



Is the UK Baptist creation care response appropriate for the current global environmental crisis?

Executive Summary



Hannah Gray

CRES Certificate Research Project

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Introduction

The science is unequivocal: we are in a global environmental crisis. Temperatures are rising, biodiversity is crashing, pollution is proliferating, resources are dwindling and poor people are suffering the greatest effects of environmental damage. There are stark warnings from the scientists – if we don't take action soon, life on this earth will become very difficult for humanity and non-human species.

Despite the science, for environmentally-minded Christians, there are reasons for hope. Conversations around how to reduce plastic use happen around the dinner table and the school playground. Research published in 2020 shows the biggest shift yet in public concern about climate change¹. Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough can take much of the credit for the rise in awareness in recent years, but many people have been working for a long time to bring environmental issues up the agenda. New and energising movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion look set to stay on the scene, keeping the profile of these issues high when vested interests might wish to see them stall and dissolve into the background.

Where does the church feature in this ground-swell of interest in the environment? As a person who has been a member of a number of Baptist churches over the years, I have often been the lone voice calling for attention and action to care for God's creation in a church context.

Pope Francis has called the Catholic Church to 'care for our common home' through his seminal encyclical *Laudato Si* (Catholic Church, 2016). The UN Faith for Earth Initiative strikes a positive chord: '*Faith-based organisations... have enormous potential to influence policy and tip the scales on the massive global movement we all know is needed to address the planet's environmental challenges*' (UNEP, 2020).

I have taken my church on the Ecochurch journey, receiving a Silver Award in 2018. This process highlighted the gap that exists in my local church context: a lack of environmental knowledge, an apathy towards the current crisis our earth is facing, a disconnect between daily decisions and their damaging consequences. Studying the CRES course² and walking the Ecochurch journey, have all caused me to question what my denomination, the Baptist Church, is doing to respond to the crisis.

My personal journey has led me to ask the research question: Is the UK Baptist creation care response appropriate for the current global environmental crisis? Through this research project, I have sought to explore Baptist responses to the creation care crisis, both national and local, and evaluate their effectiveness. There is also a reflection on the Baptist response in relation to other denominations in the UK, and reasons for differences in approach and efficacy. Finally, there are some recommendations for future activity within the Baptist family to raise the profile of creation care and encourage individual churches to take action.

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/news/biggest-shift-yet-in-british-publics-attitude-to-risks-of-climate-change/>

² www.cres.org.uk

Methodology

The research project covered four areas of enquiry:

Desk-based research	Survey-based research
1. Review of Baptist policies and online resources	3. Structured email interviews with key environmental influencers within the Baptist family (12 people)
2. Ecochurch data analysis: a. number of registrations b. number of Ecochurch awards	4. Online survey of wider membership of Baptist family advertised through BU emails and Facebook groups in February 2020



Results

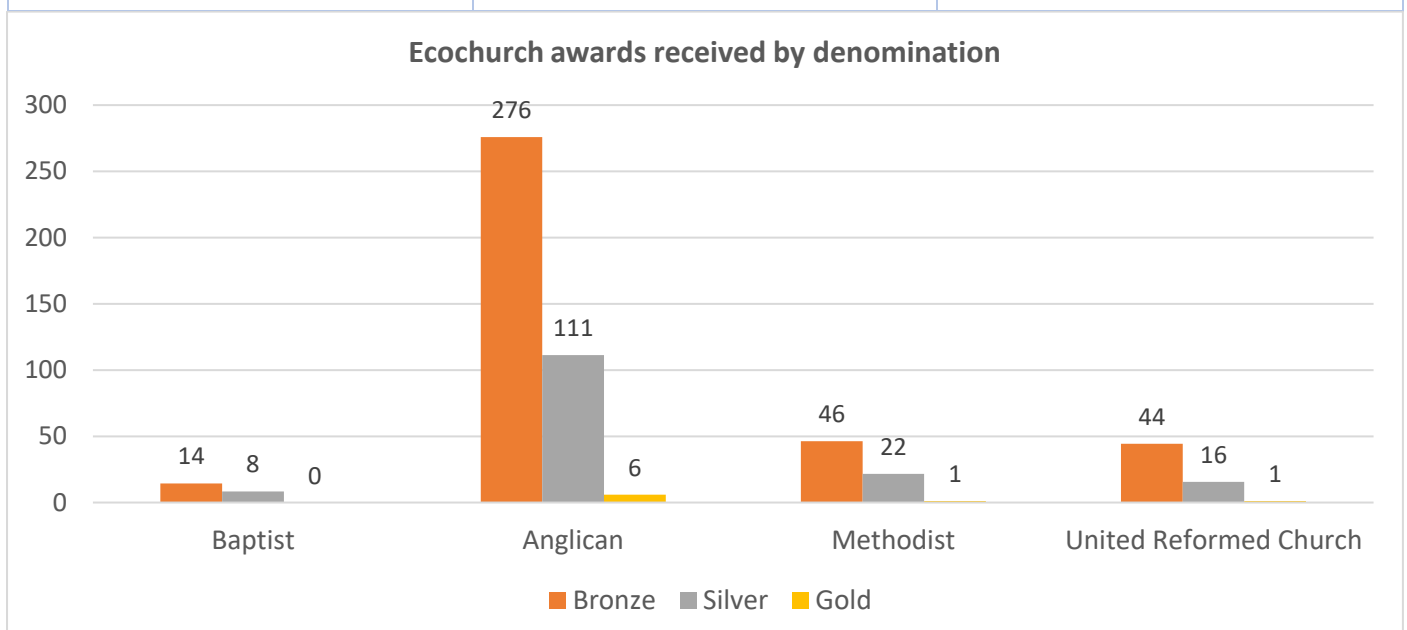
1. Review of Baptist policies and online resources

