

‘We can do that’

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The General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia recently passed a number of resolutions relating to climate change. One of them ‘requests all organisational units within the Anglican Church of Australia to reduce their environmental footprint through best practice energy use, water use, and waste disposal.’

Similarly, the September meeting of the Sydney Diocesan Synod agreed upon ‘the development and implementation of an environmental policy within each Parish and Diocesan organisation which expresses principles of good environmental stewardship and care’.

But what is the value of such resolutions? In this briefing, we will argue that they are realistic and helpful. We will also consider what makes people sometimes respond cynically or negatively to resolutions such as these.

The climate change debate is now at an interesting point. Most people agree that it is happening. But it remains difficult for people to imagine that their actions can make a difference.

- People find it hard to believe that our puny changes can make any difference to something as enormous as climate change. The ‘disconnect’ seems too great.
- It is also hard to bother making changes when we are aware of others who are not bothering. (The introduction to Australia of a well-known U.S. gas-guzzling all-terrain vehicle illustrates the way a minority will inevitably rebel against environmental care.)
- If it is hard for individuals to make changes, what hope is there to get meaningful agreement from *groups* about such changes? An ‘environmental policy’ for church groups risks devolving into endless committees, wasted paper, and no real result.

These psychological barriers combine to mean that for many of us, it is simply too emotionally exhausting to think about changing our own life and the life of a church or workplace. But here is why we think it is worth the effort.

- We might simply enjoy becoming the kind of contented Christians who do not need to over-consume. Christians (until recently) have usually rejected wastefulness. Habits of appropriate frugality were once a mark of contented Christian lives. A return to these habits will show the world that we are not mere consumers, but find our true identity thanking the one ‘who richly provides us with everything to enjoy’ (1 Tim. 6:17; cf 1 Tim. 4:4 & James 1:17).
- Our ‘puny’ changes then add up in three ways. Only when many individuals limit water usage, energy usage or waste production can the collective make gains. Secondly, proactivity by a few has a ripple effect: others catch on, copy and follow. Thirdly, in a democracy, this ‘ripple effect’ creates political will: governments are freed, or even forced, to take action when a consensus emerges in the populace.
- For Sydney Anglican groups to put their mind to such changes is a way of saying, even if only symbolically at first, that our neighbour matters and that the natural environment is worth our care. It is hard to see how an over-consuming Christian organisation brings much glory to Jesus Christ. We might even find that our group creates a ‘culture’ that helps individuals rediscover thankfulness, contentment, and appropriate frugality.
- Enough Christians buying e.g. a rainwater tank will begin to reduce costs for others.

Knowing where to start as an organisation, of course, seems daunting. But perhaps that is an artefact of there being so many options for change. Already several organisations are at work to list the ways in which people can start with the ‘low-hanging fruit’ – simple changes that will save us money. There is much more work to be done here but we thought we would start the ball rolling with a few simple suggestions:

- Has your church (or organisation) switched over to fluorescent lightbulbs? These can cut a power bill by as much as 10%. It could not be freer or easier with the help of some local councils, or such organisations as www.envirosaver.com.au .
- Has your church implemented simple practices to use power only when people need it? A few people can think about what lights, heaters and appliances are being left on, and whether timer switches, signage or simple retraining are needed to switch them off.
- Is anyone taking responsibility to purchase power-efficient appliances? Some technical knowledge may be needed here, but almost certainly your church or organisation would have someone competent to look into the options.
- Has your group considered switching to green power? www.choice.com.au reviews some of the options here; see also www.greenpower.gov.au .
- Does your group's property have space to offer one or a few dedicated parking spots to a car-share company such as www.goget.com.au? These organisations sorely need easy-access parking spaces without extensive haggling; the use of the car might be handy for church workers; and you would meet other regular local users of the car.
- Are taps and washers leaking? Have dual flush toilets been installed? Can lever or mixer taps (to find right temperature quickly) be installed? Are rainwater tanks (which attract government subsidies) an option?
- Can a church sustain a community garden, growing good quality vegetables for the local community in the grounds of a church? Composting will reduce waste; 'wetpots' will reduce water usage (www.wateringsystems.net); and the project would involve local people in a interesting long-term project on church grounds.
- Is your church or organisation renovating or rebuilding? Attention spent hiring an environmentally attuned architect will certainly translate into thousands of dollars saved in heating and lighting.

These are just simple preliminary ideas. Several people who help administer the Sydney Diocese are now thinking about what a more extensive 'environmental policy' might look like for churches and organisations; we'll keep you posted on developments.

Of course adaptation to climate change, and environmental care, are not a church's 'core business'. That is to be the community who gathers around Jesus and his word, joyfully inviting others to join in too. But there is no good reason to think that churches cannot act as community leaders in their environmental practices. They are simple expressions of contented thankfulness in the goodness of God—and will go a long way to help and reassure our worried neighbours.

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Sources/Further Reading:

Anglican developments:

General synod resolutions: www.anglican.org.au/gs2007.cfm?SID=33&SSID=119

Sydney synod resolution:

<http://www.sds.asn.au/Site/103750.asp?a=a&ph=sy> (scroll down to '17/07')

Christian Ministry in a Changing Climate, SIE report to Sydney Synod:

www.sds.asn.au/Site/103760.asp?ph=sy or <http://sie.moore.edu.au/708>

Speeches by Darren Mitchell and Karen Sowada of the SIE in support of Sydney resolution: <http://sie.moore.edu.au/708>

For tips on making changes:

www.southhurstville.anglican.asn.au/ecochurch.htm

www.shrinkingthefootprint.cofe.anglican.org

<http://climateinstitute.org.au> and its 'Cool Church Toolkit'

www.environment.nsw.gov.au/support/living.htm

www.greenhouse.gov.au

www.australia.gov.au/climateclever

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