

Vulnerability, responsibility and courage

Climate change in the hour of truth

A declaration from the Council of Churches in the Netherlands

In the topicality, in the opening of the TV News Show and on the front pages of newspapers the climate change moved over in favour of the credit crisis and its consequences. Meanwhile, maybe less prominent but no less penetrating, almost daily various political and economical observations on the radical consequences of climate change are being published, weather forecasts are connected with it and thrillers are being made on the subject. It is inevitable that this problem will keep determining the world agenda for many years to come. At the same time we establish that this tidal wave of information calls up very different reactions and has diverse effects. It makes us uncertain about our own future and that of our children. Concealed feelings of fear or even despair come into being which look for a way out in reactions as: ignoring (we do not want to see it), denial (it has not been proven) until trust in the more or less effortless solutions (the climate is self-regulating or: economy and science will solve it for us). From their dedication for righteousness, peace and wholeness of creation, nationally and internationally, churches and Christians are called to develop their own vision on these questions and to dedicate themselves with others for effective responses.

As Council of Churches we look upon these developments from a pastoral perspective. From the central religious conviction of hope Christian faith wants to try and find an answer on questions of uncertainty, fear and despair. Not by suggestion of refuge to another world or reality, but by honest, down-to-earth and realistic response to the challenges: from a hopeful approach.

Why this call up?

It has been twenty years now that the Council of Churches published 'A letter of credence on righteousness, peace and wholeness of creation'. This credential opened with: 'It is encouraging that continuously more people become aware of the life endangering threats our world is exposed to.' With this the Council of Churches joined in with the broad international movement asking attention for the 'combination of life endangering developments: increasing poverty in the world, arms race and exhaustion and violation of the natural environment.' Most of these threats are still present: undiminished or in sharpened form. A rapidly increasing world population and a diminished and more expensive offer of commodities and food are proof of that. Climate change adds an extra urgency which confronts us with 'the moment of truth' for what life on earth is worth to us.

The movement from which this letter originated, the 'Ecclesiastical Process', helped many Christians to discover and realize their social responsibility in a new way. Especially the dedication for nature and environment received a new impulse.

Two decades later the Dutch churches find themselves in another position. An important role, like the churches had in the discussion on nuclear weapons and nuclear energy within the fullness of society, is now less self-evident. The questions round religion and politics are more situated around the role and value of religion in society in general, than about the concrete dedication of the churches for righteousness, peace and wholeness of the creation. Nevertheless the Council of Churches wants to remain faithful to the previously pronounced choices and ideals in the current situation. In depth these ideals originate from what has been perceived off the Gospel. They are ideals that are asking to be retranslated over and over into the current situation and have to be tested there for their appeal. This application is now asked of the Christian faith and the churches in relation to what many perceive to be the greatest problem and the greatest question for this century: climate change. A task which Christians share with all others in society. Research shows that climate change is part of the developments which are the greatest cause for concern to the Dutch. Therefore this call up is addressed as well to the members of the churches and to the churches as organizations, as to the Dutch society and government. From the awareness to share in the experience of the problem and in the need to find a solution, we as churches want to look for our own specific contribution. Gradually a broad acknowledgement comes into being that the climate change is also a moral, ethical and spiritual problem. From that approach the churches are being asked to develop a vision from their own traditions of faith, which can contribute to the discussion with political and social organizations and with other outlooks on life. Herein the churches in their alliance of global, national and local religious communities and networks in which mutual solidarity is confessed and practised, have their own specific possibilities to respond to the challenge of climate change.

In this call up we join up with many religious, international and ecumenical declarations and promising perspectives for practical change that were initiated but met with insufficient attention and response.

Three positions

That the climate is changing is visible for everyone. But there are different thoughts on causes, velocity, risks and effects. With regard to if, how and the extent of climate change and the threats posed by it we distinguish three positions:

An international scientific consensus as expressed by the 'International Panel on Climate Change' (IPCC) of the United Nations. This consensus means that it is for 90% certain that the climate change to a high degree is caused by human action. If we do not succeed in limiting the global warming to a maximum of two degrees, amongst others by reduction of CO₂-emission, a catastrophe caused by climate change can no longer be excluded.

On two sides of this position we find more deviant positions.

The one position we might call that of the *climate-sceptics*. Among them are scientists who doubt that the data used by IPCC is correct and if human actions actually have such great influence, or those who think that this is a natural climate change. Sometimes they dispute that it makes sense to reduce the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere and persist that it would be better to stake the available means in absorbing the consequences of the unstoppable climate change. Even if they do not consider reduction of energy consumption necessary for the battle against the heating of the earth, they do want to advocate reduced energy consumption because of the rapidly exhausting commodities.

The other, more *radically warning* position points out that the international consensus is based on a compromise of various scientific positions, in which those who assess the situation to be more serious are insufficiently heard. They point out that we can not just start from the principle that the average temperature raise on earth will not be more than two degrees in this century. We must also consider seriously the possibility that it will increase until six degrees with unchanged policy and behaviour. To this group belong scientists which point out that some developments can go much quicker than initially assumed, like the disappearance of polar-ice. At the same time our lack of knowledge regarding the affect of ecological systems on one and other would be considered enough. They warn that if in the upcoming ten to twenty years there will be no radical change in global energy management regarding consumption and renewal, we will reach a tipping point where the heating gets into an unstoppable acceleration. Through that the survival of mankind and large parts of the natural environment are at stake.

We think this internationally achieved consensus to be of the utmost importance as basis for the necessary international policy. This policy is necessary for the accomplishment of social changes and technological renewal which contribute to a solution. Saving energy should hereby come in the first place. At the same time the results of these renewals should be made available to all countries. This important role of technology may not lead to overlook the great contribution the ruling combination of technology and economics had on the origin of the climate problem.

Because of the importance we attach to the internationally achieved consensus, we dissociate ourselves from the denial of the climate problem, even if responsible posing of the truth-question in an open democratic society is an important item. The 'climate-sceptics' sometimes absolutely raise important matters like the most efficient stake of limited means.

Despite of our support for the consensus-position we as churches feel especially challenged by this more radically warning position. Christians know of a biblical-prophetical tradition, to which Jesus connected. Therein the existing injustice is sometimes accused in fierce words. Prophets also bring clearly to mind what awaits people when they continue the - wrong - way they set about. Not as fate, but as a call for conversion, for change, and seeking for new paths. From this vision we will have to look sharper to what we can and must do to avoid catastrophes, with a possibly more radical outcome than that of the consensus position. Here the risk analysis is sharper and leads to higher 'insurance premiums' in terms of economic and social costs. At the most, so is the estimation from this position, there is still a 'vindication period' of between ten and twenty years. Only if we start soon with radical changes a 'soft landing' is still possible.

How all factors that cause the change in climate react to one and other, is not known in detail yet. Therefore there is still a lot of uncertainty on what we should and can take on, with which priority and what chance of success. Yet we know a lot has to be done and changed. In addition to the radically warning position we are of the opinion that the potential results of climate change – if we do nothing – are so dramatic and life threatening, that we have to be prepared to take radical steps, in spite of the margins of uncertainty.

Vulnerability, responsibility and courage

For our own input in this dispute for the churches we start from the notion 'vulnerability'. A vulnerability that is connected with the uncertainty observed before. For a long time we have lived with the idea of manageability and manipulability of life, through which man, also in relation to nature, felt sometimes invulnerable, or thought to become that by progress of science and technology. The actuality of the climate change has disturbed this image brutally. Man and his natural environment of animals and plants are linked with and dependent of each other in a web of life in vulnerability. Man and nature are both dependent of an atmosphere in which all share life. The interaction of ecological- and weather-systems and its effects can only partly be checked by man. Increasingly we become to understand that unexpected, life-threatening events may occur.

People are potential victims, but at the same time offender, especially in the rich parts of the world. In addition we have to acknowledge that victim-ship and offender-ship are not equally divided. The simultaneous awareness of vulnerability (of man and nature) and offender-ship emphasizes the emergency for working on social durability. Ecological durability can and may not be perceived apart from social durability. Disturbance of climate and environment also puts pressure on cohabitation of people. At the same time we are dealing with uncertainty of people about the consequences of effective and just climate control for their life and that of their neighbours. So there is double vulnerability and uncertainty under discussion. This uncertainty affects the possibilities for a firm basis to develop an effective and just climate policy. However, in order to realize the radical changes necessary in the transition process towards a more durable environment and society, a powerful basis amongst population is essential. This requires politicians with vision and courage and the ability to let this vision take root in society. They must assess how much change a society, becoming fragile and uncertain, can take and at what speed, without becoming seriously paralysed. There is an urgent need for debate on the relation of what the government can and has to order imperatively, and what can be left to the voluntary of citizens, trade and industry and social organizations. Here as well we touch moral and spiritual questions in which we as churches can and want to play a part.

Acknowledgement of vulnerability is biblically speaking a moment of truth that leads to a new, positive devotion. There is no more denial: this is the state of life on earth. Now the awareness of vulnerability can lead to feelings of incapacity and despair, of resignation and passivity. But acknowledgement of vulnerability can also be perceived as a passing phase towards a positive devotion for change. Nothing is being hushed up, flight becomes an unrealistic option. Christian thinking and life shows the way: man who knows of vulnerability and dependence on a greater reality which exceeds his own personal knowledge and ability, can go on freely and modestly, but encouraged and hopeful. Because he knows that from the promised future his own perspective is surrounded by a larger, forgiving and healing perspective.

Wisdom

In modern times the origin of religion has often been attributed to the feeling of man to be dependent of powers in nature which are unknowable and uncontrollable. Admiration and reverence for the creator and the creation were connected herewith. Climate change poses the question if we should not take this basic primal feeling seriously again in our search for a new spirituality and new moral climate. It asks for a spirituality that does justice to moral and to the vulnerable intertwinement of man and nature in their dependence of cosmic powers, which to Christians are linked with the faith in God as creator. Based on Christian tradition we may also fill in vulnerability as 'daring to make ourselves vulnerable'. This is a core of Christian spirituality we recognize in Jesus Christ: where 'strength becomes visible in weakness'. Christians are called up to 'be strong in weakness'. After all, the request for grace and the certainty of grace are the real source of power. Based on this tradition Christians are called not just to enable justice and dedication in society, but also to realize these in relation to life, including animals and nature. Traditional virtues and biblical wisdom, which Christianity shares with other religions, have always been linked with this feeling of vulnerability and dependence: prudence and moderation in dealing with material goods and the warning for recklessness by imposing development planning. A spirituality connected with creation, that lives in and from the wonder for creation, stimulates us thus to a new modern realization of these old virtues. This way justice can be done to the generations coming after us and to nature as creation.

From guilt to renewal

Man, who knows himself to be vulnerable in connection with others and his natural environment, is confronted with his own shortcoming and failure. He knows himself to be as well part of the problem as of the solution. Through the climate change modern consumer can feel to be his own enemy: he is not only battling with something outside of himself, but also within. Feelings of guilt can be paralysing and lead to the conviction that change is impossible. From a Christian vision however, the acceptance of own vulnerability, brokenness and guilt is a moment of renewal, of new hope and activity. Guilt and conscience of guilt are not experiences to linger with,

but to pass through them. Traditional Christian notions as sin, mercy and forgiveness do nothing else than point to the renewal of life, through Christ. Herewith the notion sin in biblical sense points to a wrong orientation on life, on missing the purpose for which life was meant. That purpose is in this life nothing but a good life on this earth, in a harmonious connection with God, man and nature. The outlook on that good life is at stake now, and it questions what we in our consumption-society up till now perceived to be the good life. It asks for conversion and change of orientation. Recently the management of the Roman-Catholic Church has certified 'pollution' to be a new modern sin, a new sin asking to be changed into the old virtue of modesty and restriction.

From guilt to renewal: we can speak of that also in connection with the question if and how Christian faith and theology are partially guilty of the environmental- and climate crisis. We acknowledge that in Christian tradition sometimes too much emphasis was on man opposite of nature: man as ruler over nature, profiting maximally. Through the climate crisis Christianity, as other religions, is challenged to investigate what in their tradition contributes to and what stands in the way of a solution. This has led to a process of reflection and renewal which is still fully ongoing and asks for intensification and broadening. Here two new perspectives come to light: the Bible describes man as a representative of Gods care for creation. In the call from God for a responsible 'management of creation' the mutual intertwinement of man and nature shows to its full advantage. Christian faith is not only looking forward to renewal of man, but for a new creation enclosing man and nature.

Righteousness, peace and wholeness of creation

The connection to the themes righteousness, peace and wholeness of creation, with righteousness at the first place, still has an extremely up-to-date value. If things would go good or bad in one of these areas, it would immediately have consequences on the other areas. Climate change links these themes with each other in a new, unknown, up to date and intense way. Never before in history the existence of men in all parts of the world, in intertwinement with nature, has been linked with each other like this in the interest of mutual survival. The connection of the three areas could lead to an accelerated down-going spiral. But it could also lead to a new way up, towards a new, positive connection, from the awareness that whoever devotes her-/himself in one of these areas, will also promote positive effects in the other areas.

