

Sharmila Blair interviews Claire Dawson and Mick Pope, authors of *A Climate of Hope* (a UNOH Publication, to be released early in 2015)

(Interview Transcript: May 2014 - Harvest Bible College, Dandenong)

S: So, can you tell me a bit about yourselves?

C: I'm Claire. I'm - in this season of life: primarily a mum, that's how I feel anyway! At the moment I've got a toddler and a pre-schooler so life is generally really full. It's challenging, it's busy, but kids are one of the profound reasons for my hope in terms of the future, and also for my concern for the future.

Back last century I completed an undergraduate degree in commerce, during which time I developed a reasonably high level of cynicism with regard to markets, and how they work - and how they work very imperfectly. And I've also studied theology. I gained a Master of Divinity from what is now MST (Melbourne School of Theology, previously BCV).

My journey has been a reasonably long one in terms of coming to care for creation more fully. I look back and can see the hand of God leading me in this direction from as early as my teens, however my experience within evangelical Christian circles as a new Christian didn't always support or nurture concern for the earth. Early on in my discipleship the messages reasonably consistently focussed on "plundering hell to populate heaven". It was almost entirely about saving souls, and personal piety.

M: I don't know where to start! I'm Mick and my journey has also been an incredibly long one. If you think about it this way, Pope John Paul II talked about the need for an ecological conversion. I feel like as a boy I got to collect moths and worms and play with creepy crawlies and watch wildlife documentaries. So as a kid I never needed that, but when I became a Christian as an 18 year-old it took me a while to realise that it actually relates to a bunch of other things.

A few years later I underwent what I would call a full ecological conversion where now I call myself an 'eco-theologian': I've got an undergraduate certificate, as it turns out, rather than a degree, in theology, and a PhD in Meteorology, so from wanting to study the stars as a kid and having an interest in natural science, I have kind of come back to earth quite a bit, in one profound sense.

So, for me the concern and why I'm in this has been big picture ideas, of wanting intellectual cohesion. Like Claire, having an 11 year-old I think about the world he'll inherit and I sometimes pause and think, "Should I tell him not to have children?" I sometimes worry about dying of heat-stroke in a nursing home, because people are already dying that way, even in Australia and in Europe. Even in developed countries people are dying of climate and weather-related disasters, and that's the world he's going to inherit.

So I'm coming at this as someone who would be happy if climate change didn't exist. I'd be happy not to write this book, instead I'd be writing smart little treatises on natural disasters and the sovereignty of God - I'd be very happy with that. (*Sharm chuckles*). So while I'm really keen to write this book, I really kind of wish we weren't. From the personal perspective as a parent I'm worried about the future, and from having been attached to nature as a kid. And I'm also driven by a theological concern that the church should be right at the front, but we're often very much at the back.

C: It's interesting how many of these things are actually seeded in our childhood or youth. I was chatting to Byron Smith a few months ago and, like me, he can remember what year it was when the lights started going on for him.

I can remember being in Geography class in Room H, learning about global warming and Antarctica – we listened to Sting's song 'Fragile'. Even though I was quite young, my search was actually very much a philosophical one. In my youth, Sting was actually one of my prophets, and he was busy fighting for the Amazon at the time, with a much higher public profile than he chooses to have now. And Mick you mentioned your concern about the kind of world your son will inherit and a line from one of Sting's songs went something like this: "What good is a used-up world and how could it be worth having?" and this line is actually sung in response to him also loosely quoting from the Gospels "Blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the earth". They were the sorts of things I was listening to and reflecting on.

I actually became increasingly cynical to the point that in my teens I decided that I wouldn't have children – I was so concerned for the future. But I was without hope and without God at that stage.

Those questions and reflections have been part – a significant part – of my spiritual journey and finding faith because of my hopelessness. But it would be a long time before my new-found faith was properly integrated into an earthly and holistic worldview. For quite a while I was so heavenly-minded that I was of no earthly use... or so I was told!

S: So, creation care is obviously a big topic. Why the issue of climate change in particular, and why do you believe that the church needs to be at the front on this one?

M: Ha!... how long is a piece of string? I think there's the very profound sense that the church has missed the boat so often and has focussed on a Christianity that is very much 'pie in the sky when you die' and been very disconnected to earthly or earthy issues, very much missing the point that human beings are humans from the humus, Adam made from the dust: Adam from the *adama* - it's a pun in the original Hebrew language. We're so intimately tied to the world around us but the church has historically just seen right past that.

