

COP26 – The Moderator on climate change and the church

This article has been provided as part of our series of articles to be published during COP26, the UN conference on climate change which is being held in Glasgow in the first fortnight of November.

The Edinburgh Reporter posed a simple question to several individuals and organisations in the city: What are you doing to address climate change?

With all the world looking at Glasgow during COP26, and in the face of climate emergency, it is clear that the time to do something about climate change, no matter how small, is now.

The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness QC, writes of the response from the Church of Scotland when faced with climate change. This is one of the main areas which he wants to concentrate on during his year of office.

“Our faith communities are united in caring for human life and the natural world”, so says the Glasgow Multifaith declaration, which I signed alongside more than 50 religious leaders from across the UK in the run-up to COP26.

The aim of so many figures from different backgrounds coming

together was to remind governments globally of their commitments made in Paris in 2015 to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. However, scientists now fear the planet could heat up by as much as three degrees.

A recent report from the UN has warned that global temperatures have risen faster since 1970 than at any point in the past 2,000 years. That statistic is one we cannot ignore, because the reality behind it is that we are already seeing the devastation that climate change is wreaking on vulnerable communities. And it is those who have contributed least to carbon emissions who are harmed the most, and are least able to adapt or mitigate the changes that are happening.

For myself, caring for creation is a fundamental aspect of being a practising Christian. So interdependent is God's creation that damaging creation damages us.

This is an issue of justice, and so our concern for the integrity of creation is matched by a concern for fairness for fellow human beings around the world.

Across Scotland and beyond our congregations are adapting and using their ingenuity to look at how best they can reduce their carbon footprint.

As of September 2021 there are 362 registered Eco-Congregations within the Church of Scotland, which means they are working towards impressive environmental targets set by Eco-Congregation Scotland.

Our churches are more engaged than they have ever been on environmental issues. More than 70% of our congregations use an 100% green electricity tariff sourced from renewables.

On the islands of Westray and Papa Westray, two of the most northerly in Orkney, the local Church of Scotland community has set an impressive example which has led to wider changes locally.

In Westray, the church has used their exposed position between the Atlantic and North Sea to install a wind-turbine-powered heating system, which combined with a ground source pump has transformed their building into a cutting-edge, environmentally friendly place of worship.

The manse is powered by another wind turbine, as is the church building in Papa Westray. Further upgrades are planned.

Despite a 7,500 miles distance, they also partnered with churches in Malawi's Thyolo Highlands Presbytery and are working to highlight the difficulties such as drought, floods, and poor harvests that they are now facing.

Across the Church of Scotland we have committed to working towards achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2030 – no small undertaking for an organisation with more listed buildings than Historic Environment Scotland in our care.

In 2021 we also disinvested from fossil fuels and have laid out a policy of carefully considering the environmental impact of future investments.

With COP26 we hope and pray for urgent action. The world can't afford anything less.

The Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness QC (Jim Wallace) is Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for 2021-22. Ordained an elder in Stockbridge: St Bernard's, Edinburgh in 1981, and inducted to the eldership of Kirkwall St. Magnus Cathedral, Orkney in 1990, Lord Wallace is the second elder in modern times to serve in the role.

A trained Advocate and Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Moderator was leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats from 1992-2005 and Deputy First Minister in the Scottish Executive from 1999-2005 (serving as Acting First Minister in 2000 and 2001).

Having taken up his seat in the House of Lords in 2007, Lord Wallace served as the Advocate General for Scotland in the coalition UK Government from 2010-2015. Currently a working peer, with many years' experience in public life as an MP for Orkney and Shetland then as MSP for Orkney, he will move to the non-affiliated benches in the House of Lords during his time as Moderator.

Lord Wallace will use the role to promote the theme of justice – social, economic and climate – and wants his year in office to be a source of encouragement to other elders and members of congregations who already play a very full part in the life of their church and communities. Married to Rosie, the couple have two grown up daughters.



Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland