

Climate Camp and Christian Action FAQ

What is the Camp for Climate Action?

The Camp for Climate Action will be six inspiring days of workshops and peaceful direct action aimed at stopping the expansion of the world's biggest coal port. The camp will involve fun activities for everyone from children to older people, first-time activists to seasoned protesters, and will encourage participation. The camp will have a safer spaces policy to encourage an atmosphere of respect and freedom from all kinds of abuse. All campers will be asked to agree to a participants' agreement to ensure that everybody respects the values of the camp, particularly non-violence.

Why should Christians be concerned about climate change?

Climate change is a matter of profound social injustice. Everybody will be affected by climate change, but those who have contributed the least to the problem suffer its consequences most gravely. Hurricane Katrina, drought in sub-Saharan Africa, the cyclone in Burma, and sea level rise in the Pacific and the Torres Strait have all demonstrated how those who are losing their livelihoods, their health, and even life itself are the socially marginalised. These injustices extend also to future generations, giving new meaning to the notion that the "sins of the fathers" will be "visited on the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:6-7). Christians are called to serve the vulnerable (Matthew 25:31-40) and to do justice to the oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-9, Micah 6:8).

Humans are also called to steward the environment (Genesis 2:15). But much more deeply than that, the Christian gospel is something that involves the whole of the creation. Climate change shows us that our lives are deeply interconnected, through our interdependence with our physical environment. Climate chaos is the reverse of "shalom", of deep communion with each other, with the natural world, and with God. The incarnation of Christ shows us that "matter matters". The same God, who is present in us today, is present in the whole of creation (Genesis 1:1-2). We do indeed stand on holy ground (Exodus 3:1-5). The creation attests to the glory of the Creator, who enriches and blesses it (Psalm, 65, 104). Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the whole of the creation is reconciled (John 3:16-17, Colossians 1:15-20). The resurrection hope is therefore something that the whole of the creation shares. In a world on the brink of climate chaos, our role as Christians is to witness to the resurrection in our lives today; to live as if God's kingdom of justice, peace and the integrity of creation really is here among us and within us (Luke 17:20-21).

But why get arrested? Aren't Christians meant to obey the law?

Of course Christians, like everyone else, should normally obey laws of the land. However sometimes our laws are unjust or legislate unjust policies. In these situations, people of God stretching back to the Hebrew midwives in Egypt have realised that we have a higher calling to obey God. Jesus himself broke many of the political and religious laws of his day, to open space for the breaking in of God's reign. Martin Luther King Jr. reflected that breaking down someone's door is wrong, but not if it is done to save the lives of people trapped in a fire. Breaking the law for a just cause and facing the consequences, he said, actually upholds the highest respect for the rule of law.

Nonviolent direct action is usually a last resort, employed only after legal channels have failed. This is clearly the case here. Despite vigorous lobbying, letter-writing, and petitioning from all kinds of people from the Hunter Valley and the rest of Australia, both major parties at the state and federal levels are fully supporting the port expansion and opening of new coal mines. The reason for our dependence on coal is purely economic, and coal companies line the pockets of our elected politicians.

Shouldn't Christians get their house in order before they protest?

It is essential that we as Christians model right relationships with each other and with our planet in our everyday lives – including reducing our carbon footprint in our homes and in our churches. But

we create a false distinction if we separate this out from questions of politics. When we reduce the problem of climate change to merely a problem of consumer choice and action, we are blind to the structural issues that propel us towards rising greenhouse gas pollution, whether that be a lack of public transport infrastructure, subsidies towards the fossil fuel industry, or government decisions to expand the capacity of the Newcastle coal terminal. Numerous activists before us, including the abolitionists, the suffragettes, and the civil rights movement, have known that social change is also about political change. A political witness is therefore indeed a part of getting our house in order!

What's wrong with Newcastle's port expansion?

