

Ashes to ashes: Pentecostalism, the PM and the climate crisis

Scott Morrison's recent speech to a Christian conference draws fresh attention to Pentecostal churches' lack of climate evangelism



Scott Morrison at a Horizon church service in Sydney. Religious scholars say many Pentecostal Christians believe God will take care of the climate.

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“We are called, all of us, for a time and for a season and God would have us use it wisely.”

Scott Morrison, Australia's prime minister and a Pentecostal Christian, flew in on a taxpayer-funded plane to deliver those words to a church on the Gold Coast.

His sermon-like speech was given to the national conference of Australian Christian Churches – the umbrella body for the majority of churches in the country's only Christian denomination showing growth: Pentecostalism.

Pentecostals, including the more than 1,000 churches under ACC's umbrella – which includes the Morrison family's Horizon church in south Sydney – is now the second largest Christian congregation behind Catholics.

But when Morrison tells Pentecostals to use their season wisely, there are some religious scholars worried that acting on climate change has not been a feature of that season.

Speaking to Guardian Australia, some argue the historical guiding principles of Pentecostalism – its focus on personal salvation with a strong consumerist vibe – has not lent itself to conjuring a congregation of climate evangelists.

The Australian Religious Response to Climate Change has among its members organisations belonging to an array of faiths – from Catholics and Quakers to Buddhists and Muslims. Members have blockaded coalmining sites and campaigned hard for rapid cuts to greenhouse gas emissions.

“We have 41 member organisations,” says the ARRCC president and Catholic, Thea Ormerod. “None are Pentecostal. We have occasionally asked leaders in the Pentecostal tradition to sign on to our letters to government. They have declined the invitations.”

In March ARRCC organised more than 120 silent protests outside the offices of government figures. Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims were among the activists. The protests were a short verse in a lengthening chapter of faith-based groups’ response to the climate crisis.

The Church of England has been pulling investments out of fossil fuel companies. The Pope says climate change is a “challenge of civilisation”. Islamic leaders have issued calls for a 100% renewable energy strategy.

In Australia, the National Council of Churches wrote to Morrison this week asking him to announce more ambitious targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

There is no grand body of research on what different Christian groups think about climate change, but what there is suggests that Pentecostals are among the least concerned.

According to 2016 research on Australian Christians “it appears to be Pentecostalism in particular where skepticism about the causes of climate change is prevalent”.

Other research has suggested that people belonging to faiths with a more literal view of religious texts – including Pentecostals and Evangelicals – were more likely to doubt the need to act on climate change. They were also less likely to think global heating was caused by humans.

‘The end isn’t coming tomorrow’

Dr Mark Jennings, an expert on the sociology of religion at the University of Divinity, says Pentecostalism is still shaking off its early incarnation as a denomination coloured by fears and hopes of an end times and a renewal ushered in by God.

“They started with the idea that the world would end soon and so this stuff [climate change] doesn’t make any sense,” he says. “That was from the origins of the movement, but now they are starting to be more comfortable with the idea the end isn’t coming tomorrow and those attitudes have adjusted.”

Jennings says Pentecostalism is not on its own in taking a strong cue from the Bible’s first chapter, Genesis, where the Christian God tells Adam and Eve to “fill the earth and subdue it”.

“They take that as the world being the property of humans and we should bring nature to subjugation,” he says.

Focus on personal salvation

Growth in Pentecostalism in Australia is part of a global boom of so-called charismatic Christians that now stands at 655 million people out of 1.5 billion Christians worldwide.

Ormerod says the apparent absence of many Pentecostals in speaking up about the climate crisis “has to do with how they tend, as a culture, to interpret the Gospel message”.

“They tend to believe God will take care of the climate,” she says. “Their focus overall is on personal salvation.” She worries that a prime minister “who shares Pentecostal beliefs puts Australians in further danger”.

Ormerod’s husband is Neil Ormerod, a retired professor of theology at the Australian Catholic University who had a 20-year association with ACC’s training and theology centre, Alphacrucis College.

It’s a form of religion for an individualistic modern consumerist age

He knows several Pentecostals concerned about climate change. But he says many tend not to see a link between social and political contexts and their own personal salvation.

