

MINT HOUSE GROUP SERIES FOR ECO AWARENESS



Session 1: Bible Study on God, ourselves and creation

Session 2: The Science of climate change, and our reactions

Session 3: Personal Actions to love earth and all its inhabitants

Session 4: Making the Church much greener

Introduction

Our Mint house groups are gloriously different in their approaches, and their members have much experience and knowledge to bring to their discussions, so these studies are not prescriptive, nor excessively detailed. There are almost certainly more questions in each session that you would have time to consider. You may only wish to use one or two of the sessions. So please use this resource as the group wishes, and top and tail your conversation in your usual way.

But since the Mint has committed to Eco Church we want to increase consciousness of all four themes above and particularly, in relation to session 4, to garner ideas for achieving the more challenging aspects of becoming a low-carbon Christian community. So the Mint Eco Church group is both offering this suggested house group programme to you and wanting to hear your response particularly to that final session.

SESSION 1: BIBLE STUDY ON GOD, OURSELVES AND CREATION

Read: Genesis 1:26-31

Questions you might discuss

1. What does this passage suggest about our relationship to God and to the rest of the world that God created?
2. Look back through this chapter and you notice that every other act of creation, including on the first part of day six is introduced by, "And God said, 'Let *this* happen...'" Now we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind...'" Why the sudden reference to "us"?

Note. It has traditionally been interpreted as a reference to the three persons of the Trinity conferring, which happens only at this last act of creation because the nature of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity is uniquely determinative of the way humans should relate together, being made in God's image and likeness. But an alternative view sees God here conferring with the whole creation he has made so far so that God and the earth and its creatures together co-create humans, which suggestion fits well the origin of human life as understood by God-believing evolutionists.

3. What practically should "have dominion" in verses 26 and 28, and which is picked up and expanded in Psalm 8:6, imply?

You will also want to consider the meaning of "subdue" in verse 28, and also the way in which Genesis 2:15 expresses the relationship God intends humans to have with the "garden" of creation.

Note: The Hebrew word *radah* meaning "rule, have authority over" is common in the Old Testament, is itself neutral, and there were good and bad rulers. A verse like Isaiah 9:7, referring to the Messiah, certainly implies that authority can inhabit the same space as peace and righteousness.

4. In 1967, and before climate change was seen clearly as the primary ecological threat, Lynn White Junior wrote an influential article in Science periodical entitled "The historical roots of our ecologic (*sic*) crisis" (<https://www.cmu.ca/faculty/gmatties/lynnwhiterootsofcrisis.pdf>) in which he blamed religion based on Genesis 1:26 for our abuse of creation. How and why might we Christians repent that wrong in adopting a correct theology of creation?
5. Perhaps the commonest word Christians use to describe our relationship with the rest of creation is "stewards" although in the bible that word describes a manager, most often acting in the owner's absence. Is this therefore a helpful image, or what alternatives might there be? You could similarly consider the potential problem of the word "environment" which suggests we are at the centre; is that true?

Read Romans 8:18-24a

Questions you might discuss

1. What do you imagine Paul saw as evidence of "creation groaning"? How does today's evidence differ?
2. What do the images of creation "waiting with eager longing" and "being set free from bondage to decay", used as they are in a context of the revealing, freeing, adoption, and redemption of us as the children of God, say about the connection between humanity and the rest of the created world?

Note: You may want to explore what you understand those dimensions of our own salvation to mean, or may consider that unnecessary.

3. If, as Paul suggests, and as Revelation makes explicit in referring to “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1), our eternal fate is an embodied one in a created world, how might that affect the way we live in our bodies now in this created world?
4. Redemption and creation are strongly linked in Paul’s mind. Why do you suppose this is, and what does it tell us about the nature of redemption as he sees it?
5. These two passages have invited us to consider our relationship with the natural world in relation to how it all began and how it will end, i.e. the doctrines of Creation and the Last Things. What other Christian doctrines raise the question?

Note: You might, for example, want to think about how we understand the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the Sacraments.

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND OUR REACTIONS

Let’s assume you have at least a basic understanding of climate change. If not you could perhaps look at “What is climate change: A really simple guide” (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24021772>).

Icebreaker questions

1. What are your feelings when you hear a news report related to climate change?
2. When and how did you become aware of the fact that human activity is changing earth’s climate? How did you/do you respond to that knowledge? Has your attitude changed over time?
3. Why do some people continue to regard anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change as a manufactured conspiracy rather than scientific fact?

