

Black Lives Matter Everywhere

A study of public
attitudes towards
race and climate
change

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Christian Aid is a Christian organisation that insists the world can and must be swiftly changed to one where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty.

We work globally for profound change that eradicates the causes of poverty, striving to achieve equality, dignity and freedom for all, regardless of faith or nationality. We are part of a wider movement for social justice.

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Cover: Ono Gumadi, daughter of pastoralist farmer Gumadi Oto, in Ethiopia which suffers from climate impacts such as rising temperatures, increased droughts and erratic rainfall. Christian Aid/Indrias G. Kassaye

Introduction

Apart from the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement has been one of the defining themes of 2020. Sparked by the death of George Floyd and other examples of police brutality in the United States, it quickly spread to include a wider debate about racial inequalities around the world.

Climate change, although something which will affect us all, is a deeply racialised phenomenon. Black and brown people in the poorest countries face the brunt of the impacts, caused in large part by fossil fuel burning in rich, majority-White nations. But this inequality is often overlooked because climate change is associated with science and the language used to describe it is often technical jargon relating to atmospheric carbon atoms and global temperature readings. The cold neutrality of climate science obscures the fact that the drivers and impacts of the climate emergency are personal and societal, and tied to political decisions with clear racial implications.

People in the, as-yet, more sheltered corners of the global North are now starting to experience the force of the climate crisis, but across the global South it is something they have already been feeling the effects of for years. Be they extreme weather events in Latin America, droughts in East Africa, floods in Bangladesh or sea level rise threatening the existence of Pacific Islands, climate change is not just a future threat but a present reality.

Climate change and its disproportionate effects on those that have done the least to cause it has been known about for decades. And yet emissions continue to rise.

If poor political decisions and unjust policies have helped to cause the climate crisis, then it's equally the case that the right policies and decisions have an essential role to play in addressing the problem and putting the world on a path to climate justice. We're beginning to see such movement, although not nearly fast enough.

Politicians around the world have claimed to be moved by racial injustice. Making rapid and far reaching climate action a priority would be a good start in ensuring black lives matter everywhere.

Five Things We Learned

1. Black Christians feel more informed about climate change than the general public. Two thirds (66%) of them feel they know at least a fair amount about climate change, compared to half (49%) of the British public.



2. Being born in a climate vulnerable country boosts awareness of the climate crisis. Black Christians who were born in a country more vulnerable to climate change are more likely than those born in the UK or born in a less vulnerable country to say they know at least a fair amount about climate change (75% vs. 65% vs. 64% respectively).



3. By 50% to 15%, Black Christians are much more aware that the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect Black people around the world compared to the British public at large. In fact, the UK public are twice as likely to think White people rather than Black people around the world are the most affected racial group (31% vs 15%)



4. Compared to the general public, Black Christians are twice as likely to make lifestyle changes to reduce their carbon footprint or engage in campaigns or protests.



5. More than half of Black Christians (51%) don't think the climate movement is racially diverse enough, compared to 33% of the British public overall.



The theology of climate change

Despite the modern environmental movement being perceived as largely secular, many of its early pioneers were closely associated with the Church. Clergyman Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley founded the National Trust in 1895, Scottish Presbyterian John Muir helped establish the world's first National Park in Yosemite, California in 1890 and John Ray, one of the world's first botanists was a devout Christian.

However certain readings of Christian theology have had a more harmful impact on creation. In 1967, Lynn White Jr shocked many by arguing that a Western theology of 'dominion' had fuelled an ecological crisis¹. Whether or not he was right in every respect, he woke theologians up to what had been long neglected – the theology of creation.

Though the Eastern Orthodox churches have a long tradition of theological reflection on creation, Western theology has had other preoccupations. Many Christians now see the need to respond in a practical, theological way to the reality of climate change.

Some voices in the Church which suggest we should not concern ourselves with the physical world at all, and often don't accept orthodox climate science, are still influential in a number of denominational traditions. However, many more Christians now, all around the world, are calling for urgent action.

There are more and more calls to reshape our understanding of creation and our place within it and to be more faithful to a scriptural vision of a humanity 'in communion' with creation, not dominating or exploiting it. Churches and Christian leaders are coming to consider climate change as something that demands a faith response. Pope Francis made an inspiring contribution to this when he issued his encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015 which invited everyone on the planet to care for our common home².