“It’s a form of religion for an individualistic modern consumerist age,” he says. “There is no critique of, say, modern neoliberal economics or the consumerist society.”

One Pentecostal leader with a public profile – albeit much smaller than Morrison’s – is James Macpherson, a pastor and vice-president on the executive board of Alphacrucis College.

Macpherson writes for the conservative magazine the Spectator, where climate science and environmentalists are an object of ridicule.

At the start of the global pandemic, Macpherson wrote how “leftists” and “environmental doomsayers” were pushing for a reaction to the Covid crisis that mirrored the “fabled climate emergency”.

He describes the public broadcaster, the ABC, as the “national purveyor of climate doom” and calls the teenage Swedish climate campaigner Greta Thunberg the “goblin of doom”.

Pastors have been reflecting upon the concept of new creation ... not as a disposing of the old ... but actually as a transformation

The Rev Prof Jacqui Grey is the dean of theology at Alphacrucis. She says Macpherson is voicing personal opinions and writes in a personal capacity.

She accepts that there is an absence of strong voices for climate action among Pentecostals but puts this down to the relative youthfulness of the denomination (it has roots from the early 20th century) and the lack of a hierarchical structure that means most leadership is local.

Young Pentecostals, she says, are passionate about caring for the environment and there is change afoot.

The strong emphasis on achieving “personal salvation” is a “fair critique”, she says, but one the church’s theologians have been “rethinking”.

Some of that rethinking “is yet to be reflected in the everyday life of the church”, she says. “It is not just the individual, but the individual is part of the community both human and non-human.”

The Pentecostal movement has matured, she says, beyond the belief that an “end times” would come and Jesus would establish a new kingdom.



File photo of Hillsong church members. Former US congressman Bob Inglis says he has ‘found a receptiveness there’ on the need for climate action.

“Scholars and pastors have been reflecting upon the concept of new creation to understand it not as a disposing of the old with a new and separate creation, but actually as a transformation.

“We are still working through the full implications of our understanding of faith and how that applies to many different social issues including climate change.”

One sign of a strong shift among Pentecostal theologians could come with the release of a special issue of the church’s academic journal – Australian Pentecostal Studies – which Grey edits. The June issue is dedicated to caring for the environment and climate change.

“As far as I know, no other Pentecostal journal globally has ever had a dedicated issue,” Grey says.

‘Young Christians want action’

That slow shift among Pentecostals will be gospel music to the ears of a former US Republican congressman, Bob Inglis.

Inglis was treated as heathen by Republicans when, in the early 2000s, he began to call for action on climate change and, later, a tax on carbon in a party shot through with climate science denial.

“It wasn’t the only heresy I committed, but it’s the most enduring,” he says.

The Christian from South Carolina now spends most of his time trying to convince the reluctant rump of Republicans that climate change is real, is human-caused, and it’s a Christian duty to act on it.

He says the idea “the Earth is going to burn up away and so it doesn’t matter” is prevalent among the Pentecostals he speaks to.

Inglis did a speaking tour of Australia in 2017, a few months after Morrison, then treasurer, held up a lump of coal in parliament, telling his leftwing opposition not to be scared of it.

Inglis met representatives from Hillsong – another large grouping of Pentecostals that has since broken away from ACC – and says “we found a receptiveness there”.

Australia is a special place for Inglis. A snorkel on the Great Barrier Reef with a scientist, he says, helped him see how marvelling in the corals and the ecosystem was, to him, a form of worship.

In the US, Inglis says, the most challenging hurdle he finds is the belief that because “God is sovereign” humans can’t be responsible for changing the climate.

“You can’t just dump into the air and say God cleans it up,” he says. “That’s not right. We have to be fully accountable and if we are, blessings flow from that accountability.

“Young Christians want action on climate change. It’s the older ones that have the hesitancy on action.”

In a statement, ACC said: “Caring for the environment and God’s creation is viewed as an important responsibility for all people, including the Church.”

Congregation members “reflect a broad demographic” and “there are certainly many who are strong advocates for environmental concerns and climate change within the Pentecostal church”.

“For the record, while the ACC does not have a specific policy regarding climate change, our Missions arm has a very strong environmental policy on Creation Care that serves our commitment to the nations we work in and includes our local communities in Australia.”