

**Climate Justice: Insights from African Anglican Theologians**  
**by The Rt Revd Dr Graham Kings**  
An address delivered at the [Partners in World Mission Conference 2015](#),  
Swanwick, England, on 4 Nov 2015.

*The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own, Father, forgive.*  
*The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth, Father, forgive.*

This prayer was prayed at the first gathering of the Eco-Bishops initiative in South Africa in February 2015. It is taken from the [Coventry Litany of Reconciliation](#). Climate Justice and ecological stewardship are at the very core of the Anglican Communion's commitment to God's holistic mission. The fifth of [The Five Marks of Mission](#) is: "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth."

I believe that when we consider deeply not just climate *change*, but climate *justice*, and when we learn from the voices of our brothers and sisters in the global south, we see an interweaving of *three* of our five Marks of Mission. We see that Climate Justice is more connected and more urgent to the mission of the Anglican Communion today than perhaps we had otherwise thought:

Let's remind ourselves of Marks of Mission 3, 4 and 5:

- 3.** To respond to human need by loving service
- 4.** To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- 5.** To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

We will explore how each of these marks of mission relate to climate justice through an African Anglican lens.

Why is it important to hear the voices of theologians and Christian leaders in the global south? It is very difficult for those in seats of power to recognize their complicity in injustice. The privileged are often blinded to that privilege, and it therefore requires courageous, persistent voices from those who are oppressed to raise attention to that injustice and to the imbalance of power.

Hearing the voices of the global south is so important for that reason. Are we in the global north blinded to our white, Western privilege? Are we aware of what living with white, Western privilege means on a day to day basis, and how those privileges are deeply connected to the realities of climate change for the majority of the world's population? As we hear from African theologians, we learn that climate change is not primarily an

ecological issue, an environmental issue, or even a development issue; it is a justice issue and a most urgent justice issue.

So we need to talk openly, honestly, and humbly about climate change in the context of a debate around justice, and indeed the global north's complicity in that injustice. We need to hear the voices of those who feel and live out that injustice most acutely; those in the global south whose crucial voice is often not heard in key decision making processes.

### **Mark of Mission 3: To respond to human need by loving service**

When talking about climate change, what is the human need that requires our loving, servant response? Severe droughts, floods, rising sea levels, food shortages, hunger, conflict and war, loss of land and home, loss of biodiversity, and loss of human and wildlife dignity are just a few of the very real effects of climate change in our world today.

More specifically, let us consider the impact of climate change on areas within South Sudan, Tanzania and Namibia. The Rt. Rev. Anthony Poggo, Bishop of Kajo-Keji in the Province of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan, [reflected](#) on the consequences of climate change in his region at the Lambeth Conference in 2008:

Last year there were floods in most parts of Sudan and Eastern Africa. The glaring examples entail the recurrent occurrence [of] droughts in places that had not experienced droughts before; prevalence of floods out of season and at awkward times and places; stronger westerly winds presumptively leading to drier environments and the citing of harsh weather conditions that are linked to the many plane crashes; extinction of plant species, lower rates of photosynthesis and water levels. All of the above have contributed in one way or another to the diminishing levels of crop yields. [Sadly, this trend has been so for the last few years.]

Poggo noted that climate change also exacerbates internal problems like population increase: for example, people are being forced to live in previously undeveloped forested areas which increase occurrences of diseases, thought to be the cause of a number of recent public health challenges.

He highlighted another impact of climate change, the reduction of needed resources like water and also arable farm land, which in turn causes conflict and war: for example, northern Sudanese nomadic herdsman need the use of available land and water (now quite scarce) as they follow their annual migration to the south.

With the urgency that is characteristic of the global south when talking about climate justice, Poggo claimed that:

doing nothing is not an option. The church can play a significant role in enlightening the people. The church meets more people face to face every week and can therefore be the best avenue to bring this issue to its adherents.

