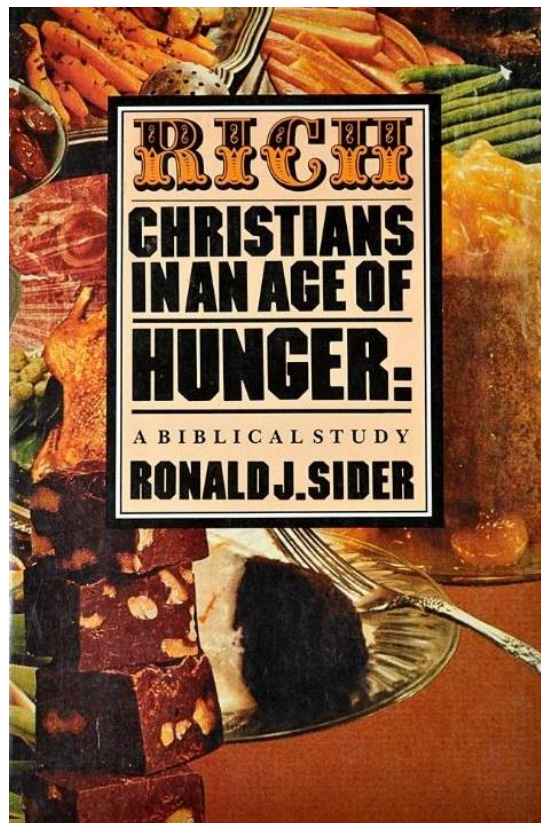
Thirdly, the credibility of our Gospel communication. The life of the messengers should be in conformity with the message they bring.

'Rich Christians in an age of hunger,'<sup>3</sup> by the influential Evangelical Ronald Sider called on Christians in the affluent West to live with much less because of the afore mentioned three imperatives. More influential still was John Stott, who argued in the same way for a new and radically different way of living. And he practised what he preached. People who have known him and worked with him were struck, if not impressed, by his simple lifestyle alongside his generosity towards people in need.<sup>4</sup>

In the last decade, churches and Christian organisations are once again considering 'creation care' to be an integral part of 'missional living' and being a 'missional church',

Creation care implies that we in our affluent societies critically examine our modes of consumption and production. In a sense, the call for a simpler lifestyle is back again, but not exactly for the same reasons. Today, the ecological imperative is felt very strongly. This was virtually absent from the Evangelical agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. No conference declaration ever addressed the issue.

The Anglican Church's 'five marks of mission' is a telling example as it was originally only four: (1) Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; (2) Teach, baptise and nurture new believers; (3) Respond to human need by loving service; and (4) Transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence and pursue peace and reconciliation. A fifth mark was added later: To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth.<sup>5</sup> This model has won wide acceptance among other Christian traditions.



**“The call for simpler lifestyle of a generation ago needs to be heard again”**

Inversely, the imperative of social justice to combat poverty, which was so strongly put forward a generation ago, does not seem to be a dominant issue today, at least in Europe. Other issues are grabbing more attention. But there is common ground with respect to discipleship. Today's emphasis is on missional living as a way of being a witness of the Gospel in a largely secularised society, resembling the concern in the 1960s and 1970s that our way of life be consistent with the practical teaching and example of Jesus.

In conclusion I would say that the call for a simpler lifestyle of a generation ago needs to be heard again, as we are challenged to make virtue out of economic necessity in the light of the ecological imperative. What was written then can broaden our perspective and deepen our motivation.

*Evert Van de Poll*

**Endnotes**

1. David McHugh, of Europe has avoided energy collapse. But is the crisis over? Associated Press News, January 10, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-europe-russia-government-business-5ad9451c167845e384bbab0723f1dfe>
2. Quoted by David McHugh, op. cit.
3. Ronald Sider, Rich Christians in an age of hunger, Word Publishing, 1978.
4. Cf. Andy Jones, Why John Stott Lived with Less. The Gospel Coalition, July 27, 2022. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/stott-live-less>
5. The 'Four Marks of Mission' were first developed by the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984, and then adopted by the 1988 Lambeth Commission of bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The fifth mark, creation care, was added in 1990. See <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

Visit our website [europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk](http://europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk) to read excerpts of the evangelical declarations from previous years

# WHAT DOES A PRACTICAL, PROPHETIC AND POLITICAL RESPONSE TO THE 'COST OF LIVING CRISIS' LOOK LIKE?

Danny Webster

As 2023 began any positive news about the state of the economy was sufficiently negligible to have been missed by many. Inflation may have dropped from its high but still sits at more than 10 per cent. So far, the UK has not technically entered recession, with growth of 0.01 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2022 averting that classification by the narrowest of margins. Strikes in many industries are showing the pressure for wage increases that actually feel like an increase rather than a cut. However that still leaves businesses with higher costs that they either absorb or pass on to customers causing prices to rise further.



In this challenging economic environment – whether it is the worst since the early 1990s, or the 1970s is a debate economists and historians will determine – the term ‘cost of living crisis’ affectively sums up the impact for many. The cost of day-to-day essentials is increasingly beyond the reach of many and forcing households to make decisions they never imagined.

[\*Photo from 'Stories of Hope: Cost of Living'\*](#)

An investigation published in the Sunday Times<sup>1</sup> uncovered the awful practice in the UK of energy companies force fitting pre-payment meters when customers are struggling with their bills. They are legally not allowed to cut off someone’s supply but by putting them on a pre-payment meter they make it inevitable that many will self-disconnect. Following this report a magistrate resigned<sup>2</sup> citing pressure to rubberstamp these decisions, and the publicity has forced a moratorium on such action.

A Christian response to the ‘cost of living crisis’ we are in should be practical, prophetic and political. It is relatively easy to achieve one of the three, but a response that speaks to the true influence of lives transformed by Jesus should touch all three.

## Practical response

The Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom produced a *Stories of Hope Resource*<sup>3</sup> in autumn 2022 to record a selection of ways churches and Christian ministries are responding to the ‘cost of living crisis’ in their local communities and across the nations of the UK. When it comes to supporting elderly people, children, and the homeless, helping those in poverty or out of addiction, and many other areas, the church is the most overlooked social support structure. In every community, Christians are committed to showing practical love to their neighbour and making a difference in their communities. Churches and Christian organisations provide life-changing support and provision for those in greatest need. They are often the first to respond and

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the ones who stick around long after the headlines have faded and the attention has shifted. Churches have opened their buildings as warm spaces for people who cannot afford to heat their houses, they have continued providing emergency food supplies even when they are having to pay higher bills themselves, and while the safety net they provide may be frayed and torn in places, it continues to be an essential support for many.

Alistair Doxat-Purser, CEO of Faithworks Wessex, reflected on his work and said: “We are not called to solve everything, or indeed make everything better. But we can give people hope for today and celebrate with them in the little victories. These victories range from receiving a recipe bag alongside their food parcel, a health appointment getting sorted, a benefits application submitted, or increasingly, seeing them at church on Sunday; all steps on the journey out of material and emotional poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

The practical response of churches to the ‘cost of living crises’ through projects and services is visible in every community. It is often the only place many connect with church and is a visible witness of faith in action.

### Prophetic response

However, practical responses alone are insufficient, firstly because when they only deal with practical change, any spiritual renewal is often relegated, and secondly, it does not address the political challenges that need to be tackled to deliver lasting change.

The prophetic task of the church in public life is to speak out for truth and justice to a world distracted and disillusioned. It is a task that requires boldness and courage, it calls us to speak the words of the Good News as we are acting with good deeds. I’m thinking about the foodbank hesitant to offer prayer to those they are working with in case it causes offence, or local government putting restrictions on partnership that mean they will only work with churches if they limit what they say about their faith. We cannot let our social action become sanitised and look just the same as any other good public service, this is the task of integral mission that fully encompasses both the proclamation of the Gospel and its demonstration in action.

The work of the church in communities should be exemplary, it should go above and beyond in professionalism and standards, we should care about our relationships with local authorities, other services, and those that we support and walk alongside. But

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professionalism is not a reason to diminish our prophetic voice. I am encouraged by Christians who hold both firmly together, constantly calling attention to what Jesus is doing, but also highlighting injustice.

The biblical model of Old Testament prophets demonstrates what working against injustice can look like. Prophets who spoke<sup>5</sup> against the inextricable link between the idolatry and injustice that they witnessed. Like Amos in chapter 5 verse 24 quoted by Martin Luther King Jnr when he said: “No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until ‘justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream’”.

Prophets see what is wrong, and they see a future when God’s righteousness and glory rule.

### Political response

While practical action and prophetic speech are both vital, they are still not enough. Our collective response to the cost-of-living crisis has to be political as well. And this point needs some care, because I am not advocating for a particular party-political response, but the outworking of this often will be through party politics. The testimony of the Scriptures, and the history of the Church through the centuries press us to see the governance of society, and in particular politics, as a way of seeking lasting solutions to the problems we are encountering.

A careful reading of the Bible will require different political responses to different issues. There are some places where we will find reasonable unity in reading across from scripture into policy with fairly direct application. Support for life



*Photo from 'Stories of Hope: Cost of Living'*

from conception to death is one area. There are other issues where the broad position can be ascertained, but the outworking in policy action will be more complex.

Economic matters usually fit in this latter category. It is clear to me that the God we worship does not tolerate injustice, and that as his ambassadors we have a responsibility to act with compassion towards those with the least and forgotten by others. How we do that requires considerable care, as Christians will disagree about the best response and most effective way for compassion to be outworked in practical policy terms.

I think this calls for clarity about where we can speak collectively as churches or Christian bodies, and where we can't. For example there may be specific injustices such as the forced installation of pre-payment metres, that we can rail against with all the outrage of Old Testament prophets. There will also be a distinction between what organisations or churches campaign for and what an individual Christian politician supports in a particular context. There is also a need for grace and understanding towards those with whom we disagree, to seek the best of what they may be supporting rather than latch on to easy political opposition. Disagreement is not the problem but disparaging one another for how we might approach things differently is.