And it is not surprising that theologians from the global South have a particular emphasis when it comes to the theology of climate change. Earlier this year Christian Aid re-published a report titled *Song of the Prophets*³, which included a series of theological reflections on the climate crisis. Those from the global South had deep notes of frustration, just like the bold and disruptive prophets we encounter in the Old Testament. There is a sense of urgency that is sometimes lacking among those for whom climate change seems to be still about the future.

They challenge those in the global North to find the will to act on what we have no excuse for ignoring. They deliver calls to resist the consumerism that is so destructive and to embrace new ways of living in creation. And they help us to return to the traditions of the Christian faith, to find some sure ground on which to stand, at times when everything seems shaken and insecure.

Rev Israel Oluwole Olofinjana, Pastor at Woolwich Central Baptist Church

"My own story serves as an example of an African that has experienced the effects of the climate crisis but did not have the resources or enough understanding to deal with the issue.

This data confirms my own experience but also raises the issue of why we are not visible when it comes to government policies and public discussions on climate change?

The effect is that while the problem appears to be brown, the advocates are usually white. It is the poorer countries in the world that suffers more the effects of climate disasters therefore we need everyone at the table."

Why we commissioned this research

Despite Black and brown people being disproportionately affected by climate change around the world, the climate movement is often represented and led by White people. Whether they are scientists, campaigners, policy experts or school strikers, White people are often at the fore. Social justice movements often gain strength through diversity.

One group which, to our knowledge, has never been surveyed regarding their attitudes, experiences and perspectives on climate change were Black British Christians. This study explores the drivers and barriers that Black Christians face when engaging with the climate justice movement.

The hope is that together we can ensure the climate justice movement is truly diverse and genuinely reflects – and responds to – the lived experiences of people who shoulder the climate crisis burden worldwide.

With the UK hosting the crucial COP26 UN climate summit in Glasgow 2021, the UK climate movement, including many churches, will be taking an active role in the global push for greater action to tackle the climate crisis. Our hope is that these results will help contribute towards creating a diverse and inclusive movement that involves and recognises all God's children.

The study was undertaken by Savanta ComRes, which surveyed 500 Black British Christian adults between 7 July and 19 August 2020 about their attitudes towards climate change and the climate justice movement. They also conducted two nationally representative polls of the UK public against which the results could be compared.

Dr Rosemarie Mallett, Archdeacon of Croydon

“In the UK it is rare to hear a view from a climate change activist who is not white. Recently there was controversy when a young Black climate activist, Vanessa Nakate was excised from an image, which also featured fellow young White campaigners, ‘purely on composition grounds’.

When this research project first came on my radar, I was amazed to learn that it would be working with Black theologians, independent and mainstream churches and majority Black churches to understand more deeply the question – what do people of global majority heritage understand or care about with regards to climate action and climate justice?

The findings show that people of global majority heritage know and understand the challenge the world is facing. It also shows that such people don't know how to get involved, do not see enough people like themselves involved, or would get involved if their church was more engaged. Hopefully this research will help inform how more people of global majority heritage can take actions for climate justice.”

Report findings

Beliefs

Black Christians are more likely to know and care about the climate crisis

Compared to the UK public Black Christians feel more informed about climate change (66% vs 49%). This is backed up by their understanding that Black people around the world suffer disproportionately from the climate crisis: 50% of Black Christians said Black people around the world were the most affected racial group from climate change whereas just 15% of the public at large think so. In fact, shockingly, the UK public are twice as likely to think White people rather than Black people around the world are the most affected racial group (31% vs 15%).

The misunderstanding among the UK public that Black and brown people are more impacted by climate change could be related to a disproportionate focus in the British media on the climate catastrophes occurring in predominantly White countries across the world, such as wildfires in Australia and California, thus skewing public consciousness about the impacts and who is most vulnerable.

It would seem those with personal connections to climate vulnerable countries have an increased awareness. Although the UK public is concerned about climate change (67%), for Black Christians the figure is 77%. For Black Christians with parents born in climate vulnerable countries the figure rises further to 81%. Black Christians themselves born in climate vulnerable countries are more likely than those born in the UK or born in a less vulnerable country to say they know at least a fair amount about climate change (75% vs. 65% and 64% respectively).



When it comes to perceptions of how the UK deals with climate change and racism, three quarters (74%) of Black Christians agree that tackling racism and racial inequality in the UK should receive the

same level of political attention as climate change, compared to less than half (47%) of the general British public.

It seems that for many Black Christians their faith underpins their concern about climate change. Three quarters (76%) agree that God asks us to take care of the earth, and that involves living in an environmentally sustainable way.