The church has focussed really well, at times, on human issues, like temperance or slavery or those kinds of things. And yet it has been missing the point that climate change is going to have a huge impact upon the people of the world.

People are happy to sponsor children and seek for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be met, but climate change is going to swamp every one of those goals! And along those lines, many are in fact not aware that the 7th MDG goal is actually to "Ensure Environmental Sustainability".

So you can do lots of good works that are focussed on humans and telling them that they need Jesus in their life so they can go to heaven when they die, but it's just like James where he writes "be well fed, and you know - have a happy life and this, that and the other"¹ and meanwhile we lead lifestyles that completely undermine that, and we often completely miss this point in the message that we preach. There's just such a

C: Disconnect?

¹ James 2:16

M: Yeah, such a disconnect – a kind of a schizophrenia, we’re in two minds, we’re double-minded – which James writes about as well.

C: And Mick you mentioned that we want people to be saved, but I have a sneaking suspicion, actually a growing concern, that there are a huge number of people who are well outside the church by choice, at least in part because they don’t see a church that actually cares. They have connected the dots between climate change and poverty, and they see a church that is apathetic, inactive, or maybe even in opposition to the incredibly strong and clear message coming from climate scientists. And it is things like this that really grieve my heart. It reminds me of a question that the New Testament scholar Rikk Watts once posed, which was something along these lines: “If people are running from a wrong view of God, are they perhaps in fact running toward him?”

I think we have potentially done a massive disservice to people whose hearts are very soft and in the right place, and we have actually presented a significant obstacle and stumbling block to them – and for me that is part of the tragedy.... There is so much about climate change that is so wrong and tragic, and there are so many complex factors at work, but for those who think it’s got to be mission or climate change, one or the other, instead we are convinced that it has to be both/and. And, actually, the opportunities to engage in mission are magnified when you get active in this space. It’s actually really exciting. Again, like Mick, I wish it wasn’t happening and that we didn’t need to write this book, but involvement in creation care actually opens doors to meet people and to have really interesting conversations about issues that really, really matter.

S: That’s fantastic. So, if I can ask you both, what are your hopes and aspirations for this book?

C: I think it’s going to take a lot to bring about the kind of change that is necessary, and this book is certainly no silver bullet – it’s not THE answer – but hopefully it will be one of many responses. If we see a number of people take action in this critical season it might be part of a movement that actually sees people – particularly people in the faith space – have those “ah ha” moments of eco-conversion, where they get it, and they start to make those connections and join the dots in terms of Christian discipleship and action on climate change.

I would love it if the church, in ten or twenty years, was actually at the forefront on this, rather than lagging behind. That would be really exciting, and I do get a sense that this is only one part of a bigger conversation that is now happening on a number of different levels.

I hope too that this book will be really timely. Part of me wishes that the book had been in print a decade ago, but in reality I don’t know that it would have even been read, such was the disinterest. I write about this in the book, but author and activist Bill McKibben has reflected on how, as a naïve young journalist he thought, “If I write a book, people will read it, things will change”. Well people read it, and yet nothing really changed, so as a writer he’s now intentionally taking a different tack, which you’ll read more about in the book.

So there is an acknowledged risk that this book won’t change anything. But I acknowledge that we’re also in a different season where we sense that there is a greater openness and readiness to engage with this topic – fortunately there is definitely more happening. And, engaging in this topic in a more focussed and intentional way, as I have researched and written, has actually changed me. It’s been a crucial part of my ongoing journey. So that’s a good start.

M: When I think about the people that I know, and the opportunities I’ve had to share and speak on this issue, there are those for whom no amount of books will move them. There are often

things that are so deeply ingrained in people's worldviews and in their ways of thinking about Christianity that means they simply won't shift.

But I have also had conversations - and Claire I came and spoke at your church a few years ago for instance - and there are people who are genuinely curious, and genuinely confused, about climate change. And if you can simply show them that some of the apparent stumbling blocks are not actually that difficult to sweep away, biblically speaking you then open up the idea that caring for creation is actually important, quite apart from whether or not climate change is real.

One of my favourite cartoons going around at the moment asks the question: "Well what is climate change? Is it all a hoax?" Well, what do we get if we act on it anyway? Well, we get clean water, sustainable development, and jobs etc... there are so many co-benefits! And then it opens up this space where we say caring for God's earth is important, caring for people is important, and that's related to God's earth, so that kind of thing as well as presenting the basic science.

