

ALL CREATURES OF OUR GOD AND KING

ANGLICANS WORKING FOR JOINT ACTION ON NATURE LOSS

**COP16 (UN Convention on Biological Diversity)
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WHY COP16 IS IMPORTANT FOR ANGLICANS

Across a turning globe Anglicans wake up to the dawn chorus as birds sing the praise of a new day and flowers tilt towards the rising sun. The sun brings energy to the process of photosynthesis in every plant and warms insects' cold bodies so that they also join in creation's song. Christians gather to pray, noting that, "[God's] Word calls all things into being, and the light of dawn awakens us to life", as we seek God's "wisdom [to] guide us this day that we may cherish and care for your good creation."¹

That praise does not cease. Nature in all its variety adds to the melody of creation, the nocturnal animals joining in with their near silent voice or their cries of love and warning, echoed in the deep oceans in whale songs of amour and lament. No wonder the Psalmist, in what has become the last verse of the last psalm, was able to write, 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!' (Psalm 150.6)

Like all people across the globe, Anglicans benefit every day from nature. We are a part of the highly interconnected and interdependent diverse creation that God has intended. Biodiversity provides our food and drink, with many plant and fruit crops dependent on insect pollination. The soil microbiome is essential for fertility. Diverse plant genetics are essential for agriculture. Trees provide fuel and building materials, as well as lowering the street temperature in our cities. Nature clothes us. Habitats capture and filter drinking water. Plants are the basis of our medicines. The natural world provides renewable energy sources. It also brings solace, can be the arena for spiritual enlightenment, and enables us to restore our mental equilibrium.

Anglicans see the beauty of nature around them. We pause and give thanks. We have come to know that to plant is to hope, to restore is to heal, and to protect is to love. Tens of millions Anglicans across the globe in 165 different countries are living this out in very practical ways. A few case studies of this incredible world-wide care for creation, including the Communion Forest, are given in this document.

Anglicans are both nature's guardians and its exploiters. We contribute to its protection, conservation and restoration, with Anglicans among indigenous peoples in particular having a deep relationship with, and profound understanding of, nature and passing on important wisdom from one generation to another. We are also nature's consumers, extractors, commodifiers and destroyers. At times we hear the praise of creation and stand in awe. At other times we intentionally

block out its lament because we have chosen to delude ourselves in a pursuit of perpetual economic growth, greed and self-interest. We become blind to extinction and deaf to nature's depleted song of praise. It would perhaps ask the question: Will it take a silent spring to wake us to what we have lost?

Within Anglican liturgy, the Benedicite is a canticle of praise for all creation. It reminds us of creation's song, with the verses following a simple pattern: "Bless the Lord you creatures, sing his praise and exult him for ever". The word "creatures" is replaced with phrases such as "whales and all that swim in the sea" or "birds of the air", or descriptions of the weather, such as "scorching wind and bitter cold". Creating our own local Benedicite, by including the names of the flora and fauna we see daily, celebrates the biodiversity around us.

In such a way, we begin to see nature for its intrinsic or inherent value, and not only for how it contributes to human needs and desires. God sees this holistic way as God creates all creatures, all comes from God, and God creates their interconnectedness and interdependence. The created world in the book Genesis is described by God as 'very good'. It is the fullness of all that he has made, with the sabbath being the culmination, or crown, of creation; a pause, a breath, a taking stock.

Anglicans also experience first-hand biodiversity collapse, the daily impact of climate change and the scourge of pollution. All three environmental crises are closely inter-related. When a species becomes extinct by human action, or we damage God's creation, we harm and reduce the diversity of expression of God's creation. We disturb the infinitely interconnected ecosystem that exists in a sensitive state of balance, as God intended. This can only be grievous to God who loves everything into being. We have failed in our calling, not only to take care of creation, but to live in harmony with our fellow creatures.

Rather than seeking to understand how we should live in a state of balance and harmony with nature, and find ways of living in symbiosis, we have understood our dominion as giving us licence to consume without limit - to abuse, spoil, exploit, squander and destroy what God has made to manifest his glory. We have sinned. Yet, there is a growing cry of lament within our church communities because we recognise that things are out of kilter and not right. We see the pain of this creation's loss etched on our fellow worshippers' faces and felt in their hungry bellies. We see it in the dying leaves of trees (that can no longer "clap their hands" as in Isaiah (55:12)), the collapse in ecological food chains² the eggs

¹The Archbishops' Council (2020) *A Time for Creation: Liturgical Resources for Creation and the Environment*. Church House Publishing, London.

