



CRE Certificate Research Project

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



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1. Introduction

The science is unequivocal: we are in a global environmental crisis. Temperatures are rising (WMO, 2020), biodiversity is crashing (IPBES, 2019), pollution is proliferating (e.g. Jambeck *et al.*, 2015), resources are dwindling (IPBES, 2019) and poor people are suffering the greatest effects of environmental damage (Martinez-Alier, 2014). 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 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. Occasionally I would find a like-minded soul, but usually I was wandering in a wilderness of environmental apathy.

I was delighted to discover an oasis of like-minded Christians through the CRES course². God *had* been stirring other Christians to recognise that caring for God's creation is an important and intrinsic part of discipleship. Through the course, I have been heartened to discover that some churches are putting creation care at the centre of their worship and work. 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).

Inspired by my fellow CRES learners, 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 course, meeting fellow learners, and walking the Ecochurch journey, have all caused me to question what my denomination, the Baptist Church, is doing to respond to the 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.

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

² Christian Rural and Environmental Studies - www.cres.org.uk

2. Methodology

The Baptist Union (BU) of Great Britain (also called Baptists Together) is a national umbrella organisation bringing together just under 2000 Baptist churches, with a central support team based in Didcot, Oxfordshire. There are thirteen regional associations employing a small group of regional ministers to advise local churches. The head office employs specialist staff to advise on legal and financial matters, and a Faith and Society team who represent Baptists in public life and encourage churches to engage with wider issues. There are six Baptist colleges delivering training for Baptist ministers. The Baptist Missionary Service (BMS) enables churches in the UK to support mission overseas.

With this in mind, the research project covered four areas of enquiry:

- Desk-based review of Baptist Union (BU) resources and policies
- Interviews with environmental influencers within the Baptist family
- Survey of a cross section of Baptist ministers, leaders and members of churches
- Assessment of participation in the Ecochurch scheme by Baptist churches.

2.1 Desk-based review of Baptist Union resources and policies

An assessment of environmental policies and resources from Baptist institutions was carried out primarily through interrogation of websites and digital publications, accessed during January 2020.

2.2 Interviews with environmental influencers within the Baptist family

The desk-based review highlighted a number of influencers within the Baptist family who have been promoting creation care in the past decade. An email was sent to these people with a series of structured questions (see Figure 1) which interviewees responded to via email. Responses were compiled in a spreadsheet.

1. Why is creation care important to you?
2. What has been your experience of being a creation care advocate within Baptist churches?
3. Can you give any examples of good creation care initiatives coming from the Baptist family within the UK?
4. What do you think are the main obstacles to environmental engagement in Baptist churches?
5. How do you think Baptist churches compare to other denominations with respect to creation care?
6. How can the Baptist Union best encourage individual Baptist churches to care for creation?
7. What do you think the Baptist Union should focus on in the next decade with respect to creation care?
8. How would you describe the UK Baptist response to the creation care crisis at this point in time?

Figure 1: Structured interview questions sent to environmental influencers within the Baptist family

2.3 Survey of a cross section of Baptist ministers, leaders and members

An online questionnaire was designed using Microsoft Forms (see Appendix 2). The BU Faith and Society Team's February email included a link to the questionnaire (sent to Ministers, Secretaries and Treasurers). The Eastern Baptist Association (EBA) February email also included the link (sent to Ministers, Chaplains and Secretaries). The author also encouraged members of various Baptist Facebook groups to complete the questionnaire^{3,4}. The questionnaire was open from 15 January to 31 March 2020.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/410179719443903/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/baptistcollaboration>

2.4 Methodology for Ecochurch analysis

Data was sent from the Ecochurch team in January 2020 in two Excel spreadsheets:

1. All churches in the UK who have received an Ecochurch award up to end of December 2019
2. All churches in the UK who have registered for the Ecochurch scheme up to end of December 2019.

2.4.1 Ecochurch award data

The award data were analysed to compare the relative number of churches who had received different classes of awards according to denomination. These figures were compared to the total number of churches in the UK of each denomination, to assess the proportion of churches engaging in the scheme. The data were validated and cleaned before analysis. A number of churches were listed twice, either because they were in two denomination lists (common for Methodist and URC joint churches), or because they had received a bronze and a silver award at different times. For the joint denomination churches, one record was retained and the denomination was recorded as joint. Where the same church was listed twice because of receiving more than one award, the record containing the bronze award was removed.

This process yielded a total of 546 churches who have received an Ecochurch award. Out of this total, 22 awards were received by joint denominations, including various combinations of Methodist, United Reformed, Baptist and Anglican. Of these 22 awards, Methodist and URC were represented 19 times each, far higher than Anglican and Baptist. To ensure this distribution was fairly represented in the summary results, a weighted calculation was carried out to split these joint awards fairly between the denominations.

2.4.2 Ecochurch registration data

The registration data did not have a denomination column like the award data. There were 2338 churches in this dataset. The dataset contained a Diocese column, which could be used to ascertain the number of Church of England registrations. These Anglican churches were then filtered out to enable easier categorisation of the remaining entries. The 'Find' function on Excel was used to search the text in the church names to work out denominations, including search terms like 'Baptist' and 'Methodist', 'United Reformed' and 'URC'. The remaining church names were visually checked to determine if they could be assigned to a recognised denomination. These two processes yielded eight different denominations, in addition to Anglican. There were 412 churches on the list which could not be categorised into denomination. The number of churches in each denomination registered for Ecochurch were then compared to the total number of churches in the UK of each denomination, according to reference sources⁵.

⁵ https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2018StatisticsForMission_0.pdf
<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/i-am-here-because-real-14073111>
https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/8617/methodism_in_numbers_2018.pdf
<https://urc.org.uk/statistics.html>
<https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=226624>
<https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/research/back-issues/quaker-meeting-houses/>
<https://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/churches/>
<https://www.congregational.org.uk/find-a-church/church-finder>
<https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/find-a-church>
<https://www.elim.org.uk/>

3. Results

3.1 Results from desk-based review of Baptist Union resources and policies

3.1.1 National approaches to creation care

Information available on national Baptist institutional websites relating to creation care and environmental issues refers to activity in the past decade. These resources, policies and activities are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of national Baptist Union approaches to creation care engagement (ordered by most recent first)

Level	Initiator	Date	Details of approach
National	Baptist Missionary Service	ongoing	Environmental missions e.g. East Asia, advising textile industries how to pollute less https://www.bmsworldmission.org/and-god-saw-that-it-was-good-creation-care-as-mission-in-east-asia/ Peru, sustainable agriculture in the Amazon https://www.bmsworldmission.org/news/pray-for-amazonia/
National	Baptist Missionary Service	April 2019	<i>Creation Stewardship Policy</i> Development of a policy for the missionary service focussed on the environment, both overseas and at the head office. https://www.bmsworldmission.org/about-us/creation-stewardship-policy/
National	Joint Public Issues Team ⁶	Lent 2019	'Living Lent' initiative Encouraged people to join an online community during Lent, to reduce their carbon footprint, share experiences on social media, with regular emails. https://livinglent.org/
National	Baptists Together	Summer 2018	'Creator God' magazine An edition of the magazine produced by the BU and sent out to all Baptist churches every four months, which was focussed on creation care. https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/519431/Baptists_Together_magazine.aspx
National	Baptist Missionary Service	2015	'Worth Saving' initiative Encouraged BMS supporters to pray, read and take action on creation care. https://www.bmsworldmission.org/get-involved/campaign/worth-saving/
National	Joint working group ⁷	2012	'Hope in God's Future: Christian discipleship in the context of climate change' A report and study guide to assist Baptist Churches and guide the BU. https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366527/Hope_in_God.aspx
National	Baptist Missionary Service	2009	<i>Futureshape</i> DVD A study guide to help churches to engage with creation care and BMS world mission https://www.bmsworldmission.org/product/futureshape-dvd/

⁶ Joint Public Issues Team of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, working for Peace and Justice. <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/>

⁷ A report of a joint working group on climate change and theology, convened by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.

3.1.2 Regional approaches

Interrogation of the thirteen regional association websites, coupled with web searches for terms like ‘creation care’ and ‘environment’ in conjunction with each regional association name, only yielded these examples:

- West of England Baptist Association partnering with other organisations to run a green church conference⁸
- Heart of England Baptist Association news story about No Planet B conference in Birmingham⁹
- Footsteps lay training programme¹⁰ in Central and Southern Counties Associations includes *The theology of creation and Science and Mission and Ministry in the 21st Century* sessions, featuring climate change.

There was some evidence that regional associations signpost local churches to occasional environmental campaigns and events through monthly email updates, but there appears to be little evidence showing leadership on creation care issues at a regional level through website material.

3.1.3 Local approaches

There are some very good examples of creation care at an individual church level, or where individual churches join up with other organisations to improve their local environment. Here are some examples, it is not an exhaustive list.

- Fernhill Heath Baptist Church – first Baptist church to receive a silver Ecochurch award¹¹
- Norwich Central Baptist Church – another Baptist church to receive a silver Ecochurch award¹²
- Dronfield Baptist Church – partners in the Lea Brook Valley community conservation project¹³
- Sheddingdean Baptist Church – in the process of building a new church adjacent to a nature reserve, with a vision for *Church, Community and Creation to be living in harmony*¹⁴.

3.1.4 Training colleges

Interrogation of the Baptist training college websites, coupled with web searches for terms like ‘creation care’ and ‘environment’ in conjunction with each college, shows a very limited offering of environmental issues being covered in ministerial training or postgraduate study. Half of the training colleges had no reference to these search terms on their websites or prospectuses. The few examples found are:

- Spurgeons College: Optional module in MA and MTh called *The Doctrine of Creation and Environmental Ethics*¹⁵, tutored by Joshua Searle (contacted for the structured interview but declined)
- Bristol Baptist College: Optional module in Diploma and MA called *Christian Faith and the Environment*¹⁶
- Regents Park College: Optional module in Diploma in Theological Studies called *Issues in Mission*, which includes the option to study *environmental theology and creation care*¹⁷.

⁸ <https://www.webassoc.org.uk/creation-care-lets-listen-and-share/>;

⁹ <https://www.baptist-heartofengland.org/stories/no-planet-b/>

¹⁰ <http://centralba.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CBA-Footsteps-1-Information-Pack-2019-20.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/486032/Eco_award_for.aspx

¹² https://baptisttimes.co.uk/Articles/459177/Norwich_church_goes.aspx

¹³ <https://arochoa.org.uk/our-activities/practical-conservation/partners-in-action/lea-brook-valley/>

¹⁴ <http://www.sheddingdeanbaptist.org.uk/cornerstone1/vision-for-a-building.php>

¹⁵ https://www.spurgeons.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Documents/Unit_Descriptors/MA-MTh-Unit-Descriptors-2018-19.pdf



¹⁶ <https://www.bristol-baptist.ac.uk/theological-studies/taught-ma/>

¹⁷ <http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Undergraduate-OUDEC-2014.pdf>

3.2 Results from interviews with environmental influencers within the Baptist family

The initial desk-based review suggested 12 people to interview. Some of these interviewees suggested others who were subsequently contacted. In total 19 enquiries were submitted, and 12 people returned the questionnaire (a 63% response rate). There were many common themes in the responses, which have been summarised and grouped in Table 2, with word clouds generated in Powerpoint based on the frequency of words in the collated responses.

Table 2: Summary of responses from interviews with environmental influencers

Interview question	Summary of response themes and keywords
<p>1. Why is creation care important to you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love for the natural world • We have a God-given role to be stewards • Creation care is a social justice issue; the poorest are affected first and deepest • Humanity’s treatment of creation is a symptom of our fallen spiritual condition • Concern for future generations 
<p>2. What has been your experience of being a creation care advocate within Baptist churches?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging; slow; frustrating; long; tiring • Apathy turning to interest in past decade • Varied • Enjoyable • One topic which gets lost amidst the many 
<p>3. Can you give any examples of good creation care initiatives coming from the Baptist family?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some individual churches with particular people spear-heading good initiatives • Ecochurch sign ups and awards • Efforts to get BU to consider divestment from fossil fuels • Solar panels on Baptist House (£200k investment at BU Head Office in 2011)

3.3 Results from survey of a cross section of ministers, leaders and members of Baptist churches

The online questionnaire closed on 31 March. A total of 104 people participated.

The demographical summary of participants is shown in Figure 2 and the various roles the participants hold within their churches is shown in Figure 3.

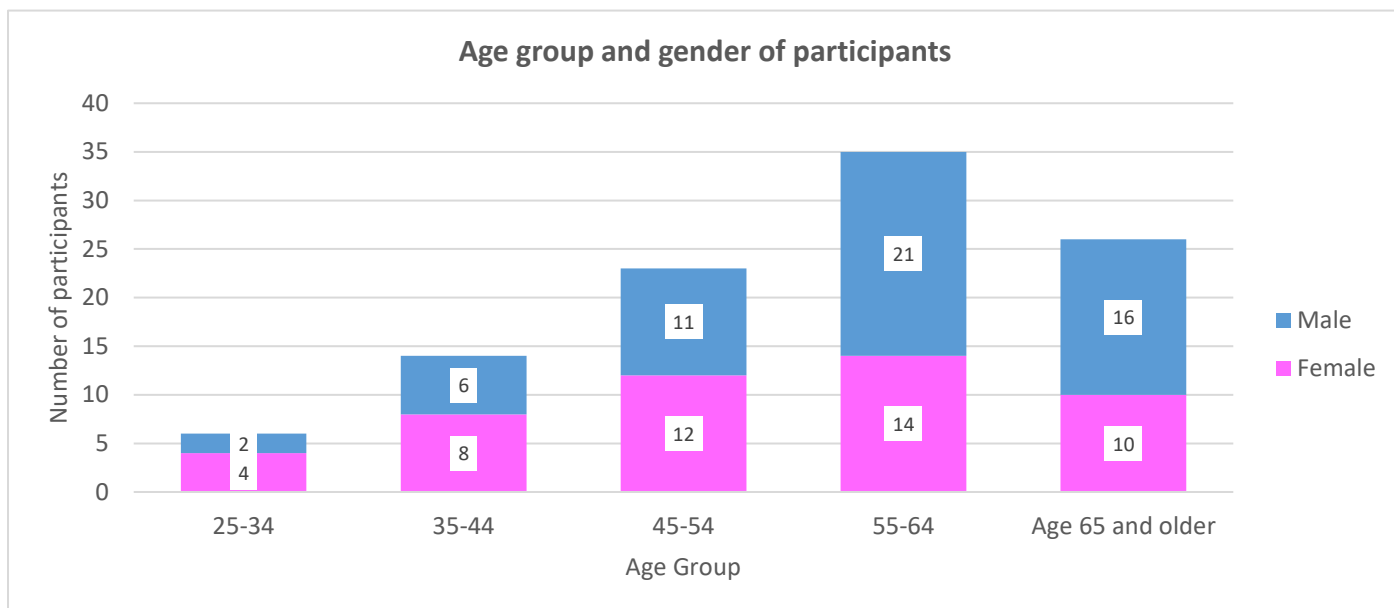


Figure 2: Age group and gender of online survey participants

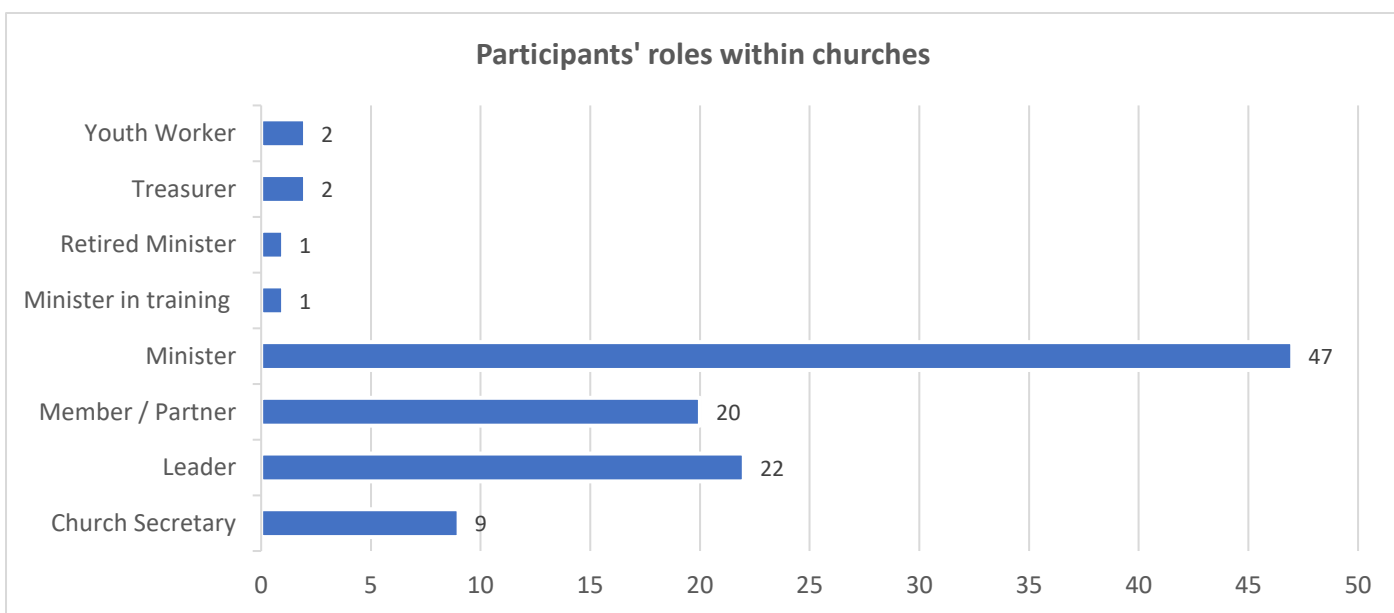


Figure 3: Roles of online survey participants within their churches

Figure 4 shows the responses of people to the statements about creation care included in the online questionnaire, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

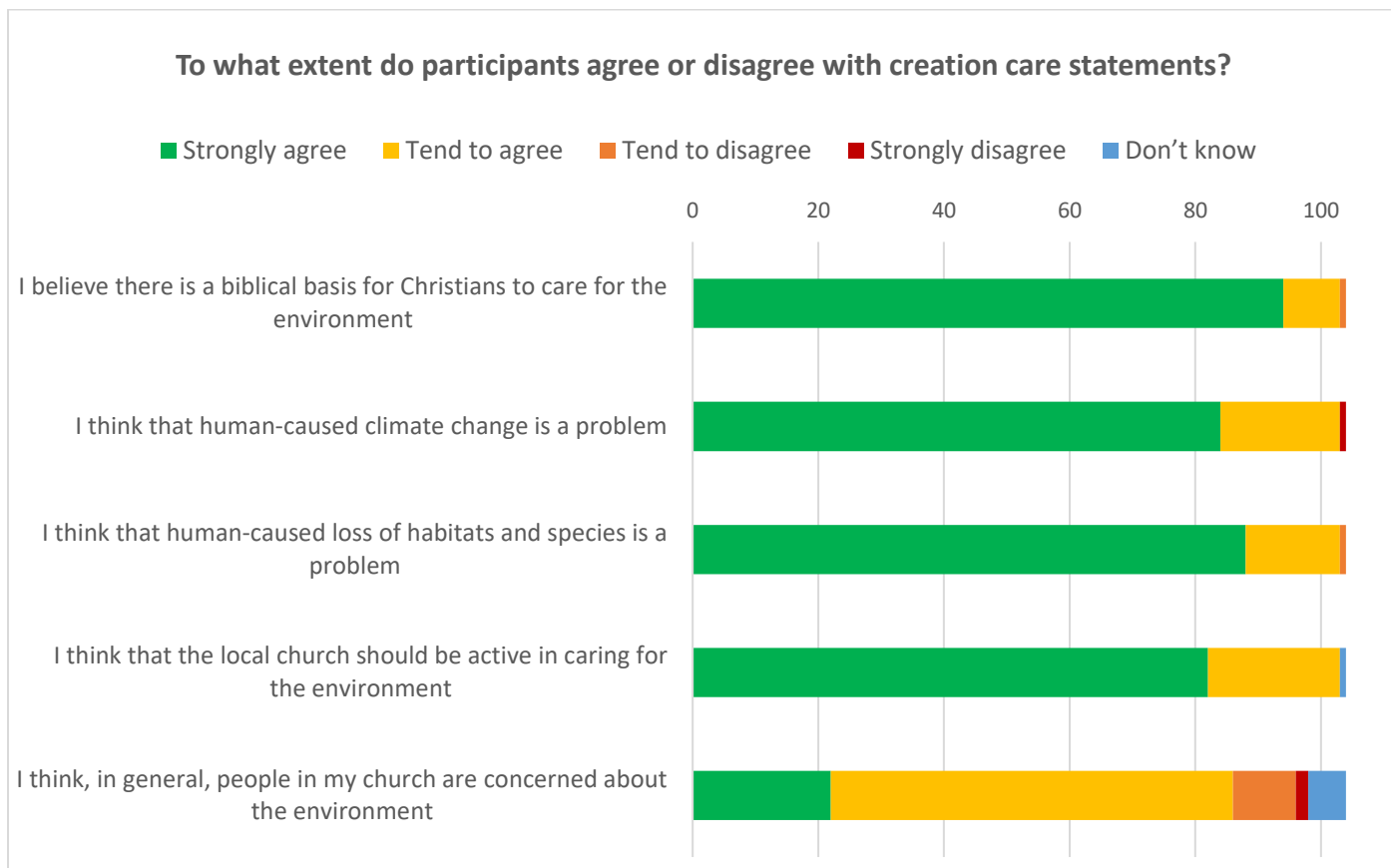


Figure 4: Opinions of online survey participants on various questions posed in relation to creation care and the church

Figures 5 and 6 show whether participants have heard of the Ecochurch scheme, and if they want to receive further information about creation care from the Baptist Union.

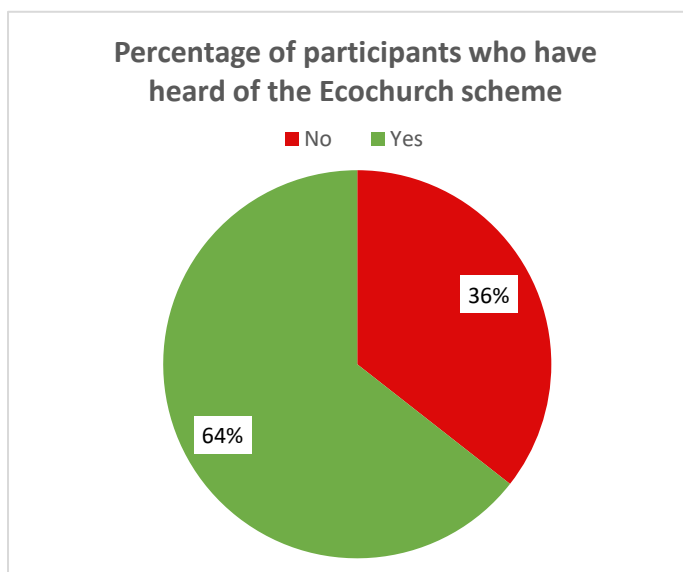


Figure 5: Percentage of online survey participants who had heard of the Ecochurch scheme

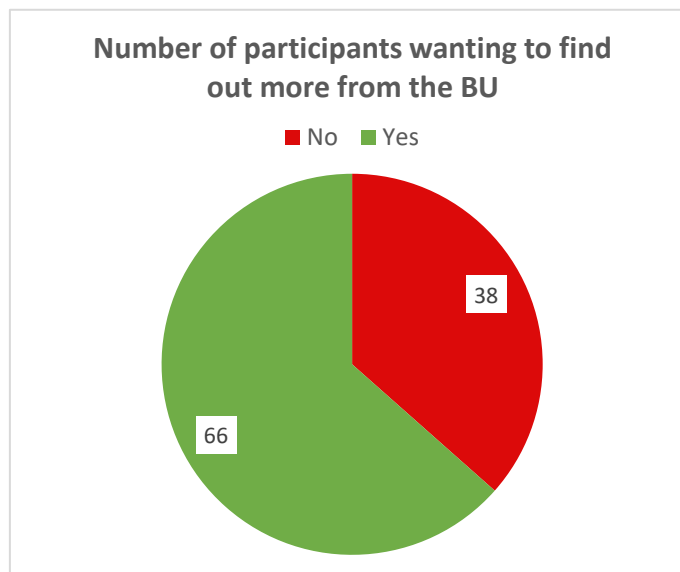


Figure 6: Number of online survey participants interested in finding out more about creation care from the Baptist Union

Figure 7 shows the actions that participants' churches are taking to reduce their impact on the environment. The first eleven actions on the chart are actions the author had given in the questionnaire, and participants could tick. The actions marked 'OTHER' are where the participant added additional actions not mentioned on the tick list.

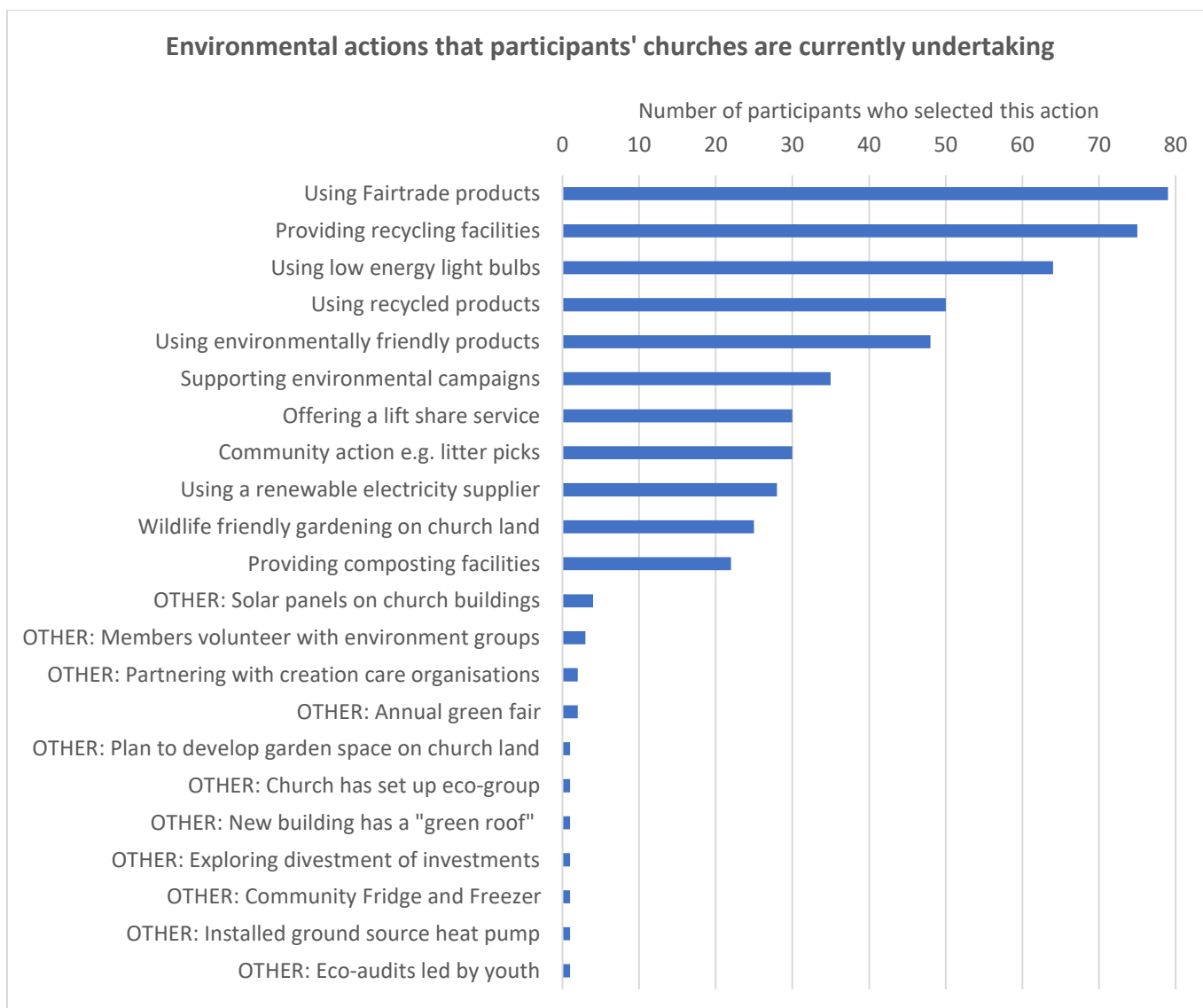


Figure 7: Number of churches taking various actions to reduce their impact on the environment (N=104)

3.4 Results from assessment of participation in the Ecochurch scheme by Baptist churches

Figures 8 and 9 display information about churches in England and Wales who are highly engaged in the Ecochurch scheme. Figure 8 shows the number of churches in each major denomination who have received an award, and the level of award received (Gold, Silver or Bronze). Figure 9 shows the total number of churches who have received an award in each major denomination (award levels combined) compared to the total number of churches in each of those denominations in England and Wales.

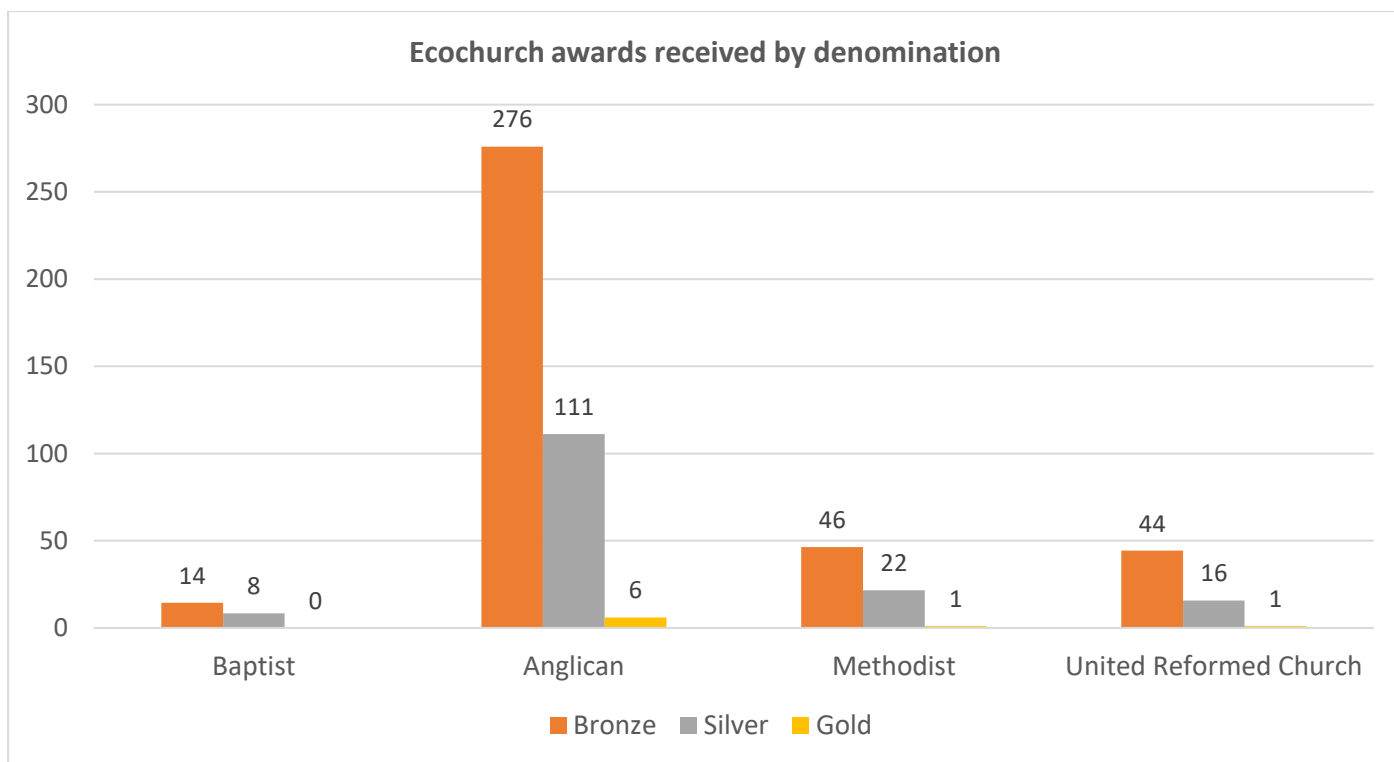


Figure 8: Number of Gold, Silver and Bronze Ecochurch Awards issued by A Rocha UK to churches according to denomination.

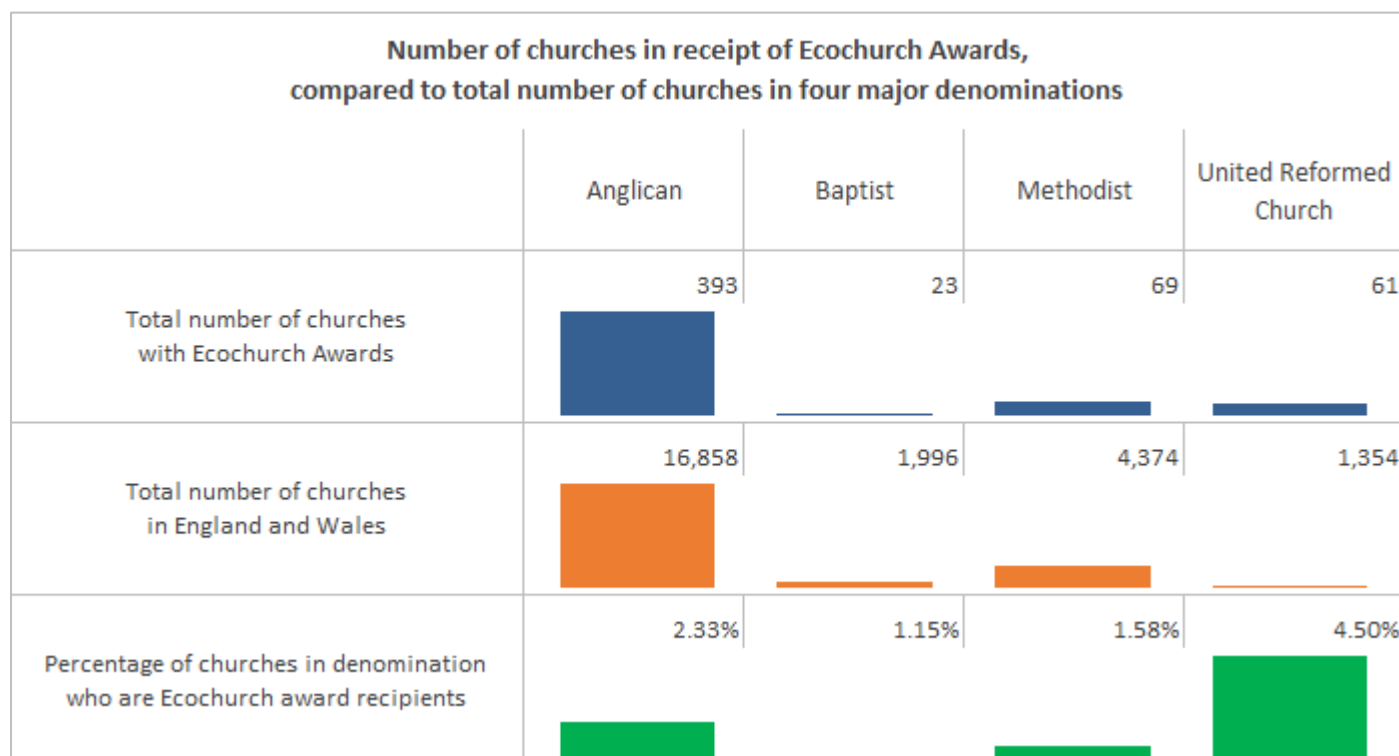


Figure 9: Number of Ecochurch award churches in each denomination, in comparison to the total number of churches in each major denomination.