In terms of taking responsibility and action, Poggo did not just point a finger at the global north, but also sees culpability within Sudan, and cited the recent twenty-one years of civil

war, during which mass deforestation took place in order to make charcoal. As a response, their diocese has made a deliberate effort to intensify tree planting, and trees are planted for every new church that is dedicated.

Now we move from Sudan to Tanzania, East Africa, where the Rev. Canon Johnson Chinyong'ole, General Secretary of the Anglican Church in Tanzania, is this month working to address [the food shortages in his country caused by climate change](#).

Late rains in central Tanzania have caused crop failures and therefore severe food shortages, as the majority of people in that region depend on subsistence farming. This is critical because the lean season, when crop yields are usually low, is in three months' time, and so any food stores will be seriously reeducated at a time when food is most needed. Canon Johnson Chinyong'ole is working to get food mobilized from other parts of the country to support those most in need, and he also wants to build seed banks for later in the year as many farmers have neither seed left to sow nor money to buy more seed.

And finally we consider Namibia. The Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, chair of the Anglican Communion Environmental Network [has said that](#) "drought has forced the livestock industry – upon which seven in ten Namibians depend for their livelihoods – to declare a state of emergency, and the government is pressing farmers to sell their cattle."

When the majority of the world looks to the Earth to provide resources for their daily needs and when those resources are robbed, destroyed, and compromised by climate change, the third Mark of Mission calls us to respond by loving service in this context of human need on a global scale.

#### **Mark of Mission 4: To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation**

How do we interpret this fourth Mark of Mission with regard to climate justice? In Christian Aid's provocative theology of climate change: [Song of the Prophets](#), Susan Durber draws on insights from theologians, activists, and Anglican leaders in the global south. Kenyan Anglican theologian, Professor Jesse Mugambi, and advocate for climate justice draws out two key causes of climate *injustice*:

1. an imbalance of power between the global north and global south, and
2. consumer culture, driven by the global north

Both of these, Mugambi argues, are embodied in unjust structures of society which lead to natural and human violence towards the majority world, the global south. Thinking about climate justice is therefore not just about responding to human need through loving service, but also about transforming unjust economic and political structures of our society which *cause* climate change, and as part of that, acknowledging the complicity of the global north in these structures.

Mugambi is explicit in his critique of the relationship between the global north and south throughout history. He argues that "the attitude of the north towards the global south has remained one of patronage and condescendence rather than of partnership and empathy"<sup>[1]</sup>

and that refusal to change this attitude is not down to ignorance, but “because of the power relations that remain unchanged, resulting from the dominant political, economic and missionary history.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Mugambi’s words are reminiscent of the final page of *Things Fall Apart*, by Nigerian author, literary professor, and poet Chinua Achebe’s: After years of traditional and cultural breakdown in an indigenous Nigerian tribe as a result of colonial and missionary influence, one colonial Commissioner considers the suicide of one of the tribe’s chiefs to be good content for his next book to be published in the European market: “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.”<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, Mugambi describes northern patronage of the global south as “dehumanising,” suggesting that this kind of dominance and exploitation is only possible when you choose to forget the human dignity and equality of the exploited.

In recent missiological history there has been a shift away from patronage, from seeing the north as a missiological centre-point and great educator, to the south, to recognising every nation as being a center of God’s missional calling to all nations. It is this shift towards equality, dignity, and empowerment that needs to be reflected in the global north’s political will to combat climate change, releasing nations in the global south to decide how their natural resources are used, and to exert political power in preventing the continued destruction of their ecological landscapes.

Mugambi argues that the reason for ecological destruction which in turn is the cause of climate change, is “profligate consumption, » and he highlights that this is not the same as the “abundance” that Jesus proclaims in John 10:10.

The Psalmist declares in Psalm 24:1 that

The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it.

