

# COP26 and the Climate Emergency: My Christian Response

*Val King recounts her personal journey after handing over her business to a trust of 70 employees. Convinced that peaceful protest is the imperative in the current crisis, she joined the COP26 Camino and faced possible imprisonment. She draws attention to the persistent investment by large companies and churches in fossil fuels, and argues such protests are essential because only government intervention can bring about real change.*

## The Failure of COP26

Nearly 200 countries met at COP26 in Glasgow in November with the main goal of securing global net zero greenhouse gases by mid-century and keeping the target of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels within reach, which scientists say is required to prevent a climate catastrophe. Although most countries submitted plans, analysis has found that even if their targets are met, they will only limit global warming to around 2.4 degrees above pre-industrial levels. The main headline from the conference was the last-minute negotiations with

India and China and the agreement to 'phase down' coal production rather than phase it out. U.S. climate envoy John F. Kerry summed up the situation thus: "While some may have wanted even stronger language, the text that we agreed to has the first-ever – believe it or not – mention of coal and fossil fuel subsidies. That's never happened."<sup>1</sup>. Fossil fuels had been 'called out' for the first time at COP25 and it is difficult to comprehend that 24 COP meetings took place without direct mention of the main cause of climate change – the burning of fossil fuels. And, while the UK Government as President of COP called on all nations to act with urgency

to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, they continue to grant new licences for oil and coal fields. Aside from a list of targets, I have yet to identify one significant government initiative to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Targets are all very well, but they need to be supplemented by specific measures and action plans to ensure they will be reached.

One positive result from COP26 was the commitment by all parties to meet in Cairo in November this year, when Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) will be on the agenda. But in the meantime, the media has moved on to other pressing matters, not least



Photo: Lichfield Live



the pandemic, while the future of life on earth hangs in the balance. And it is our brothers and sisters in the Global South, who have done the least to create the problem, who bear the brunt of the effects of climate injustice. During COP26 rich countries had the opportunity to step up financial support to developing countries. I consider their failure to make good on an 11-year-old promise of \$100bn to be shameful.

Prior to COP26, Professor Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser and Chair of the Centre for Climate Repair at Cambridge University, wrote an article for 'Business and Finance' entitled 'We have no time on our hands', in which he stated the need for urgency in the strongest terms: "We have 4-5 years to put in place everything that is required to manage civilisation for the next millennium."<sup>2</sup> Sir David also points out the role of business in tackling the

climate emergency: "I am very, very keen to be working with the business sector, because it's the business sector that's taking these new solutions into the marketplace that create wealth, and also spin the whole process forward."<sup>2</sup>. Since writing this piece, COP26 has taken place; you can watch a highly informative 22 minute video on Sir David's views on the outcomes of COP26 and the challenges we face, including the role of the business community: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLd4EqQywwQ>.

## Prayerful Action

If we recognise the climate crisis as a moral, ethical and spiritual issue, what might be the appropriate Christian response? Firstly, we must pray. In the days leading up to COP, I joined the Camino to COP, an interfaith pilgrimage from London to Glasgow. Some had made the entire 500-mile journey

sleeping in church halls and engaging with communities on the way. At the start and end of COP26, I took part in all-night Earth Vigils, at times seated, at other times walking through the streets of Glasgow. We prayed for COP delegates and for the poor and vulnerable around the world; we prayed for God's Creation that is being destroyed as a result of our selfishness and greed. We prayed that we might take the right action, to speak out on behalf of those with no voice; to hold governments and institutions accountable for their actions or lack of action and for their hypocrisy. Each day during COP an inter-faith Vigil was maintained close to the conference centre and groups throughout the UK gathered in person and online to meditate and pray. I like to think that this presence gave delegates comfort and strength.

Before joining Christian Climate Action (CCA), when I was still Managing



**The Camino to COP reaches Glasgow with the Coat of Hopes<sup>3</sup>, November 2021**





Prayer Vigil outside the conference centre on the final night of COP26

Director of the Rooflight Company, I joined my husband Pete on the streets of London in April 2019 with Extinction Rebellion. We had just sold the business to employees in March 2019, so I must have been moved by the realisation of the terrible crisis we humans are in, because 2019 was one of the busiest and most stressful years of my life. Transitioning the business from private ownership to a trust model, effectively owned by 70 employees, was a big task on top of my duties as Managing Director. Added to this, we moved house twice. Nearly three years on, having started my own business, BFG Associates, I still feel compelled to do whatever I can to reduce the terrible impacts of climate change. In this journey, CCA has given me an even greater sense of purpose and has also deepened my faith; I see climate activism as a moral imperative, and am motivated in the same way as the abolitionists of slavery.

