

# A Personal View from an English Hillside

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Since the United States Department of Agriculture scientist Rachel Carson wrote the book *Silent Spring*<sup>2</sup> a couple generations ago to worldwide acclaim and Alaska began to witness 1989's ongoing environmental disaster of the Exxon Valdez "oil spill," thinking Christians have had to accept that we must witness to good ecology. Environmental protection and good practice go hand-in-hand with any understanding of God as creator. But this is not enough. We have to become demonstrative about good, if not God's ecology, in our lifestyle, in our faith communities, in both worship and practice as well as our wider witness to society.

I rejoice in affirming in worship and life that God is *our* Creator, whether that means using our formal confessions of faith<sup>3</sup> or the classic creeds of our ecumenical partners. Whether God ordered that Big Bang to instigate creation or molded us from dust is almost irrelevant to my faith and knowledge that God saw creation as "good"—and that includes our humanity—in the tribal elders' repeated campfire explanations that are woven into our Genesis narratives.

It is not enough if my and your affirmation of the goodness and importance of God's creation stops at the front door. What I am seeking to do in this essay is to recognize both a plethora of good practice and yet a lack of coherence in the practice of many of us. The obverse question then is whether that lack of coherence diminishes our witness individually as radical Christians and within the broader Anabaptist community; we return to this via specific questions (to

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2 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London, UK: Penguin, 1965).

3 Howard J. Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith: An Introduction* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995).

you personally) within the text and in the article's conclusion. My experience of and learning about Anabaptism tells me that our orthopraxy is as vital to our discipleship as our orthodoxy.

Many years ago, I was hiking through Tuscany and came across a ruined church. Among the broken tiles and fallen stone was a chipped stone tablet bearing the words "*Ora pro nobis quid enim vivimus,*" which means, "We pray for what we live for." As I sat on that hillside reflecting on the saying, I realized it was a good way to understand my Anabaptist faith and ministry. As I sit now in my English hillside village home, those words explain how I reflect upon ecology and mission; I believe that since much of our theology is driven by our experiences, it reflects what we spend our time, lives, and prayers upon.

In the interest of essential witness and action, lest I remain in the arena of good intention, I will explore exemplar specifics on the following (inevitably, brevity cause these to be snapshots):

- the Anabaptist community's size
- the reality of the environmental crisis
- the implications of housing choices
- land usage and partnerships
- moving around
- witness and the *realpolitik*

I write this essay from a personal viewpoint, as someone actively engaging with the ongoing UK Anabaptist Network (and as a former national Steering Group member), also previously that Network's first development worker and now cohost of a tiny home-based Anabaptist-oriented group. However, from my contacts and correspondence, I find myself asking questions that are similar to questions that other sometimes-isolated British and European Anabaptists (or at least, sympathizers) also seem to be asking about our ecological witness.

### **"Remember . . . We Are a Small Diaspora"**

Some years ago, while serving as an executive trustee of the UK's Mennonite Trust, I was acting as a volunteer weekend host at the then London Mennonite Centre. One of our European visitors was a well-known published Mennonite leader who sagely reminded a group of us gathered around the large kitchen table: "Remember, we are a small diaspora."

Those statistics can be found via a good search engine. Or a look at the Mennonite websites showing where our coworkers are laboring among localized centers of activity in different countries. The vitality of those European mainland Mennonite "communities" is witnessed globally via the Mennonite press, mission networks, and the internet. But we must acknowledge that, prac-

tically, their witness is small and often limited regionally. How much coherence does it share?

The truth is that across Europe the varied, small, Anabaptist-Mennonite communities and/or dispersed networks of them are numerically small when compared to other denominational groups. Here in Britain, following the demise of London's Wood Green Mennonite Church, the few other appellationed Mennonite congregations are non-English-speaking and draw from expatriate communities in their regions. The story of the contemporary British Anabaptist movement has been documented<sup>4</sup> and is now rooted in networks of individuals (some of whom meet regularly in regional study groups), who support occasional regional conferences, attend the biannual Anabaptist Theology Forum, or undertake academic courses at the Bristol-based Centre for Anabaptist Studies; contact is maintained personally and via an e-newsletter.

The patient Anabaptist resurgence is relatively new. But since the Second World War, Ireland (in both its nations) has welcomed North American Mennonite worker families, often in the field of reconciliation, to exercise widely received ministries. This recent influence meant that at an ecumenical UK conference recently, one Anglican bishop (totally unmindful of our peace witness) told me that "you Anabaptists really punch above your weight in your challenge to the rest of us." Our Anabaptist community is even tinier when compared to the 5 percent of the British population who regularly attend Christian worship, but we do have insights and witness to share. So, with the temerity of a biblical prophet, I will explore what some of our varying voices from this side of the Atlantic can contribute to the global debate about ecology and witness.

