

Beyond hope and despair

Paul Bodenham, outgoing Chair of Green Christian, looks back over the last 15 years, and forwards to the future.

For what I have received
 May the Lord make me truly thankful.
 For what I am about to witness
 May the Lord make me.

From *Prayer* by Moniczka Kowalczyk-Krol

I have just stood down after 15 years as Chair of Green Christian – that’s too long for any organisation to have the same person in the role. So it’s time for change, and I’m delighted to report that George Dow and Deborah Tomkins are taking over as Co-Chairs. George will oversee the governance and management of the charity, and Deborah will be the point of contact for partner organisations and the media. I wish them both the same deep joy and sense of privilege as the role has given me.

I have been asked to share something of my experience of the journey from 2004 – not just as Chair of Green Christian, but in the Christian environmental movement generally. Looking back makes me aware not just of how much has been achieved, but also how much more remains to be done. In that time we founded Operation Noah and stood it on its own feet. More recently we have initiated the new economics programme, Joy in Enough. The “ecocell” programme of a decade ago helped us discern a Way of Life, whose fourfold discipline of prayer, lifestyle, witness and encouragement now underpins all that we do in building

community and developing strategy. We have been, and continue to be, a meeting place for many wonderful people – members, partners, Church leaders, campaigners, NGOs and media – but there are never enough hours in the day to do as much as we’d like.

Green Christian and organisations like it are more necessary now than ever, but not in the way we might hitherto have thought. It seems humanity has reached the moment of reckoning which science and “the Green movement” have always said was coming. Climate and ecological breakdown are unfolding in real time. The assumptions and expectations on which our civilisation rests are turning on us and now threaten destruction. Realities which once were solid are dissolving around us. The future we took for granted is out of our hands, and we cannot know what will take its place. This meta-crisis is challenging us to rethink even faith itself.

Amid all this tribulation, Green Christian will continue to be many things – a community, a charity, a pressure group, a pocket think-tank, a crucible of ideas, a movement. If I were to sum up the role

I feel Green Christian plays, it is with the image of a hinge. We are people who hear the gospel’s call to bear the weight of history, span its height and depth, and offer our heart and our bones as linchpins for change.

The characteristic I have particularly appreciated about my fellow members and Trustees is their “pluck”. For an organisation of minimal paid staff and about 800 members, we are not huge, but we aim to be effective. We are the grit in the oyster of the institutional Church, thinkers of the unthinkable, provokers and pioneers wherever there is temptation to settle or collude. Activists have a reputation for being self-righteous and off-putting. But like it or not, we do not “know best” and can’t afford to give the impression that we do. All we can be sure of now is the not knowing. As the first of Alcoholics Anonymous’ twelve steps puts it: “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction – that our lives had become unmanageable”.

I am looking forward to continuing with Green Christian to map the strange land which opens up when we accept the

current chosen trajectory of collapse. As it was for the first followers of Jesus, it is Good Friday without any certainty of an Easter. You might think I am giving up hope in saying that. You might want to admonish me that despair is a sin. But let me explain what the hope is that I am giving up.

I now see that the hope I once espoused was in fact a strategy of avoidance, psychologically motivated and theologically constructed, because I feared my own anxieties – and ultimately that archetypal loss, death itself. Now I have accepted that, I find myself moving beyond both hope and despair, to a place where neither the past nor the future dictate the terms for action, but action comes naturally all the same.

Beyond that threshold I find a new kind of hope, free from the future and free for the future. There is a greater clarity of mind, poverty of spirit, and freedom of manoeuvre. I can't claim that my motives are any "better" for this, but I do feel that their amalgam has less of the self-interest and anxiety which were there beforehand. Is that hope? I don't see why not.

I don't think I am the only person experiencing this shift in consciousness, awakening to regenerative collapse. I can hear it in conversations within Extinction Rebellion, and in the silences where conversations about climate change, tail off or swerve. Finding the words is hard, and the scope for misunderstanding is seemingly endless, but forging a new language for these times is necessary work.

Many people experience it as a journey of grief – and it is not lost on me that my own awakening happened after the last of my parents died. But for me the closest parallel is coming out. Like many LGBT people (especially Christians), I grew up in the shadow of an

existential threat. I coped by denying reality, which put me in an emotional deep-freeze until my mid-20s. But the truth is never entirely lost. Eventually I found the courage to seek help, and to climb out of denial. Nothing prepared me for the explosion of love, life and colour which followed.

The rewards of embracing the precious and precarious truth of our times are more ambivalent, but the experience is

just as transformative. I hope you find your membership of Green Christian gives you the courage it gives me, and I wish you the same rewards. ■



Paul Bodenham is programme leader for social action in the Catholic Diocese of Nottingham. Having retired as Chair of Green Christian he is focusing on "Borrowed Time", a project to develop pastoral care for the climate emergency.

Prayer by Moniczka Kowalczyk-Krol

They keep repeating that
We are made for these times.

I am not made for these times.
My courage weighs less than a robin's egg
Its shell is as tender as childhood milk

I am not made for these times
The light I carry is not a bright beacon
It is a guttering candle casting shadows on the walls of my room

I am not made for these times
My bones feel as awkward as a summer depression
They seek shelter in the old dark places of the earth

I am not made for these times
My heart is a trembling bird
Beating its wings at the reflection in an unfamiliar window

I am not made for these times
My words fall like dying stars
And catch like burrs on the coat of my tongue

For what I have received
May the Lord make me truly thankful
For what I am about to witness
May the Lord make me.

(with permission)