## Conclusion

A Christian response to the cost-of-living crisis must be practical, we must demonstrate our compassion in action, and in action that makes a positive difference rather than to salve our conscience. It must also be prophetic in calling attention to the idolatries and injustices that lead to financial challenges. And it must be political so that solutions that last are found and we do not allow poverty to be aggravated and perpetuated.

*Danny Webster, Director of Advocacy, Evangelical Alliance UK*

## Endnotes

1. Morgan-Bentley, Paul (2023) 'Exposed: How British Gas debt agents break into the homes of the vulnerable' Sunday Times, 1 February. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/british-gas-prepayment-meter-debt-energy-bills-investigation-wrgnzt6xs> (Accessed 6/3/2023)
2. As covered by the BBC here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-64512612> (Accessed 6/3/2023)
3. Available online at <https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/stories-of-hope-cost-of-living>
4. Doxat-Purser (2022) 'Hope for today: partnership response in times of crisis' Available at: <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/hope-for-today-partnership-response-in-times-of-crisis> (Accessed 6/3/2023)
5. For example in passages such as Isa. 1:11-31; Jer. 7:1-11; Ezek. 8-9; Micah 6 and Mal. 2

# WISE LIVING IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND CONFUSION

## Philip Powell

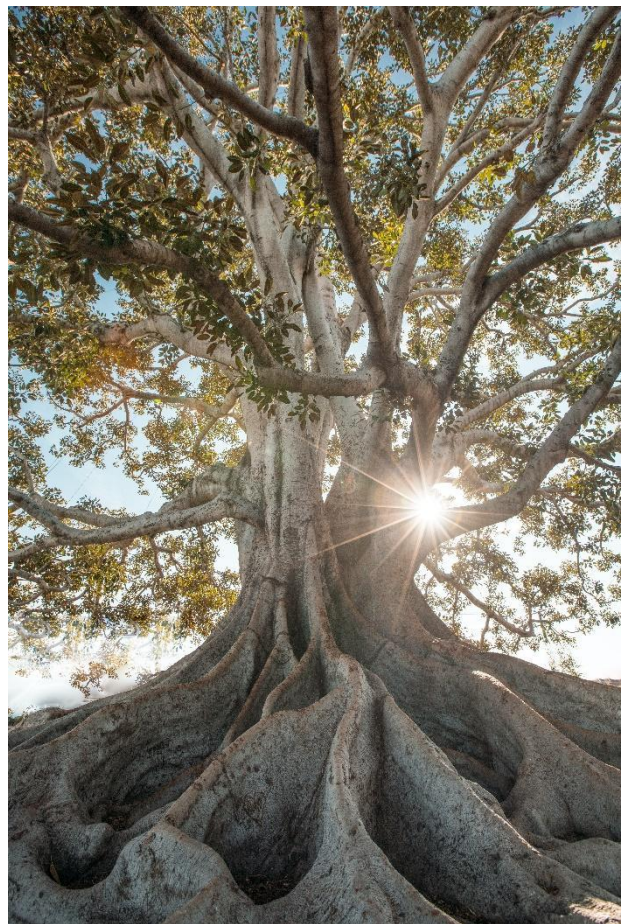
In Europe, for over a decade, we've been dealing with multiple crises from the Greek debt-crisis to the Syrian refugee crisis to the global COVID pandemic and its aftermath. And more recently the Russian war in Ukraine has led to an energy crisis and a cost-of-living crisis. We are also having to deal with the intractable challenges of the global climate crisis that in the long-term will multiply and magnify other crises. Prolonged periods of uncertainty usually lead to more social unrest and protest.

In 1959, during the Cold War, US President John F. Kennedy said: "When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters - one represents danger and the other represents opportunity." While Kennedy's interpretation of the Chinese characters may not have been correct, there is still some wisdom in the basic point that crises do offer opportunities both at the individual and societal level for change and growth.

### Becoming rooted in a place

Life for many of us happens at multiple locations. Where we live, where we work and where our extended families live are not the same places. Some even drive for an hour on Sunday morning to attend a church service with fellow Christians who've similarly driven a long distance to be at church. For more and more people international air travel has become normalised. Being rooted in one place for a long period of time, even intergenerationally might seem like a novel idea, something the Romantics would want for everyone, but from a practical standpoint is no longer possible. Having the freedom to move and relocate has come to represent success and accomplishment. But I want to challenge this normalised acceptance of modern rootlessness and make a case for why being rooted in a place matters, both for our well-being and for our Christian discipleship. During times of crisis, the negative in the news gets amplified, making many of us feel overwhelmed by the needs and challenges people are facing in faraway places, despite the fact that we have limited agency to effect real changes in distant places. Social media makes us feel attached and detached to people and places in rather strange ways. We seem to have *virtual* solidarity with victims of an earthquake or hurricane somewhere else, which is not inherently a negative thing, but lack *actual* solidarity with the people living on our own street. It is much easier to post on Instagram or Facebook about floods in South America than it is to come to the aid of an elderly neighbour having mobility problems and feeling trapped at home. I am not against caring for people in faraway places or against travel *per se*. Rootedness is not the same thing as being confined or trapped in a place and having a parochial mindset. It is possible to be rooted in a place and still have a cosmopolitan and global outlook on life.