### "Get Real"

To help strengthen Anabaptist insights and witness, we have to "get real" about what the issues actually are. "The first concern of democratic governments is to encourage economic growth, regardless of its environmental costs. It is true that serious poverty is a major cause of environmental degradation and that a certain level of prosperity is necessary if people are to free the energy and resources required to protect their environment."<sup>5</sup> Regrettably, such conservative philosophies permeate the thinking of nearly all Westernized democracies that see their main goal as simply materialistic through economic growth. As

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4 Stuart Murray and Alan Kreider, eds., *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000); Andrew Francis, "Food in the Contemporary UK Anabaptist Movement," *Anabaptist Witness* 2, no. 2 (November 2015).

5 Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet* (London, UK: Atlantic, 2013), 14.

Anabaptists, our commitment to community and biblical justice should cause us to cry out against such blind self-centeredness.

Climate change is happening, whatever President Trump says. And former President Obama was right; his “brave 2015 call to the USA to grossly cut its carbon emissions [recognized] the human arrogance that wants domination over the world that it has marred, not made.”<sup>6</sup> We have to recognize that the truth hurts us in our pockets and our lifestyles. Former Vice President Al Gore never set out to make blockbuster movies, and even though his 2017 “An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power” movie did not gross as much financially from national screenings as his 2006 “An Inconvenient Truth,” we still have global warming.

North American Anabaptist-Mennonite communities and congregations have a rich tradition, both historically and contemporarily, of prophetic discipleship lifestyles—individually as well as corporately. Now, once again, we have to be even more prepared to live and speak counter-culturally. This means doing our homework and sharing good Sunday school, if not worship time, as well as prayer about environmental concerns. We may not all be called to be the next Erin Brockovich,<sup>7</sup> but our belief in a Creator God calls us to be active environmentalists. And that will mean learning about the issues—globally and locally.

Within our Anabaptist multivoiced tradition, we must beware of allowing or simply saying such multidisciplinary study is *only* for our pastors, educators, or Sunday school facilitators; we all have a responsibility to engage. When we do so,

we will discover that the Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act, long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God.

We will discover that for these reasons the destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy.<sup>8</sup>

If we do not apprehend some knowledge of the factual issues and comprehend the broader environmental implications, we will not be able to share as richly

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Francis, *OIKOS: God's Big Word for a Small Planet: A Theology of Economy, Ecology and Ecumeny* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Erin Brockovich*, Sony Pictures Entertainment, directed by Steven Soderbergh, starring Julia Roberts.

<sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, *Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), 308.

(i.e., witness) with our neighbors and colleagues why we care so deeply for the world of the Creator God. To ignore what is happening to the creation around us implies that our own faith is also out of balance.

While I often lament how few church leaders have basic economic textbooks or environmental handbooks on their study shelves, I am encouraged that more thinking UK pastors are picking up on writers like Wendell Berry, or Art and Jocele Meyer,<sup>9</sup> or Doris Janzen Longacre—in part, thanks to the patient witness of UK Anabaptists’ “book-sowing” over recent decades. All these good people are not just advocates and writers but practitioners of “earth-friendly” living, who are seriously challenging those whose lives are less earth friendly.

We are not alone in this call to environmental activism. Those who have committed their lives to Jesus’s call to *shalom*, or to living within a new style of community and family—sharing housing, food production, and transport—are all companions, bread-sharers, in the journey of increasing ecological witness. However, while some can point to the extant writings of theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin or Dorothee Soelle in demonstrating clear ecological witness, much UK environmental thinking has been rooted in the work of secular philosophers and ethicists. For example, in 1983, friends gave me philosopher Robin Attfield’s book<sup>10</sup> as an ordination present because of my long-standing commitment to “green thinking.”

In the intervening thirty-five years, I have watched the avalanche of UK-sourced eco-/green/environmental books grow as well as the commitment, writings, and work of Christians to this cause of “ecology and (our) witness,” because on our crowded islands any “Three Mile Island” event is on everyone’s doorstep (as the Japanese discovered in Fukushima’s 2011 meltdown)! The initially Methodist but now cross-denominational work of the John Ray Initiative (JRI) to “advance study and connection between the environment, science and Christianity” has been influential. Each of their multivoiced annual conferences have had profound effects, inspiring activism, journal articles, and often books.<sup>11</sup> In the London Mennonite Centre library, a much-read copy of the JRI’s 1999 reprinted conference-published papers<sup>12</sup> fell apart from overuse. What many UK Christians have failed to recognize is that the intellectual,

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9 Art and Jocele Meyer, *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty, and Injustice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991).

10 Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1983).

11 I was one of their speakers at their 2016 eco-themed national conference.

12 John Ray Initiative authors, *A Christian Approach to the Environment* (London, UK: John Ray Initiative, 2005).

scientific, and theological work about ecology and witness is being done, being published, and available to tap into.

Within the UK, the churches are relatively recent voices into the eco-debates. (Later, I will mention more of the work of *A Rocha*, the Eco-Congregation movement, and other agencies.) Previously, my experience was that environmentally aware Christians often channeled their individual lobbying through the politically nationalist parties such as the Scottish Nationalists or Irish *Sinn Fein* or Welsh *Plaid Cymru* as well as either the Liberal or Green (previously known as “Ecology”) parties.

My contacts with *Die Grune* (the German Green Party) and progressive environmentalist Christians at the annual German *Kirchentag* tell me that UK Christians have much catching up to do. But we are learning that Christian witness occurs in a variety of ways and are recognizing that coherent orthopraxy is important when Christian communities are small; think Acts 2:42–47.<sup>13</sup>

What is clear is that across European nations there is a Christian groundswell of those seeking changes to benefit the world’s ecology. I value those changes and pray for their fruition. We need to learn how to utilize this groundswell in our mission. To “earth” this thinking, I am first focusing upon some of the practical lessons we are wrestling with.

### “The Wise Ones Built Their House upon . . .”

Jesus had very clear thinking about others’ splinters and our own logs (Matt 7:5). Whether as Christians generally or as Mennonites specifically, we would do well to heed his injunction to deal with our own failings before pontificating about others’. When we practically apply our theology and discipleship properly to our everyday lifestyle, this becomes even more necessary. We can begin by talking about domestic choices, since global warming is not only caused by climate change but significantly added to by domestic energy inefficiency.

Most people, unless they are part of a low income family, can choose the homes they live in, whether they are renting or buying the property. The nature of that choice can say much about our faith, our theology, and our environmental witness. Wherever we live, we have to realize that the energy efficiency of (and size of) our homes as well as the number of our possessions has a key environmental impact. As just one example, how much of *your* furniture is made from sustainably sourced timber?

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016).

How we use furnish and how we use our own homes is an important witness. The Mennonite witness of *Living More with Less*<sup>14</sup> challenged me at many points in my adult life to house-share. Recently, my life partner and I each gave up our separate three-bedroom houses to buy a smaller, more energy-efficient, three-bedroom home to share (albeit with a much larger vegetable garden). We gave away our surplus furniture to a housing charity, gave our excess books and chattels to thrift shops, and recycled our junk.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, conversationally explaining why to neighbors and congregations has become another point of witness. Those of us who are itinerant adult eco-educators have great responsibility in our seminar-leading ministries to exemplarily encourage our hearers toward significant practical domestic change.

Domestic energy efficiency has become part of UK government policy—but without the legislative imprimatur nor financial inducement (such as tax breaks) to make it happen. That hypocrisy is compounded when our elected representatives do not answer the questioning letters that I and others send. One Swedish friend tells me he cannot understand why the British want their weather inside their homes, because nationally we lack serious coherent policies about home insulation, adequate ventilation, better double-/triple-glazing as well as communal- and solar-heating schemes. It would not be impossible for northern hemisphere architects and planners to create building codes and inexpensive designs that would allow for sustainable refurbishment/retrofitting or inexpensive new-build strategies for every size of community.<sup>16</sup> The tenements of Scotland and other Nordic nations prove this to be true, with their central landings, multi-glazed windows, and government-funded roof insulation, which are fast becoming exemplary apartment blocks as one of the best energy-efficient forms of urban housing. Practical theology means following suit by insulating our homes and not burning more fuel. Our choice of home and lifestyle is a matter of Christian witness.

Adopted and adapted from the American model,<sup>17</sup> another growing British movement is “co-housing,” which is proving popular with other than just ageing hippies! Co-housing creates a financial co-operative that builds an intertwined energy-efficient complex of apartments and small duplexes, each with just enough space for independent living by their own residents—whether solo,

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14 Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 118–71.

15 Janice Hodby and Andrew Francis, “Living Simply,” chapter 4 of *To Be a Christian* (Imagier: Bristol, to be published in the fall of 2018).

16 Christopher Day, *The Eco-Home Design Guide: Principles and Practice for New-Build and Retrofit: Sustainable Building* (Cambridge, UK: Green, 2015).

17 Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 2011).



couples, or families. These complexes are surrounded by shared gardens and also contain communal guest rooms, laundry facilities, and living space where all the residents meet and eat (normally) at least twice per week, creating “community.” Two Anabaptist leaders (a couple) in the northern city of Leeds have become primary facilitators of a local group, working to create a new-build co-housing project. The hope is that this project will be both an example and an encouragement to other groups across the north of England. Often, co-housing projects operate car-sharing schemes as well and are built on urban sites, where they can act as a witness to a new way of living. Perhaps we do not make enough witness of some of our Mennonite retirement villages as a model for more of us during our working lives?

One of the major negative lessons to learn from Britain is about building codes. Increasingly, environmental concern must mean using building materials from sustainable sources, repurposing existing but sound buildings, and re-utilizing brownfield (rather than agricultural) sites while minimizing the use of concrete and even-more-polluting hard materials. North America, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia have far better building codes, including stronger encouragement and practices in their use of timber-framed buildings than do Britain, Ireland, and other parts of mainland Europe. Except in overcrowded downtown areas, sustainably produced, timber-framed buildings ought to become the norm for Christian communities, congregations, and households—as I discovered when traveling among North American Mennonites!