I regularly ask myself what Jesus' response would be to the climate emergency and the selfishness and greed that lie behind it. Sorrow? Anger? Compassion? I will never know, but I know that, in addition to prayer I must speak out and take action with the faith and privileges that I have been given. I can use my consumer power to live more sustainably, I can write to my MP, I can stop taking flights, eating meat etc, etc..... I have done these. However, given the immensity and urgency of the situation, I feel compelled to go further.

## Peaceful Protest and Civil Disobedience

Throughout history the power of peaceful protest and prolonged disruptive non-violent civil resistance has consistently proved to be effective in obtaining meaningful change from governments. Think of the civil rights movement in the US and women's suffrage in the UK. Of course, as Christians we have the ultimate examples of Jesus, St Paul and countless saints, who set themselves at times against the prevailing authorities, and paid the highest price. Going against the 'System' and breaking the law is well-trodden ground. The purpose of CCA actions is not solely to wake people up to the gravity of the climate crisis; it is to get the attention of government and institutions in order for them to take action. Unfortunately, this appears to require us to cause disruption, not least to obtain media attention. I truly wish this was not the case, as I hate causing disruption and annoyance to others, and I have been on the receiving end of many hateful comments and abuse. But this is not a popularity contest.

Three months ahead of COP26, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report was released with the headline 'Code Red for Humanity' by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. He said: "This report must sound a death knell for coal and fossil fuels before they destroy our planet. Countries should also end all new fossil

fuel exploration and production, and shift fossil fuel subsidies into renewable energy."<sup>4</sup> While coal production was the main topic at COP26, there was a notable absence of commitments to the reduction of exploration and subsidies in oil and gas. The much-reported presence of some 500 delegates representing the oil and gas sector may well have contributed to this outcome.

The fact is that oil and gas companies in developed economies, including our own, have little incentive to reduce production. Internal rates of return (IRRs) are around 15%-20% on hydrocarbons. Typical IRRs on renewables are around 5%-6%. Based on these numbers, it is hardly surprising that all three European majors continue to invest significantly more resources into oil and gas development than renewables development. BP, for example, will start up seven major new hydrocarbon production projects in 2022, with at least three more following in 2023 or later. In the face of this profit-driven, as opposed to planet-driven approach, the only answer is government intervention, a reduction in subsidies and a withdrawal of investment by individuals and institutions.

Many faith groups have divested from fossil fuels, but the Church of England, through the Pensions Board, Church Commissioners and some Dioceses continue to invest over £60m<sup>5</sup>. It is argued that by engaging with fossil fuel companies, they assist companies



**A 'die-in' at Glasgow's Queen Street Station representing the people of the global south, November 2021**

in their transition to a low carbon economy, and are ready to reduce investment if progress is not made. This approach may have been valid a few years ago, but the determination of oil and gas corporations such as Shell and BP to continue to open new fields is evidence that the approach is inadequately slow. Rt Revd Ernesto Manuel, the Bishop of Nampula in Northern Mozambique, puts the case for fossil fuel divestment very clearly: “Fossil-fuel investments increase climate change and impacts on those most vulnerable, and also destabilise communities... We plead with the international community — take your money out of fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy which is decentralised, benefits local people, and does not contribute to climate change”<sup>6</sup>.

On 29th August I was among 15 members of CCA who peacefully protested at St Paul’s Cathedral to call on the Diocese of London to divest from fossil fuels. After Holy Communion, we processed to the front of the Cathedral singing ‘Oh Lord hear my prayer’ and held out two banners with the messages: ‘No Faith in Fossil Fuels’ and ‘Churches Divest Now’. One of us, a lady called Karen, went to the pulpit and read out a statement to explain why we had chosen to act in this way. When she

finished, there was applause from the congregation<sup>7</sup>. I knew there was a risk of arrest, but I was surprised at the speed with which the police arrived. After discussion with the Canons representing St Paul’s, we said that we were not going to move from where we were standing and were left to be arrested for aggravated trespass. I was taken to Bishopsgate Police Station and held till 3am the following morning before being released pending investigation. I await to hear if or when I will be charged. During the action we handed over a letter to be given to the Bishop of London asking to discuss diocesan fossil fuel divestment. This resulted in a meeting with Bishop Sarah in October. We had very constructive discussions on the climate emergency and divestment and have a continuing dialogue with her and the Director of Finance.