American author and environmental activist, Wendell Berry, best exemplifies this idea of being a "placed person"<sup>1</sup>. For Berry, rootedness is about being at home in a particular place; it is more an attitude than about the activities we engage in. Taking action to make a difference matters, but it begins with how we understand ourselves and our identity in relation to a place.





Becoming rooted in a place draws us deeper into relationships with the people who are our neighbours, connects us with the spiritual and materials needs in our area, and makes us have a greater appreciation for the flora and fauna of the area where we live. So, instead of complaining that there is a lot of rubbish on

our streets, we join a local litter-picking club and put actions to our words. We make an effort to become more informed about and involved in helping small businesses in the area we live overcome the challenges they are facing. We join a community gardening project and give away the produce for free to the local food bank.

This kind of a lifestyle is the fruit of being rooted in one place for a long period of time and it is good news in the midst of the crises we are dealing with because it makes a real difference for the people we relate to in the places where we live.

### **Resetting our relationship to time**

Like so many people in the world I like using Apple gadgets like the iPhone and the MacBook Pro because they are good and, in many ways, better in comparison to similar products on the market. A core market proposition from Apple is that they offer us speed. The new M2 Chip on the MacBook Pro is over 10% faster than the older M1 Chip. What is new has to be faster for it to be good.

The performances of athletes are judged by how fast they can run, swim or cycle, because winning the gold medal is about speed. And over the past two centuries, travel times have decreased dramatically. In the eighteenth century crossing the Atlantic Ocean from London to New York took several months but now with planes like the Concorde this can be accomplished in a matter of hours. Imagining the speed at which things happen is a dizzying experience.

So speed, which is a good thing in some aspects of life, has increasingly come to tyrannise the way we think and act in the world. There is a drivenness to our existence, and our self-worth is tied to getting and showing results for the time and money investments we make.

But why have we come to assign such extraordinary value to speed and at what cost? What are the consequences we have to face because speed is the rule and ruler of our lives? Why have we made life about getting to a desired destination as quickly as possible, and not about the process or journey of getting there. What do we lose in the process when this happens?

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, in his book 'Three Mile an Hour God' (1979) explains that humans can walk about three miles an hour and that God travels through time slowly because he is love. He is not in a rush to get anywhere.

Koyama believed that Jesus Christ dislikes 'speedism' and it is the devil that seeks speedy solutions<sup>2</sup>. So, if we want to connect with God and with people and make a difference in the world, then we have to slow down and become more patient. Patience and not speed is the fruit of the Spirit. We cannot grow and nurture deep relationships without investing quality time. These relationships of depth and quality with people where we live do make a difference in the world.

Times of crisis call for and sometimes force us to reset our relationship to time. Slowing down is a radical lifestyle choice.

### **Growing in truthfulness**

In 2016, *post-truth* was chosen as the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. It has come to be generally accepted that there are multiple and conflicting notions of truth, and nobody's truth ought to be imposed on anybody else. Anyone claiming to know the truth that is true for everyone has to be a misguided and arrogant person. Such claims have no place in our post-truth world.

But the freedoms we enjoy in a democratic society are based on the cultural foundations that citizens have a moral obligation to be truthful in their interpersonal relationships, and falsehood and lies will inevitably destroy the social fabric of any community. There are real life consequences when we forsake speaking and living the truth.

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The truth gives us the basis for contending that some things in our world are terrible and other things are good. It enforces a distinction between things. We need this conviction to keep doing the right thing, even when it is costly, and not become compromised during dark times of struggle and hardship.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the later period of his life after he was arrested and sent to prison for conspiracy to overthrow the Third Reich, in an unfinished essay 'What Does it Mean to Tell the Truth?' grapples with questions about truthfulness and speaking the truth. He wrote:

*“The truthfulness of our words that we owe to God must take on concrete form in the world. Our word should be truthful not in principle but concretely. A truthfulness that is not concrete is not truthful at all before God.”<sup>3</sup>*

For Bonhoeffer being truthful is about honouring the concrete demands of human relationships. It is about using words to express what is real as it is real in God. What this means practically is that we don't simply go along with the first time we hear about something or someone. Becoming a truthful person moves us in a different direction, away from the block-headed fundamentalist, religious or otherwise, who wants to shout their 'truth' more loudly than anyone else. This growth in truthfulness certainly doesn't happen on Instagram or Facebook, that is the place we escape to when we don't want to engage people in real life.

We grow in truthfulness through being in relationships with people who are different from us, learning to look for and listen to counter-perspectives. We become open and willing to examine and seek correction for our own distorted understandings of truth, while remaining convinced that Jesus Christ, God's Word in history, is the truth. In this way we can become micro counter-revolutions against the falsehoods of our age.