Within the European environmental movement, many have utilized the timber-frame designs of Walter Segal,<sup>18</sup> who is both German and (reputedly) Mennonite in background as well as a professional architect, whose work over time in not utilizing the so-called “wet trades” of bricklaying and concrete foundations has increasingly challenged reluctant town planners. The internationally reported 2017 Grenfell Tower block fire in London, which caused many to die unnecessarily, must act as a warning against inadequate urban building codes, cost-cutting, and low-grade statutory inspections of retrofitted buildings—and that not all buildings can be timber-framed nor clad. Learning from those who do things better (than us) is a matter not just of moral responsibility but also of Christian stewardship.

In my own housing advocacy,<sup>19</sup> I recognize that the charge of hypocrisy can easily afflict some Christians in the sprawling suburbs—with our manicured front yards, multiple cars, and seemingly little environmental concern, just like

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18 Alice Grahame and Taran Wilkhu, *Walters Way and Segal Close: The Architect Walter Segal and London's Self-Build Communities: A Look at Two of London's Most Unusual Streets* (London, UK: Park, 2017).

19 Andrew Francis, ed., *Foxes Have Holes: Christian Reflections on Britain's Housing Need* (London, UK: Ekklesia, 2016).



everyone else. I remember the concern of our then neighbors when we dug up both the front and back yards to create a vegetable garden. Gradually, as they received gifts of our garden's produce or heard me talk both on the radio and with them personally about the need to eradicate "food miles" from our shopping<sup>20</sup>—localizing our diet and food production—they began to understand. The point is that how we even live in our own choice of home becomes a matter of eco-witness.

### **"Back to the Garden . . ."**

Are you humming a Joni Mitchell tune?<sup>21</sup> The Bible begins with a narrative about the Garden and ends with the Holy City—albeit with the River of Life running through it, shaded by the tree that sheds the leaves of peace. However, the Hebrew and Christian human journeys of the biblical testaments are not just about the pastoral idyll of a "land flowing with milk and honey" nor simply the creation of the Jesus community but also about the realpolitik of human treachery, privation, rape, genocide, slavery, racism, betrayal, torture, and crucifixion. Our very human story echoes the environmental struggle as both people and planet have been raped and are oppressed and exploited in the cause of greed.

The hard facts of this planet's ecological plight are no longer in dispute after the international environmental summits in Rio de Janeiro (1992), Kyoto (1997), Copenhagen (2009), and Paris (2015). However, too many politicians and world leaders believe they can play fast and loose with the Maker's instructions, just as Eve and Adam did, and as a result, they fail to make the right choice. We risk losing the garden entrusted to us because humanity wants to play God for itself.

My own advocacy about growing more of our food and increasing our own food security continues through writing books<sup>22</sup> and presenting seminars; it really is a case of getting Christians back to the garden. Two of my recent books deliberately focus on understanding so-called "green theology" from an Anabaptist perspective, then ensuring this theology forges part of our definitive witness. If God's *shalom* of justice, well-being, and peace counts for anything, it is because we believe in God the Creator as surely as God the Savior<sup>23</sup>—"as

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20 Andrew Francis, *What in God's Name Are You Eating? How Can Christians Live and Eat Responsibly in Today's Global Village?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 59–63.

21 In her popular song "Woodstock" (included on her 1970 album *Ladies of the Canyon*), singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell ends each verse with, "And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

22 Francis, *What in God's Name Are You Eating?*

23 Andrew Francis, *Shalom—The Jesus Manifesto: Radical Theology for Our Times*, 106ff.

we pray and work for Jesus' world, as we seek to repair the damage we have done and as we preach the gospel to all creation, we may catch glimpses of how things will be one day"<sup>24</sup> "when the lion and the lamb lie down together and the reign of God's shalom is revealed."<sup>25</sup> Both books survey key strands of theological resourcing, recognizing particularly the input of Roman Catholic, Anabaptist-Mennonite,<sup>26</sup> Orthodox, and ecofeminist theologians upon the UK's Christian environmental movement. What unites much of this ecumenical thinking is appropriate land usage and the justice of sharing earth's resources.

In addition to writing and presenting seminars about going back to the garden, I have helped others make this theology a practical reality; in five of my former ministry locations, we have repurposed underused church backyards as community gardens. Four of these continue today—another ecological witness to community cooperation and localizing food production.

Christian advocacy about appropriate "land use" is another part of witness. Although only 3 to 4 percent of UK land is covered with housing, industry, and roads, development is either not possible or prohibited on a further 55 percent plus, either because of topography, land ownership issues, or preceding designated status as "national park" (or similar). The UK is a small set of crowded islands where one cannot easily escape officialdom's glare. In England particularly, building codes are so stringently applied that illicit developments are bulldozed, owners fined, and the homeless in tented communities are forced to move on. Why is it that in rural France building with used-tire walls rammed with earth is permissible for structural walls yet totally outlawed in Britain?

