

# Briefing



## Looking at climate change

If there are  
Oystercatchers,  
there must  
be God!

COP29:  
Challenges,  
failures and  
slow progress

Who are  
Free to  
Believers?

# Contents

Editorial	3
David Coleman biography	5
Sensibly, gradually, eventually	6
Oystercatcher manifesto	8
If there are oystercatchers	12
The seabird stole	14
If policies were penguins	15
COP29	18
Prayer for resilience	21
The S word	22
New committee members	24
Who are Free to Believers?	25
Book reviews	27
Reading party	29
Questionnaire	32

***Briefing* is free. However, to cover rising costs and to ensure its continuation, donations are always welcome.**

**If you would like to contribute, please contact David Parkin, the Treasurer of Free to Believe, for more information: [treasurer@freetobelieve.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@freetobelieve.org.uk)**



# Welcome to *Briefing*



Welcome to this edition of *Briefing*, and this time we turn our focus to God's creation and the climate crisis which we are living through. We are delighted to introduce our guest contributor, the Revd David Coleman. David is a United Reformed Church minister serving as ecumenical eco-chaplain for Eco-Congregation Scotland, a Christian environmental charity addressing climate change and conservation.

David's contributions cover a wide range of areas in thinking seriously about creation and environment. We have the theological response, in a manifesto for reading the Bible in a time of climate crisis, and a prayer for resilience that could be used for personal reflection or in public worship. We have an update on the political response, in a report on the COP29 summit held in Baku in November 2024. Of course, we can't divide the political and the theological, and this is seen in suggestions on how eco-policies adopted by churches, both nationally and locally, can be most effective.

You might find some of David's message difficult and challenging, you might find yourself looking to the skies and spelling Earth with a capital E. David might make us re-evaluate some of the language we use in church, and question whether we really put the climate crisis at the heart of our faith and church life. But we hope that readers of *Briefing* value challenging voices, embrace the questioning of assumptions and conventional

attitudes, and enjoy being given new and creative ways to think. As David asks – do you have to dilute the truth to tell it in love? Not in an emergency. We are in an emergency, and we need to listen.

Looking ahead, the next edition of *Briefing* will be in summer 2025, and will focus on the Free to Believe Reading Party. This will be looking at Graham Adams' book, *Holy Anarchy*. Then, in the autumn, we will welcome guest co-editors Jo and Alex-Clare Young, who will be thinking theologically about disability. You can read a review of Alex's latest book (on a different topic) later in this edition.

As always, we hope you enjoy reading *Briefing* and we would welcome any feedback, thoughts and responses on this edition. They may be included in the next edition, or perhaps you could start a conversation on our Facebook page. We would also welcome suggestions of topics for the future. We'd like to hear what you think. You can send any messages to [editor@freetobelieve.org.uk](mailto:editor@freetobelieve.org.uk).

***As David asks – do you have to dilute the truth to tell it in love? Not in an emergency. We are in an emergency, and we need to listen.***

We hope you enjoy this Spring edition of *Briefing*.

### **Editorial group**

Liz Byrne, Nick Jones, Iain McDonald,  
Helen M Mee, Megan Price and  
Kevin Skippon





# Biography

---

For the last six years, URC special category minister, the Revd David J M Coleman, has been immersed in the deeply rewarding project of encouraging – and being encouraged by – churches seeking a loving and sacred relationship with the Earth and our fellow creatures. There's so much green treasure in the fields of Christian scripture, tradition and spirituality, but sadly also an inertia which serves neither the deepening of our faith nor our vigorous contribution, alongside other people of faith, to the health of the planet.

***There's so much green treasure in the fields of Christian scripture, tradition and spirituality ...***

As Environmental Chaplain with Eco-Congregation Scotland, and especially since lockdown, David has developed a unique video ministry helping the voices of Creation to be heard, while

curating and resourcing the Season of Creation for Scottish churches, and cherishing dialogue with Creation-loving Christians around the world.

St Francis and his friends spent half their time communing with 'nature' and half engaged in direct mission in difficult urban contexts. David thinks that might be a good and sustaining ratio to aspire to for a ministry such as this. All the more so in the Trumpian era, when building our spiritual resilience is a more urgent and realistic aim than 'fixing' the planet.



# Sensibly, gradually, eventually...

## the new temptations

*The Revd David Coleman*

If you thought the sexuality debates within the URC were tedious and protracted, because of delaying tactics by those who knew they'd lost the argument, then welcome to the battlefield of the Climate and Nature Crisis. A diabolical new warfront spewed out from changes in the United States; so vile, it looks to make us all better Christians in response!

There are also wolves in more 'British' sheep's clothing. I received a polite email from a member of the Scottish Parliament, which strategically employed the words 'sensibly', 'gradually' and 'eventually', as if to look urgently for even the most basic changes in our economy – in the direction of 'not maximising' knowing damage to life on Earth – were the wild fantasy of ignorant youth.

On the contrary, I'm continually embarrassed by my own moderation. But given that we do have leaders, in Church and nation, how can we encourage them, pray for them, convince them, to give a lead?

### **The authority problem**

Ever dealt with scholars who daren't hazard an original thought without stacks of footnotes? Or battled that inferiority complex which relegates your own insights to that of 'midgets on the shoulders of giants'? (That's the way the 'giants' felt in their day!)