So, in summary, I guess what I want out of this book is something that will open some eyes, and shift people just that little bit further in the right direction. I'm not that concerned about those who are hard-nosed deniers. I don't know what it's going to take to move them but it won't be this book.

I'd also hope that this book is something that Christians find to be reasonably accessible, so that they can actually give it to someone who is outside of the faith community, outside of the Christian community, and for them to be able to say "this is what some Christians are thinking and doing and this has been helpful in motivating me on this journey. Christians don't have two heads, and they're not all virulently opposed to caring for the world." Because, like Claire, I've had conversations about these things with people who respond by saying "Now that's the kind of Christianity that I can believe in, because it's a God who loves everything that there is, and who has a concern for everything."

As I've tried to write my section on theology, and as I've thought about this over the past decade, the more I've seen that the work isn't that hard to do, to show that at the heart of the biblical narrative is a God who cares for the world - for the entire world. For the small furry creatures, for the fish in the oceans, and for the people he's made in his image. Yeah, I just want to open people's eyes to the fact that this isn't Christianity *plus* environmental care, or Christianity *and* aid and development, or Christianity and whatever cause you like... it's what the Bible is all about: the whole shebang - everything!

S: That's great Mick. So tell me, why the title? What does it encapsulate for you?

M: Well, we needed to use the word climate in it. (*Sharm laughs and nods*) And hope is the one thing that Christians can bring that I don't think stems from a purely atheistic worldview. I once gave a talk to a bunch of kids at a school, and I walked the physics teacher and said "Well, sustainability, that's all a matter of time-scale anyway" because of course everything disappears at the big rip, or the big crunch or whatever you think happens in modern cosmology.

And so the fact that the whole creation groans in birth pains, waiting for the children of God to be revealed, that creation itself has a hope just as we have a hope, in the resurrection, is something that we as Christians can say uniquely. And that hope can strengthen and underpin the technological changes that we need to make - or the repentance of lifestyle that must occur - in order to envisage a different way of doing economics, a different way of creating sustainable societies.

All the things that need to change must come from a repentance of heart, and that repentance is in response to Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and the hope of his eventual return. So, *A Climate of Hope* encapsulates all of that. We have something genuine to offer the world.

C: And I'm not sure whether you'd refer to it as a by-line, but the phrase '*Church and Mission in a Warming World*' is important too. Including a reference to a *warming world* is what will hopefully indicate to readers that the book is actually about climate change, or climate disruption as some are now calling it. Change can refer to something positive, however we now know that the way our climate is changing is generally going to lead to negative impacts; for most people of the world's inhabitants, life will get harder.

Church and Mission? Well church is worth emphasising for a number of reasons, but in particular because our response to this has to be a communal one: me doing my bit is not going to be enough. And Mick doing his bit is not enough either.

If the church, the global church, all did their bit individually, and corporately, and if they used their collective voice to speak to the powers of our era, then we really might be able to make a difference. And Mick and I share a strong sense that it is now a crucial part of the mission of the church, it is part of the good works that we are called to do. We are to tend to this earth. We do it because it is right, and we do it because it is an important way to express love of neighbour.

But it is also part of mission: it is part of connecting with people, caring for people, demonstrating the love of God, having the conversations as you go... and it intersects with the ordinary but important stuff of life: growing veggies alongside a neighbour in a community garden, and having rich dialogue with them as you get your hands dirty. What you are doing together is a life sustaining thing, and in fact an essential life skill. Unfortunately we are now so disconnected from these things now. But Christians involved in this space – gardening with God – they are seeing such fruitfulness. They get alongside others and get into the 'doing' of creation care. Even if you give it a different name, it's still a perfect context for mission.

M: I just had what might be a profound thought, regarding the whole idea that it's corporate, whereas modern Christianity is so individualistic – where the focus is your own personal relationship with Jesus. If you look at the Old Testament, what was Israelite spirituality about? It was about land, and the way in which you planted your crops, and letting the land fallow every seven years, it was about hygiene, and relationships with others. And we tend to just spiritualise everything. I know there is a difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament periods, and that certain rules and systems don't apply anymore because of Christ, but nonetheless that whole patterning of life is central to the text.

Religion has become such a dirty word today, but if religion is just a corporate living out of your faith and your spirituality, then perhaps I think we need to redeem the word "religion". James certainly does in terms of his emphasis on looking after the orphan and widow, who were the more vulnerable members of society in his time. And we could include looking after the earth, all in the context of community.