In Scotland, more relaxed regulations allow crowded city dwellers to put up rural cabins "with the landowner's permission," which are often grouped together creating temporary weekend or summer communities; this is known as "hutting." In recent years, many have been inspired by the satellite programs of the North American "tiny homes" movement, with homes that are usually built sustainably—up-cycling used materials and often off-grid. Yet, in the British versions of networked TV programs of folks building such tiny homes, they have to issue the sternest of legal warnings reminding such UK builders to beware of official regulation. I have Anabaptist-flavored acquaintances in France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia who have their own complaints as

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24 Dave Bookless, *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 142.

25 Francis, *Shalom*, 116.

26 E.g., Calvin Redekop, ed., *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2000); Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire—Footprints of Peace: A Spiritual Manifesto from a Jesus Perspective* (Washington, DC: O Books, 2012).

well as questions and compliments about their legislative restrictions in both land usage and housing developments.

In Britain and the other crowded nations of Europe, we have been greatly helped by Australian thinking, which has often recognized that environmental thinking and practice must form a basis for state legislation and community practice. One key example is the permaculture movement,<sup>27</sup> which has adopted a holistic view for 1) land use and food production, using “no dig” and multi-cropping practices, and 2) community and housing development. Several members of our local Green Party (including our household) with either large backyards or community gardens use permaculture practices as a way to improve the soil’s quality, thereby increasing our domestic food production for our own family and friends, including those at church. One permaculturing UK Congregational pastor of my acquaintance provides all the food—including rabbit and chicken, and apples for the pies—raised on his own land for their church’s annual Harvest Supper; he has even appeared on regional TV to explain theologically why he and they do this as “an ecological witness.”

Permaculture has come to mean more than just food-sufficiency in the household. Self-reliance in food is meaningless unless people have access to land, information and financial resources. So in recent years, it has come to encompass appropriate legal and financial strategies, including strategies for land access, business structures and regional self-financing. This way it is a whole human system.<sup>28</sup>

Those of us involved in the UK permaculture movement easily recognize that there is a more laid-back and integrative approach in Australasia toward healthy ecological practical witness—much more easily accepting of (and hearing) the different voices of native peoples, New Age practitioners, Christians, and those who just enjoy living by alternative and organic values. This is much more my preferred *realpolitik* for all people.

One group, which affirms that questioning, and that has done so successfully is the neo-pagan Lammas Community in West Wales (which is one of the four constituent UK nations and has its own language). In buying poor agricultural land and patiently working to overcome the prejudices of several nearby villagers (who called them “dirty hippies” and much worse), they overcame local bureaucracy, sheaves of building codes, and ultimately statutory principle.

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<sup>27</sup> Bill Mollison, *Permaculture: A Designers’ Manual* (Tyalgum, AU: Tagari, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> Bill Mollison, with Rena Mia Slay, *Introduction to Permaculture* (Tyalgum, AU: Tagari, 1994), vii.

They have now won the legal right to build low-impact,<sup>29</sup> off-grid<sup>30</sup> domestic homes on their own land. Initially, this code revision was conceded only on the basis that within five years each household would be earning at least 50 percent of their income from the surrounding land. These houses do not have to satisfy all urban building codes, but if they use recycled/upcycled and nonstandard materials, they still cannot get building insurance.

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Chris Wimbush, one of Lammas's founding and now long-standing residents, told me: "But now, they have realized that before us, the farmer could only let others' sheep graze our land for about £2,500 per year . . . yet within five years, we shall be producing over £100,000 worth of organic vegetables annually to sell in the local markets, as well as what we need for our families." The forty-fold increase in production is due to good husbandry and co-operative working practices. It has also persuaded both the Pembrokeshire county authorities and the Welsh legislature that their legal Institute 52 should be relaxed to enable repeated sustainable developments across Wales.

English legislators, however, seem to have resolutely gone deaf—not even considering similar legislative change. This will be no surprise to North American readers who can witness the life of Alaskan homesteaders, former hippies in comfortable southern state communes, and those hiding away in jerry-built homes in the Midwest, northern states, and Canadian provinces where building codes are different from what is actually enforced. But it should not stop Christians from demanding legislative and building code change for the sake of God's planet.

Is it because of such regulation about almost everything that many UK Christians hardly dare to think outside the box of their movement's traditional forms of worship? Apart from harvest festivals, most British congregations have little relationship with the natural world around them. Some new initiatives, however, are bringing change and new thinking.

One example is the UK's growing Forest Church movement with gatherings across Britain that meet at different times and seasons outdoors, with a strong understanding of God as creator.<sup>31</sup> Their informality and flexibility

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29 Tony Wrench, *Building a Low Impact Roundhouse* (Hampshire, UK: Permanent, 2008).