And yet consumerist culture largely involves those in the global north treating the earth as if it belongs to them, to be used without limit regardless of the cost and despite the damage done to those who are politically and economically unable to stop it. Durbur raises the voices of Anglican leaders in the global south as they critique the consumer culture of the global north and call “privileged Christians to move from a culture of consumerism to one of sharing.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The [Eco-Bishops Initiative](#) led by the Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, issued “[The World is Our Host Statement: A Call to Urgent Action for Climate Justice](#)” in February 2015. This humble, challenging, and inspiring statement widens the challenge of climate justice from an exclusive focus on unjust systems of economics and politics, adding that:

The problem is spiritual as well as economic, scientific and political. We have been complicit in a theology of domination. While God committed the care of creation to us, we have been care-less – but not hopeless.

By “theology of domination,” the statement refers to God’s command to Adam in Genesis 2 to “rule over” the earth, which certain schools of theological thought have interpreted as a

command to dominate and exploit the earth for human purposes. There is a spiritual need here: for repentance from theological complicity in ecological exploitation that leads to climate change, and for a humble turning to careful stewardship of the Earth, in fearful remembrance that it belongs not to humanity, but to God, for his glory.

Zambian theologian, the Rev. Canon Dr. Kapya John Kaoma, challenges a theological complicity not just in active ecological destruction, but also in apathy towards taking any action leading to change, noting that a wider “theology of dominion” promotes earthly deterioration as inevitable, something to be expected in anticipation of Jesus’ second coming.

When we hear these insights from Prof. Jesse Mugambi, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba and Dr. Kapya John Kaoma, we see that engaging in climate justice means acknowledging political, economic, scientific, and spiritual complicity in unjust structures that cause ecological violence to the majority world.

The way towards peace and reconciliation is humble repentance and turning away from consumerism, earthly domination, and exploitation. We need to ask for God’s hope, wisdom, and strength in guiding us towards an ability to give up power. We need to share the earth’s resources and to live simply for the sake of the dignity and equality of our global neighbours.

### **Mark of Mission of 5: To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth**

Dr Kapya John Kaoma contributed an important chapter on this fifth Mark of Mission in the book [Life-Widening Mission: Global Anglican Perspectives](#), edited by Cathy Ross.<sup>[5]</sup>

He put forward two theological mandates to engage in climate justice by striving to safeguard the integrity of creation:<sup>[6]</sup> First, the earth is a sacramental “place of divine mystery” and therefore another form of divine revelation. Second, we have an ethical responsibility to care for future generations by sustaining the life of the earth.

Dr Kaoma argues that our understanding of mission needs to be broadened to include ecological mission, not just social mission for the salvation of humanity. He uses terms such as “eco-mission,” “earth-care” and “missionary Earthkeeping”<sup>[7]</sup> noting that these have not been given the particular focus in missiological studies, conferences, and papers that they deserve. They were mentioned in [Edinburgh 2010](#) as part of other themes, but were not considered as singular priorities in their own right.

For Kaoma, the earth is a sacrament; a way in which God is revealed and more greatly known. Whilst Western theology has often viewed the earth as negative, a cause of distraction and prevention from spiritual freedom, Kaoma cites the Scriptures which declare that “the universe is filled with the glory of God” (Isa. 6:3) and that “for him and through him and to him are all things” (1 Cor. 8:6).

He maintains that God is present on earth, that he made the earth and declared it “good,” and that Christ is the unifying force and presence holding the entirety of earth together. The creation reveals the creator; the earth reveals Christ.

“Therefore,” states Kaoma, “in ecological terms, this manifestation of divine glory is revealed fully in the complex web of life.”<sup>[8]</sup> It takes the whole world to know the whole gospel. According to this thinking, to participate in destroying the earth is to participate in destroying the revelation of the Creator God. Kaoma moves from talking of “*missio Dei*” to “*missio Creatoris Dei*” — from “the mission of God” to “the mission of the creator God,” and he stresses that constantly upholding, renewing, and sustaining the earth is intrinsic to the creator God’s mission. He argues that the prophet Isaiah “was right when he proclaimed God’s salvation as an advent of the new creation, where all creatures will live in perfect shalom.”<sup>[9]</sup> And so, for Kaoma, climate justice involves joining God’s wider mission for the salvation of the earth as much as it involves joining with his mission for the salvation of humanity.

Prof. Mugambi, Dr. Kaoma, and Archbishop Makgoba all highlight in different ways the extent to which African people live in awareness of their ecological environment and in dependence on the earth, and indeed see their faith in God as connected to nature. For example, for Archbishop Makgoba this means planting trees as a part of confirmation litanies. Leading African theologian John Mbiti goes further, writing that:

Africans exist in a religious universe, so that the natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They not only originate from him but also bear witness to him.<sup>[10]</sup>

In this way, to destroy ecological systems is to destroy the potential for witness to Christ, and Kaoma argues in no uncertain terms that this is “an abomination to the Creator.” He also sheds light on certain Enlightenment-influenced missionary activities which “eroded indigenous people’s eco-spirituality and led to the desecralisation of nature.”<sup>[11]</sup>

He also makes tangible suggestions of positive action that can be taken to reduce climate change, and therefore to walk towards climate justice. Practically speaking, he calls for reducing meat consumption, planting trees, not dumping waste in global south countries, and developing eco-friendly seminaries as tangible steps to climate justice. Culturally speaking, he calls for those in the West to challenge cultural patterns and aspirations by being content with smaller houses, having one car instead of two, and, ultimately, learning to live by needs rather than wants. Theologically, he suggests that theological education on eco-spirituality be taught in seminaries and theology faculties as core curriculum; he also recommends updating Church and Sunday school materials to reflect eco-aware theology, and to dedicate a “decade of environmental protection” in contrast to the “decade of evangelism” that was declared by the Anglican Communion for the decade 1990–2000.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, African Anglican insights into climate justice paint a picture of passionate advocacy for urgent action, for repentance from historical and current complicity in unjust

systems, for equality for all nations and peoples, and for a broadening of theology, which sees climate justice as central to God's redemption of his people and of the earth.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes about how "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22). As we seek to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, and consider the reality of rejecting consumer culture and of "living simply so that others can simply live" (to borrow the words of Mahatma Gandhi), what future vision are we pursuing on earth?

Philosopher Kate Soper, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at London Metropolitan University and Keynote speaker at the [Ethical Consumer Conference 2015](#), is developing an "alternative hedonism." This is a call away from thinking of ethical living as ascetic and dreary, a constant denial of those things that we enjoy. She writes about the pleasures of a lifestyle of reduced consumption.

This is very interesting because it is a secular challenge to apathy around changing consumer habits which lead to climate change. It is also strikingly reminiscent of the Prophet Isaiah's call in chapter 58, which describes how pursuing a lifestyle of freedom for others, letting go of power and sharing wealth leads to the most exquisite picture of thriving living:

The Lord will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. (Isaiah 58:11-12, NIV)

As our African brothers and sisters know more instinctively and fully than we often do, "abundance of life" is not found in greater wealth and possession, but in participating in the "*missio creatoris dei*" through justice to all humanity and to all of creation.

Let's end in [a prayer for climate justice](#) by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba. <sup>[12]</sup>

Spirit of God, You established the dance of Creation;  
bring life out of death  
bring order out of chaos.  
Call us to radical action:  
to care for the web of Creation  
to share our resources justly  
and to work for the renewal of our Mother, Earth.

*Bishop Graham Kings's other posts may be found [here](#). The featured image shows Senegalese singer [Baaba Maal](#) inspecting failed crops on a visit to a village in Mauritania. It was uploaded to Flickr by [Oxfam International](#), and is licensed under Creative Commons.*

- 
- [1] Susan Durber, *Song of the Prophets: A Global Theology of Climate Change* (2014), p. 11.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- [3] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (2001), p. 151.
- [4] Durber, *Song of the Prophets*, p. 15.
- [5] “The Fifth Mark of Mission: To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth,” in *Life-Widening Mission: Global Anglican Perspectives*, ed. by Cathy Ross (2012), pp. 75-92.
- [6] *Ibid.* p. 77.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- [12] Initially written by Archbishop Makgoba for the first day of Advent, it is now used a climate justice prayer resource.