

Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2021

Consultation Response from the Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland

Introduction

The Evangelical Alliance represents and joins together hundreds of organisations, thousands of churches and tens of thousands of individuals to make Jesus known. Representing our members since 1846, the Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest evangelical unity movement in the UK. United in mission and voice, we exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society. We have been working in Northern Ireland for over 30 years and engage across a wide range of policy issues from poverty to reconciliation and issues of human dignity.

We welcome this Climate Change Bill as it honours the commitment made in the New Decade New Approach agreement, to introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions, in line with the Paris Climate Change Agreement 2015. We also welcome it as it recognises that climate change is a defining crisis of our time, on a global and national scale, and one which the global Church is alert to and is fast becoming a priority, especially to young adults in our churches. The Bible sets out a strong theological argument why Christians should care about climate change and creation care, perhaps more than any other group.

Theological Reflection

**"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."
Genesis 2:15**

As Christians we believe that there is a clear Biblical mandate to care for creation. God has given humans a unique responsibility to act in a way that looks after and looks out for His creation. We are called to be stewards and take care of the earth that God has given us.

"The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Matthew 12:31

Christians also believe that there is a clear Biblical mandate to love our neighbours. We know that our neighbours are not just the people living on our street but people across and around the world. Thinking about the impact of our actions, such as what we buy, what we eat or what we wear on our neighbours in other parts of the world is an important part of our responsibility to act compassionately towards others and respectfully towards future generations.

"Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did." 1 John 2:6

And finally, as Christians we believe that there is a clear Biblical mandate to strive to be more like Jesus, embodying his characteristics and compassion for God's people and God's earth. Jesus was not greedy, nor selfish, nor wasteful, and these are not characteristics that we should be adopting in our lives today.

As Christians we have no doubt, that at the heart of Christianity, the Bible calls for us to serve God by living compassionately and loving His people and creation, and for that reason we think it is essential that we respond to this consultation on behalf of our members and the wider Christian community.

The Climate Change Bill (Northern Ireland) 2021

The policy objectives of the Bill are to:

- Enable the mitigation of the impact of climate change in Northern Ireland.
- Establish a legally binding net-zero carbon target for Northern Ireland by 2045
- Provide for the establishment and powers of a Northern Ireland Climate Commissioner and Northern Ireland Climate Office.
- Guarantee existing environmental and climate protections.

Churches in Northern Ireland do not disagree with these aims and objectives. We welcome the move from sentiment to action and the delivery of the NDNA promises. However, we have questions around the Bill:

1. Why two Climate Change Bills?

Reverend Allen Sleith, member of the PCI Stewardship of Creation Panel, claims that denialism and alarmism seem to be the two main extremes of the discussion around climate change and that they only “end up reinforcing the status quo”. Within this context it makes it harder to engage churches and society in the long-term engagement work that climate change requires. There is a real risk that The Northern Ireland Assembly is confusing matters further by proposing two Climate Change Bills that broadly have the same aim but have different strategies to achieve them. We would prefer to see the proponents of each Bill working together to develop a Bill that shows unity in our politics and a good example of leaders working together across political and party divides.

2. Is this ambitious Bill deliverable?

We have some concerns about some of the more practical issues associated with delivering such a comprehensive piece of legislation, as outlined in the Private Member Bill: Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Bill 2021 Bill Paper:

“There is a lack of potential costings provided with the PMB, both in terms of setting up the provisions under the PMB and achieving the net zero and annual targets. There is especially a lack of costings for specific sectors, beyond what the UK CCC has provided.”

“There is a lack of published detail on the level, scope, methodology of consultation performed and detailed analysis of responses, especially whether it covered all aspects under the PMB beyond the overall target and sought opinions across all sectors to be impacted.”

“The PMB does not appear to be accompanied with a form of impact assessment or a rural proofing scoping or exercise, given the potential impacts on rural communities and livelihoods”.

How can the people of Northern Ireland respond to a piece of legislation that will have a profound impact on our lives, our economy, and our land without having an indication of what it is going to cost and exactly how it will impact us?

3. What about the impact on the agricultural economy and community?

We note the comments of the Minister of Environment, Edwin Poots: The Minister has expressed his disappointment about the outcome the Private Members Bill, which he says will impact negatively on the agri-food sector and the rural community.

In Northern Ireland, the local church often lies at the heart of rural communities as an integral and important part of farming life. We are concerned about the impact on these communities and on the life of these church families.

4. Why a net zero target for 2045?

The Committee on Climate Change said that, given Northern Ireland's economic reliance on agri-food, an 82% cut in emissions by 2050 would be an equitable contribution to the UK's wider net zero ambition.

It said there was no technical reason why Northern Ireland could not get to net zero, but it would mean a reduction in agricultural output.

Agriculture is the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases here - most of it is methane from cattle.

If the Committee on Climate Change is a trusted government body, why does this Bill have to go far beyond their recommendations?

Response from Christians and the Church

Here I will outline some of the many responses from churches and Christian organisations across the UK and Ireland to the climate crisis and show how this issue is growing in importance to churches, faith organisations and individual Christians.

1. 'Burning the House Down'

A 2020 survey carried out by two faith-based organisations, Tearfund and Youthscape, examined attitudes to climate change among Christians aged 14 – 19 across the UK.

The research found that 90 per cent of young people are concerned about the climate crisis and 80 per cent think that Christians should respond to climate change, yet only 10 per cent think that their churches are doing enough (Youthscape, 2020)

[Burning-down-the-house.pdf \(digitaloceanspaces.com\)](#)

2. 'Christians, Creation and the Climate'

This most recent survey by The Evangelical Alliance which surveyed over 900 people - both church leaders and church members - found that 86 per cent of church members and 90 per cent of church leaders believe that they have a responsibility to address climate change, yet only 14 per cent of church members and 16 per cent of church leaders agree that their church is doing enough to address climate change.

The full research will be published later in 2021 in the run up to COP26 (United Nations Climate Summit in Glasgow in November 2021).

We were struck by some of the emotive responses we received:

"I find it frustrating that... my church sees it as a secondary – if not tertiary – issue."

Whilst there are some Christians who are ambivalent about climate change, there are many who feel passionately about the important role that the church can play in addressing climate change. The survey showed that there is a desire for churches to support their congregations to do more.

"We need to see how caring for the environment links with the gospel, with evangelism, with loving God, loving others and with worship."

3. 'Creation Care'

The Evangelical Alliance created a resource called Creation Care specifically for a Northern Ireland context which recognised that Northern Ireland is a special part of these islands.

"From farming to fishing, golf to film locations, tourism to sites of special scientific interest and UNESCO world heritage sites, our land is closely linked to our livelihood. Land shapes people and people in turn shape the land. A people's relationship with their land is an intimate thing and its good stewardship is central to social wellbeing and justice".

Creation Care is a challenge to the evangelical church in Northern Ireland, asking, "are we living well in this land?"

[CreationCare.pdf \(eauk.org\)](#)

4. Tearfund

Our member organisation, Tearfund are prioritising conversations on the climate. They believe global poverty is intrinsically linked to the climate crisis and is pushing people further into poverty. Laura Young is the COP26 advocacy and campaigns coordinator at Tearfund, she is concerned that Climate justice is a priority for young adults but not the church. They have created a suite of resources to equip and resource the church to act including prayer, the Wave of Hope campaign and encouraging churches and Christians to join them in signing The Climate Coalition's declaration which calls on the UK Government to lead the world in delivering a healthier, greener, fairer recovery which limits warming to 1.5°C. They have also helped develop The Climate Emergency Toolkit- a step by step guide for churches or Christian organisations throughout the UK and Ireland to respond to the climate crisis.

[Reboot – take action on the climate crisis - Tearfund](#)

[Church Climate Resources | Climate Emergency Toolkit](#)

In the near future we have plans to collaborate with Tearfund NI to develop the Christianity and Climate Change film series to include NI church voices and become a resource to equip local churches to engage with the issue of climate change at a local level.

5. Listening to the voices of Young Adults

Christian climate scientist, Katharine Hayhoe points out that one of the most important things we can do in the face of climate change is have a conversation, but what must follow is action. Space needs to be made for such a conversation, and young people should be invited to take part, to voice their concerns and set out a plan of action to move forward with the urgency this issue deserves.

Recently The Evangelical Alliance published a suite of resources to help churches to reach, engage and disciple 20s and 30s and to equip churches to host these necessary conversations with young adults.

[7 conversations your church needs to have to reach young adults - Evangelical Alliance \(eauk.org\)](#)

6. Presbyterian Church In Ireland

As the largest Evangelical church denomination in Ireland, The PCI are encouraging their church leaders and members to have a clear theology around creation care and the environment and to respond with action.

Reverend Allen Sleith sits on the PCI Stewardship of Creation Panel and is a regular contributor to the Belfast Telegraph feature 'Thought for the Weekend'.

In a newspaper article dated 20 February 2021 he called the local Church to a lifestyle of self-sacrifice as a response to the climate crisis,

“Lent is a season of sober reflection in which we recognise and hopefully practice, something of the same prioritising that Jesus embodied, restraining our self-centred appetites, in service of God and our life with others.

And in this era of climate change - a greater looming challenge than even Covid-19 - a Lenten way of life will be for the long haul - and the sooner, the better.”

[Allen Sleith: Thought for the weekend - BelfastTelegraph.co.uk](#) 20 Feb 2021.