30 Nick Rosen, *How to Live Off-Grid: Journeys Outside the System* (London, UK: Bantam, 2008).

31 Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church: A Field Guide to a Spiritual Connection with Nature* (Anamchara online, 2013).

echoes some urban trends of the “emerging church” movement.<sup>32</sup> At the heart of both movements is a clear understanding of the environment surrounding their patterns and places of meeting, which often involve eating and playing together as well as prayer and reflection. Anabaptist history teaches us that our forebears had to have a similar openness to a variety of witness in order to simply survive as well as to share their understandings of the words, works, and ways of Jesus. We have much to learn from these freestyle movements as Anabaptists seeking to develop better understandings of ecology and witness.

Precisely because there are Christians in virtually every neighborhood—whether rural, suburban, or downtown—we can learn from each other and from those we work alongside as environmental activists to offer a coherent vision for the earth and its peoples, plants, and creatures. We as Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians have, in addition, distinctive and strong community perspectives in both *nachfolge*<sup>33</sup> and *gelassenheit*<sup>34</sup> to inform a life together (as Bonhoeffer termed it) and to realize that our ecological witness about housing and lifestyle must increase—and quickly.

## On the Road to a New Future

Many of us as Anabaptists, former London Mennonite Centre coworkers, community gardeners, and radical Christians across the UK have found that low-key, patiently fermented, small pieces of ministry can have significant ecological witness.

In two cities, because of my commitment to biblical justice, the influence of Mennonite friends, and my growing contact with the permaculture movement, I worked with different pastor acquaintances and the then UK charity *Tools for Self-Reliance* to begin Christian projects to refurbish hand and garden tools. Initially, we gathered a group of Christians to de-rust, re-handle, and sharpen gardening tools, some of which we sold to UK community gardeners to pay the transit costs of sending others to projects in the developing world. We extended both UK projects to include refurbishing hand tools, then repaired bicycles on the same principle, sending most refinished work abroad. We also started Saturday morning bike workshops for kids and parents at a church café.

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32 Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures* (London, UK: SPCK, 2006).

33 *Nachfolge* is German for “following after”—a term commonly used in Anabaptism for our personal discipleship in following after the words, works, and ways of Jesus.

34 *Gelassenheit* is German, broadly translated as “yieldedness,” which within Anabaptism refers to our discipleship practice of yielding our personal whims and wants to accepting God’s demands or those of the covenant community we are individually committed to.

At one workshop, we hoisted an embroidered flag outside that said, “Bikes are not just vehicles of revolution but part of a natural cycle,” the truth of which I witnessed as I traveled down the Mekong. As all these projects have evolved, they have remained overtly Christian and continue to be an ecological witness, attracting publicity and media interest.

But Westernized Christians live in a world that is not always so low-tech, and we face many questions about transport practices. If we live in certain cities, we should affirm but not over-romanticize the significant mass-transit systems. The Metro in Paris, *Tunnelbana* in Stockholm, and Underground in London can seem very different for those everyday users of the New York subway, the Chicago “El,” or Toronto’s RT, just as “riding the tram” in San Francisco feels very different from doing the same in the UK northern cities of Sheffield and Manchester. However, it is not just about perception but also about ecology and witness. That must lead us to question not only how much foreign travel, including air flights, we undertake but also our own everyday transport decisions.

Regrettably, in rural Britain and Europe, just as in North America and Australasia, we rely too much on the petrol engine; we must seek ways to reduce our reliance and find alternatives. This can force us to make difficult choices. Some of my annual teaching/speaking engagements in churches, communities or at summer festivals are in places unreachable by public transport (even by bus), so I have to plan my speaking tours and poetry gigs carefully and use a small RV to travel and stay in between those seminars; I have had to make a counter-intuitive choice to my eco-theological beliefs. But another longstanding UK Anabaptist leader now has only electric cars and a solar-powered home, negating his fossil fuel dependency. More locally, how much should we use a handcart or the car to bring home our community garden’s harvest? Such choices easily become further ecological witness. We need to be challenged to make them appropriately.

Many UK Anabaptists gather across cities or rural counties. We do not have identities like “Amish neighborhoods” or known community homesteads like the three Bruderhof communities here and others elsewhere globally. In Britain, we do not have mission-focused Anabaptist congregations nor, any longer, a national Mennonite “mother house.” We must rely on our individual witness in Christian households to make initial impact on neighbors and colleagues—to build friendships, *then* speak of our Jesus-centered faith. In that interim, it will be our lifestyle, however ecologically aware, that will tell of our own vision for God’s world.

## **Witness and the Realpolitik**

Part of the Christian dilemma in becoming involved in the environmental movement’s activism is its realpolitik: there is a hardline, if not ruthless, atti-

tude toward implementing strategies that have little room for grace and forgiveness. The movement pillories companies (sometimes rightly) and outlaws practices too quickly to enable creative societal change. This does not mean that we should not find inexpensive alternatives to fossil fuels *now*, nor tax—even progressively fine—polluting practices of offending companies.