Figure 10 displays the number of churches who have registered for the Ecochurch scheme, according to denomination (total number = 2338). It includes churches who have received an award, as well as churches who have registered but not yet received an award.

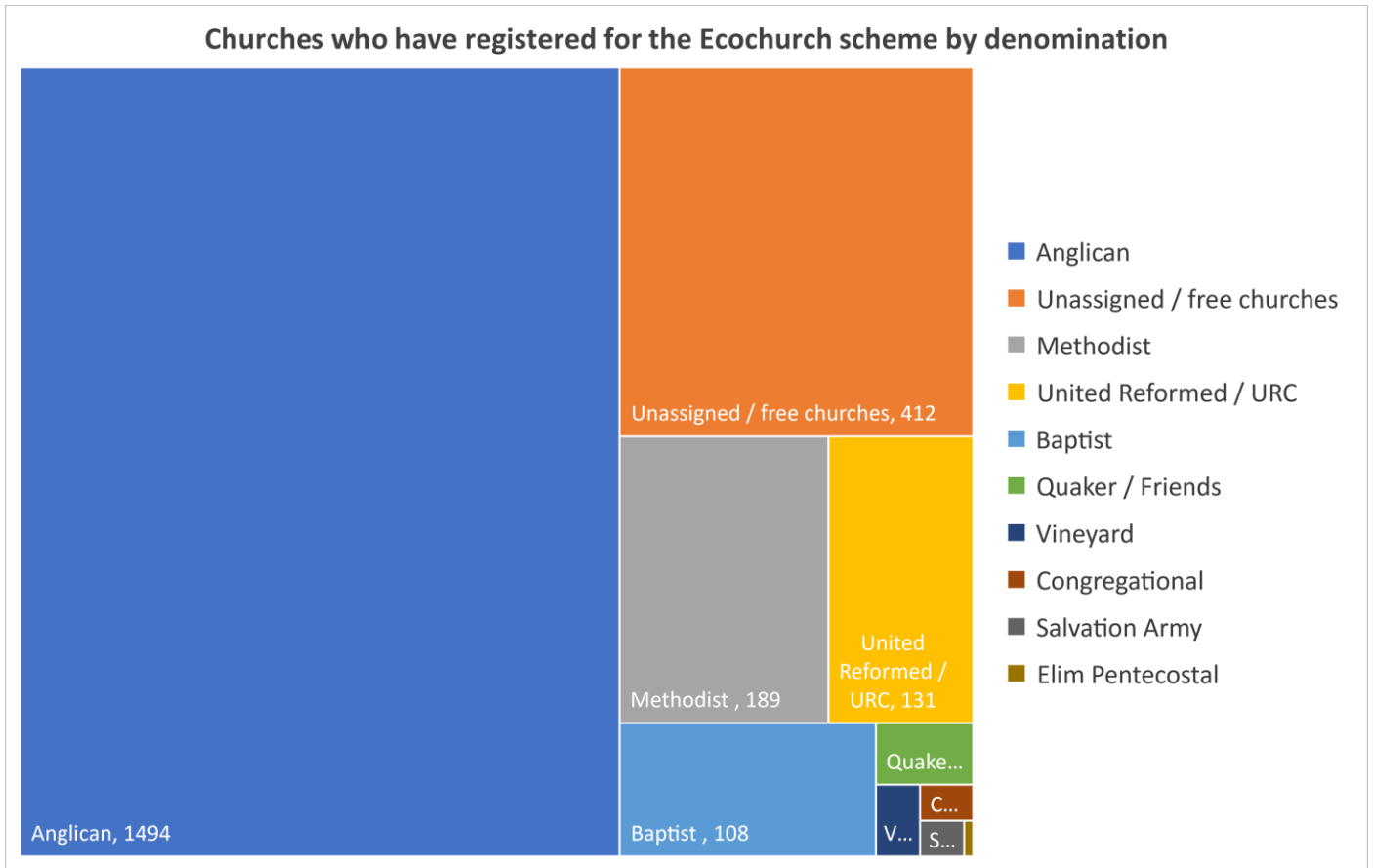


Figure 10: Number of churches who have registered for the Ecochurch scheme, according to denomination

4. Discussion

Hulme (2014) states, *'arresting climate change is not just beyond science, it is also beyond the state. Religious movements and institutions... have the mobilizing power to enlist and de-list multitudes of citizens'*. This research project has focussed on the network of UK Baptist churches and their affiliated institutions to find out whether Baptists are mobilised to respond to the environmental crisis and will now discuss the results presented in Section 3.

4.1 Comparison with other denominations

Involvement in the Ecochurch scheme is a good measure of church engagement with environmental issues at a national scale and across denominations. The analysis of Ecochurch data showed that 108 Baptist churches have registered for the Ecochurch scheme, which is 4.5% of the total number of churches in the scheme (see Figure 10). This means, of the 1196 Baptist Churches in England and Wales, 9.0% have registered for the scheme. This compares favourably with other denominations. URC churches had a slightly higher registration rate (9.7%) and Anglican churches were slightly lower (8.9%). 4.3% of Methodist churches had registered for the scheme at the end of 2019, but the recent launch of the Eco-Circuit scheme may boost these numbers during 2020¹⁸.

Measuring rates of registration to the Ecochurch scheme demonstrates a certain level of engagement with environmental issues. Churches who receive an award indicate a deeper level of engagement. Analysis of award data (Figure 9) shows that although 9.0% of Baptist churches have registered for the scheme, only 1.2% have received an Ecochurch award (of any colour). This is lower than Methodists (1.6%), Anglicans (2.3%) and URC (4.5%). Whilst 9% of Baptist churches registering for Ecochurch is a good start, 91% are not currently engaging with this valuable scheme, and only a small minority are following through with enough actions to receive an award.

To evaluate the Baptist response to the creation care crisis, it is critical to understand the structure of the denomination. Each local church is self-governing and self-supporting, with a very flat hierarchy. The Baptist church has no bishops or priests exercising authority over members, instead, it is a bottom-up, locally-focused model of church, with the regional associations and national BU 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 interviewees, 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. Unfortunately, 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 interviews, for example:

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

¹⁸ <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/denominational-awards/eco-circuit/>

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

Therefore, a typical local Baptist church is poorly informed about environmental issues, and one might argue, be unlikely to respond to guidelines from national leadership even if they were forthcoming. This contrasts with Anglican churches, where Dioceses encourage parish churches to work towards Ecochurch awards so the Diocese can achieve an Eco-Diocese award¹⁹. Similarly, the URC General Assembly agreed in 2016 to encourage churches to join the Ecochurch scheme and launched the Eco-Synod scheme²⁰.

One aspect of the project's online questionnaire gives particular cause for concern in a Baptist context. 12 out of the 47 ministers (25.5%) who responded to the questionnaire had not heard of the Ecochurch scheme, and 15 ministers (31.9%) were not interested in finding out more about creation care from the BU. Ministers have an important role in Baptist churches given their autonomous nature, and their leadership on environmental issues will be crucial to engagement in this issue for the denomination overall. For this reason, it is especially disappointing to find little evidence of environmental issues in Baptist college curricula.