Information available on national Baptist institutional websites relating to creation care and environmental issues in the past decade is summarised in this document: [Baptist Union approaches to creation care](#). There was very little information on the Baptist college website and prospectuses regarding this topic. A handful of individual churches had excellent information about their creation care activities on their websites.

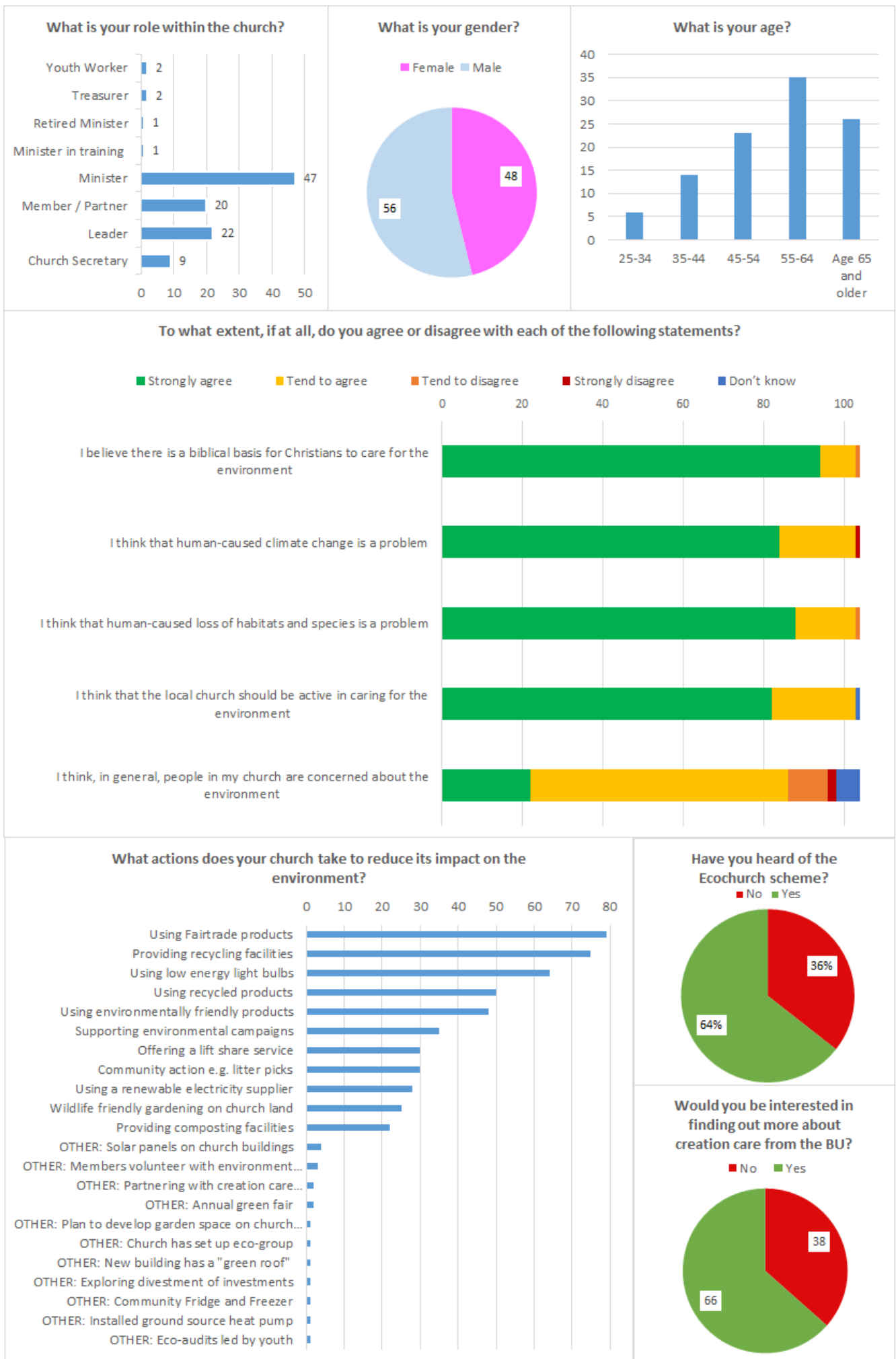
2. Analysis of Ecochurch data (correct at January 2020)