But it is especially our human dealings with others—whether in theological debates, the political process, and even our community activism—that Christians need to focus on, to redefine the way we deal with and listen to each other. As a church historian, I know Martin Luther was a misogynistic anti-Semite as well as a clever, somewhat-expedient theologian, but for Christians involved in the *realpolitik* of the UK’s eco-struggles, Luther’s “Here I stand” stance is a reminder and challenge to maintain our faith’s platform. Through our Anabaptist multivoiced learning, we need to encourage the grace of cooperation and listening to people, groups, and contexts that are different from ours. I am all too conscious, for instance, of the fact that some in the UK Green Party in which I am locally active regard me as some kind of weak individual because I am declaredly a Christian. I am also conscious that Jonathan Bartley—now the national coleader of the Green Party of England and Wales—and I served together on the UK Anabaptist Network’s national Steering Group for several years, but now Bartley’s internet profile has airbrushed much of his Christian commitment away.

Such hardline demarcation between Christians and others does not have to repeat itself in other national debates, providing that Christians demonstrate their eco-credentials, green theology, committed activism, and lack of hypocrisy. Nearly twenty years ago, while serving as a denominational pastor, I was part of a delegation that formed one of the regional Christian and pagan interfaces for dialogue, discussion, and action. Each of us was respected for the stance, faith, and philosophy we held; our differences did not prevent fruitful discussion and shared support for a variety of different neighborhood activities. Today there is a much more coordinated set of networks creating interfaces between Christians and pagans,<sup>35</sup> often involving various forms of ecological witness.

As Anabaptists, we understand both what it means to be a minority and to listen to others to forge ways forward. In this, we can help build a strong ecological witness that we can support—and then it might be our personal

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<sup>35</sup> I am using “pagan” here in its UK context, not a sometimes devaluing, pejorative North American sense. In Britian, there is a growing Pagan Network, an umbrella organization with various complementary magazines and websites ([www.ukpagan-council.org](http://www.ukpagan-council.org)), supported by earth-believers, non-Christians, and some followers of the hedgerow magic. Recall that *pagani* in Latin simply meant “country dwellers,” who were non-believers.



task to explain that ecology and witness from biblical perspectives. I am aware that many others do not share my Christian faith, but with candor and grace, there can be mutual respect, whether visiting Lammas, working with Forest Church and “emerging church” supporters, pagans, Scottish hutters, various food co-operatives, permaculturalists, community gardeners (allotmenters) and/or members of different housing schemes.

Many of us who are Christian eco-activists are encouraged by and support involvement with *A Rocha*, a Christian organization “engaging communities in nature conversation.”<sup>36</sup> Founded in Portugal in 1983, *A Rocha*’s work has spread to twenty nations worldwide, developing projects, facilitating learning, and providing “a forum for understanding the relevance of the Christian faith to environmental issues.” Through community-based conservation projects, *A Rocha* responds to the global crisis of biodiversity loss, utilizing residential field study centers, site-based projects, and wider advocacy. Utilizing predominantly small-scale projects, such as the Five Loaves Community Garden in Lynden, Washington (USA), they encourage Christians and their neighbors to become involved in community action, demonstrating to the wider populace that ecology and witness go hand-in-hand. Personally, I know Anabaptists/Mennonites in five nations who are involved in *A Rocha* projects. This kind of localized, small-scale witness sits well with orthopraxic Anabaptist discipleship.

Within denominational Britain, an ecumenical eco-congregation movement has grown. Member congregations voluntarily subscribe and self-examine their life and buildings for “their ecological witness.” This engages them in study conferences, worship topics, and the opportunity to receive awards at a variety of increasing levels of eco-credentials determined through a more formalized assessment. Awards are given for sustainable energy sourcing, the use and insulation of buildings (including ancillary land usage), recycling policies, and so forth; the movement creatively challenges not only the congregations but also their individual members domestically.

Many North American Mennonite churches would regard all this as normative, but fewer mainland European ones do. In England and Wales, the Eco-Church movement has 500-plus congregations, now serviced via the *A Rocha*<sup>37</sup> environmental charity, and two executive staff members. Yet in Scotland, with only a national population of 5.5 million people (not even 25 percent are churchgoers), the Eco-Congregation Scotland<sup>38</sup> movement is far more influential, with well over 400 congregations and five executive staff, thanks to the dynamic support of the Church of Scotland and the UK’s United Reformed

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36 [www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org).

37 [www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk](http://www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk).

38 [www.ecocongregationscotland.org.uk](http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org.uk).

Church (both of which include past and current influential radical reformation voices).

