

HERALD - FOLLOW-UP TO ALLEN SLEITH

In the March edition of the Herald Rev. Dr Allen Sleith (a fellow member of the PCI Stewardship of Creation Panel) superbly set out the accepted scientific wisdom on climate change and raised many of the challenges we face. In this article I add to the concerns he raised.

I feel we are still far too complacent regarding the forthcoming effects of climate change – despite regular updates on an increasingly threatening situation. Perhaps it is because we in Ireland have not yet faced any major disruption to our normal lives; perhaps we are so preoccupied with Brexit issues there has been a dearth of information telling us that change is happening in Ireland.

But it is happening. The increase in autumn and winter storms – first forecast in the 1980s – is so far causing only minor traffic chaos and damage to coastal and other properties; the currently minute annual rise in sea level is barely threatening the viability of farmland in low-lying areas near the sea; increasing summer rainfall has yet had little adverse effect on tourism. In the wildlife world birds are now colonising us which until recently were found only on mainland Europe while at the same time we have lost many of our wintering migrant wildfowl as waters in eastern Europe, previously frozen, now remain ice-free throughout the winter. There is an increasing opportunity for insect species (including some regarded as pests) to migrate northwards.

We know that the effects of climate change will be less here compared with many, perhaps even most of the world's populations. So, what is our Christian responsibility as we see environmental degradation threatening the lives and well-being of our fellows in other parts of the world? Christ calls us to love our neighbours as ourselves – but if we do not know what is happening to our neighbour how can we act to help him? So, let us search news channels for further information on the most threatened communities – and then consider how we would react in their situation and work out ways to help them.

For example, in parts of Africa grasslands are rapidly being replaced by deserts – what of those whose livelihoods are seriously and urgently challenged as crops fail, as livestock starve? We are so comfortable with food being available, ready-made, in our shops that we seldom give a thought to those countless millions dependant on the natural or cultivated world to provide their daily sustenance – and for which they labour.

Allen referred to Bangladesh and the danger of massive flooding – in truth we have great difficulty in appreciating just how excessively difficult it will be dealing with its after-effects, not only immediately, but also in succeeding months and years as land will remain polluted and disease-ridden. Where can the millions of displaced people be housed – and how can they be fed? Is this not beyond the capacity of Bangladesh to solve?

He also mentioned the melting of the polar ice-caps – this will have significance well beyond the inevitable associated sea-level rise – we hear much of the probable dire effects on wildlife, but are we as aware, or as concerned, that human communities are at severe threat, both in terms of natural food resources and living space?

Added to these is another factor – as a result of floods, famines and droughts there will be migrations of millions of people. Where and how will these people be fed, housed and nurtured? Recent history of refugees would suggest that many will meet with little sympathy, or worse, outright hostility, as they seek security of life.

What can be done? Perhaps our first challenge is to persuade politicians to act and to act now. For over thirty-five years governments have been made aware of the realities of climate change, yet little

by way of preventative or ameliorating intervention has taken place. By concentrating on local issues, the losses of land, crops, homes and lives overseas seem to be of little consequence to Westminster, Dublin or Stormont governments.

We must seriously examine our lifestyles, corporate and individual, grounding our thoughts, feelings and actions Biblically. Our most solid justification for any action comes both from Christ's teaching and from passages in Genesis and Leviticus in particular. Can we please hear more on these subjects from the pulpit?

The Irish Presbyterian Hymnal has a short section headed 'Environment' including hymns exhorting us to examine our role in God's Creation. Can we take time to read through these hymns and perhaps make these lines from one of them our environmental mantra –

Earth is the Lord's: it is ours to enjoy it, ours, as His stewards to farm and defend;

From its pollution, misuse and destruction, good Lord, deliver us, world without end!

Joe Furphy, an elder in Lowe Memorial, is a member of the PCI Stewardship of Creation Panel and is the PCI representative on Eco-Congregation Ireland. He is a retired environmentalist.