Rev Alton Bell, Senior Pastor at Wembley Family Church

“From my perspective, climate injustice is a product of the industrialisation of the world, which in turn is a product of the enslavement of people of African heritage.

The legacy of these actions still impacts Black and brown people most, and it is they who live in the global South. If this research can help inspire those from the global South and convince those in the industrial countries to take action, then this will allow the earth to breathe again.”

Habits & practices

Black Christians walk the talk on climate

Compared to the UK public overall, Black Christians are twice as likely to back up these beliefs with actions. They were twice as likely to have undertaken sustainable, pro-climate, lifestyle changes such as eco-friendlier form of travel (18% vs 9%), installed solar panels (8% vs 4%) or bought an electric car (8% vs 4%).



They were also more than twice as likely to have taken part in a climate justice demonstration or protest (10% vs 4%), volunteered on a project (12% vs 5%) or taken part in an educational

activity related to climate change (19% vs 6%).

Black Christians were also more prepared to support climate causes financially with 32% donating vs 15% for the UK public overall. They were also much more likely to share climate justice information on social media (24% vs 11%).

Encouragingly, a third (32%) of Black Christians changed their behaviours in the past 12 months in relation to their church, indicating that churches are discussing and inspiring their congregants to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours.



Supporting this hypothesis, a quarter (24%) of Black Christians say they have prayed, fasted, worshipped or taken part in a study group at church in relation to the environment or climate justice; one in five say they have heard or taken part in a conversation at church (21%) or heard a sermon at church (20%) in relation to the environment.



Creative and communal examples of environmental actions in church were also reported, including challenges to complete environmentally-friendly lifestyle changes, such

as 'eco-lent' (e.g. not eating meat or only using public transport), zero-waste church services, tree planting and carpool services.



Selina Stone, Tutor and Lecturer in Political Theology at St Mellitus College

“At a time when so many people are moved to respond to matters of justice, this report reminds us that attending to the abuse of our shared home is essential for us all.

This data highlights the connectedness of our human family, and the need for churches to make disciples who love their global neighbours as they love themselves. May we act in solidarity with those in need.”

Barriers

What is stopping Black Christians getting involved in the climate movement?

Encouragingly, half of Black Christians (53%) said they would get more involved in climate change action and campaigning if there were opportunities in their church to do this.

But nearly a quarter (23%) say they do not want to be involved in the climate justice movement. Half (50%) of Black Christians say that support the climate movement but they don't know anyone that is directly involved.

46% say they would like to get involved with climate justice but they don't know where to start, indicating that there is fertile ground for churches and organisations like Christian Aid to support Black Christians in engaging in the movement.

A further 45% of respondents say that they think the climate justice movement is not ethnically diverse enough. This reflects another question in the survey where half of Black Christians (51%) agree that the UK's climate change movement is not racially diverse enough, compared to only a third (33%) of the general British public who say the same.

Nearly two in five (37%) Black Christians who took part say that climate justice is important but it is not urgent enough for them to prioritise at the moment and a further three in ten (30%) saying they don't see what climate justice has to do with the church and a quarter (23%) saying that the climate justice movement is aggressive and un-Christian.

Delving deeper into the reasons why 23% of Black Christians do not want to be involved in the climate justice movement, the top five reasons are related to not having enough time (24%), wanting to know what was involved first (23%), having to care for their children/family (22%), being faced with more urgent things such as poverty and knife crime (21%), or because there are no activities at their church related to this (21%). Only 5% of those who do not want to be involved in the climate justice movement say it's because they do not believe in climate change. This equates to only 1% out of the 500 Black Christians who took part, emphasising the great opportunities to engage more Black Christians in the climate movement.

**Dr Marcus Chilaka,
The Redeemed
Christian Church of
God**

“This report is remarkable because it is the outcome of the rare survey of the attitudes, experiences and perspectives of Black British Christians on climate change.

It brings out the ‘experiential voices’ that need to be heard on the climate crisis. I endorse the findings and report which will contribute to the goal of having a truly diverse climate justice movement that is best placed to tackle the climate crisis.”

Opportunities for the climate movement

The climate movement has long recognised the importance of engaging the Church. Back in 2007 an Environment Agency survey of green leaders asked them what were the top things that needed to happen to 'save the planet'. Second on the list of 50 was involving faith leaders.

It is clear from this study that there are major opportunities to grow and diversify the climate movement. While the movement is predominantly seen as largely White and lacking racial diversity, there is an engaged, informed and willing audience among the Black Christian community that wants to get involved.