C: And the ancient texts introduce us to wonderful, earthy concepts like gleaning: intentionally leaving surplus, so that those in need can come and take. To us it's actually quite radical, but it was for these people part of the fabric of life together.

S: So far this all sounds fascinating and inspiring, but no doubt you've had some challenges as you've engaged in research and writing?

C: My biggest challenge, by far, was just discerning where to draw the boundaries. There is so much that one can read these days, so many discussions one can have, both online and in person... as much as one can boil the climate change issue down to some really simple principles, the mechanics of what has happened behind the scenes, politically, commercially, and also in terms of various responses from faith communities, it can end up being profoundly complicated – and of course many of these issues are intertwined.

I quickly discovered that there was no end to the side-tracks and tangents one can take. Keeping in mind our audience was important here, in terms of the level of sophistication. We have intentionally sought to keep this book at an accessible level, and ultimately that was helpful for me. I could have spent twenty years reading and preparing, but the book would not have been written, or it would be written way too late. As a bit of a perfectionist I needed to be mindful of the motto that ‘Some things are too important to be done perfectly’. The amount of information available now – the wonderful stuff, and the absolute rubbish, and everything in-between, means that it is now a real art to know what to include, and what to put aside, and what to leave for someone else. It’s not something I feel I’ve done particularly well, and I think there could be a number of spin-offs in a number of directions following this book.

We were wanting to make it an introductory level text. So there will be Christians who don’t find much that is new in this book if they’ve already been on the journey a long time. Hopefully some of the stories will be an encouragement to them, and they’re the sort of people who might find that this becomes a helpful resource to put in the hands of others who are wanting to know more.

There are of course already lots of good books out there, but very few for the Australian evangelical context. Additionally, so much of the climate change debate is politically fraught, and so many of our faith communities tend to mirror the agendas of right/conservative and left/liberal politics. We have had to navigate our way around lots of ‘hot potatoes’ and ‘elephants in the room’; and there are a number of ‘red herrings’ too.

There is one very clear message, but in communicating it at times there feels like there is so much to say. Synthesizing it has been hard. And writing one’s first book on climate change could certainly be likened to jumping in the deep end! What about you Mick?

M: Yeah, similar things. From the science point of view, you can get really, really deep, and I wonder at times “well, what kind of things are really helpful?” I speak a lot about this now, increasingly often, and I go equipped with lots of material, but I regularly ask myself “well, how much do I need to beat people around the head with the facts?”

I love to use the analogy of the court-room, and the need to have multiple lines of evidence. Do you have a confession? DNA at the scene? A smoking gun? How much stuff do you need to put in to convince people? And part of the cause of this frustration is that you throw all of this stuff at someone who is an entrenched denier and none of it will penetrate. So it’s about getting that balance right, of the essential basics of the science, and also trying not to frighten people too much, but rather motivate them, because the potential scenarios are truly quite frightening.

Even with modest warming of 2 degrees it’s going to be a radically different world. In fact you can argue that we’re in a radically different world now; in fact we are when you compare our climate to the time before the Industrial Revolution.

Theologically speaking, we’re trying to write an introductory level book. I have a lot of books on my bookshelf, sophisticated analysis and deep exegeted arguments, and I think every chapter

within the theology section could be a section in itself... I think Claire's right, there are more books to be written (*Mick chuckles*).

I was really keen to play up the missional aspect of things. I've spoken and written on eco-missiology, the whole area of how we have genuine mission to the earth, to care for it for its own sake, as well as the impacts it has on people around the world. The whole thing could have exploded, and I find that every time I speak, there is simply not enough time to say everything that could be said. And, people are always wanting to hear more, which is great. It was a real shoehorn job to say things succinctly and at an introductory level. Ultimately the message is that there is a whole world to open your eyes to, but reading these important things will help you get up and running.

C: For me, as a non-scientist, I'm very aware that from the outset it was actually never my intention that I'd write significant portions of the book. I had in mind an edited collection, where I gather a diverse array of contributions from people much more expert in their fields than I. This is not how it unfolded, and there is actually an argument to be made that we don't need more and more scientists talking about this (as much as that is generally helpful); perhaps what we need is more lay-people who have heard what the scientists have had to say that help communicate, translate and interpret for lay audiences.

For example, pastors need to be talking about this, but they're generally not scientists. And the fact is, while science informs us about the issue, in essence it's not purely a 'scientific issue' – it's rather a life issue, it's about our very survival, it's about how the world works. Science can analyse and explain this for us, but we're all human beings and we're all in this together.