Newcastle is the world's biggest coal export port. Burning coal for electricity is by far the biggest cause of climate change, and Australia exports more than twice as much coal than any other nation - controlling 30% of the world's coal export industry.

In fact, if you add up all of our domestic greenhouse gas emissions from transport, industry, energy, agriculture and every other conceivable source, the pollution from our coal exports tops all of them combined.

In an era of global climate change, increased extreme weather events, rising tides, expanding droughts, crop failures and a global food shortage, it is critical that we move away from coal and fossil fuels as quickly as possible. It is possible to do this using current technology.

But the coal industry and the government don't seem to have got the memo. Newcastle's coal port is undergoing a massive expansion, and the NSW Government has given the coal industry permission to more than double their exports. The effect that this is having on the world (particularly on the world's poor) is so horrible that most of our decision-makers try not to think about it.

But there is hope. Like in India and South Africa, a sustained non-violent direct action campaign is pushing coal exports onto the national agenda. Over the past few years, ordinary people from all walks of life have staged successful actions which have not only made significant greenhouse gas reductions and delayed the port expansion, but have also drawn national attention to Newcastle harbour.

In the lead-up to the Camp for Climate Action, faith communities, environmental groups and community organisations are coming together to send the message that when it comes to climate change, we don't want to be part of the problem. We want to be part of the solution.

But by protesting against rising coal exports, aren't we just denying people in countries like China the right to the standard of living that we already enjoy?

The fact is that the vast majority of Australia's coal exports actually go to rich countries. In 2006/07, 44% of coal exports went to Japan, 12% to Europe, 12% to Korea, and 10% to Taiwan. Only 8% of Australia's coal exports went to India, and just 2% to China.

Half of the world's carbon dioxide emissions come from a small minority of the world's population. It is true that greenhouse gas emissions are rising in countries like China and India. However, both countries have per capita emissions which are only a fraction of Australia's, and both countries are also being more proactive on climate change than Australia. Although all majority world countries, including India and China, were calling for binding greenhouse gas emission reduction targets at the climate negotiations at Bali in late 2007, four rich countries (Australia, Canada, Japan and the USA) blocked consensus on binding short-term targets. It is the minority world which is profiting the most from fossil fuel exploitation and climate change.

Still, it is clear that the majority world cannot "develop" along the same trajectory as we have. If the whole world were to try to live at the same resource intensity as Australians do, we would need several planets. That we in this country have so much more than people in other parts of the world, and that they suffer the environmental consequences of this, is deeply unfair. But to argue that because we have for so long been able to treat the environment as our dumping ground means

that others should also be able to do the same is a very narrow idea of justice. In the story from Luke 12:13-21, Jesus is approached by a man who got a raw deal on the family inheritance. Jesus is not interested in his dispute; he turns the man's argument on its head. He wants to witness to another way of life which is beyond the accumulation of wealth. Absolutely, Australia should assist those who do not share in our living standard. But that assistance should not be in the form of fossil-fuelled industrial development. Just as we work to decarbonise Australia's economy, so we should work with other countries on alternative ways to develop.

Further information

"Common Belief: Australia's Faith Communities on Climate Change". A collection of faith statements from many Christian denominations and other non-Christian religious communities. Downloadable from

http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=45&Itemid=34

Tear Australia's climate change campaign <http://www.tear.org.au/advocacy/campaigns/climate-change/>

Operation Noah, a UK-based Christian climate campaign. <http://www.operationnoah.org/>

World Council of Churches resources on climate change,

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/climate-change-and-water.html>

Michael S. Northcott (2007) *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*. Darton, Longman & Todd, London. Get URLs for videos of his Melbourne/Adelaide presentations. You can access a podcast of one of Michael's talks in Australia at <http://www.sa.uca.org.au/site/page.cfm?u=1012>.

Martin Luther King Jr, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (possibly the foremost essay on Christian nonviolence) <http://www.thekingcenter.com/prog/non/Letter.pdf>