4.2 Theological perspectives and societal comparisons

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:

A distorted view of "evangelical" faith (largely fuelled by American fundamentalism) means that strong voices get traction in portraying environmental issues as "not the real Gospel" (Interview 9)

...some churches still fail to make the connection between creation care and salvation seeing the former as a distraction from the task of evangelism (Interview 7)

...some Christians... do not see any role for the church in engaging with practical issues such as creation care; their emphasis rests rather on preaching aimed at 'conversion' and at the numerical growth of churches. (Interview 5)

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)

These experiences were also backed up by some comments from the online questionnaire, for example:

- *Creation Care is an aspect of ethics and Christian living, not meaningfully an element in the mission of the church.*
- *Ostensibly Christian expressions of Creation Care which are not centred on God/Christ and his mission to redeem creation are using God as a pretext for a secular-driven agenda.*
- *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*

¹⁹ <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/denominational-awards/eco-diocese/>

²⁰ <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/denominational-awards/eco-synod/>

Despite these comments, in general, the majority of comments from the online questionnaire were significantly in favour of churches taking more action and of the centrality of creation care to the Christian faith. Overwhelmingly, participants strongly agreed with the statements: over 80% strongly agreed that there is a Biblical basis for creation care, that human-caused climate change and biodiversity loss are problems, and that the local church has a responsibility to take action for the environment.

There may be some bias in the online survey, given that those clicking on the link to participate may already be interested in the environment. However, it does seem aligned with another similar survey commissioned by Christian Aid in 2019 to understand opinions about climate change held by the general public and Christians as a subset. 55% of the respondents strongly disagree with the statement 'I do not think climate change is an issue', and 20% tend to disagree (Figure 11), and there was not a significant difference between Christians and the wider public.

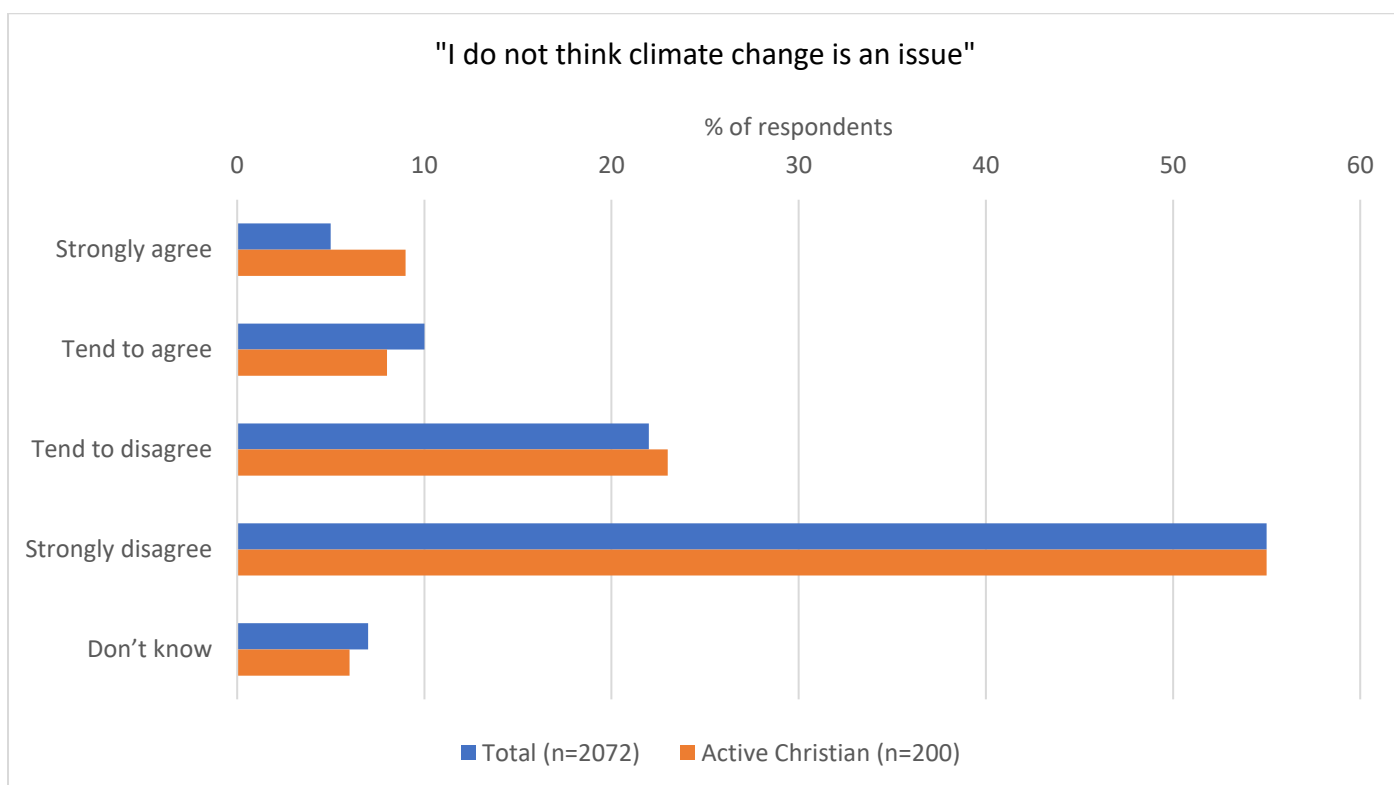


Figure 11: Extent to which the general public, and Christians as a subset, agree with the statement 'I do not think climate change is an issue'. Based on results of the Christian Aid and ComRes Poll, (Christian Aid, July 2019).

Most churches are composed of an interesting tapestry of people, of different demographics, political opinions, educational levels and backgrounds. Each church might have a range of perspectives on theology and knowledge about environmental issues. In this setting of differing opinions, in a Baptist context where decisions are made democratically in church meetings, discussions around how to spend budget and invest people's time and energy can become heated. It might be that the majority of people in a church are in agreement with environmental statements such as those posed in the online questionnaire, but if a couple of influential people in a church are opposed to environmental actions, for whatever reason, it takes a strong person to challenge them. In this scenario, it is conceivable that theological perspectives might override general feelings of the need for environmental action. Speaking from personal experience, churches are uniquely positioned to quash environmental passion and conviction by invoking the saving souls or 'God has told me' trump cards.

4.3 Overcoming barriers for Baptist church engagement

Whilst this research has identified some practical reasons for churches not being more environmentally active (e.g. small congregations, limited financial resources, restrictions of listed buildings, not owning land or buildings), there appear to be three common barriers limiting Baptist churches engaging in creation care. These are:

- 1) the independent nature of Baptist churches,
- 2) poor theology regarding value of creation and eschatology,
- 3) insufficient leadership from the BU.

So, what can be done to overcome these obstacles?

Firstly, it is not plausible to restructure the Baptist denomination, so 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.

Secondly, how can the obstacle of poor 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 (Figure 7) 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.

Thirdly, 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).

4.4 Learning from social science research to encourage 'eco-theo-citizenship'

In *Laudato Si* (Catholic Church, 2016) Pope Francis says that the global environmental crisis is a summons to an eco-conversion for followers of Christ of all denominations around the world. There is a growing awareness amongst social scientists that informing people of scientific facts does not result in behaviour change (e.g. Nisbet, 2009; Goldberg *et al.* 2019), but rather that '*it is religious traditions and leaders that can motivate people to change and can offer hope in the face of such facts*' (Kearns, 2011). Indeed, '*by appealing to the inner conscience and hope within people's souls*' (Veldman *et al.*, 2014), faith and religion can play an important part in transforming society's interaction with creation. Faith can provide motivation and hope to address the environmental crisis, and a biblical understanding of our creator God gives Christians a responsibility to do so (Northcott, 2014).

Despite this huge potential for faith to help the environment, the results of this research project show that not enough Baptist churches in the UK are currently engaging with environmental issues. Kidwell *et al.* (2018) analysed participation of Scottish churches in the Eco-Congregation scheme over a number of years and did not observe a single mechanism by which churches became eco-active. Instead, they observed three pathways to eco-awareness and action:

1. Energy and leadership of a committed individual
2. A group of individuals gathering into a team
3. A top-down approach, which encourages eco-activity through existing management processes

The authors coin a term called 'eco-theo-citizenship' which emerges through a combination of '*practical actions, theological values and commitment to cultural change*', and they observe that the process can be slow, but eventually becomes deep-rooted and leads to a culture shift in those churches. This research project shows that it is mainly the first pathway which has led to 1 in 10 Baptist churches becoming eco-active, with a couple of examples from pathway 2. Pathway 3 has not yet been employed in the Baptist church in the UK, and perhaps such an approach led from the centre by the BU could engender the next wave of Baptist Ecochurches?

Veldman *et al.* (2014) identify four main impediments to religious engagement in their review of how world religions are responding to the climate crisis, summarised in Figure 12. Though these are focused more on individual responses rather than denominational responses, there is some overlap with barriers identified through this research project, in particular *paradigmatic barriers*, which correlate with poor theology in relation to the value of creation and eschatological understandings of creation, and *applicability*, which correlates to not being as important as saving souls, or other focus of church mission. These factors are likely to be exacerbated in the autonomous setting of Baptist churches.

Impediments to religious engagement with the climate crisis:

1. *Paradigmatic barriers* – theological beliefs or worldviews that disable environmental concern.
2. *Applicability* – debate about the appropriate level of attention to give to environmental concerns e.g. competition with other concerns, not as important as...
3. *Social critique* – not recognizing the social and cultural factors that affect the human-earth relationship (can lead to an over-emphasis on individual action rather than recognising the roots of the problem)
4. *Lack of conviction* – lack of knowledge and / or motivation to act, or an attachment to one's current lifestyle

Figure 12: Impediments to religious engagement with the climate crisis, according to Veldman *et al.*, 2014.

The BU needs to catch up with other denominations, by providing resources, both theological and practical, to enable churches to become eco-active as congregations wake up to the environmental crisis. The BU also needs to facilitate regional collaborations and use its influence to lobby for political action and divest from fossil fuels. This national resourcing and leading by example, coupled with a new generation of individuals within Baptist churches who are called by God to spearhead the environmental awakening of their church, could lead to a significant escalation in Baptist responses to the creation care crisis.

5. Conclusion

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 (Santmire, 1985). 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 (Kidwell *et al.*, 2018). 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. The Baptist church is no exception to this. This research has shown that progress so far in Baptist churches on this topic has been slow, patchy and weak. However, there are signs of hope that the tide is turning, that the 'sleeping giant' (Valerio, 2020) is awakening, even in Baptist churches. 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.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Structured interviews to key Baptist influencers in relation to creation care

Structured interview questions sent to Baptist influencers

Email subject: **Structured interviews with key Baptist influencers in relation to creation care**

Hello, my name is Hannah Gray and I am a leader at Light of Life Baptist Church in Norfolk.

I am studying for a Certificate in Christian Rural and Environmental Studies (www.cres.org.uk). My research project is looking into whether Baptist churches in the UK are responding with sufficient urgency to the current environmental crisis.

As part of this project I am seeking to interview people within the Baptist family who have been involved with environmental theology and / or practical projects. My initial research has shown that you are one of these people.

I would be most grateful if you could take 10 minutes to answer these questions from your personal perspective and experience within the UK. You can write your response to these questions and email them back to me, or if you would prefer to have a conversation around these issues on the phone or via Skype please let me know and I will arrange a convenient time with you.

Many thanks for your time.

Structured Interview Questions:

- What is your name?
 - What is your job title?
1. Why is creation care important to you?
 2. What has been your experience of being a creation care advocate within Baptist churches?
 3. Can you give any examples of good creation care initiatives coming from the Baptist family within the UK? (I have done a desk-based analysis of information available online to create [this list](#). Please let me know if I have missed anything.)
 4. What do you think are the main obstacles to environmental engagement in Baptist churches?
 5. How do you think Baptist churches compare to other denominations with respect to creation care?
 6. How can the Baptist Union best encourage individual Baptist churches to care for creation?
 7. What do you think the Baptist Union should focus on in the next decade with respect to creation care?
 8. How would you describe the UK Baptist response to the creation care crisis at this point in time?

Appendix 2: Online survey of perspectives on creation care to Baptist church ministers, leaders and members in England and Wales

Title: **Questionnaire to determine perspectives on creation care in UK Baptist Churches**

Hello, my name is Hannah Gray and I am a leader at Light of Life Baptist Church in Norfolk.

I am studying for a Certificate in Christian Rural and Environmental Studies (www.cres.org.uk).

My research project is investigating perspectives on creation care in UK Baptist Churches.

Please take 5 minutes to complete this survey, which will be shared with the Baptist Union to inform their policy making and guidance to churches.

Privacy statement: All of the information that you provide will be treated as confidential and will only be used for research purposes. Your comments will not be identified as belonging to you, instead they will be combined with those gathered from other survey participants, and will be analysed as part of a group. I will not use any of the information you provide for direct marketing or other non-research activities. I will only contact you again if you request to be contacted in the final question.

Thank you.

Hannah Gray

Light of Life Baptist Church

Questionnaire:

1. What is the name of your church?
2. What is your role within that church?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your age?
5. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
I believe there is a biblical basis for Christians to care for the environment					
I think that human-caused climate change is a problem					
I think that human-caused loss of habitats and species is a problem					
I think that the local church should be active in caring for the environment					
I think, in general, people in my church are concerned about the environment					

6. Have you heard of the Ecochurch scheme?

Yes / No you can find out more at <https://ecochurch.arochoa.org.uk/how-eco-church-works/>

7. Please tick any actions that your church takes to reduce its impact on the environment:

This is not an exhaustive list, but provides some common examples. You can list anything else your church does in question 8 if you want to!

- Providing recycling facilities
- Providing composting facilities
- Using recycled products
- Using Fairtrade products
- Using environmentally friendly products
- Using low energy light bulbs
- Using a renewable electricity supplier
- Offering a lift share service
- Community action e.g. litter picks
- Wildlife friendly gardening on church land
- Supporting environmental campaigns
- Other:

8. Have you any further comments on this topic? If so, please write them below:

9. Would you be interested in finding out more about creation care from the Baptist Union?

Yes/ No

10. If you want to find out more about creation care from the Baptist Union, please enter your email address and I will send you some further information.

Thank you for completing this survey.

The final report will be sent to the Baptist Union to inform their policy making and guidance on this topic.

Hannah Gray

Light of Life Baptist Church, Norfolk