Sleith is also a regular contributor to the Herald Magazine, the well-established, regular publication from the PCI. In March 2019 Sleith wrote an article called, ‘Turning Over a New Leaf’ which called the church to lead by example when it comes to acting in response to climate change.

[Presbyterian Herald March 2019 by Presbyterian Church in Ireland - issue](#) (page 36)

In the most recent publication of The Herald Magazine Summer 2021, Sleith says that “denialism” and “alarmism” only “end up reinforcing the status quo” so the response from the church must be specific and distinct in these 3 ways:

Be informed – citing a list of Christian writing by experts in climate change, most noteworthy ‘*Riders on the Storm: The climate crisis and the survival of being*’ by Alastair McIntosh.

Be inspired- Others may be inspired to tackle climate change for their own reasons, many of which are laudable, but the church does so because it loves the God who created, sustains and saves it by grace, and so aligns itself with such love.

Be transformed - As McIntosh writes, “Climate change can press us to deeper layers of reflection than we might ever have entertained before.” He continues, “A crisis is too good a chance to waste.”

[Presbyterian Herald Summer 2021 by Presbyterian Church in Ireland - issue](#) (page 20)

7. Eco Church Community

This is an English and Welsh initiative which consists of a free online survey and supporting resources designed to equip churches to express care for God’s world in worship and teaching; in looking after buildings and land; in engaging with local community and in global campaigns, and in the personal lifestyles of congregations. The actions taken count towards a prestigious Eco Church Award at Bronze, Silver or Gold level. We would welcome the broadening of this scheme across all of the UK. Eco Church is an A Rocha UK project, run in partnership with Christian Aid, The Church of England, The Methodist Church, Tearfund, The United Reformed Church and Allchurches Trust Limited.

[Eco Church - An A Rocha UK Project](#)

The most recent A Rocha UK campaign is called *The Climate Sunday Initiative*.

The Climate Sunday initiative is calling on all local churches across Great Britain & Ireland to hold a climate-focused service on any Sunday before COP26 (November 2021). At this service, congregations are encouraged to make a commitment to greater action to address climate change in their own place of worship and community and to use their voice to tell politicians we want a cleaner, greener, fairer future at the heart of plans agreed during COP26. Churches can sign up online before 5th September 2021.

[Climate Sunday | Service Resources | Worship | Commit | Speak Up](#)

8. Jubilee

Jubilee is a Christian creation care organisation who define 'creation care' as environmental and agricultural stewardship that incorporates fairness and flourishing, welfare and wellbeing. They run the first community owned farm in Northern Ireland near Larne. Their care farming services focus on human health and wellbeing, notably the many benefits – physical, mental, social and spiritual – that come from working with animals, plants, soil and other people in community. Funded by various parts of the Irish Church they offer a community care farming programme, a community supported agricultural scheme (CSA), veg box subscription service and a curriculum-based conservation education and engagement.

[Home - Jubilee - Christian Creation Care Organisation - CSA](#)

In conclusion

The Evangelical Alliance represent individuals, churches and Christian organisations across Northern Ireland, and we are seeing and hearing an unprecedented rise in engagement in the issue of climate change and creation care. Rising numbers of Christians, especially young adults want the church to not just talk about climate change but to take more action.

On Saturday 10 July 2021, Peter Lynas, UK Director of The Evangelical Alliance was a guest speaker at New Wine Ireland Summer Conference. He took the opportunity to state that “the Church needs to lead the way in Climate Change.” [New Wine Ireland - Local churches changing nations](#)

Churches, Christian organisations and Christians across Northern Ireland broadly welcome the introduction of government policy that meets the commitments of the international Paris Agreement in 2015 and the national New Decade New Approach promises of 2020. We do so because our faith informs our thinking on climate change and creation care, and we believe we have a God appointed responsibility to be stewards and take care of the earth God has given us. We want to do so by championing attitudes and activities that reflect the self-sacrifice and compassion of Jesus as a response to the climate crisis.

The Evangelical Alliance believes that churches (and the Christian community more widely) can be partners in helping the Northern Ireland Assembly meet their targets. The church in Northern Ireland is a huge resource and could play an important role in helping the Assembly reach the NI population. Churches have influence in local communities and have the ear of the people in a way that the government does not have. Churches can help to challenge the individual ethical choices of individuals and families and can encourage more eco friendly business practices by our members. Churches also have wider community links, often working with other community groups and statutory organisations where they can promote attitudes and practices that lead to societal change. Furthermore, many of our churches have links to other parts of the world through denominational links which offers an opportunity for churches to have a huge impact on how we tackle the climate crisis at a global level and not just at a local level. Churches can play a crucial role in bringing about positive outcomes for the aims and objectives of this Bill in Northern Ireland.

We would be happy to meet with the Committee at any point to discuss further any or all these points. Please find the contact details below.

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