I've learned to 'test the spirits' of 'infallibly' big names, and those who quote them. Yet the best of what I hear quoted is 'public domain insights' – things which should be obvious. Yet we chicken out and offload onto the authority



of someone apparently better qualified.

Big oil is well up to this, with vast resources to bribe academics and the odd Nobel prize winner to sell their souls. Uncertainty about causes of the crisis is all the devil needs. But aggressively skilled rhetoric doesn't make you right. Meanwhile, about 99% of peer-reviewed science recognises that the direct cause of runaway 'natural' disasters is status quo human activity. That's fact: the question is, how do we respond? Especially with the Gospels so stuffed with stories about the importance of taking notice. Try that as key to the more intractable parables. Or even 'justification by faith'.

That said, here's an exceptional statement from one of our few remaining polymaths; the outstanding 'treasure from the field' of a 2023 conference whose statements were otherwise depressingly 'Global North':

*'The environmental crisis overshadows every other issue. The story here is of an insanely unbalanced account of human entitlement and human capacity*

*that has consistently, in the last three centuries, ignored any sense of the interdependence of human life and the life of the organic order as a whole: the life that matters has been, explicitly or implicitly, defined as human life – and human life lived in a specific mode, that of expanding consumption.'*

*The Rt Revd and the Rt Hon the Lord Williams of Oystermouth, former Archbishop of Canterbury*

I'm delighted, as part of the global Season of Creation committee that, for a second year in a row, the theme includes the explosively radical preposition... WITH Creation. Fellow creatures as partners, not just a means to an end. We need not an ivory tower eco-theology, pondering Creation as a theologians' construct, but a green baptism of general practice Christianity into the eyes-wide-open liberation of truth about where we are. The truth – offered pastorally, openly, in love. Don't be afraid of being mainstream, though don't sell your soul to get there. Do you have to dilute the truth or hold it back to tell it in love? Not in an emergency, you don't! There is no longer pastoral without prophetic!

# Oystercatcher manifesto for Bible reading

(If there are Oystercatchers, there must be God!)

**1 Your printed Bibles and commentaries** presume a world without climate crisis. They're made for a different planet. None lack their own agenda and slant, all of which is fine... BUT even the most conscientious translators translate only into the idiom they're expected to. Beware the semantic exclusion of non-human personalities (eg Mark 16:15 in *The Good News Bible!*).

**2 Experiential, pedestrian, terrestrial** Bible imagery is rooted in experience rather than in detached abstracts. This stops us despising writers as 'primitive'. The environmental literacy of writers like Jeremiah (who knows his trees) and Isaiah (try writing chapter 55 without knowledge of the water cycle) is impressive. The 'dome of heaven' (Genesis 1) is how the sky actually looks when

you look up. 'Outer space' provokes wonder, but is weaponised to distract from terrestrial urgency. Hint: what do playboys like Musk, Bezos and Branson mess about in?

**3 When you hear 'Earth'...** not just a location but, next to God (or Jesus in the New Testament), the personality most mentioned in the Bible. 'Heaven and Earth' (sky and soil), taken together, are one unified Creation. An undivided dynamic unity created by God the Sustainer. Think 'bottle-garden.' Everything affects everything. Rebel options: spell Earth with a capital 'E'. You'll think differently. THEN: only ever use 'who' rather than 'it' for Earth.

**4 When you hear 'Heaven'...** look at the sky today. In the Bible, Heaven/sky are the same word, most of the time. Heaven is not 'another



universe’ – that’s science fiction, not the Bible! But if you insist on separating them, experience Skyness first of all, and only then bring your imagination into gear for ‘Heaven’. Likewise: ‘angels’ are not aliens but fellow creatures. ‘Unseen’ is not ‘unreal’. Or we’ll only value what we think has purpose.



**5 Give us this day...** in the Lord’s Prayer, are you praying for God’s will to be done throughout both ‘Heaven and Earth’? In climate crisis, interdependent realms of God’s Unified Creation need that prayer. We can’t take it for granted that ‘Heaven’ is invulnerable and in balance. (Matthew 11:12).

**6 When you hear ‘world’...** touch the Earth, stroke an animal, drink water. Eat bread. Don’t accept ‘world’ as merely ‘human culture’. Allow that ‘world’ includes every creature. Choose to read that this is what God so loves that God ‘gave his only Son’ (affirmed in prayer globally). The depths of the word’s meaning suggest something worth delighting in.

You can read it narrowly, but now’s not the time.

**7 When you hear ‘Spirit’...** stand in the Wind and feel their movement. Breathe in and out. Spirit, Breath and the wayward gusty Wind belong together in the Bible and require no additional rapture to step into. But if you are given a rapturous vision (or intellectual insight), remember, the community needs to interpret it, rather than just you yourself. Spirit is reality, not abstraction. Without them, the Bible is just an old book.

**8 When you hear ‘redemption’...** think ‘liberation’. Christ and the truth (both, without conflict) set us free! Coming into your own place and purpose. Don’t wait till you’re dead to find it.

**9** When you hear **'obedience'**... obediently and faithfully question who or what you are being asked to be obedient to. The only story of Jesus' 'obedient' childhood is when he disappears in a crowded city and drives his parents frantic. Do you serve Church best by 'obedience' or by loving challenge?

