

Covid, Climate and Christianity

Can young people lead the way in building back better?

asks **Shilpita Mathews**

From university closures to social isolation, Covid-19 has significantly impacted young people. The crumbling of economic systems and effects on our health, both mental and physical, have highlighted the frailty of our human existence. Nearly a year on, despite the best efforts of many young people to claim invincibility and defy changes, no life remains untouched. As a young Christian coming to grips with “the new normal”, I would like to reflect on the role that faith can play in times of crisis – and to look beyond Covid to an equally urgent crisis: climate change.

Before rushing to “build back better”, we must reflect on the lessons learnt during these crises. Only when we pause to



Young climate protestor Sept 2020 Photo credit: Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona

understand our Creator's vision for the world, can we work towards restoration.

Covid-19 impressed on us a sense of deep interconnectedness. The zoonotic roots of the disease highlighted that environmental destruction has a direct consequence on our economy, environmental integrity and planetary health. Pursuing economic growth at the expense of the planet has proved to be a non-option; defining planetary boundaries is key to pursuing sustainable economic development. Moreover, it has shown our ability to rapidly change our behaviour, for example, by working from home, which has significantly reduced our carbon footprints.

Next, despite the digitalisation of our interactions, our lament over social distancing has renewed a love for people and the planet. Young people like me, who otherwise spend a lot of their lives online, are pleasantly surprised by this longing for physical encounters in the natural world and meeting friends in-person. Life in lockdown revealed a newfound appreciation for nature.

Finally, the crisis also revealed the disproportionate impact all crises have on the most vulnerable in society. Overall, these events have revealed many truths and conveniences which millennials have often taken for granted, living in the busyness of Western consumerist lifestyles.

Whilst we hope the pandemic has peaked, the climate crisis is ongoing, with its most devastating effects yet to come. A 2020 BBC survey found nearly three quarters (73%) of children (8-16 year olds) in the UK are worried about the state of the planet – including 22% who say they are “very worried”.¹ This eco-anxiety has been compounded by the pandemic as young people face an uncertain present and future. But where do all these anxieties begin?

Both the Covid and climate crises entail a loss of control. They have exposed the false gods of our culture such as security, success, wealth and freedom. While in and of themselves, pursuit of education or mobility are good things, they have

1 www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51451737

started to become “God things”. Our lives act as a microcosm for the state of our planet. The good gifts of Creation have been exploited, becoming more important than their Giver. The call to love God’s Creation for instance, is often not reflected in our materialistic shopping patterns. Equally, our call to love God’s people is marred, as depletion of natural resources and the impacts of climate change have effects like displacement of people. While the problem of sin is age-old, the shock of Covid-19 has caused many young people, for the first time in their lives, to truly lament.

A God who was, and is and is to come

In the turmoil of Covid-19, we bring to God not just our own loss, but the lost world we live in. We are called to turn towards God as we weep over the destruction of our planet and loss of lives. We are also called to repent, acknowledging today’s injustices are a consequence of “a massive disordering in our relationship with God, the Creator of heaven and earth”, as theologian Ellen F Davis puts it.² Yet, beyond despair, we are called to seek the character of God.

In the midst of the pandemic, we are reminded that throughout history God’s people have been a lost community, seeking freedom. A freedom that comes through repentance, and faith in an unchanging God. The same holds true today. As the pandemic has threatened our self-sufficiency, we are reminded by St Paul in Philippians 4:13, who was writing himself from the lockdown of prison, that Christ is sufficient. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”, wrote Paul. Christ-sufficiency emboldens us, as disciples, to partake in His ongoing reconciliatory work of all things, both people and planet (see Colossians 1:20).

A biblical response to Covid and the Climate

The ultimate restoration of Creation gives us not only an intergenerational but eternal vision for the world. So how can young Christians serve the world that God loves?

While environmental stewardship and social justice are long-standing foundations of the Church, these are often viewed in silos. As young people standing on the precipice of the climate crisis, we can affirm that Jesus’ call to love our neighbours (Matthew 22:39) directly translates to environmental justice. Our carbon footprints exacerbate the climate crisis, resulting in disasters and a range of tragic impacts, and disproportionately affects poorer countries.

Serving God should therefore prompt lifestyle changes

amongst young people, which they can cultivate early on in life, like reducing plastic consumption. Equally, it should prompt questions like who do I bank with, who do I work for, who do I vote for or where do I target my giving? Ensuring that in all our lives, our discipleship seeks environmental justice.

A false dichotomy between environmental actions and evangelism can influence some Christians. However for Christians, tackling biodiversity loss is not an optional extra; we believe that Jesus is Lord of all Creation, and that following him means caring for his world.

Ultimately, within the Church and elsewhere, action on climate means going beyond lifestyle changes. For instance, members of the Young Christian Climate Network (YCCN) are campaigning and raising awareness within their Churches, universities and workplaces. Forging partnerships within the global Church, especially in developing countries at the forefront of the crisis, is also essential.

Beyond the Church, we are called to be champions of a green recovery. For young people starting out in their careers, it can mean finding ways to raise issues in our workplaces, such as the need for good environmental policies and practice. With the numerous environmental jobs which we hope to see created, as part of the UK’s green recovery, it means actively seeking green careers. As an environmental economist, I have the privilege of working on enabling governments and businesses to implement climate-friendly policies, such as meeting the net-zero targets in the UK, and global Paris Agreement commitments. And, as the UK prepares to host COP26, the UN’s global climate conference, our calling as Christians can mean demanding change via political activism.

As the world emerges from the Covid crisis, young Christians, alongside others, are needed to help build a future where social and environmental prosperity are at the heart of the economy. In the face of the challenges that lie ahead, God’s eternal vision for the world must act as a compass in our discipleship. The pandemic has given an opportunity to respond with hope and love as we seek climate justice. ■



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² see <https://blog.arocha.org> 07/04/2020