The Baptist level of engagement in the Ecochurch scheme is on a similar level to other denominations. Just under 1 in 10 churches have registered for the scheme, and 1 in 100 churches have received an Ecochurch award.

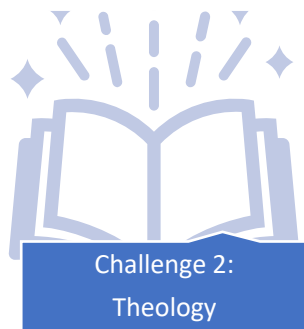
Major protestant denominations in England	Proportion of churches registering for Ecochurch scheme	Proportion of churches with Ecochurch awards
Anglican	8.9%	2.3%
Baptist	9.0%	1.2%
Methodist	4.3%	1.6%
United Reformed Church	9.7%	4.5%



4. Analysis of online survey of the wider membership of Baptist family (104 respondents)



Challenges for the Baptist family



The research uncovered two challenges within the Baptist family preventing an adequate response to creation care:

Challenge 1: The autonomous nature of Baptist churches has held back coordinated action on creation care

Each individual Baptist church is self-governing and self-supporting. In comparison with other denominations, the Baptist model is a bottom-up, locally focused way of doing church, with the regional associations and national Baptist Union holding a detached support and advice role. Whilst this can sometimes be a strength, for example, allowing dynamic and organic initiatives to develop in local churches, it can also be a weakness when coordinated and strategic action is required. This was identified by a number of the key influencers, for example:

...each church is autonomous, so environmental engagement only happens if/ when individuals within a church get fired up about the issues (Interview 5)

Baptist churches fiercely defend their right to autonomy and might ignore suggestions from central BU to engage in certain initiatives like Ecochurch. In any case, there is little evidence of such suggestions coming from national or regional levels of the Baptist family, or Baptist colleges, in relation to progressive creation care theology or practice. This was identified from the desk-based review, and backed up by the structured interviews, for example:

...information, guidance etc do not come down from an upper layer of hierarchy (Interview 5)

...for many years the issue seems not to have concerned the denomination's national leadership (Interview 1)

Challenge 2: Many Baptists see creation care as non-spiritual or less important than a core mission of saving souls

A perspective which came through strongly from the interviews was the role that theology has in Baptist churches regarding their environmental (in)action. The majority of interviewees recounted experiences of Baptist churches seeing creation care as non-spiritual or less important than a core mission of saving souls, for example:

For many churches the emphasis is on the conversion of individuals, where evangelism tends to override any meaningful consideration social awareness and social action. Care of the planet is relegated to worldly, even secular, activity. (Interview 4)

Some responses from the online questionnaire confirmed this for the wider Baptist community, for example:

- *Creation Care is an aspect of ethics and Christian living, not meaningfully an element in the mission of the church.*
- *Creation care is not an aspect of Christian mission although it is an aspect of ethical Christian living... A focus on creation care to the neglect of the challenge of evangelism will ultimately prove to be a cul-de-sac for churches.*
- *... it's not a high priority for most evangelicals, and I know a few who see it as a distraction from the gospel.*

These findings resonate with other studies into impediments to religious engagement with environmental issues³, that theological beliefs or worldviews can disable environmental concern and action, and that theological beliefs can relegate the level of attention to give to environmental concerns in comparison to other issues.

³ Veldman, R., Szasz, A. and Haluza-DeLay, R. (2014). *How the world's religions are responding to climate change; Social scientific investigations*. Routledge

Recommendations to overcome these challenges

How can the perceived obstacle of the independent nature of Baptist churches be overcome?