To conclude, lifestyle choices cannot simply be about what we are saying no to, it cannot just be a quantitative matter. So instead of owning two cars we now own only one car. We need wisdom appropriate for our circumstances and station in life. It has to include what we are saying yes to. Who we are becoming will determine how we are able or unable to deal with the crises in Europe. Wise living begins with taking small steps and doing one or two things a bit differently.

**“We grow in truthfulness through being in relationships with people who are different from us, learning to look for and listen to counter-perspectives.”**

Philip Powell, Co-director, Justice Centre

#### Endnotes

1. Wallace Stegner, “Wendell Berry, a Placed Person” in *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell & Nathan Schlutter, (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2011), pg. 1 - 6
2. Benjamin Aldous, *The God Who Walks Slowly: Reflections on Mission with Kosuke Koyama* (London: SCM Press, 2022), pg. 45
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “What Does it Mean to Tell the Truth?” in *The Bonhoeffer Reader* ed. Clifford J. Green & Michael P. DeJonge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), pg. 750 – 755

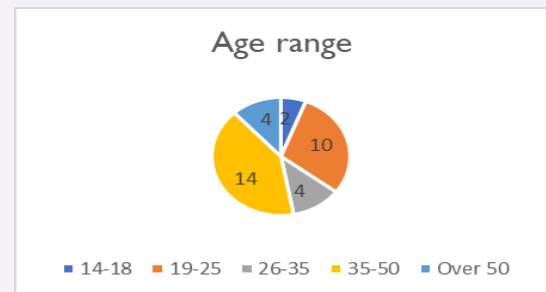
# CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES' RESPONSE TO THE ENERGY CRISIS

Alex Vlasin

A relatively small percentage of the general population in Central and Eastern Europe are part of the evangelical Church. The percentage varies from 0.1% to 5%, with Poland and Greece at one end of the spectrum with less than 0.5% of evangelicals and Romania at the other end with about 5%<sup>1</sup> with the majority of the population being part of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches. The energy crisis does not appear to be a central topic for evangelical churches. Brief research on evangelical social media found no published materials by evangelicals on this theme<sup>2</sup>. There are only a few articles written in the past years on related subjects such as global warming<sup>3</sup> or creation care<sup>4</sup>. As for the traditional churches the situation is comparable but with slightly more depth in Theology of ecology in academic published works<sup>5</sup>.

## A survey in Romania

To deepen the understanding of these findings, a quick survey was conducted among a proportion of evangelical population in Romania (the majority were university students in theological studies) which demonstrated an enormous void in speaking publicly about these subjects. The survey was open for a 24 hour period using a Google form. In this graphic we can see the age range of the respondents, showing the majority are between 35 and 50 years of age. As for their church membership, only one mentioned they are not part of an evangelical church, but we decided to keep the answers since this person in all probability studies in an evangelical school.



## On the theological level



The question regarding sermons, podcasts and other social media materials on the subject of the evangelical biblical interpretation of the energy crisis had three potential answers: **Never** heard a sermon or encountered any audio or video on the subject; heard between **1 – 5 times**; or over **6 times**. The graphic shows that an overwhelming majority had never encountered a presentation on the topic of the energy crisis during the past twelve months. This infers the subject is very rarely included in public presentations of Evangelical churches. Moreover, when it comes to written texts and social media, 94% responded that they have never read an

article or any written text on the subject whilst only 6% stated that they had consulted such material. This short survey demonstrates that the evangelical church is not actively engaging with this subject in either sermons, on social media or in written press.

## On the practical level

On a practical level, the involvement in the life of the community and the reaction to the disasters (war or more recently the earthquake in Turkey and Syria) is much greater. For instance, many churches in Romania have turned their sanctuaries into dormitories to accommodate Ukrainian refugees.<sup>6</sup> Hungarian Baptist Aid quickly reacted to the needs of the victims of the earthquake and other churches from various European countries joined in.<sup>7</sup> Evangelical churches all over Europe very quickly welcomed the refugees and were ready to respond to their needs. Therefore, it appears that the evangelical churches are more practical than reflective on pressing issues such as the energy crisis or the impact on

the quality of life due to limited living resources. With such an approach, great help is provided to those in need showing a loving response to the present needs of people. However, the biblical motivation needs to be understood and the wisdom of using the resources needs to be explained based on the Scripture.

## Economic survival mode

The general population in Eastern Europe have been, economically speaking, in survival mode for many years. By now, most Central and Eastern Europeans are used to fluctuations of the local currency against Western money.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, inflation has become a common problem with changes to the price of food and other daily essentials, causing frequent price oscillations and this has been part of everyday life for the last 30 years or so. Corruption and financial instability are still reasons why people leave their own countries for Western countries for jobs and a better life. Furthermore, local people have the perspective that external political powers are responsible (at least partially) for their misery and therefore actions should be mainly directed towards such interference.