Worst hit

The vulnerability for and through climate change is the greatest for the poor inhabitants of underdeveloped countries. Their situation deteriorates increasingly by more droughts and flooding. Through this a safe life-environment and food security are endangered. Soil suited for food plants is threatened to be used for bio-fuels. Although they may well serve to lessen the emission of greenhouse gases, they also cause the food prices to go up. Natural disasters, caused by typhoons, increasing water levels round vulnerable islands and river-mouths, mostly surpass the solution capacity of these countries.

The vulnerability of people in underdeveloped countries is less self-caused than that of the participants of a western consumer society. Besides they are seriously obstructed in striving for a decent existence by a climate change mainly caused by the consumption pattern of rich countries. They justly speak of an environmental and climate debt, the rich countries need to redeem. They point out that rich countries have already used up their amount of CO₂-discharge and that the 'ecological footprint' of the rich still exceeds many times that of the poor. Herewith they have in fact impaired the space for CO₂-discharge of the poor countries and by that their options for development of classic (fossil-energy-based) development. Moreover, their situation deteriorates increasingly by rising food- and energy prices, which are at least partly caused by climate change. In this regard, unlike the underdeveloped countries the Netherlands have a privileged position. The expenses we can bear for the development of a 'new delta-plan' for the Netherlands should not be averted to the necessary support for the execution of 'delta-plans' elsewhere in the world.

In various ways climate change introduces great investments for the underdeveloped countries. This is about the costs to adapt to the unavoidable results of climate change and for an as much as possible climate-neutral realization of the necessary economical growth. Rich countries have – also in their own interest – the task and duty to contribute to that by making capital and non-polluting technology available. Herewith it is also important to be aware of what is already available in notions and means in those societies and cultures.

International extinction questions

The vulnerability by climate change requires a new debate on sharing. The interests of countries in the north and south are intertwined by it. Churches, in connection with churches everywhere in the world, have to fulfil their own and special role. They set up, maintain and use networks, in which with visible result can be worked at renewal

and mutual support and encouragement. Herein financial support goes hand in hand with exchange of ideas and experiences.

This new sharing-debate is also in direct connection with questions on war and peace. Reduced availability of energy, food and water increases the threat of conflicts. But this could also occur through new availability of resources like gas and oil under the North Pole. 'Climate-refugees' is a new notion soon to find a space in our dictionaries. On the other hand the notion that the climate problem intensely links all countries in the world in order to find a solution offers enormous new chances as well. It would be good when this new situation could lead towards a much closer cooperation of environmental movement, peace movement and development organizations. Since these movements and organizations are also present within the churches, the churches could take the necessary initiatives.

Alliance

To Christians the origin of alliance is in God, Who makes a covenant with men, animals and earth (Genesis 9). Thus they are recognized and appreciated in their right, their diversity and alliance with each other. This way in the total of creation men is not just steward but also ally and partner. Through the climate change animals as well are heavily affected and eco-systems with their biodiversity which was given in creation are more and more under strain. The alliance of all life should sound in the search for alliance of people with each other.

Whoever feels vulnerable and is not enough her/himself in that, seeks for alliance with others for support, encouragement and the search for new living patterns. The church has always looked upon herself as a community in which alliance is central. In view of the climate crisis that alliance is also searched with other social associations, in a shared care and devotion. Especially that alliance forms a counter pressure against the uncertainty about the potential social, economic and political consequences raised by climate changes as well as an effective climate policy.

Most people know that a change of lifestyle is necessary to be able to tackle the climate problem. At the same time research shows that awareness and behaviour are still far apart. Changes can best be started where life forms of production and consumption are experiences and shared together. People that share a life environment can reinforce each other in climate-friendly consumption patterns. Not: 'I will not, because my neighbours won't either', but vice versa: 'what the neighbours are doing, I could do as well'. Or: 'neighbour, why don't you join in?'

The importance of alliance also applies at social and international level. Not 'why would churches and environmental organizations apply themselves for a better climate if others continue on the old footing?', but: 'look, this is developing into a broad social movement'. This way, internationally as well, not just a few countries or a single region have to carry the load and a single country can not hide itself behind the statement that not *every* country is joining in.