**10** When you hear **'servant/slave'**... remember the useless ones do only what they're told. (Luke 17:10). Check to see if translators have made 'good' slaves into 'servants' and kept the bad ones 'slaves'. (See number 12 on legacies of slavery,

abolition of which was delayed by similar strategies to climate denial.)

**11** When you hear of **God in Christ Jesus**... remember and respect with gratitude and wonder how Church has insisted on (though often ignored) the full and unreserved humanity of Jesus. How much of this is shared with other creatures? Even to a cellular level? Feel your own body. Go to the toilet. Get hot, get cold. Swim in the sea. The radical implication of the Incarnation, if you don't limply pass it off as a 'mere metaphor', is that Jesus also shares our evolutionary history – thus also that of all living things.

**12** No more **othering**... after 'Black Lives Matter' and 'Legacies of Slavery', churches are more than ever aware of the 'othering' of races, gender identities, different abilities etc. 'Stewardship Christianity', which identifies our calling as 'looking after (God's) property' without allowing that Creation has feelings or an opinion, has been well past its sell-by



date since before the Paris Conference and the late Pope's Laudato Si encyclical of 2015. The Poverty Truth Commission: 'Nothing about Earth without Earth is for Earth'. God's Rainbow Covenant (Genesis 9) is with 'All Flesh' and 'The Earth' rather than just with us. We are the Earth. So is all life. From which follows...

**13** **The cross is also always the tree...** ancient stone crosses present the cross as habitat for birds of Heaven. Where God meets Abraham and Sarah. Isaiah attacks the abuse of trees in the cults of Israel's neighbours. A sermon without trees may be a crime, because it deprives people of what they need in order to respond to the signs of our times. Rebel option: can you bring a tree into church on a special festival – like Christmas, perhaps? And let the tree be tree?

**14** **'Climate denial'** needs to be no more acceptable in churches than racism.  
a) It's stupid, and God is no protection against stupidity.

b) It does real harm, and not just to others.

c) It's deeply ingrained in our (church) culture and will stay that way unless named and challenged.

***When you hear  
'redemption'... think  
'liberation'. Christ and  
the truth (both, without  
conflict) set us free!  
Coming into your own  
place and purpose.  
Don't wait till you're  
dead to find it.***



# If there are oystercatchers, there must be God

*Helen M Mee*

I want wholeheartedly to support David Coleman's assertion, 'If there are oystercatchers there must be God'. The oystercatcher is a bird which has a place deep in the Scottish psyche and I guess that will be true in Ireland too. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds describes the oystercatcher as a 'large, stocky, black and white wading bird. It has an orange-red bill and reddish-pink legs.' They are classed as Amber on the Conservation Concern List.

I was first consciously aware of the species when I worked in a hospital in West Lothian, where a number of breeding pairs had set up home on the flat roof of the building (about a ten-mile flight to the coast). Being waders, the birds were regularly seen paddling about in one of the many puddles in the car park after a rainshower. They have a distinct and loud call, which became all the more real when a young bird landed in one of the hospital's internal courtyard garden areas. It just did not have the wing strength to take off in the confined space. We lived for two days with the young bird screeching 'Mum/Dad, I am down here', with the responding 'We see you' from the roof. Everybody sighed with relief when the youngster gained enough strength to fly home and the constant echoes of 'bi glic bi glic' died down.

Oystercatchers make an appearance in heraldry, in England in the Hoylake arms and then in the newly created arms granted in 1976 for the Wirral. I assume this is because of the huge number of breeding pairs on the estuary. However, there is a church dedicated to St Bridget in West Kirby by Hoylake. In Scotland, however, the oystercatcher is a slightly more esoteric symbol. The oystercatcher is the symbol of St Bride (or Brigid/Bridget), herself being a weave of Christian, Celtic and Druid saints. An example of that is the pre-Christian perpetual fire which burned in Kildare to protect herds and increase the harvest by invoking the goddess Brigid.



By the time Brigid is understood as a Christian saint with her community and church in Kildare, there is still a fire kept alight to represent the light of the Christ. The reddish beaks and legs of the oystercatcher are thought to be a symbol of this fire. It is unsurprising that the arms of the Burgh of East Kilbride, which were incorporated into the arms of East Kilbride District, include oystercatchers (Kilbride being 'the church of Bride').

The Hebrides are said to be named after Bride, and her presence is symbolised by the resident oystercatchers, which accompanied her on an evangelising journey from Kildare in Ireland to the Hebridean island of South Uist. It is said that when her ship was becalmed at sea, oystercatchers miraculously put wind in her sails by flapping their wings, blowing Bride to shore.

Legend also affirms that not only was Brigid the midwife and wet nurse for Mary the mother of Jesus (a legend that deserves unpacking elsewhere) but that she was present at the crucifixion, guided there by an oystercatcher.

In Glasgow there are at least two churches dedicated to St Bride and a further two in Lanarkshire. Three of these are Roman Catholic congregations and the other Episcopalian. In deference to the bird's central role in the Bride legend, the magazine of St Bride's Episcopal Church is called 'The Oystercatcher'.

