A Christian response to climate change

I feel some trepidation giving you my ideas on a Christian response to climate change, as I have no relevant qualifications, just an amateur interest in the topic, and on top of that I don't know what you might already be doing about this issue. I run a small business providing design & book publishing services. I'm involved with *Pacific Ecologist* magazine. I'm a vestry member at St Michael's in Kelburn. Though I've spent my whole life in a church environment, I'm a fairly recent immigrant to Anglican-land. Anyway, this is my attempt at a plan, and it may well have significant holes.

Obviously it's a very important topic. With a business-as-usual scenario, greenhouse gas emissions can be expected to triple by 2100, with the accompanying high likelihood of a 5ºC global average temperature increase. If we're going to restrict that increase to a less dangerous 2ºC, we need to stabilise total emissions at a level 80% lower than our current annual output. So it's not a small 'tweak' that's required, it's a pretty thorough transformation of society from top to bottom. My view is that the climate change issue is just the most obvious symptom of a basically sick way of life which we in the developed nations have inherited, a way of life radically misaligned with the long-term carrying capacity of the world. So my comments are going to range a little wider than just climate change. I'm going to quickly sketch some aspects of the transformation required at each levels, then move to some suggestions about what you can do in your own parishes.

At the international level, we need to adopt the Contraction & Convergence plan for emissions reductions. C&C has the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and is the official position of the Africa Group of Nations in climate change negotiations. China & India have also expressed support for the concept. If you're not familiar with it, have a look at the graph on the resource sheet. 'Contraction' refers to the need to reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases to a safe level – say 450ppm. Effectively this creates a global budget of greenhouse gas emissions, and the budget declines over time until a stable point is reached (the year 2100 in this example). 'Convergence' allocates shares in that emissions budget to all nations on the basis of one share per person. Currently, nations' effective emissions allocations are more or less proportional to wealth, rather than population sizes, i.e. the developed nations have emitted far more than their fair share. The transition from the current situation to the one share per person ideal (at 2030 in this example) is the convergence part of the process. After the convergence phase, all countries would contract their greenhouse gas emissions equally until the necessary contraction limit is reached.
It's a fair system which intends to ration a finite resource, namely the absorptive capacity of the atmosphere. Under C&C, the shares are tradable, which means developed nations can purchase emission permits from developing nations to gain some time. Follow the links on the resources sheet if you're interested in learning more.

At the national and local government levels, key areas to work on are:

1. Shifting taxes away from the goods (labour, innovation) to the bads (greenhouse gas emissions, other pollutants, non-renewable energy use, etc). This is a way of including currently externalised or socialised costs in prices, so that the prices of goods provide buyers with accurate signals.

2. Adopting a producer-responsibility model, so that if a company manufactures or imports a product, they are responsible for disposing of it when it reaches the end of its useful life.
3. Funding efficient public transport, to help people out of the habit of regular car use.

At the level of business and industry, the basic reorientation required is an acknowledgement that the human economy is not independent of the 'natural' economy, the ecology, but rather is a subset of it. This involves recognising that the true sources of our wealth are *natural* and *social* capital, and any enterprise which undermines those while still turning a profit is living on borrowed time. The alternative is to take the long term view, and provide meaningful work that enriches employees, the community, the natural world, and not just shareholders. In industry, it's about getting radically more resource- and energy-efficient. The imitation of natural processes is a good place to start. The canonical example of this imitation is the comparison of spider silk and Kevlar. Kevlar is made in a petrochemical-heavy process involving loads of very hot and concentrated sulphuric acid. Spiders, on the other hand, make their silk (which is twice as strong as Kevlar by weight) out of digested bits of dead flies at room temperature.

At the level of communities and households, if we're serious about radically cutting emissions, at some stage we're going to have to learn to get along with much reduced regular car use. That means rearranging our built environment so that workplaces, shops, churches, etc are within walking distance. We may also need to think about returning to growing a significant proportion of our food in a way that doesn't involve tractors, trucks and fossil-fuel based fertilisers.

So that's my sketch of some of the changes required. I've left out some pretty important areas, agriculture for example, because I just don't know enough about that yet to say anything sensible.

How do we fit in? Here's a quote from the Archbishop of Canterbury:

> It is relatively easy to sketch the gravity of our situation; not too difficult either to say that governments should be doing more. But governments depend on electorates; electors are persons like us who need motivating. Unless there is real popular motivation, governments are much less likely to act or act effectively. There are always quite a few excuses around for not taking action, and, without a genuine popular mandate for change, we cannot be surprised or outraged if courage fails and progress is minimal. Our own responsibility is to help change that popular motivation and so to give courage to political leaders. And this means challenging and changing some of the governing assumptions about ourselves as human beings.[1]

So it's about motivation. My feeling is that churches at the local level are well placed to take a leadership role in motivating and modelling the transformation of society which I've outlined. Here's why:

[1] From "A Planet on the Brink", in *The Independent*, 17 April 2005, http://www.countercurrents.org/cc-williams180405.htm

1. Christians, even those who might not normally be interested in 'justice' issues, have an extensive vocabulary for describing their motivations that goes beyond self-interest. This includes words like 'stewardship', 'self-sacrifice' and 'repentance'. We also have the idea that frugality might be a virtue, and that a rich and happy life consists in the quality of our relationships with one another, rather than in the quantity of possessions owned.
2. Churches are communities held together by strong bonds of friendship and have at least the potential to be mobilised to work together to achieve concrete goals.
3. Churches are often made up of quite a diverse range of people (e.g. landlords and renters in one church). If they're all talking to each other, any particular person active in responding to climate change in their own area of expertise will be aware of the ways their proposals for change may negatively affect other sectors. [oldies, vege gardens]