### “What would happen if churches would publicly address this crisis using biblical values?”

Moreover, there is the perception that their past and current living conditions are at the discretion of more powerful nations which decides their fate. This attitude of self-protection, and the blaming of other

nations for the issues that negatively influence the quality of their lives, is characteristic of the current mentality of many Eastern European citizens.

## Coping mechanism

Conversations with theological students, church workers and youth groups of evangelical churches, demonstrate that young people are fearful about the impact of the energy crisis but do not publicly talk about it whilst the older generation talk about it but do not engage in theological reflections on the topic. Moreover, attitudes towards the energy crisis are formed through the resilience of a minimalistic lifestyle (living in cold houses; frequent power cuts; lack of food, etc.) and developed during communist times under Russian domination. So this lifestyle becomes a coping mechanism as does resentment towards the nation(s) rather than a social issue with which the church should have the desire to theologically engage. These listed limitations have been extrinsically imposed rather than internally desired as a consequence of a theological understanding of biblical values of creation care or loving the neighbour.

## Questions for reflection

Since this article analyses the outcomes of research and does not provide a theological reflection of the subject, we will venture to conclude with a series of questions in the hope that this will ignite theological reflection and engagement with the subject of the local churches in their society.

Here are some potential questions:

- What would happen if churches publicly addressed this crisis using biblical values?
- Once the subject is acknowledged, what would be the response of the church to those impacted by it?
- Are there biblical characters and examples that could be followed today by the churches? What would that look like in everyday life?

Rev. Dr. Alexandru Vlasin

### Endnotes

1. See Patrick Johnstone & Jason Mandryk: *Operation World*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, WEC int, 2010.
2. Online written social media in Romanian language. Search done in January – February 2023.
3. <https://www.evangelicreformat.org/blog/2021/8/31/este-incalzirea-globala-blestemul-lui-dumnezeu-prezis-in-apocalipsa>, visited 9 Feb 2023.
4. <https://alfaomega.tv/crestinulsocietatea/stiinta-tech/12386-de-ce-sa-le-pese-crestinilor-de-mediul-inconjurator>, visited 10 Feb 2023.
5. Daniel Munteanu: “Criterii dogmatice ale ecoteologiei ortodoxe” in *Pe urmele iubirii*, Ed Bibliotheca, Targoviste, 2013, pp: 356-572.
6. <https://ubc22.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/UBC22>, visited 14 Feb 2023.
7. <https://www.hbaid.org/hungarian-baptist-aid> and <https://international.hbaid.org/>, visited 15 February 2023.
8. The majority of these countries still have their own currencies.

We are delighted to announce that Alex Vlasin has agreed to join the Vista editorial team. Alex has a Ph.D. in Mission Education from Queens University of Belfast and a Ph.D. in Sociology from University of Bucharest. He is currently serving as missionary with Barnabas International offering missionary training and member care, as well as being a visiting lecturer at the Baptist Theology Faculty, Bucharest University.

# CLIMATE CHANGE, CREATION CARE AND EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE WEBSITES

Jo Appleton

In January 2023, I surveyed the Evangelical Alliance websites of countries which are members of the European Evangelical Alliance, looking for mention on their websites of articles or resources relating to the key search phrases of 'climate change', 'climate crisis' and 'creation care'. Almost half of the websites had at least one article containing these words, and examples are given in the table below. Several had dedicated web pages or areas of their website with multiple articles and resources, notably the German, German-speaking Swiss, the Dutch and UK EA websites. Most of the articles date between 2019 and 2022, although the German website has an article from 2007 and the Swedish website from 2009.

I was unable to find any articles using the search phrases on the websites from the following countries: Israel, Turkey, Hungary, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Albania, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Portugal, Kosovo, or Latvia. This must be caveated with the limitations of using translated search terms which may not be accurate, the fact that some of these websites are used to link member churches and organisations rather than promote current thinking, and some not having a search function available.

That said however, the table below gives an interesting insight into the thinking of many evangelicals in Europe around climate change, and links to resources which you may find useful in your ministry.

Austria	1.10.19	<a href="#">Youth and Church: And they fit together! -</a>	Quoting American Emma Higgs, this article explores how churches can address the concerns of Generation Y, including taking the environment seriously. "More so than past generations, young Christians see God not only as Saviour, but as Creator and Sustainer of this very stricken earth. And they expect that love for all of God's creation will also find room in the church."
Austria	10.5.22	<a href="#">WEA Secretary General emphasizes the key role of African evangelicals at AEA reception:</a>	"Prof. Schirrmacher praised the evangelical leaders in Africa for playing a decisive role in addressing important social issues and issues of climate change – alongside the crucial role that African evangelical churches have played in world evangelization."
Denmark	15.8.20	<a href="#">Download 'Caring for Creation'</a>	A download of the 2012 Lausanne 'Caring for Creation' report from the global hearing on caring for creation and the Gospel, translated into Danish.
France	2.12.22	<a href="#">Living mission in a created world</a>	Article by Erwan Cloarec, President of the CNEF outlining six proposals for how the perspective of creation care changes how we present and represent the Gospel to our contemporaries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living mission in a created world involves loving God's world</li> <li>• Living mission in a created world involves engaging with God's creation</li> <li>• Living the mission in a created world reminds us that the Word of God is first</li> <li>• Living the mission in a created world reminds us of our limits</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living the mission in a created world involves living in accordance with the message we carry</li> <li>• Living the mission in a created world invites us to move forward together in a unity marked by diversity</li> </ul>
Germany	7.11.21	<a href="#">Nature conservation and biodiversity: "Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself"</a>	24 results for 'climate change' dating from 2007 to 2021. Most recent article linked.
Greece	7.1.21	<a href="#">Taking care of creation</a>	Article about a biblical perspective on climate change and thinking about how to vote in the light of political parties' economic policies
Ireland	No date	<a href="#">We connect</a>	One of the ways the Irish EA connects with its membership is through conferences, open forums and discussion days. Creation care is one of the topics they have covered.
Italy	13.11.21  28.11.22  8.5.22	<a href="#">Evangelicals, climate change and care for creation</a>  <a href="#">International Week of Prayer 2023</a>  <a href="#">Climate changes attitude and humility</a>	Report of the CoP26 meetings in Glasgow, signposting to EAUK resources and pointing to previous evangelical declarations dating from the 1980s, linking to these documents. There is a call for 'all churches to become aware of this enormous heritage, to study it in the light of the Scriptures and to live an integral mission that does not neglect the responsibility that God has entrusted to us as stewards of all his creation in his stead. The first day of the international week of prayer includes a meditation on 'joy in creation', including acknowledgement of 'the difficulties in the face of what we do to God's creation' Transcript of a UK broadcast 'thought for the day' by theologian Elaine Storkey about how we should live in humility and harmony with the planet, recognising that we are 'only part of God's creation'
Netherlands	No date	<a href="#">The Church's role in the climate crisis: All creation</a>	A web page giving links to other resources about creation care and articles such as 'the green heart of our faith'; research showing that more than 80% of church youth are deeply concerned about climate change, and exploring what the Bible has to say about the climate
Norway	2023	<a href="#">Climate crisis in light of Christian faith - Norme</a>	A day conference planned in Bergen on 24 March focusing on the climate crisis in the light of Christian faith. Topics include 'what does the bible say about the protection of creation', "how to relate to climate research' and 'what do we do about this?'
Spain	12.12.22	<a href="#">IV Conference on Bioethics - Spanish Evangelical Alliance</a>	2022 motto on home page 'Evangelical Alliance, for life and care of Creation: we promote the unity of the church to transform society' A statement from the IV National Conference on Bioethics includes a section on the care of creation and the role of humans as those delegated by God to take care of the planet in a responsible way

Sweden.	28.9.21	<a href="#">They want no children to be born</a>	An article outlining the anti-natalist movement who believe that it is immoral to bring children into the world when they will experience themselves or cause suffering to others, not least through climate change, in contrast to the Christian understanding of the value of children, and Christ's imperative 'let the children come to me!' (Mark 10:14)
	22.12.09	<a href="#">Climate meetings and creation responsibilities</a>	Article linked to the climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009 and the Christian response to looking after creation: For those who are Christians, commitment to creation is a matter of course."
Switzerland (German speaking)	17.4.19	<a href="#">The Gospel and responsibility for creation</a>	Republishing of the Lausanne Global Consultation on the Protection of Creation and the Gospel into German by the Swiss Evangelical Alliance
	12.5.21	<a href="#">Climate crisis requires decisive action</a>	Report from the Swiss EA's Working Group for Climate, Energy and Environment (AKU) that 'decisive action to combat global warming is an ethical duty to our descendants and all of creation. <a href="#">Link to the AKU website:</a> "The AKU sees itself as a competence centre in the field of climate change, energy and environment. It motivates Christians to tackle the problems of climate change and excessive resource consumption passionately and with concrete actions."
		<a href="#">How religiosity influences just and sustainable action</a>	A survey of Christians in Switzerland, Germany and Austria asking their views on social justice and sustainable living. The research is being led by Prof. Dr. Tobias Faix and Prof. Dr. Tobias Künkler. It was open between November 2022 and January 2023 and expects to report later in 2023.
Switzerland (French speaking)	24.9.18	<a href="#">Climate Justice Broadcasts</a>	Advertising a series of programmes about climate justice from <a href="#">StopPauvrete</a> (an awareness-raising movement part of 'Interaction', the humanitarian and development arm of the Swiss Evangelical Network (RES)). They were broadcast between September and December 2018, broadcast on French speaking TV channel Maxtv/Theotv
		<a href="#">God ecology and me</a>	Link to order the French translation of 'God, Ecology and me' by David Bookless, published by A Rocha
UK		<a href="#">Changing Church: Climate Change</a>	69 results found across the website for 'Climate change', mostly dated between 2018 and 2023. The <i>Changing Church: Climate Change</i> area of the website has a number of resources for churches aimed to "equip the UK church to respond to the climate crisis with gospel motivation." These include '5 key questions for your church on climate change response'; 'Climate change: Gospel motivation for a global issue', and '10 top tips for creation care'.