Oystercatchers are migratory birds flying south to over winter. It should surprise no one that they are expected to return around 1 February, yes as harbingers of spring, but 1 February is of course St Brigid/Bride's Day. It is perhaps more surprising that there are two oystercatchers in the arms of the Scottish Police College, their black and white plumage being reminiscent of the black and white check which appears in the police uniform. The motto of the College, *Bi Glic Bi Glic*, is based on the cry of the oystercatcher and also translates from Gaelic as 'Be Wise, Be Circumspect'. However, it is noticeable that that is not a million miles away from the name of the bird in Gaelic. The oystercatcher is called *Gillie-Brighde* or *Gillie-Bride* in Gaelic, which means Bride's Servant.

As David says, 'If there are oystercatchers there must be God.'



# The seabird stole

## *The Revd David Coleman*

To mark renewal of the Environmental Chaplaincy, I began a conversation with fabric artist Yvonne Bell on a stole to celebrate our kinship with fellow creatures.

Chaplaincy travel leads to many encounters with seabirds, whose amazing lives are only beginning to come to light. Yvonne brings through much character: the mean aspect of the Great Skua and the bendy beak of the Curlew. Where angels might traditionally have made an appearance, these are the ‘things with wings’ who’ve brought me inspiration; all the more as I’ve seen the impact of bird flu on populations already under pressure from changes in climate, food patterns, and factors affecting migration. The Gannets at the top do the job when I’m peeping over a pulpit, on Zoom or a screen. The full length opens up some of the characters I’ve met along our coasts.



I’ll be using this stole alongside others that show the Trinity/Turbine, and the wildlife enjoying the ‘vine’, based on the Ruthwell Cross\* habitat. But lovely to be wearing in my work something which reminds us: if there are oystercatchers, there must be God!



\*The Ruthwell Cross, thought to date back to around AD 680, is a stone cross and is one of the most famous and elaborate Anglo-Saxon monumental sculptures.

It is preserved in Ruthwell village church. Ruthwell is now in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, but once was part of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria.



# If policies were penguins...

*The Revd David Coleman*

As a minister within the United Reformed Church, I am most aware of the URC's policies and intentions: [www.urc.org.uk/environmental-policy](http://www.urc.org.uk/environmental-policy). However, the establishment of such policies, and ensuring they are in place or under development and owned by everybody, is the business of all denominations and faith groups. Any policies will need to be specific to the aspirations, capacities and context of your churches. Here are a few thoughts on shaping and reshaping them. There's a video version at: [www.vimeo.com/907617111](http://www.vimeo.com/907617111).

It was with caution that I asked Edinburgh Zoo for permission to film there for Lent reflections. Some friends harbour a lifelong suspicion of zoos: understood as an assault on the dignity of fellow creatures, presented in outdated displays that allow them no privacy or interest.

Like the 'stewardship' model of Care for Creation, where you're responsible only to God and not to fellow creatures with their own

languages, personalities and God-given rights. It's a grimly unambitious – and now ultimately harmful – approach, disregarding our high human calling to active partnership and intervention for good in favour of janitorial servitude or nervous non-intervention.

Looking more closely, I discovered the zoo's involvement in conservation projects in Scotland and worldwide. No zoo animals now come from the wild. In order to be sustained, the zoo has evolved. A valuable takeaway from the Revd Dr Stephen Holmes's lectures on a theology





of creation ([bit.ly/theoZoo](http://bit.ly/theoZoo)) was the depressing tendency of religious people, when talking environment, entirely to leave behind their spiritual motivation. There is no need for that. Care for Creation deepens and arises from the enrichment of authentic faith. Edinburgh Zoo's motto is 'Multiformis Sapientia Dei' – which I'm going to translate as 'Diversity is the Wisdom of God'. One size will not fit all, but in order to fit, it may need some teeth.

A recyclable eco policy will ideally be an expression of hope-filled and responsive love

for the World, for which God gave God's Son; a love amongst the churches, personally and actively fostered at every opportunity by those who give leadership to the churches. That needs to be in job descriptions.

One deadly serious question:  
Is your proposed policy  
sustainably enjoyable?

Is it worth celebrating and how  
would you do so when you get  
together? Is it worth a cake?  
Or two?

Would an environmental policy  
talk of 'Kingdom values'? Can  
I suggest it definitely should?  
Because 'Kingdom' is one of  
those baggages we carry around  
but don't unpack. For me, it's  
come to mean that state of being  
when God's will of biodiversity and  
justice converge in God's unified  
Creation of sky and soil. Is there a  
difference between the 'Kingdom  
of heaven' (ie Creation as is) and  
'Kingdom of God' (the way it ought  
to be/will be)?

***Edinburgh Zoo's motto is  
'Multiformis Sapientia Dei' –  
which I'm going to translate as  
'Diversity is the Wisdom of God'.***

***A recyclable eco policy will ideally be an expression of hope-filled and responsive love for the World, for which God gave God's Son...***

So, never allow any policy to look like tedious box-ticking divorced from 'the real business of being church'.

You'll also need a firm public recognition that a human-caused crisis of nature and climate is a matter of fact, not opinion. Then honesty to be clear that we will not 'fix' this, though by the grace of God, our responses are valuable. Even and especially those tiny labours of love. In the early twenty-first century, environmental policy is a species of prayer.

So, we're also talking mission, witness, discipleship and evangelism. It's important to use those sensitive, powerful words, which are wont to be avoided by some and monopolised by others. None of which can, with integrity, be isolated from the causes of the sickness of the Earth. All of which need to show clear green credentials.

If funding policy is involved, don't subsidise anything in any church – like replacing a gas boiler with a gas boiler – which locks them into fossil fuels.

Provide encouragement for every pastorate, especially those in vacancy, to find solidarity in Eco-Church or Eco-Congregation. Good ministers will be looking for pastorates who take their faith that seriously.

Adopt some sort of Net-Zero target (and footnote what you choose to mean by that) while allowing that this is aspiration; an attempt to make life better for all concerned.

Edinburgh Zoo quotes research on the mental health benefits of wonder and love. Your policy is there to do good, and minimise harm, to the faith community and to their neighbours, global and local, human and otherwise. Carbon footprint is a popular but narrow measure because if you stick with the same scheme you get figures to chart progress. But welfare of landscapes, wild and domestic species – and above all biodiversity – are real 'values' too. Seek first the kingdom – then the policy will be added to you!

# COP 29:

## Challenges, failures and slow progress

*Adrian Shaw*

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was established in 1994 with the aim of preventing 'dangerous' human interference with the climate system. The 198 countries that have ratified the Convention are called Parties to the Convention (COP). COP, which meets annually, is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention.

COP29 was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, and, like all recent COPs, attracted tens of thousands of participants and some controversy. It was chaired for the third year by a petrostate, with frustration at the chairing leading to walkouts at different times by France, Argentina and small island states. The election of Donald Trump as President elect also caused shock and, as expected, has led the USA to withdraw from the Paris agreement again.

A highlight for faith groups was a Faith Pavilion, providing a platform for faith based discussions on climate justice.

***COP29 was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, and, like all recent COPs, attracted tens of thousands of participants and some controversy.***



*Photo credit: Dean Calma/IAEA*

## The highlights

### Last-minute deal

In a last-minute deal, developed nations agreed to help channel at least \$300bn each year to developing countries by 2035, to support their efforts to deal with climate change. Countries most affected by climate change were calling for \$1.3tn a year in climate finance this decade. The timetable, who contributes and how the resource will be delivered remain unclear.

### The context: 2024 will be the hottest year ever

The EU Copernicus Climate Change Service reported in November that 2024 will be the warmest year on record and the first year of more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Climate Action Tracker suggests that the best we can hope for is to limit warming to 1.9°C but that warming of 2.7°C is a more likely given current government policies.

### Greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise

The UN State of the Climate Report 2024 reported that atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide has risen to over 420 parts per million (ppm), from pre-industrial levels of 280ppm. The same report lists examples of extreme weather associated with rising temperatures, including flooding in Europe and more intense Atlantic hurricanes. Attribution Studies make it possible to link examples of extreme weather to climate change with increasing confidence.

### Around the COP: the Faith Pavilion

Faith groups have no formal place in the negotiations but for the second year there was a Faith Pavilion at COP, organised by the Muslim Council of Elders, to promote interfaith cooperation and action on climate justice. It hosted over fifty dialogue and discussion sessions,

with 230+ speakers from 97 organisations representing 11 different religions and denominations globally. Among the events was the launch of the Women, Faith and Climate network to increase visibility of women-led climate action.

### **Global growth in the low carbon economy**

Renewable energy is booming, with installed capacity of over 4000gW globally, projected to increase to 7,300gW by 2028 according to the International Energy Agency. China accounts for over half of all growth in renewable energy and also leads in the sale of electric vehicles. Almost 14 million new electric cars were registered globally in 2023, bringing their total number on the roads to 40 million, 16 million of which are in China. A detailed technical report on COP29 and its outcomes is available from Carbon Briefing.

*Adrian Shaw is a key volunteer with Eco-Congregation Scotland. Formerly Climate Change Officer, the Church of Scotland, now researching 19th Century church engagement with science and environment.*

***In a last-minute deal, developed nations agreed to help channel at least \$300bn each year to developing countries by 2035, to support their efforts to deal with climate change.***



# Prayer for resilience

Dear God, Sustainer. Listener.  
God with us, God with Earth;

The Long Time of Trial has come,  
and not so long in coming  
as we sort of hoped.

We have been *led* there  
– not by you.

The Day of Mess and Turmoil  
has arrived.

When once again that  
‘Ruler of the World’  
believes they have the  
upper hand;  
the same who lay in wait  
when you shared wildness  
with the wildlife and with angels;  
forty days.

Dear God, Sustainer. Listener.  
Do hear this:

We’re up to our eyes in today;  
knowing with certainty  
that much about tomorrow  
will be worse.

As justice trampled  
makes seas rise,  
make glaciers melt...  
All the rest of it.  
Things you know  
and we pretend we don’t.

And in this time  
Christ who says  
‘Truth sets us free!’  
is Christ who says ‘Do not worry!’  
and means it.

*[We say ... hold on!]*

Christ says: ‘Look at the birds’  
Christ says: ‘Learn from the sky!’  
and means it.

So, at last we will.

Then all those faithful  
‘*God’s in charge*’ prayers,  
all those heartfelt  
‘*All is well*’ prayers,  
are not futile,  
but recycled by your grace.

Dear God, Sustainer. Listener.  
In Christ and all the Scriptures,  
in the kinship of the Church,  
you gave treasures,  
piled up, preserved.  
Help us cash them in.


Redeem them,  
for the resilience  
of faith, hope, love,  
and joy defiant;  
with you and with the Earth.  
AMEN




# The S word



## Kill the Steward




Though it arguably has its origins in the haushalterschaft of the Reformation, ‘stewardship’, as a lamentably unambitious and merely janitorial representation of the high human calling to care for the life of the Earth as a whole, gained popularity in the late 20th century. Before our consciousness of the current crisis. Folks realised then, with panicked horror, how the King James Version ‘dominion’ had been twisted to justify ‘domination’. The idea in Genesis (and arguably Psalm 8) is certainly a high and distinctive calling. But it’s not the only or defining concept.




Stewardship plays into the anthropocentric hands of those who other and objectify the personalities of Creation:

- rather than celebrating our kinship and partnership with them
- rather than acknowledging our dependence on them, and the care we receive from them.






It’s a dead end, and we can do better in an age of climate and nature crisis; we’re all in it together, after all. But badly-briefed Church figureheads, for whom Creation is not the day job, still feel they have to slip the S-word into statements they’re asked to make. Do them a favour, tell them, and don’t be in awe!





The best Gospel refutation is perhaps the contrast between the Good Shepherd who lays down their life for the sheep – and the ‘Hired Hand’ (steward) who doesn’t care, and scarpers off (cf. John 10:12).


***I hope you wouldn’t think of ‘stewarding’ your nearest and dearest, and I suspect they wouldn’t put up with it. Why should our fellow creatures?***




As for Genesis 1:28, usefully no published English language Bible has seen fit to use the S-word to translate the 'rule/responsibility' given to humanity. Conversely, no ancient tribal leader would last long if they weren't both personally familiar with, and trusted by, their people. Exercising justice, not abusive exploitation.



The later model of humanity as justified absolute tyrant should be so obviously false as not to need the bogus defence of a merely dutiful relationship of care (stewardship), in which love is not necessary, and loyalty is only to God, rather than also to our neighbours of whatever species. And didn't (king) Jesus' model loving servant leadership in any case?



I hope you wouldn't think of 'stewarding' your nearest and dearest, and I suspect they wouldn't put up with it. Why should our fellow creatures?



It's OK for money, though. Which you shouldn't worship, love or serve. (1 Timothy 6:10; Matthew 6:24).

## Resources



Some links you might be interested in checking out:



### Eco- Congregation Scotland

- [www.ecocongregationscotland.org](http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org) (look under Resources to see the collection of Vimeo videos available).




### Season of Creation

- [www.seasonofcreation.org](http://www.seasonofcreation.org)



### Are you a Facebook user?

- [www.facebook.com/eccongregationscotland](https://www.facebook.com/eccongregationscotland)
  - [www.facebook.com/ecorevscot](https://www.facebook.com/ecorevscot)
  - [www.facebook.com/david.colemanwork](https://www.facebook.com/david.colemanwork)
- 

# New committee members

Nicola Anne Robinson is a Scottish URC minister, serving in the Leeds URC Partnership. She is new to Free to Believe and appreciates a welcoming, liberal space to ask questions and explore how Jesus' radical way can shape our lives and world today. In her spare time, she enjoys lots of good walks with her dog, Maisie, and tea and cake with family and friends, as well as reading and knitting.



Megan Price is Synod Clerk for the United Reformed Church National Synod of Wales. Daughter of a now retired URC minister, she grew up in North Wales and now lives in Cardiff with her soon to be (meaning by the time you read this) husband, Mike. She spent fifteen years working in arts marketing before joining the Wales Synod team three and half years ago. A member of the Progressive Christian Network and a regular volunteer on the URC team at Greenbelt, she is passionate about social justice, an avid theatre-goer and a sporadic knitter. She is thrilled to have found, in Free to Believe, a space for those with an open, questioning faith and with a truly welcoming heart.

# Who are Free to Believers?

## My Ecumenical Journey

*The Revd Angela Robinson*



I have always enjoyed the Free to Believe conferences and the company one keeps; however, I cannot remember how I heard about Free to Believe. I am an ecumenist, with a Diploma of Ecumenism from Bossey, 1966, after which I went back to Oxford and read Theology. I was a teacher until 1978 when I entered the ministry.

I was a member of the first ecumenical community (1970-79) in Witney, which included two Roman Catholic nuns from a Benedictine enclosed order, who had to get official permission to leave their community and live with Protestants along with two continuing Congregationalists. We kept our heads down so successfully that hardly anyone has ever heard of us! I was also a member of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (some superb post-Vatican 2 Mariology) for some decades.

In retirement, following another ministry in Essex, where my husband died of MND, and 14 years in Bangladesh, I returned to my birthplace of Southport. I attend the Anglican early morning Communion Service before driving 12 miles to Bretherton Congregational Church as all the Congregational churches in Southport went URC. I am a member of

***I feel greatly privileged to have had so many opportunities to listen to what the Lord is doing with us all.***

a remarkable 7.30am Tuesday prayer meeting that has been going for years in Southport and has turned out to be mainly Roman Catholic and Evangelicals, very few Anglicans, and is a veritable powerhouse of Christians involved in local social action.

Incidentally, when the ecumenical community started in 1970, the nuns read the 'Scheme of Union' that was just coming out to launch interest in the URC and were seen giggling. When asked why, they said, 'You are giving to your General Assembly more power than we give to the Pope!'

On retirement, I went out to Bangladesh with the Council for World Mission for a one-year option, but stayed for 14 years. I ended up wearing a stole given to me by the Moderator Bishop to preside over his English-speaking congregation and later became Chaplain to the English speakers and had the honour of preaching at the Remembrance Service at the Commonwealth Graveyard for the British High Commission, but then he did not have to pay me as I had a modest salary for being Principal of the British School and, later, others!

My first ecumenical opportunity was when my firmly Congregationalist parents sent me to an excellent Anglican boarding school, and when I was in my first ministry in Grassington I was asked to preach at their celebration service in Liverpool Cathedral, in the days before the Anglican Church ordained women. I discovered decades later, from a Huyton College Old Girls reunion, that I was in the newspapers as the first ordained woman to preach in Liverpool Cathedral!

I feel greatly privileged to have had so many opportunities to listen to what the Lord is doing with us all.



# Book reviews

## Trans Formations

by Alex Clare-Young (SCM Press 2024)

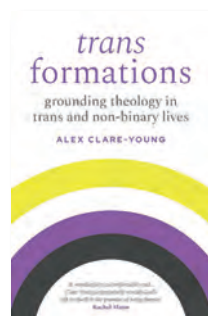
Available from the URC Bookshop: [bit.ly/4ke1CTI](https://bit.ly/4ke1CTI)

*Nicholas Jones*

One of Donald Trump's first actions on beginning his second term as US president was to sign an executive order stating that there are only two sexes, male and female, immutably determined at conception. This is both scientifically and culturally inaccurate (intersex, trans and non-binary people exist) and has potential to cause harm. Here in the UK the political 'debate' around the definition of a woman has too often seen dehumanising language reducing complex identities to body parts.

Against this background it is refreshing and powerful to read a book which begins its introduction with the statement that it is *by*, rather than *about*, trans and non-binary people, telling stories about the lived experience of a group far too often not listened to, both in wider society and within the Church. The book is dedicated to folks 'who are striving to articulate their most precious authentic understandings to those who would silence them'.

This book, based on doctoral research, intersperses theological chapters with sections exploring the lived experience of nine gender non-conforming Christians. Each has a different story to tell, coming from different denominations and with a different set of experiences. Many have been hurt by the institutional Church, and some are trying to reconstruct a faith which has been lost. These accounts contain themes of suffering and resilience, but also joy. Here, new expressions of church can be helpful, as well as new ways of thinking about God which move beyond binary divisions. For example, there are discussions of gender in relation to God, including the fascinatingly



paradoxical statement that 'God the Father has no gender.' There are also discussions of the problems of theories of the atonement, which revolve around sin and punishment, and how this can be a barrier to those seeking a faith which is accepting and open. The book forms its own language, with serious academic credentials yet also a poetic fluency. It's a book about real experiences, which is based on rigorous research but also contains a playfulness and is very readable for a non-specialist general audience willing to be challenged.

The question for readers of *Briefing*, from a wide diversity of denominations and church backgrounds, might be how we can respond. Those of us who wish to be supporters and allies of the trans community need first to learn and to listen, and a book like this would be an excellent starting point. Then, together, we can continue on the task of building a Church which is truly welcoming and affirming, and where everyone is genuinely invited to be their authentic self and encouraged to live life in all its fullness.

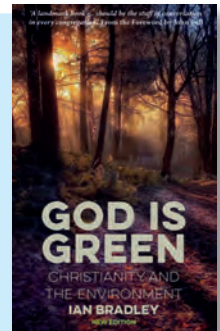
## God is Green: Christianity and the Environment

Ian Bradley (Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd 2020)

*David Parkin*

God is Green examines what the Bible has to say about humanity's relationship with, and responsibility for, the environment, and how Church traditions over the centuries have interpreted this. Ian Bradley argues that Christianity at its essence is a 'green faith' which has been distorted over the years. First published in 1990, this new edition of the book is revised for the contemporary state of our climate, and includes a chapter-by-chapter study guide for individuals and small groups.

Ian Bradley is Emeritus Professor of Cultural and Spiritual History at the University of St Andrews.



# Free to Believe Reading party 2025

17-20 June 2025

Luther King House, Manchester

£375 (see below for booking options)

**Holy Anarchy: Dismantling domination, embodying community, loving strangeness**

**Leader: Graham Adams**

For the last 12 years, Graham has been the Tutor in Mission Studies, World Christianity, and Religious Diversity at Northern College within the Luther King Centre – with a particular interest in how questions of Empire affect each of the three parts of his teaching role. Before that, he was minister of a Congregational church in Manchester. Ecumenically, Graham has participated in several events and theological consultations organised by the Council for World Mission and is a member of CTBI's Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group. Graham also organises the college's annual worship conference, being interested in how worship and mission affect each other, and is a hymnwriter.