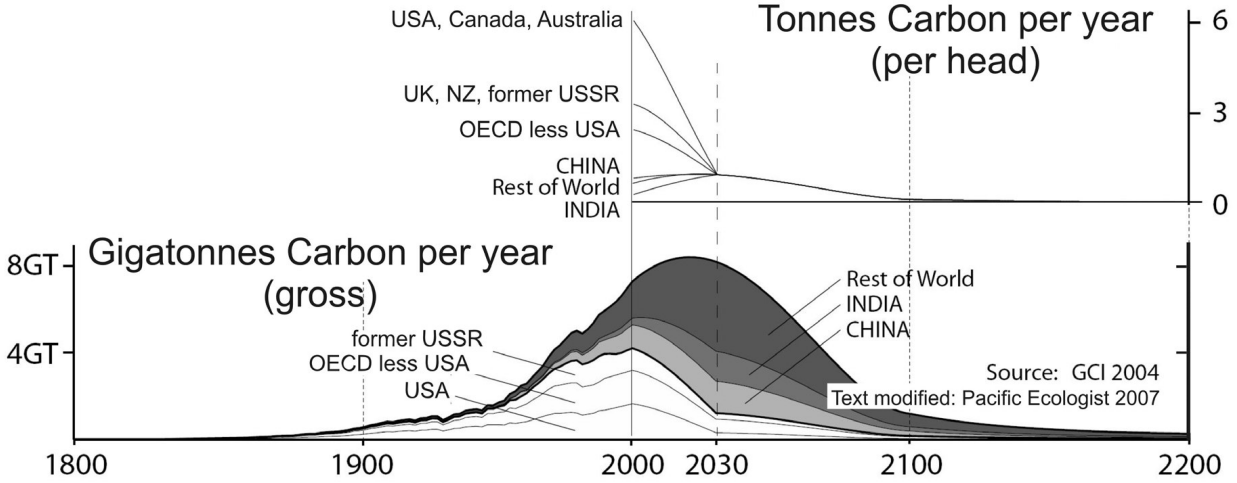
These factors make me think that churches are just waiting to be activated on this issue.

What I think you should do in your own parish

1. Audit your parish's energy use and publicise the results. The Christian Ecology Network Aotearoa (who I understand are now part of A Rocha) have a helpful website on 'greening churches' (see resource sheet for this and subsequent websites).
2. Encourage your parishioners to audit their own energy usage with EECA's EnergyWise tool, and their transport costs with Land Transport's FuelSaver site. A paragraph each about these could be the first two month's entries in a new regular section in your parish newsletter.
3. Encourage your parishioners to inform themselves, both for the 'consumer' side of their life, as well as their roles as decision-makers in whichever fields they're in. Concrete and immediate ways to do this are: register for and promote the Next Wave conference 24/25 August, and subscribe to *Pacific Ecologist* magazine.
4. Preach on climate change. This has recently been presented to me as a repentance issue, in that our lives currently fall short of righteousness in significant ways, which we need to turn away from. If you're short of ideas, you could check out Jonathan Boston's sermon, which is linked to on the resource sheet.
5. Flush out someone keen to take ownership of this issue in your parish. They could start by doing the parish energy audit. This person isn't there to make parishioners feel that 'o well, that problem is taken care of', but rather their job is to keep the issue alive, and to equip people to become what they are: capable stewards entrusted with a good creation.

A Christian response to climate change – Resources

Contraction & Convergence



This example shows possible global (and national) emissions paths for stabilising atmospheric greenhouse gas levels at 450ppm by 2100

"The fair choice for climate change", by Aubrey Meyer, in BBC News online, 18 May 2006. Contraction & convergence explained simply.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4994296.stm

"Support grows for equity-based global-warming strategy", by Aubrey Meyer & Kay Weir, in *Pacific Ecologist* 13
http://pacificecologist.org/archive/13/contraction-and-convergence.pdf

"Church backing for climate plan", BBC News online, 5 July 2004
Rowan Williams expresses support for Contraction & Convergence
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3866543.stm

Local government

Communities for Climate Protection NZ.
http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=3920

Business/industry

Natural Capital: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution, by Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L.Hunter Lovins
http://www.natcap.org/sitepages/pid5.php

The Ecology of Business, by Paul Hawken

The Vocation of Business, by John C Médaille
An exploration of Catholic Social teaching as it relates to economic life.
http:// medaille.com/distributivism.html

Household

EnergyWise calculator. EECA's online tool for finding out where your electricity usage is going, and for creating an action plan to minimise it.
http://energywise.org.nz/calculator

FuelSaver. Land Transport NZ's online tool for estimating your car's yearly fuel bill, and working out how much you could save by switching to a more efficient model.
http://fuelsaver.govt.nz/

Parish

"Greening the Church", from Christian Ecology Network Aotearoa (now A Rocha)
http://www.kiwilink.co.nz/~hippies/greening%20intro.htm

More to read

"Climate Change and Christian Responsibility", by Jonathan Boston
A sermon given at St Paul's cathedral, 6 August 2006
http://justice.anglican.org.nz/news/climate-change-and-christian-responsibility/

"The Simpler Way", by Ted Trainer. A plan to transition from consumptive society to a just and ecologically sustainable one.
http://socialwork.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/

Worldchanging. Regularly updated news site focussing on real-world solutions to green woes.
http://worldchanging.com

"Church as Icon of the Future", by yours truly
Biblical identity and eschatological hope as resources for eco-active churches.
http://www.vuw.ac.nz/chaplains/issues/eco2-4.html