²Fricke, E.C., Hsieh, C., Middleton, O., Gorczynski, D., Cappello, C.D., Sanisidro, O., Rowan, J., Svenning, J.-C., and Beaudrot, L. (2022) 'Collapse of terrestrial mammal food webs since the Late Pleistocene', *Science*, 377,1008-1011.

laid with thin shells³, and the carcasses washed up on our shores. We see it in increasing competition for nature's resources, the conflicts that emerge as a result, and in increased migration in search of security. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 98% of disaster displacements in 2022 were caused by weather-related events⁴. The result for humanity – whether we have much or have little – does not leave us at peace with nature. We are not able to live life in all its fullness.

OUR CALLS TO COP16

We believe that we have a distinctive Christian and Anglican voice to add texture and colour as an actor at the Colombian COP16 on the Convention on Biological Diversity. We come to listen to others, especially around our five priorities, each of which is headline 'choose . . .'. "Choose life" Moses implored the Israelites, with the options of life or death, blessings or curses (Deuteronomy 30.19). So we implore the governments of the world negotiating at COP16 to choose hope, choose peace, choose wisdom, choose justice and choose wellbeing for the whole of creation.

1. CHOOSE HOPE

When we slow down and enter into a sabbath pause, we notice things. Jesus brought this pause into every day. He saw the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the fruiting of trees, the corn ripening in the fields and that which had been choked by thistles. When we notice something, we are far more likely to treasure it. When we treasure something, we want to protect it. When we protect something, we want to see it thrive. When policies, commitments, actions and habits are in place that are good for nature, generally they are also good for sustainable business, and good for people too⁵. This is a hope-filled vision for all creation.

Our hope is not passive but active. The Christian imperative to act is empowering. We can each do something; when we can, how we can, with what we can. It does not matter if our personal actions are small or seemingly insignificant in the face of global pressures. We are responding to God's will and making amends for our sin.

We need to hear attentively the voices of those most impacted by biodiversity loss. Many, especially indigenous people, carry immense hope-filled wisdom that could help our global community trace out and find a more nature positive future. They know that losing nature isn't something that can be given monetary value because it profoundly matters at a spiritual level. As

such, Anglicans have the potential, alongside people of other faiths and those of good will, to be shepherds of hope and justice.

We want to play a part in a global coalition on nature, noting that, together with other faith communities, we are able to mobilise hope-filled responses to nature conservation through our theological reflection, our actions which demonstrate our love of neighbour (including non-human neighbours), the management of our land in nature positive ways, and our life of prayer seeking God's peaceable Kingdom which bears the fruit of love, joy and peace.

This will take a hope-filled humility in our relationship with our fellow creatures with which we share this single island planet home. This does not deny that, as human creatures with significant creative gifts and powers, we also have a responsibility to help other creatures to thrive and realise their God-given potential: creation "groans and labours" (Rom 8.22), and "the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8.19). Many indigenous communities understand this need for humility better than we do: they live in fellowship with the creatures in their ecosystem, taking only what they need, walking lightly, allowing and enabling natural regeneration, and respecting the right of other creatures not only to exist but to thrive.

2. CHOOSE PEACE

The Colombian theme for COP16 is 'peace with nature' and COP29 in Azerbaijan is 'COP truce'. Like its sister climate change, biodiversity loss is a major force multiplier in migration and conflict. Reducing land availability, especially through the depletion of soils and subsequent crop failure, deforestation, desertification, and scarcer natural resources are all drivers⁶. War itself also damages biodiversity and fosters a growing perception of the injustice between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. For example, in Afghanistan, decades of conflict have destroyed more than half of the country's forests, leading in turn to increasing vulnerability to floods, avalanches and landslides⁷.

Many Anglicans live in places of war, or emerging from conflict, or are themselves refugees. Inspired by their faith, they are often the reconcilers and menders in their communities. Through a myriad of small-scale projects across the world we are seeking to mend where the fabric of creation and communities has been torn. This is a missional task as through this work we reflect God's longing for the world. Whether it is village tree

³Castilla, A.M., Herrel, A., Robles, H., Malone, J., and Negro, J.J. (2010) 'The effect of developmental stage on eggshell thickness variation in endangered falcons', *Zoology*, 113(3), 184 – 188.