From Christian faith we ultimately do what is right because we have learned to know that it is that good what is asked of us by God. Even if we know that the results will not or hardly become visible during our lifetime, we are still asked to do what is right. The wisdom of keeping within bounds and knowing the limit does not depend on our neighbours but first of all has to be rooted within ourselves.

Pioneers

The problem of climate change asks for resourcefulness, for radical proposals for change of pioneers in all sorts of fields. Such alternative behaviour is mostly rewardingly stimulated within certain communities which are open for that. From their origin Christian churches as well could perceive themselves as communities for alternative behaviour, as inspiration and stimulant for others. From past and present there are many examples of local church communities following this track. Convents and communities like the Benedictines and Franciscans are examples of that. Already since the seventies of the last century there are groups within the churches applying themselves for 'a new lifestyle'. They developed after a call up by the Council of Churches in 1974, which was also a reaction to the report of the Club of Rome. Initially the accent in this movement was more on the economical relation with the South but gradually the environment got more attention.

In our time religious groups come with initiatives which range from the cooperative start of clean energy projects, such as sun- and wind energy, through sharing domestic appliances and cars to the choice for less-meat or vegetarian (and with that less polluting) meals. The solidarity with nature is also emphasized in projects with attention for church- and convent gardens and liturgical flower arranging. Especially in the combined dedication to clean energy churches in small communities have their own possibilities. A lot of experience has already been made in that field in many European countries, like England, Germany and Sweden. Within these groups one

learns that another, less consumptive attitude to life and spirituality produce a lot in terms of well being and more human-being, as intended by God with His creation. According to the Gospel of John Jesus promises us 'life in abundance', a life from the spirit, in a sharing community. It is an image which is in contrast with what in our society generally is understood under life in abundance.

Churches have a lot of experience with much longer existing forms of living solidarity with and in communities elsewhere in the world. Remember the dedication for fair trade, peace, fugitives and such. We know now that also in these areas the consequences of climate change can manifest themselves (for example if 'climate fugitives' knock on our door). A contribution to a combined working method of climate change is also possible from various existing 'networks of dedication'.

This way climate change as a crisis offers also opportunities: to re-experience being human and being church and to realize it.

Call up

This call up attached to the declaration mentioned above is directed to four addressees:

the Council itself (1),
the member churches (2),
the individual members of the churches (3)
and the organizations of politics and social background (4).

1. The Council:
 - Intends to work out the own possible and desirable role in a long-term program and spread a message to churches, politics and the broad society.
 - Will encourage and stimulate that the theological and ethic background of the question of climate change is clarified and that the theme anchors in the work of the churches.
 - Supports the international and ecumenical programs on climate change and dedicates itself to its further publication.
2. Of the churches is asked:
 - To give climate change and her consequences an important place on their agenda and in their work in the area of pastoral care, diaconal work, theological study (in congregations/parishes and training), education and liturgy.
 - To contribute to their credibility in order to realize in their own organization what they are asking of others in this call up. A possible instrument can be a 'religious climate report', which for example could be recorded in annual reports.
 - To insist in their contacts with government and political parties on just and effective climate policy, if possible in relation with the introduction of the climate law.
3. Members of the churches are encouraged:
 - To face the situation honestly and in responsibility to themselves, to fellow-believers and neighbours far and near and to coming generations.
 - To search for a convinced and positive realization of a more durable lifestyle, which is of value for the (personal) quality of life and for the private and mutual spirituality and make use of the possibilities which all sorts of (inter)religious and other campaigns on clean energy and saving of energy, durable consumption, fair trade, durable mobility, nature- and animal protection, development cooperation etceteras already offer.
 - To apply themselves in all sorts of connections (church, politics, voluntary application and care, school, company/job etceteras) for a constructive contribution to the approach of the climate problem. *FairClimate* with its triple approach of saving, greening and compensation offers a good starting point for that.
4. Of politics and social organizations is asked:
 - To create a basis with citizens and their organizations and a notion of the need for change; both from the moral and spiritual values spread by the churches.
 - To work constructively on formulating and implementation of a just climate policy and the connected durable society-model in which the Dutch accept co-responsibility for the consequences of climate change for people in the underdeveloped countries.
 - To represent and advocate a convinced and consequent vision on the connection of peace and durable development in international contacts.