# BOOK REVIEW

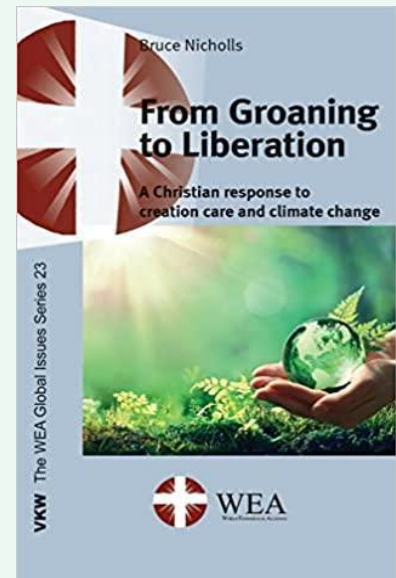
Evert Van de Poll

**Bruce Nicholls (2022) *From Groaning to Liberation. A Christian response to creation care and climate change* (WEA Global Issues Series, Vol 23). Eugene, Wipf & Stock / Bonn, VKW**

In this concise and very readable publication, Bruce Nicholls, one of the founders of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, gives a rapid overview of the issue of climate change and then concentrates on the Christian response.

The value of this book, which is clearly aimed at an Evangelical audience, is that it gives so many concrete examples of churches and Christian organisations all over the world engaging in what is nowadays called “creation care”.

Nicholls begins with the multiple causes of climate change—both human action (ch. 1) and non-human natural factors such as the rotation of the earth, earthquakes, and cycles of hot and cold climate ages (ch. 2). He sees a direct relation between social injustice and environmental degradation.



*“Ultimately, the cause of poverty and injustice is human consumerism and greed. It is people who are abusing the land, cutting down its forests, turning wetlands into farms, draining the aquifer and polluting the air. Change is needed and it must begin with moral transformation” (p. 26).*

This leads him to a short description of the ‘Biblical understanding of creation care’ (ch.3) and a ‘theology of the cosmos’ (ch. 4). There is nothing new here, other authors have dealt with this topic in more depth and detail. Clearly, the thrust of this publication is not ecological theology but ecological action. Interestingly, Nicholls compares the reaction to the environmental problems of Asian religions and philosophies, as well as secularism. He argues that these problems are fundamentally related to people’s moral values and religious (including non-religious) convictions.

*“The call to safeguard the environment begins with true and faithful worship. “Earth worship is at the heart of our ecological crisis. It is precisely the modern devotion to the cult of consumerism which is driving the horrific global scale of environmental destruction’ (quoting Michael Northcote). The idolatry of earth worship blocks the true worship of the Creator God, justice for the poor and oppressed, and the natural harmony of the created order...Ultimately the renewal of earth depends on renewing both religious and social values” (p. 10)*

He gives an interesting overview of the response of Ecumenical and Evangelical institutions (WCC, WEA, Lausanne), showing the shift from absence of concern to an increasing awareness of the urgency of translating the Biblical mandate of humankind to be stewards of God’s creation, into concrete action. Nicholls insists that this also includes defending the rights of animals (p. 48ff.)!

The guiding principle should be the sustainability of nature. Faced with climate change, we have no other choice than to adapt because *“from a human point of view, it is impossible to sustain our global economic growth and development and at the same time lessen climate extremes with their consequences of human suffering” (p.95).* And we can be hopeful, because from a faith point of view, *“God will not allow sinful human beings to destroy his world”.* *Our perspective is the redemption of creation, the ultimate re-creation and harmony of all life, human and environmental” (p. 97f.)*

In the section ‘How then shall we live’ Bruce Nicholls takes up the call for a simple life-style raised in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, which at that time was related to the issue of growing disparities between rich and poor, and applies it to the ecclesiological issue and the need for creation care.

*“Our starting point must be to simplify our life-style, as in the slogan ‘to live simply so that others can simply live’. This begins with eating less, including less red meat... to refuse to eat the foods we don’t need. But to live simply also means having fewer clothes,*



*fewer household gadgets, less unnecessary travel, and for some of us, fewer magazines and books! One of the pleasures of life is to generously support needy causes” (p.103).*

*“We agree that there is no one definition of a simple life-style, for people live at different social and economic levels. But we can all live more simply with a concern for love and justice for those suffering from poverty and oppression” (p.109).*

He also mentions recycling and reusing material goods and resources, as well as projects of gardening, as a means to sensitise believers to *“the joy and health-giving activities of growing vegetables, plants and flowers”* (p. 104). In the final analysis, and here lies the importance of Nicholls’s essay, eco-justice is intrinsically linked to social justice.

*“The Gospel challenges us all to repent of our selfish lifestyles and to put our trust in God to renew the earth. We restate that Jesus’ commission is to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbours as ourselves. This means we don’t really love God if we don’t at the same time love and serve our neighbour”* (p. 109).



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