⁴IDMC (2022) *Global Report on Internal Displacement*

⁵Companies House (2023) *Going green is good for business*

⁶NATO Allied Command Transformation (2024) *Climate Breakdown and the Loss of Biodiversity*

⁷UNEP (2018) *Why we need to protect biodiversity from harmful effects of war and armed conflict*

nurseries in Tanzania, or protesting about creation care to the government of Australia, or championing the rights of the people of the Amazon in the face of large timber and fishing corporations, Anglicans are seeking to sow peace with nature. The Hebrew bible uses the word shalom for peace, though shalom is a broader concept referring to the harmony of all life lived with an awareness of God. It is that harmony with creation that we are called to discover through our servant-hearted discipleship as we follow the call of the prophet Micah (6:8) to “to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”

3. CHOOSE WISDOM

We treasure the many and varied indigenous Anglicans and the unique perspective that each person and group brings. Indigenous peoples are responsible for about 22% of the world's land and intersect with 40% of the world's protected areas⁸. We are conscious that too often their voices have been silenced or, worse, their way of life and customs seen by those in power as needing to be stopped. The abuses that have been committed are a stain on our history. That painful history went very often hand in hand with an exploitation for profit of indigenous ancestral lands and the biodiversity they knew and revered. Yet, in many places indigenous people remain custodians of biodiversity, especially in the hotspots of endemic species around the world. The indigenous carry deep knowledge of life on the land and water, hunting and fishing skills, the medicinal properties of plants, and the local names and folklore of flora and fauna. This wisdom is beyond monetary value and is lost forever when its carriers are silenced, broken or die. Might we hear, in listening to indigenous people, something of the voice of God coming to us through their wisdom?

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, acknowledges the contribution and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, and any implementation of this, must ensure that the rights and knowledge of these peoples are respected⁹.

Indigenous people have much to say about living in harmony and sustainably with nature if only we have the ears to hear. They point us back to the wisdom of God. The book of Proverbs speaks about wisdom as a woman who is always pleasant and peaceful, and brings something more special than jewels. Unlike the tree of knowledge in Genesis, which is off limits to Adam and Eve, the Tree of Life found in Proverbs is ready to be harvested and with more wisdom comes more happiness (Proverbs 3.13-18).

Our human condition has been to refuse to live according to divine wisdom and so come to live in disharmony with God and the rest of creation, of which we are a part but have become apart, and this has been perpetuated down the centuries in social injustices, domination and exploitation. But God is a merciful God who keeps calling us home from our sinful ways. In and through Jesus of Nazareth, redemption and healing is brought to everyone and all things, through reconciling all things visible and invisible (Colossians 1.16) towards the future revelation of the glorious liberty of God's children (Romans 8.21), when, in the new heaven and the new earth, there will no longer be death, mourning, weeping or pain (Revelation 21.1-4). This is a vision of a return to the infinite interconnectedness of a diverse creation that humanity has disrupted. St Francis of Assisi, in his 'Canticle of Brother Sun', called all creatures his brothers and sisters because they are God's gifts and signs of his providential and reconciling love.

4. CHOOSE JUSTICE

Anglicans are deeply concerned about the inequalities around the use of the world's nature resources and ecosystems. Whilst many of the world's population consume far more than they really need (throwing away much and contributing to food waste), others are seeing the exploitation of their land and destruction of nature on which they depend. Our global Anglican reach means that stories can be shared, especially about how an unquenchable growth agenda, and exclusive preoccupation with the present, leaves no regard for the future quality of life. As Anglicans we can be a bridge between corporations and communities that seek reconciling conversations and we can promote sustainable lifestyles that embrace the concept of 'enough'.

Daily we pray the Lord's Prayer in which we ask God to 'give us today our daily bread'. He does not promise a whole bakery or deep freezer of bread. He promises us enough. He is our provider and we are indebted to him, and from this gift we have bread for the meal table and bread for the Eucharistic table, the table of the Lord. He is reminding us of the gift of creation and that we have yet to find a way to ensure everyone has enough.

We pray for 'our' daily bread, not 'my' daily bread, thus confronting the individualism of our consumer culture head-on. Yet, too often we are consuming not today's bread, but the bread of the day after tomorrow though the over-exploitation of nature's bounty. We are surpassing planetary boundaries with nature and robbing future generations of what is rightly theirs¹⁰.

⁸<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-018-0100-6>

⁹See: Section C. 7a – *Contribution and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities*

¹⁰Richardson, K., Steffen, W., Lucht, W., Bendsten, J., Cornell, S.E., Donges, J.F., Drüke, M., Fetzer, I., Bala, G., Bloh, W.V., Feulner, G., Fielder, S., Gerten, D., Gleeson, T., Hofmann, M., Huiskamp, W., Kummu, M., Mohan, C., Nogués-Bravo, D., Petri, S., Porkka, M., Rahmstorf, S., Schapoff, S., Thonicke, K., Tobian, A., Virkki, V., Erlandsson-Wang, L., Weber, L., and Rockström, J. (2023), 'Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries', *Science Advances*, 9(37).