In November 2021 the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 takes place in Glasgow, hosted by the UK and Italy (<https://ukcop26.org/>) COP26 stands for the 26th meeting of the Conference of the Parties, indicating how long the issue of climate has been recognised as an international challenge to be addressed, even though almost all world governments have dragged their heels in failure to implement earlier agreements.

But world public opinion demands urgent action. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) working with the University of Oxford published earlier this year (2021) the results of the largest and widest survey to date of attitudes to

climate change and how to shape the future. You can download the full “People’s Climate Vote” report at <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/climate-and-disaster-resilience-/The-Peoples-Climate-Vote-Results.html> and at least read the Executive Summary (on pages 6-9). You will see that the majority of people the world over believe we are in a climate emergency, with some fairly minor differences on the basis of age, level of education, level of national income and so forth.

Further Questions you might discuss

4. It is telling that during the Covid pandemic, Government, aware that we often for good reason do not trust politicians, has repeatedly said “We are following the science”. Does the same apply in relation to the greater emergency of the climate?
5. Did you react to the labelling of climate change as the “greater emergency” in that last question? You might consider the cumulative number of deaths into the future from each, but what other considerations are also important?
6. Climate change, for ill or for good, is largely an outcome of carbon emissions. Why is it important that other ecological issues around sustainability, conservation and pollution become part of the same debate? What issues and why? How do the different issues relate to each other?
7. The UNDP vote referred to above asked about 18 key policies related to climate, listed below. How would you order their importance?

Energy: To address the climate crisis, what should your country do about energy?

- a. Use solar, wind and renewable power
- b. Waste less energy in homes, buildings, and factories
- c. Stop burning fuels that pollute
- d. None of the above (this option was provided in each section below too)

Economy: To address the climate crisis, what should governments do about the economy?

- a. Invest more money in green businesses and jobs
- b. Require more information on how products are made
- c. Make companies pay for their pollution

Transportation: To address the climate crisis, how should your country improve transport?

- a. Use more clean electric cars and buses, or bicycles
- b. Transport good on planes, ships, trains and trucks that run on clean energy
- c. Improve the design of cities and rural communities

Farms and food: To address the climate crisis, what should governments do about farms and food?

- a. Use climate-friendly farming techniques

- b. Reduce food waste
- c. Promote plant-based diets

Protecting People: How can your country better protect people from extreme storms, flooding, droughts, forest fires, and other climate impacts?

- a. Install more early warning systems for disasters
- b. Provide good and affordable insurance
- c. Build infrastructure and conserve nature to protect lives and livelihoods

Nature: To address the climate crisis, what do you think your country should do about nature?

- a. Conserve forests and land
- b. Keep the ocean and waterways healthy
- c. Support local communities, indigenous peoples, and women that are environmental stewards

You'll have to look at the report to discover which four topped the list! But try and guess first what was top and what was bottom.

SESSION 3: PERSONAL ACTIONS TO LOVE EARTH AND ALL ITS INHABITANTS

Starter activity

1. Each list the top ten things Christians ought to do. Then share where you would put care for the environment on your list and why.
2. Each member of the group suggest to the others one really good action that can be taken to show personal care for the environment. It can be something you have done, or something you feel you'd like to do but are currently struggling with.

Living gently on the earth

Ecocell is a carbon reduction course for small groups of Christians or individual use; it has a detailed introduction and five modules on Energy, Food, Transport, Stuff we own and People Power. You can download the whole from <https://www.greenchristian.org.uk/ecocell/ecocell-documents> but here are its suggested nine first steps to take.

Consider each of them in turn, discover who is already doing this, and discuss to what extent it is reasonable and practical to act in that way. What could be added in this section?

1. Don't fly! Of if you must, at least donate £50 to £100 to sustainable energy projects and/or to disaster relief agencies (in reparation for the climate damage of your flight.). Most European travel is possible by train: www.seat61.com for more information.

2. Limit your driving: Walk, cycle, take the bus, tram or train whenever you can, and use local shops. Organise a lift share scheme for your Church – for both car owners and those without.

3. Limit your electricity use: Turn lights off and use low energy light bulbs. Don't leave appliances on stand-by. Get rid of the tumble dryer. If buying a new fridge, freezer, washing machine go for AAA rated. Use less electricity and switch to green providers. Visit www.greenelectricity.org for a comparison of all the green tariffs. Install solar photovoltaic panels and generate your own electricity. Place your desk and dining table by a window.

4. Use your LOAF! Buy and grow some food that follows Green Christian's LOAF principles for food: Locally produced, Organically grown, Animal friendly and Fairly traded. Grow some of your own food. Buy British fruit and veg in season and support local shops. Eat less meat and dairy, eat some vegetarian or vegan meals every week. Buy free range eggs and meat and sustainably caught fish (MSC). Arrange a communal LOAF meal at your Church.

5. Repair, re-use, borrow or share rather than buying new: Use local swapshop networks, jumble sales and charity shops to acquire what you need and not just to donate to. Use your own cloth or canvas shopping bags at local shops. When buying wood products, check the wood is from a legal and sustainable source (FSC).

6. Limit your gas or heating oil use: Insulate loft and walls and hot water cistern. Wear an extra layer, and turn central heating thermostat down 1 or 2 degrees. Use a hot water bottle in bed, or an extra blanket, instead of heating the whole house at night. Make sure your heating and hot water are set on a timer.

7. Save and cherish water: Fix water butts to down pipes. Fix dripping taps. Pour non-greasy left-over water on the garden plants. Take short showers. Don't water your lawn in dry weather – grass is very robust and will recover!

8. Reconnect with the natural world. Go for a walk. Get wet. Dig the earth: Include the Earth in all Church liturgies. Plant trees for special occasions such as baptisms or weddings. Support a nature conservation organisation. Take an interest in particular groups of organisms: e.g. wild flowers/bees/butterflies/fishes/birds.

9. Exercise citizenship. Campaign to protect the Earth: Arguably THE most important thing you can do. Support Christian environmental organisations such as Green Christian: www.greenchristian.org.uk and Operation Noah: www.operationnoah.org. Sign petitions, write letters, email MPs. Join demonstrations and civil resistance groups.

Final Question

Which of the personal actions you've been considering, most of which concern a manageable step in the right direction, have felt like something you might pledge to accomplish as a group, encouraging each other? Could you agree to this? If you have more than one agree to one of them at this meeting, and when you check progress at the next choose another then to take you forward.

SESSION 4: MAKING THE CHURCH MUCH GREENER

EcoChurch, of which the Mint is now a member, is a partnership of churches (approaching 10%, some 3,500, of UK churches are members so far) supporting each other in becoming much greener. We pledge to address four dimensions of our Church Life: worship and teaching, buildings and land, community and global engagement, and lifestyle both personal and as a church community. You thought about the last of these in Session 3; this Session asks you about the other areas and requests your feedback to the EcoChurch steering group. *(Most house groups have one or more members of that group; if you don't you could invite one to attend this session, or nominate someone to record your responses for forwarding.)*

In each section the first question asks you to contribute to a blank sheet and the subsequent questions look for your ideas on specific issues.

Worship and Teaching

Questions

1. In order to increase our understanding of and commitment to green issues what changes might be made to our worship, the preaching and other aspects of church life which are aimed at our own discipleship?
2. If we were to arrange occasional open meetings to consider environmental issues which issues (or organisations or specific speakers) should be on the list?
3. The only invariable occasion in Sunday services when creation features strongly is harvest festival, although creation care is seldom the only focus then. How would you feel about a commitment to include other specific creation-focussed Sundays in our regular programme? [Suggestions include the Sunday nearest Earth Day, 22 April; World Environment Sunday, closest to 5 June; a Sunday in Creationtide, 1 Sep to 4 Oct]
4. Might you wish as a house group to return to the topic of Ecology and Discipleship regularly? What are your thoughts about how that might be supported?

Building and Land

5. From your observation (and some may have much fuller knowledge than others) what do you suspect are the main challenges of our Mint building to a low carbon and low environmental impact?
6. Imagine the church has been given £50,000 to spend on reducing its whole environmental impact. On what mixture of changes in the building would you suggest it be spent?
7. The land around the building is mostly used for car-parking. Even so can you envisage actions related to the land that could encourage our connection with nature?

Community and Global Engagement

8. What ways can you think of that are particularly appropriate for a church community like ours, to partner others locally, nationally or globally in action for the environment?
9. In what ways might the Mint be involved in awareness-raising events for or within the wider community?
10. How might we be more committed to pray for a specific overseas environmental project?
11. Should we participate as a church in sustainability issues like a Lenten carbon fast or WWF's annual earth hour?

A closing prayer if you would like to use it – for this or for each session.

May God who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds of the sky, who leads the lambs to pasture and the deer to water, who multiplied loaves and fishes and changed water into wine, lead us, feed us, multiply us, and change us to reflect the glory of our Creator now and through all eternity; and may the grace ...