Yet I readily confess that I felt at many points very under-qualified for this project. In fact it's such a massive topic, so much so that nobody can actually be an expert on more than a few facets of it. Which is why from the outset I really wanted to have a range of voices speaking out. Yes, we'd gather more experience and expertise this way, but it would also reflect just how much is already happening in this space.

S: My next question, along somewhat similar lines, is why, Claire, did you approach UNOH Publications with the idea for this book?

C: I have grown to really appreciate and respect the work of UNOH since hearing Ash Barker speak when I was at Bible College, almost last millennium I think! And then having worked with UNOH's resource team a number of years ago, I had developed enough of a connection that I could approach Ash with the idea. So there was a level of opportunism about it.

But I really felt that when it came to Christians in the Australian context, especially people who broadly describe themselves as justice-seeking evangelicals, there was a good chance that they would be looking to UNOH, and UNOH Publications for some guidance on this issue. In reality, UNOH Publications would be one of just a few Christian publishers that intentionally seeks to give opportunity for prophetic voices to be heard. And while climate change is certainly not 'core business' for UNOH, in that it's not something that they've been particularly focussed on in the past – for UNOH not to speak out or to allow others to write about the issue, well my concern was that there might be an argument from silence that UNOH didn't perceive that climate change was in fact a really pressing issue, particularly when it comes to impacts in the realms of poverty and justice.

So as well as some healthy opportunism, it seemed clear to me that here was an organisation that is committed to justice-seeking, and that is prepared to look at and address important issues that

intersect with climate change in a range of ways (the plight of asylum seekers would be one). While climate change was not front and centre for UNOH, it did just seem to fit.

S: And finally, what would you say to Christians who want to learn more, know more?

C: Obviously... for a start, read the book! (*everyone laughs*). But additionally, find people to share the journey with. If you don't know of people in your networks who can walk this road with you, then take heart, you'll find them fairly easily via Facebook, and while this may mean a friendship or two that is electronically mediated – obviously less than ideal – the fact is that this certainly isn't a road to walk on your own. The support and encouragement of friends is vital: the sense of solidarity and some timely, understanding companionship during those dark times when it all seems too bleak and too hard - to know that you're not alone is definitely really important.

Sometimes it is necessary to re-focus and remind ourselves of our ultimate hope: not hope that the church or the world can get its act together, or hope that technology can adapt and develop at a fast enough pace that we stumble upon some quick-fixes, but rather coming back to that ultimate hope in a renewed and redeemed earth. It can be really hard to hold in tension the 'now' and the 'not yet' of Christian eschatology. So ideally some of your travelling companions will be people of faith, as our ultimate hope is not in successful activism, but rather in Christ, and the promise of resurrection life for us upon a restored earth. That is our true hope. We act in light of this, and seek that the Kingdom will break into this world here and now, as a sign and foretaste of what is yet to come.

But we also need to pray, and to wait. To be honest I don't know how activists involved in a secular space keep going. The rates of burn-out and depression must be quite high, but I do have great admiration for people who have been fighting since the seventies, who over four decades on haven't yet given up. I really have no idea how they do it!

M: I'd say the same. It's a case of connecting into community. You just never know what impact you can have. As we keep saying, our book is intentionally fairly low-level and introductory, but if that's going to be motivational, formative or inspirational for our readers then I hope they hand it on to somebody else.

It's really a process of discipleship, in the sense that Christianity is all about discipleship: we don't make converts, we make disciples, which means there is a lifelong relationship with Christ and learning from him, and from each other, as we show Christ to each other. If you undergo an ecological conversion and come to understand that caring for God's earth for the many reasons we lay out is important, then you're going to want to be discipled by people who think similarly, and you're going to want to disciple others who might not think that and who need to be helped in that way.

The other thing I'd add is to not be afraid to learn from others who are outside the faith, or who are from other faith traditions. I sometimes think we can be shamed by people from other faith traditions, and people with indigenous beliefs... ok, so while we don't put rose-coloured glasses on when we look at indigenous peoples, despite having done some damage over time in their own way, many have now come into a kind of equilibrium with their local environment. So, it is important to be willing to learn from whoever it is and to journey with them, because again there is this opportunity for mission all the time, to say "I care for the same things that you care for, but for different reasons, and I'm willing to learn from you because you know more than me, and I'm grateful for what you've done".

S: Thanks so much guys... I'm very much looking forward to reading the book too!