*Holy Anarchy* is a different way of thinking about the kingdom of God. It particularly aims to disrupt systems of Empire which dominate us, often unnoticed – both in society and in our own religious beliefs and practice. It involves a different approach to God's power, as 'awesome weakness',



Reading  
party  
Holy Anarchy

Dismantling domination,  
embodying community,  
loving strangeness  
with  
Graham Adams  
17-20 June 2025  
Luther King House  
Brighton Grove  
Manchester M14 5JP  
Cost: £375  
Enquiries to  
[bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk](mailto:bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk)



Information and booking details available on the  
Free to Believe website: [bit.ly/FTBconf](http://bit.ly/FTBconf)  
Book available from the URC Bookshop: [www.urcshop.co.uk](http://www.urcshop.co.uk)

and to the role of the Church, as ‘awkward body of Christ’. It speaks to these times of tension and uncertainty, offering hope – but not necessarily hope as we know it. And it can shape worship in which we look to this alternative horizon, humbly but audaciously. It is an adventure – come and join the journey!

A Reading Party – at least in Free to Believe terms – consists of a smallish (smaller than a conference, anyway) group of people who have read the selected book and are interested in talking about it together. Depending on the leader of the group, there may be relatively formal talks about topics covered, group discussions of issues raised, informal conversations and opportunities to ask and answer questions. A few years ago, we were fortunate to have the author Richard Holloway with us as we considered one of his books. Many of us found that particularly interesting. If you enjoy reading, and enjoy talking about books, a Reading Party could be for you!

**Full cost: £375 (deposit £50). Register by 31 May 2025.**

Grants may be available to ministers through EM3 (active and active retired) and lay URC members by enquiry to Synod offices. There are two bursaries available to young people. Please enquire via **[bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk](mailto:bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk)**. Full fee to be paid by 31 May 2025.

Bookings can be made by bank transfer, TicketSource or cheque.

- If paying the deposit (plus booking fee) by TicketSource at **[bit.ly/FTBtkts](https://bit.ly/FTBtkts)**, then the balance of £325 will be collected via bank transfer – full details will be emailed to you.
- If paying by bank transfer (see account details on the booking form), then please email the booking form to **[bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk](mailto:bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk)**.
- If paying by cheque, then please send your cheque to the address at the bottom of the booking form.
- If possible, please pay by bank transfer and email your booking form or via TicketSource.

*Holy Anarchy*, Graham Adams is available to purchase on the URC Bookshop: **[www.urcshop.co.uk/holy-anarchy-by-graham-adams](http://www.urcshop.co.uk/holy-anarchy-by-graham-adams)**.

## Free to Believe Reading Party 2025

Luther King House, Manchester, 17-20 June 2025

£375 (deposit, £50). Full fee to be paid by 31 May 2025. Payment can be via Ticket Source at [bit.ly/FTBtkts](https://bit.ly/FTBtkts) (deposit only + booking fee)

### Bank transfer:

Account name: Free to Believe  
Sort code: 60-13-37  
Account number: 53754867

### Cheque:

Made payable to 'Free to Believe'  
and sent to: Free to Believe,  
c/o 7 Springs Crescent,  
Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0JT

**I wish to book ..... place(s) at the Free to Believe Reading Party 2025.**

**Names (in block capitals):** .....

If booking for more than one person, please indicate if you require a single room or a double room, and which people will be sharing.

1. .... Single/Double
2. .... Single/Double
3. .... Single/Double
4. .... Single/Double

**Address:** .....

.....

**Phone:** ..... **Email:** .....

**Special dietary requirements:** .....

- ☐ I am paying by bank transfer (£50 deposit – bank details above)
- ☐ I enclose a cheque for £..... (£50 deposit payable to 'Free to Believe')

Signed: ..... Name: .....

Date: .....

Please return form by email to: [bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk](mailto:bookings@freetobelieve.org.uk)

Post cheque to: Free to Believe, c/o 7 Springs Crescent,  
Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0JT

*Confirmation of bookings will be made by email.*

# The *Briefing* questionnaire

Further to the request in the last edition of *Briefing*, if you haven't had opportunity to respond to the questionnaire to help the editorial team make *Briefing* as relevant as possible to its readers, please take the time to do so. All responses are anonymous. Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey.



The questionnaire is available online at [www.tinyurl.com/36hns7cw](http://www.tinyurl.com/36hns7cw), or via the QR code. Alternatively, the questions are below, along with an address to send your responses to.

1. Do you receive *Briefing* by post or email? If it was only available digitally, would you still like to receive it?
2. Is *Briefing* the right length? Or is too long, or too short?
3. In terms of text and layout is *Briefing* easy to read? Would you make any changes?
4. Does *Briefing* give you a sense of connection to Free to Believe?
5. Does *Briefing* get the right balance between the URC and the wider Christian world?
6. Do you feel *Briefing* covers a range of theological viewpoints? Is there anything you think is missing?
7. Do *Briefing*'s contributors represent the demographic diversity of progressive Christianity? Are there any voices that are missing?
8. Should *Briefing* cover political topics and viewpoints, or should we avoid these?
9. What subjects would you like to see given more coverage? Do you have any suggestions for articles?
10. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

Please send your questionnaire responses to:  
The Revd N Jones  
6 Brimstage Close, Heswall, CH60 1YE

