

# Actions speak louder than words

**Andrew Davison** argues we must lead by example



*A flourishing life need not be energy-intensive or joyless*

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When it comes to climate change, I have disappointed myself. I've said all the right things. I've joined in the expression of green pieties on social media, but I have not much changed how I live. I am particularly disappointed that I spent so long treating flying – travelling on aeroplanes as often as I wanted or could afford – as if it were a sort of middle-class birthright. That behaviour alone has put me among the top few percent of offenders when it comes to carbon emissions.

Two things eventually made a difference on that score: or rather, two people. One is a university friend – multilingual, internationally-connected, fantastically successful in her profession – who could afford to travel around the globe as much as she wanted. However, she stopped flying, out of love of the earth she leaves to her children. The second is a colleague from my years at Cambridge, Julian Allwood, Professor of Engineering and the Environment. Here are two Christians who have taken stock and changed their behaviour. I met Julian ten years ago, when I preached at St Bene't's

Church in Cambridge and he was in the congregation. We have recently written a book together in which, among other topics, we address the pessimism that accompanies the idea that individual actions will not make any difference to climate change on their own. The effect that these two friends had on me helps shape my response: that there is no greater provocation to action or, in this case, to restraint, than the example of others.

An illustration comes from Sweden, and the *Flygfritt* (flight-free) movement. It was started by Maja Rosen and Lotta Hammar in 2018, who aimed to persuade 100,000 people not to fly. By not flying themselves and inspiring others to follow, they shifted Swedish habits. Partly in response, the Swedish government announced a change in priorities for its transport infrastructure and is expanding the domestic rail network. We can and should lobby politicians, but they will most likely listen to us when we lead by example.

I was held back from putting concerns about climate change into action by the idea that one person's actions alone make no difference. As I've said, I've come to see that differently. The other thing that deflected me from action has been the idea that some technological solution is bound to come over the hill before long, absolving us from the need to change how we live now. Certainly, our capacity to generate electricity from renewables will continue to grow at pace, but not fast enough to compensate for eliminating fossil fuels from where we use them most, namely transport, heating, and industry. We will make more electricity in the future, but if it's our only source of energy, there will be less energy overall.

Other touted engineering solutions include "green hydrogen" and "carbon capture and storage" (CCS), implemented at scale so that we can carry on using fossil fuels without dangerous climate consequences. This, however, is unrealistic. The production of "green hydrogen" is an energy-intensive process, requiring renewable electricity that would be better used elsewhere. And CCS is not a new or speculative technology; it has been used at industrial scale since 1972 and despite more than five decades of development, it is still marginal. Global CCS capacity has reached just 0.1% of emissions; even if installation rates immediately expanded 10-fold, the effect on climate mitigation by 2050 would remain insignificant.<sup>1</sup> CCS facilities are large, complex projects that require extensive planning, public consent, geological assessment, and capital investment. Even on an optimistic view, these solutions won't be making a game-changing difference by 2050.

That's not to be down on technology. We can have hope that innovations like CCS and nuclear fusion might transform the scene in the long term but they cannot currently be deployed at scale. As we face climate catastrophe, we need a clear-sighted sense of what matters and what does not, in changing how we live and in reducing our energy use. Avoiding plastic straws is all very good, but it is "tithing mint, dill, and cumin" (Matt. 23:23) compared to how households most use energy or contribute to climate change: driving, heating, flying, and a ruminant- and dairy-heavy diet.

That's where restraint is needed, and Christian tradition is no stranger to restraint. Many of us observe the season of Lent; many traditions prescribe (or advise) days of fasting. I have found Lent a useful way to think about our response to climate change. The parallel is only partial. Lent lasts for forty days; climate-driven restraint needs to last for years to come. On the other hand, in many ways the changes required to reduce



The climate is changing

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carbon emissions are less demanding than those of Lent. In that season, we might deliberately set certain pleasures aside. The restraint we need to show in responding to climate change is different: lives need to change, but we do not need to make anything needlessly difficult. It is not a recipe for joylessness.

Christian traditions have long understood that we are not transformed primarily by argument, but by practices that slowly re-form our loves. We come, over time, to want different things. What begins as discipline can become freedom. That is why restraint in the face of climate change need not be seen as a story of loss. Some things must be given up. But many of the goods that sustain a flourishing life — friendship, attention, beauty, worship, care for the vulnerable, delight in Creation — are not energy-intensive at all. They are, rather, time-intensive, relational, and local. They require presence more than consumption.

The world offers very few places where people can talk and take stock of their lives together, but our churches can be exactly that. We can assess the facts together. We can admit our weaknesses to one another. We can inspire one another. We can make resolutions, which are so much more powerful when they are made together. ■



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1. [nature.com/articles/s44286-025-00344-1](https://www.nature.com/articles/s44286-025-00344-1) "Too late for CCS and Hydrogen", J. Allwood, Jan 2026