

MISSIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

OR

CAN YOU GO ON SHORT-TERM TEAMS **AND** CARE ABOUT
THE PLANET?

By Tim Herbert

We've all done it. Got on a plane at Heathrow and flown half-way round the world, possibly taking two or even three flights to get to our destination. When the team stumbles bleary-eyed and jetlagged out of an oriental airport, you are met in a 4x4 or minibus with the aircon on max. Or, if you're less fortunate, you get on a rickety old bus that fogs the air for miles behind with its blue exhaust haze. On completion of your mission, you travel back the same way you came. And how much carbon have you produced?

Young people today are increasingly aware of the damage that we are doing to the planet just by our day-to-day lifestyles, let alone the optional activities we engage in over the summer. We know that the climate is changing and that the poorest people in the world will suffer first. At Greenbelt this year, one seasoned campaigner explained why a major Christian charity is changing its emphasis from fair trade to climate change: "What's the point in guaranteeing a Bangladeshi farmer a fair price for his produce when his farmland is 5 metres under the sea?"

The point is clear – Christians can no longer go on with their traditional activities without considering the environmental impact. Where is the logic in going to tell people about Jesus, if simply by going we have contributed to the global warming that will harm them? Surely the love that compels us to tell them the good news should also spur us into doing as much as we can to prevent harm coming to them!

Caring for people's environment has to be right up there with caring for their health, education, welfare and liberty as part of a portfolio of practical Christian care meeting people's needs in the name of Jesus. How are we going to have any credibility at all when we tell them God loves them, when his followers are complicit in the desertification, soil erosion, flooding and drought that will create millions of hungry and homeless people in the next few decades if we don't stop it now?

We clearly still feel called to take the good news to the ends of the earth as Christ told us to. But how can we make that activity carbon-neutral? Cycle to Thailand? Sail to the Philippines? Obviously, these are changes that would be impractical. But since aviation already accounts for 10% of Britain's greenhouse gas emissions (New Statesman,

03.04.06) we clearly need to change something. How about trying to take direct flights wherever possible? It might be a little more expensive but since a plane uses up half its fuel load just to take off, minimising the number of takeoffs involved in a trip reduces carbon emissions. We can act as advocates when we get there, encouraging churches and missions to change their activities and set up recycling projects. Most people of our parents' generation are still scarily ignorant of the issues involved.

Or how about carbon offsets? This concept is becoming increasingly popular among people who are unable to make carbon-reducing changes to their lifestyles but compensate by purchasing carbon-credits or by investing in eco-friendly projects. How would people feel about a small climate change levy on top of their Serve Asia fees? After raising £1000, another £50 wouldn't be hard to find, and we could ask OMF to invest it in environmental projects on behalf.

Or we could take this challenge one stage further: how about we ask OMF to develop some of its existing agricultural projects into reforestation or biodiversity schemes which could be funded out of the Serve Asia offsets? We could even send Serve Asia teams to work on these projects, so we can take the good news to ALL creation, not just the humans.

I recently read about a group of Indian Christians who had gone to a coastal area to preach the gospel and plant churches. However, they soon realised that much of the poverty in the region was due to salinisation of the soil, which had been exposed to the sea by the cutting down of mangrove swamps. So as a first step to practically communicating the love of God, the Christians began replanting the mangroves. So far they have replaced over 100 hectares, stimulating the regeneration of the entire community and raising the profile of the church there.

Let's recognise that we have to take the environment seriously. Until Christians care enough about the planet to take practical steps to maintain it, any attempt to tell people about a loving and compassionate creator God will be completely hypocritical. Wouldn't it be great if OMF were the first organisation to have carbon-neutral summer teams?