The Lord's Prayer draws us back to ask when enough is enough, and, with St Paul, learn "to be content with whatever I have" (Philippians 4.11) and that "there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment" (1 Tim 6.6)]. Paul urges in Colossians 3.5 that greed be "put to death" and in Ephesians 5.5 that no greedy person "has an inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and of God." We need to move away from the idols of consumption and having more stuff, of hoarding for ourselves by filling our metaphorical barns, all of which masks our inner dis-ease of emptiness.

Choosing justice can only be achieved if we live simpler lives, consuming less, building community and the common good, and learning to share. It also means learning to live lives of jubilee where we intentionally fast for our own well-being, and leave land fallow for a season so that its soil and nature can begin to recover, as commanded in Leviticus 25.4-5. COP16 can do more to look at how we communicate a different narrative to continued growth leading to human happiness.

One of the main foci of recent climate change COPs has been securing commitments for just finance. Likewise, there needs to be global ambition around the \$700 billion funding gap in financing the pledge to protect 30% of our ecosystems and restore 30% of those already damaged by 2030¹¹. This will require a funding flow to the global south, where much biodiversity damage is due to the extraction of resources used by the global north. The world's poorest cannot afford to pay for this, but it is a moral duty on those who have economically benefited to provide funding. This funding will have cascade benefits as it is shown that restored ecosystems provide services for local communities and reduce migration and conflict.

5. CHOOSE WELLBEING

Nature connection is important for childhood development and adult mental health. Studies have shown that we thrive when out in nature and there are many positive health benefits in terms of reducing stress and enhancing mental wellbeing, as well as the enjoyment of physical exercise¹². In nature children develop enquiring minds, learn to assess risk, and experience awe and wonder through taking a close look at flora and fauna¹³. Even tending a pot plant, or being able to see a tree in an urban environment, is good for us. No wonder the book of Revelation (22:2) speaks of the "leaves of the trees being for the healing of the nations". In some parts of the Anglican Communion trees are given and planted to mark life events, such as baptism, confirmation and marriage.

The benefits of a closer connection with nature are in body, mind and spirit. Whilst in some parts of the world church congregations meet outside under a tree because they have no building, in other places they are choosing to occasionally gather amidst nature to sing their songs of praise and break bread. This seems to be attracting new people to the Christian faith who come asking where they fit in the great cosmology that surrounds us, yet seek a God who loves them. The psalmist knew this question, asking, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8.3-4).

Seeing each person as unique and loved by God, means that Anglicans desire that every child should experience nature, perhaps plant a tree, feel the soil with their fingers, and hold something alive in the palm of their hand. Children should grow up in environments where nature is cherished, where pollution is a corporate sin, and where businesses disclose their impact on nature, not in a voluntary way (as currently in the Global Biodiversity Framework¹⁴) but through mandatory action that will lead to pride in their business delivery. Only then can nature really enter the soul of every human being in a positive way and help bring life in all its fullness.

CONCLUSIONS

Anglicans, deeply rooted in local communities and seeking to live sustainably alongside nature, have much to offer to COP16 and there is much that we want to learn from others. The voices of indigenous people, women and children, are ones we increasingly need to hear so that God's wisdom might be heard through them.

The need to consider ethical, cultural and spiritual values of nature, and the interaction of faith communities with the nature around them, has been increasingly recognised by conservation organisations and the global community, and is included in what is known as ecosystem services or natural capital. We recognised certain landscapes and places as having a sacred quality and there are ample stories of the close relationship between saints and wildlife, such as St Cuthbert, who after a night up to his neck in the sea praying the psalms was warmed by the breath of otters as they dried him with their fur, and St Francis of Assisi preaching to birds. These stories, and what we see, hear, touch, taste and smell in the natural world around us, leads us to praise the Lord for his creation.

¹¹The Paulson Institute (2020) *Financing Nature: Closing the Global Biodiversity Financing Gap*

¹²Fields in Trust (2018) *Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces*

¹³Kuo, M., Barnes, M., and Jordan, C. (2019) 'Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 305.

¹⁴UNCBD GBF Target 15

Every Eucharistic gathering, bringing to the altar the fruits of creation made from grain once scattered in the fields and grapes once dispersed on the hillside, is a thanksgiving that God the Father made all things, both visible and invisible, and declared it to be good, indeed, very good. Our response can only be to thank him for the many gifts he bestows on us and the rest of creation with which we share this single island planet home.

We desire to join in singing creation's song and allow the depleted voices to be heard more as nature recovers. Whilst we have lost forever the voices of species that have become extinct, in the economy of God they are part of the great cloud of witnesses that call us to live in such a way that chooses life. The psalmist offers thanksgiving for such a life given by God for us to share and which, with the right will, we can continue to enjoy (Psalm 65.9-13):

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

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Anglican Communion delegation to COP16