Broadening the climate movement to include more people with first or second-hand experience of the climate crisis would strengthen it and add authenticity and depth. The high level of knowledge and personal stories would be a great asset, and a source of insight and education for the movement as well as a great advocacy tool for the uninitiated.

However, to do this some of the barriers need to be addressed. One of those is that the movement is not perceived as racially diverse enough. On one level this is a Catch-22 situation which will continue to be a problem until more diversity is achieved. But organisations can work to promote non-White voices and help them to tell their stories, giving them prominence within the movement.

Respondents to the survey also said that a lack of information, lack of time and other challenges were keeping them from getting involved. Perhaps the climate movement needs to ensure that its activities are available and flexible enough to be accessible to both the cash, and time, poor as well as communicate more clearly to the climate curious what is involved?

One route could be to engage institutions in which Black people were already a part. More than half (53%) of those in the study said they would be open to getting involved if there were opportunities to do so at church.

A challenge to churches

Climate change is the great moral issue of our times. Nothing will have a greater impact upon creation if it's left unaddressed, and nothing causes as much disproportionate suffering on the poor. That is why it is an issue of injustice and why church leaders from across denominations are speaking out prophetically on it.

The recent wave of awakening to racial inequality sparked by the Black Lives Matter protests has forced all institutions, including Christian Aid and many churches, to examine their own structures and behaviours. On a global level, engaging with the racial inequality of climate change and using their platform to bring about positive change is one thing churches can do. Churches hold great sway as community institutions that can speak with moral power. They often have influence over local MPs and can lead on a local level. Churches are part of global networks and can be a bridge, bringing the voices of climate vulnerable Black and brown people around the world to the attention of their congregations.

The climate crisis has also become a hugely important issue for young people, as seen by the global school strikes and multiple public surveys. If the Church cares about inter-generational injustice, as well as being relevant to a generation that will have to deal with the 'carbon sins' of those that have gone before, it cannot ignore climate change.

Churches are starting do more on climate change, which is to be welcomed, and yet for the 23% of Black Christians who said they didn't want to be involved in the climate movement, a fifth (21%) said a lack of climate related activities from their church was the reason.

A call for Christian Aid to step up

Christian Aid has a potentially important role to play in this equation. One way is in equipping churches with resources to help them understand the urgency of the climate crisis and its impact on poverty and make it easier for them to take an active role in the climate movement. Christian Aid already provides a range of resources from theological reflections, case studies and campaign actions. It's encouraging to know there is an appetite for this from Black Christians.

Christian Aid can also be an agent in addressing some of the barriers listed above. One of them is the perception that the climate movement is aggressive and un-Christian. As a prominent and longstanding member of this movement, Christian Aid can be an example to Christians that this perception does not have to be the case. But it can also work with secular movement actors and encourage them to act and communicate in ways which might put off Christian and Black Christian audiences, audiences which the climate movement itself has identified it needs to reach.

Christian Aid also has a role to play in providing information and education on climate change. The survey respondents that knew at least a little about climate change said they get their information about the environment and climate justice predominantly from the news (70%) and social media (57%). Friends or family (32%) and charities and campaigning organisations (31%) were broadly equal in terms of being sources of information.



Among the charities that Black Christians were aware of, Christian Aid topped the list at 85%, above Greenpeace (76%), Action Aid (71%) and Friends of the Earth (68%). These results may have skewed towards Christian Aid because the charity helped to publicise the Savanta ComRes survey, but it suggests NGOs have an important role to play, and an organisation like Christian Aid that is rooted in both the Christian faith and climate justice can act as an important bridge between the climate movement and Black Christians.

Recommendations

For the climate movement:

Diversify. Climate groups and organisations need to work to promote non-White voices and help them to tell their stories, giving them prominence within the movement. They also need to ensure their activities are accessible for people who don't normally engage with the movement due to barriers such as poverty and lack of time.

For churches:

The climate crisis is a theological and moral issue and there is appetite among congregations to know more. Christian Aid, and other Christian organisations, have a number of resources to help churches to engage on the issues around climate justice and equip their congregations to be agents of positive change.

For Christian Aid:

Christian Aid must work with theologians and church leaders from diverse groups, listen and find out what resources and support they need to engage their communities, whilst also showing that the climate movement isn't at odds with Christianity.

End notes

1 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/Creationide%20discussion%20materials%20-%20Week%20three.pdf>

2 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

3 <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/song-of-the-prophets-theology-climate-change-report-May2020.pdf>