Perhaps there is scope for a Baptist version of Ecochurch, similar to Eco-Circuit/ Eco-Diocese/ Eco-Synod? Such a scheme would need to recognise the autonomy of Baptist churches and connect into the Regional Minister network, which is closer to individual churches than the national BU. The Regional Associations could set up networks of individuals within the region's churches who have knowledge and experience of environmental issues and action. This could become a resource for mentoring new churches into Ecochurch scheme, by providing ideas, inputting teaching, and signposting to resources through social media channels. There are already good examples of collaboration between Baptist churches through social media, which are proving very useful in the current coronavirus lockdown situation. Such collaborative networks could be harnessed to join up thinking and action on environmental issues in the future with support from regional ministers and influencers on these channels.

How can the perceived obstacle of narrow theology be overcome?

Many of the interviews highlighted this issue, and some suggested solutions, including, each region to appoint an environmental advocate to preach and teach around churches on the issue (Interview 1), *prepare good biblical theological material for pastors and leaders to educate about the reasons for taking creation care seriously* (Interview 2), *produce some resources for churches to use (eg in homegroups) that deal with the theological and practical questions pertinent to the ecological crisis* (Interview 7). In addition, as has already been mentioned, Baptist colleges need to incorporate creation care and environmental ethics into their curricula. Greater participation in Ecochurch will also help to demonstrate to churches that creation care is biblical, through the worship and teaching sections of the award. In addition, enabling churches to see the links between environmental damage and social justice is a strong driver for change. Many Baptist churches have engaged with social justice campaigns and action, connecting with organisations like Tearfund and Christian Aid. The online questionnaire shows that using Fairtrade products is the most common action taken. Churches already understand the link between Christian faith and social justice, so teaching which makes clear the links between environmental degradation, poverty and injustice will have strong traction.

Baptist churches should aim to be communities which foster 'eco-theo-citizenship'⁴, a kind of lifestyle which emerges through a combination of '*practical actions, theological values and commitment to cultural change*'. This process can be slow, but eventually becomes deep-rooted and leads to a culture shift churches and a wonderful witness to the wider community.

How can the central Baptist Union respond differently?

Certainly, they need to lead by example, and carry out more actions similar to installing solar panels on their head office. The BU needs to urgently take a lead on divesting funds from fossil fuels, campaigning on environmental issues in their advocacy role, and develop further resources for churches to support them with theology and practical actions. The BU national team should connect with the Ecochurch team and invest resources into promoting the scheme to Baptist churches. The profile of creation care at national conferences and on BU websites definitely needs to be raised. Some of the interviewees suggested other actions the BU could take, for example, setting up a fund to support churches to invest in costly actions (Interview 7), allow the existing Home Mission funding stream to be spent on creation care activities (Interview 9), and appointing an environmental worker at national level to coordinate efforts (Interview 3).

⁴ Kidwell, J., Ginn, F., Northcott, M., Bomberg, E., and Hague, A. (2018). Christian climate care: Slow change, modesty and eco-theo-citizenship. *Geo: Geography and Environment*. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1002/geo2.59>

Key findings



1

Progress so far has been slow, but there are signs of awareness increasing and actions emerging

2

There remain particular challenges for Baptist churches, related to autonomy and theology

3

Future effort needs to focus on:

- Stronger national leadership on this issue
- Supportive regional collaborations
- Empowerment of individuals within churches

The research results show that whilst fewer than 1 in 10 Baptist churches are registered for the Ecochurch scheme, this is on a par with other denominations, although churches with awards are far fewer. The interviews with key influencers expressed frustration at their attempts to raise the profile of creation care within the Baptist family, particularly in relation to justifying it from a theological and missional perspective, and a lack of success in engaging national and regional sections of the family. However, many of the interviewees noted a change in the last decade, of more interest and action around this issue, and were positive for the future. The online questionnaire echoes this sentiment, a significant majority agreed that creation care is biblically based, that humans have to take the blame for much of the environmental harm, and that the church has a responsibility to act. It also shows that many Baptist churches are already taking actions to help the environment and would like to do more.

This research complements findings of similar research, showing that climate change and creation care are becoming more important subjects for Christians, probably because the profile of these issues in the media is increasing and the effects of environmental degradation are becoming evident to everyone. The Christian faith has a strong foundation of biblical teaching for love of creation even if over the centuries some theology has been unhelpful. In addition, churches can be a powerful force for change. Churches have strong social capital, with long-lasting congregations, integration into local communities and significant people and fiscal resources. Although making environmental changes may be a slow process in many churches, there is great capacity for deep and meaningful transformative change in Baptist churches.

Churches of all types should be a witness to wider society when it comes to environmental action and discourse, through both community-based local action and denomination-level national advocacy. By this multi-scale approach, churches have potential to reduce environmental degradation and bring environmental hope and love into the forefront of teaching, prayer and works. With focussed national leadership, supportive regional collaborations, and positive changes in each local church, the next decade should usher in a more appropriate response to the environmental crisis from Baptist churches in the UK.