## A Christian Response

In a joint statement on the climate emergency with Archbishop Justin, Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, said: “We call on everyone, whatever their belief or worldview, to endeavour to listen to the cry of the earth and of people who are poor, examining their behaviour and pledging meaningful sacrifices for the sake of the earth which God has

given us.”<sup>8</sup>. As individuals we must make meaningful sacrifices, but those in positions of power and influence have an even greater responsibility to act, as their decisions and actions have the greatest impact on the future of God’s Creation.

It was a sense of meaningful sacrifice that motivated three Christians to face arrest and imprisonment by taking part in an action on the DLR at Shadwell station in October 2019. The trial of Reverend Sue Parfitt, Father Martin Newell and Phil Kingston took place in January 2022. All three are members of CCA, and each told the jury they were compelled by their faith to take action to protect God’s creation and prevent run-away climate change. All three were unanimously acquitted, as the jury found they were lawfully exercising their right to peaceful protest. Although the actions were disruptive, the jury came to the conclusion that they were proportionate to the climate emergency and their firmly held beliefs that they had tried all non-disruptive means to bring the climate emergency to the attention of government, business and the public. At the start of the trial a document called ‘Further Agreed Facts’ was read out. It is important to note that the Agreed Facts were agreed by the Prosecution and the Judge and were





**Peaceful Protest by members of Christian Climate Action, St Paul's Cathedral, August 2021**

not part of their defence. I would like to draw your attention to Fact No.6:

‘Much of South America, North Africa, the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia (places which are currently home to 3.5 billion people) will be too hot for humans to live in within the next 50 years under a high emissions scenario, while many of the world’s major cities will need to be relocated or otherwise adapted within similar timeframes, due to sea level rise. This includes London, and in particular the City of London. In October 2021, the chair of the Climate Crisis Advisory Group, Sir David King, warned that London will have to be replaced as the UK capital if climate change is not rapidly addressed, because it will not be possible to defend it from sea level rise and flooding.’

Reverend Sue Parfitt said the following when addressing the jury: “Why did God call an old woman like me to act in this way? As Christians we believe God chooses the weak things of this world to confound the things that are


mighty. Central to my faith is obedience, and so far as I am able to discern, I am compelled to act in this way. In light of the urgency of the climate emergency we’ve got to sound alarm until we burst!”

It may be that you do not approve of the tactics of Extinction Rebellion and those of us in CCA who practise civil disobedience and non-violent direct action. We would argue that our actions are proportionate with the current and future effects of the climate emergency and the climate injustices being perpetrated on the poor and the vulnerable. As Christians we need to be open to a new way of being. The theologian Professor Elizabeth Johnson appeals to people of faith in her book *Ask the Beast* with a compelling and hopeful vision:

“A flourishing humanity on a thriving planet, rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the vision that must guide us at this critical time of Earth’s distress, to practical and

critical effect. Ignoring this view keeps people of faith and their churches locked into irrelevance while the drama of life and death is being played out in the real world. By contrast, living the ecological vocation in the power of the Spirit sets us off on a great adventure of mind and heart, expanding the repertoire of our love.”<sup>9</sup>

This is a vision I can believe in, but while there are faith and business institutions and governments which continue to believe that ‘business as usual’ is going to overcome the catastrophic effects of the climate emergency, I will continue to protest.

I would therefore urge you to act as if the climate emergency is an emergency by holding the government to account, particularly during their tenure of the COP presidency. There may be ways that your business, or those you have influence over, can tackle climate change. If you want to find out about CCA, visit: <https://christianclimateaction.org/>. 

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/15/five-big-takeaways-cop26/>
2. <https://businessandfinance.com/news/we-now-have-no-time-on-our-hands-in-conversation-with-professor-sir-david-king/>
3. <https://caminotocop.com/> <https://www.coatofhopes.uk/>
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-58130705>
5. Operation Noah | A Christian response to climate change
6. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/21-may/news/uk/faith-institutions-pull-out-of-fossil-fuel-companies>
7. [https://www.facebook.com/christianclimateaction/videos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/christianclimateaction/videos/?ref=page_internal); <https://christianclimateaction.org/>
8. <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/joint-statement-climate-change-archbishop-canterbury-pope-francis-and>
9. <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2014-04/ask-beasts-elizabeth-johnson>



**Val is former owner and MD of the Rooflight Company, a manufacturing business with 70 employees based in the Cotswolds. She and her husband Peter sold a majority shareholding to employees in March 2019 and she is a Trustee of the Employee Ownership Trust. Val now runs BFG (Business as a Force for Good) Associates, advising business owners on the transition from private to employee ownership. Having grown up in a Roman Catholic family, Val sees herself as Christian first and foremost and enjoys exploring aspects of other faiths.**