A friend of mine, Trevor Jamison, is the full-time chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland, and during the drafting of this article, he and I spoke together about the movement's influence. He was healthily reticent about the details of the churches' recent campaigns about unregulated "fracking," the plastic bottle deposit, and other issues. He far preferred to acknowledge the grassroots corporate struggle—by churches of many different sizes—in prayer, study, and activism to witness holistically to the need for a good ecology in which pollution is diminished and corporate practices are environmentally sound. Given the topography and variety of commerce that sustain Scotland, the emphases for constituent congregations vary in the big cities (healthy inward investment), the industrial areas (decreasing pollutants), the fishing ports (clean seas and fish stocks), and the "Highlands and islands" (quality eco-tourism). In many ways, Scotland exemplifies how the different emphases of ecology and witness in grassroots congregational life will vary across Westernized nations. One size (or response) cannot fit all. "Ecology is not just a mark of mission but a mark of discipleship";<sup>39</sup> in our Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of *nachfolge*, it may take a British Roman Catholic professor of theology to remind us of this in the advancing new ecumenical age.

While researching this article, I tried contacting elected representatives of all our regional governments, requesting their understanding of "ecology and [Christian] witness." One Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) told me at Holyrood how he and many colleagues felt well-supported in environmental campaigns, citing Christian support for the ban on "fracking" (hydraulic fracturing for shale gas), the work of Iona Community members, and the recent successful Scottish Eco-congregations' lobby to introduce statutory deposits on plastic bottles. I had a similarly encouraging response from another such MSP when researching a book on UK housing.<sup>40</sup> An elected member of *Plaid Cymru* told me how Christian congregations are a key part of the vanguard enriching the quality of neighborhood life in both de-industrialized Welsh valleys and rural communities. And a *Sinn Fein* member of the Stormont Assembly easily recalled the names and reconciling ministries of Mennonite workers in Northern Ireland.

## Offering a Visionary Agenda

In a crowded Britain, and even a crowded Europe, living within a more isolated worldview is far more difficult for religious communities than in North

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39 Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), 181.

40 Francis, ed., *Foxes Have Holes*.

America (where I studied at Princeton, NJ, and traveled among Mennonite acquaintances), or in my travels over a generation in East Asian countries. It struck me that in North America, one could live in a “church bubble,” home educating one’s children (e.g., Amish schools), choosing only non-salacious mass media and Christian colleges. And in Asia, although folk there had global technology, their mindset was normally a decentralized “village mentality.” To have an effective ecology and witness, we must break out of our church bubble or village mentality.

Many internationally recognized humanist and/or atheist philosophers understand Christian (and separately Islamic) theology to hold a credible, transnational view of God’s world that calls for both needed philosophical and practical change to meet the growing environmental challenges. But they often note that such Christian theology has been “very quickly pushed into a subordinate position by the secular law of European states.”<sup>41</sup> If one’s federal legislature becomes dominated by a non-environmental worldview in this way, the Christian witness for ecological justice must work harder to become more effective.

The need for environmental witness is necessarily creating dialogue. Often this dialogue is with those whom the pastors of my childhood would have chided me about, if not disapproved of. It is truly ecumenical, in the sense of God’s *oikos* (household) being recreated in the rethinking of ecology, economy, and ecumeny being totally intertwined.<sup>42</sup>

As I write, I am in my study, looking over the village rooftops, fields, and freeway to the city where I know the imams, Sikh Elders, the bishop, and many church leaders, pagans, and New Agers as well as eco-activists. From here, I see the pollution cloud hanging above the city and know that it demands our collective response. Part of our theological witness will be to determine what we believe “ecumenical” means: does it mean cooperating with only other Christian denominations or acting in concert with “all God’s people”?

A Quaker acquaintance, Alastair McIntosh, the former Director of the UK Centre for Human Ecology, can easily remind me that how we as Christians present ourselves and work in “earth-friendly” ways in “broken neighborhoods” helps with both people’s healing and their ability to see the physical world with fresh vision.<sup>43</sup> Amen to that. The “work of social and ecological witness is

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41 Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet* (London, UK: Atlantic, 2013).

42 Francis, *OIKOS*.

43 Alastair McIntosh, *Rekindling Community: Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality* (Totnes, UK: Green Books for the Schumacher Society, 2008).

necessarily about protest. Theologically speaking, this makes its prophetic.<sup>44</sup> And we have to be prepared to risk rebuttal to enter today's world of realpolitik.

Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians have a distinctive heritage and witness. Ecology and witness may not have been our historical distinctive. But now we have to live out an earth friendly discipleship to begin witnessing well; learning the theological niceties can follow. As New Testament believers, we have to live as those from virtually 2,000 years ago—risking our lives among the realpolitik of others—if we want to share the broad and deep implications of the reign of God for people and planet.

This means accepting God's visionary agenda that makes our lives distinctive:

If we want to respond to creation differently, with loving care for all that lives on earth, and if we aspire to be what we were meant to be, that is co-creators in God's image, then we must realize that creation refers not only to our origins but to our future as well . . .

. . . The creation, that begins with the first creation, is unfinished.<sup>45</sup>

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44 Alastair McIntosh, *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power* (London, UK: Aurum, 2001), 121.

45 Dorothee Soelle, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), 163–64.