

Article

Living in God's rhythm helps us care for the world

This article reflects on the heart behind creation-care.

In recent years the church has been woken up to the importance of stewarding creation. But many of us are faced with the choice to exchange one type of striving for another – we know the pace and drivenness of modern life and its relationship with nature is out of sync with God's rhythm, but the to do list of green living can sometimes feel equally overwhelming.

This article isn't about denying the need or urgency of making lifestyle changes, and campaigning for environmental justice. It's about seeking to do these things from a place of grace, rest and heart-change, so that the change of rhythm will be sustainable living for us, as well as our world.

If you want to read more about practical changes you can make as a result, visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/takeaction , <http://ew.ecocongregation.org> or www.arocha.org

1. Understanding the natural rhythm

The world that God created is rhythmic – our hearts beat; our lungs breathe in and out; we sleep and wake; plants grow, decay and then nourish new seedlings to grow again; day turns into night; seasons change again and again as the cycle rotates.

You can find God's planned rhythm in every part of creation. What's more, there is order. A hidden pattern of connections and symmetries – a flower opens for the first time and there is a bee, woken from hibernation, ready to collect its pollen. It's all perfectly planned.

However, our culture often tries to surpass these natural rhythms, in order to break free of their perceived limitations.

We drink copious cups of coffee to keep working that bit longer even though we're exhausted. We seek out the best anti-wrinkle cream to stay looking young. We expect to be able to buy any vegetable in the supermarket at any time of the year despite the season and often have no idea of where it has come from or how it grows. We fly off abroad in search of sunshine to avoid the gloomy British weather. We fit lots of chores in on a Sunday because it's the one day of the week when we have a bit more time to do them.

Our culture also idolises the individual and the right to make the lifestyle choices we want.

Technological and scientific advances, while wonderful in so many ways, often allow us to disconnect from the world around us and the natural rhythms, restrictions and timing of creation. And this means that we have the potential to operate as if our lives function in a vacuum, rather than considering the impact our lifestyle choices may have on others or God's creation.

Many of us often choose – whether actively or not – to follow the counter-rhythm of culture rather than the natural rhythm of God.

2. Fighting the counter rhythm

Now, I'm as much a culprit as anybody in terms of fighting the natural rhythms of life.

I do okay in a few areas. However I do push myself continually - to work harder; to serve others and the church more; to strive for perfection; to be self-sufficient.

I do try to buy in-season fruit and vegetables, but when I'm busy or short of time or money, I give in to the temptation to go for what's quick, easy and right there in front of me on a supermarket shelf. And I'm definitely not very good at resting when I need to – unless I'm so exhausted I can't do anything else!

But I was recently reminded of a prayer that I once read and have frequently quoted to others – “I would put my heart up against God's heart, feel its beat and catch its rhythm”. We are called to align ourselves to God and lift our eyes, heart, mind, body and soul to Him.

To do this though, we need to find his rhythm and therefore, the rhythm of creation too. St Columbanus said “Understand the creation if you would wish to know the Creator”.

We need to slow down, to live out of God's grace rather than our own self-sufficiency, and to accept ourselves as being on the path towards becoming fully how God designed us to be. Yes, we may well feel vulnerable and weak, but if we don't let God meet us in this place, we will never totally feel our hearts next to his, catching his rhythm.

3. Catching his rhythm

For me, the first step is acknowledging my need to slow down, take Sabbath rest, and live more in God's grace. I also believe God is asking me to spend more time with him, just resting in his presence. There are a number of ways that I find it easiest to do this – worshipping along to music, walking in his creation, praying, reading my Bible, journaling and simply taking time to listen.

So I've been making more time to do these things recently – and already I've discovered that living in sync God's rhythm is much more energising than following the frenzied staccato of man's rhythm.

I've found amazingly that as I make more time to spend with God, I'm much better able to do what I need to, and can do it without burning out.

Even more importantly, I find myself understanding more what God's priorities are, allowing him to shape my life and my identity, and crucially, give me a deeper grasp of what it really means to love my neighbour.

4. Using God's rhythm to help us care for the world

Living according to God's rhythm helps us to rest in him and to be more open and present to all that he is calling us to do. We find ourselves in a place where it's easier to listen to his voice, know who we are in Christ, and believe his promises over our lives.

So how do we move from this place of close relationship with God to an active, living faith, in which helping our neighbours and caring for the world becomes central? (Without falling into the trap of creating a new counter-rhythm which replaces striving for our own perfection with striving for a better world.)

God's world is built on interaction – between God and us, between us and creation, and between God and creation. We cannot live without God. We also cannot live without creation. And yet, as I mentioned earlier, in the Western world, so much of what we do strives to eliminate, reduce or hamper the role of the creation. As a result, we have lost our connection with the land and the seasons, as well as our understanding of the interdependency of the global community in which we now live.

The lives of the vast majority of world's poorest people depend utterly on nature and its ability to sustain and support them. So sadly, it's almost always the poorest and most vulnerable communities who are the most affected by the negative impacts of our lifestyle choices. This is environmental injustice – and it is completely at odds with God's commands to love our neighbours as ourselves, and to be stewards of his creation.

Statistics tell us that most people in the UK are now aware of the issue of climate change, the direct causal link to human activity and the increasingly disastrous impacts on vulnerable communities around the world. However, very few people are prepared to act to change their lifestyle in response.

In recent years, the Church has been woken up to the need to act against environmental injustice, spearheaded primarily by the main development charities demonstrating the links between climate change and human suffering in the developing world. But rather than slowly catching up with others, surely we should be at the forefront of tackling these issues? We know God cares deeply about every single human being. The case for creation care is clear too – we know God cares about the sparrows, the lilies and every aspect of his creation. So, what possible reason can we have for not caring in an active way too?

I actually think that one of the reasons stopping people acting is guilt, or often more accurately, a fear of guilt. So many people (including a lot of Christians) have confessed to me that they'd rather not think about how their nice lifestyle might have a negative impact on others because then they'd feel guilty and have to do something about it.

In his book *Totally Forgiving Yourself*, R.T. Kendall explains it is right to feel the Spirit prompting true guilt when we have sinned and that because of Jesus' death on the cross, we can be relieved of that guilt as soon as we repent and ask for forgiveness. However, he also says that if we keep on sinning, excusing ourselves by saying things like "oh, that's just the way that I was made" or "I'm naturally selfish" etc, we not actually allowing God to shape and improve us into the people that he wants us to be.

Rather, we need to acknowledge to God and ourselves that we're not perfect, not dismissing ourselves as a repetitive sinner because of it, but instead choosing to live in his grace, allowing him to work in us and mould us into something better. By allowing ourselves to be shaped by the rhythms of repentance, forgiveness and grace, we are developed into a renewed version of ourselves, one step closer to Christ-likeness – yet another example of God's ever-changing and deepening creation, lived out through us.

Living in God's grace enables him to bring us to a place of stepping forwards, helping us to confront our selfish decisions and transforming our hearts and minds so that we desire to act in a more ethical way. In his letters, Paul talks frequently about his journey of desiring to be more and more Christ-like. For all of us, I pray that God "in his mercy will forgive what we have been, help us to amend what we are, and direct what we shall be; that we may do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him, our God." *

And it's here, in this place of freedom and grace, that we will feel God's heart, catch his rhythm and desire justice and mercy for his world. As we slowly grasp the depth and breadth of God's love, we won't be able to avoid seeing that how we live affects the lives of others or his creation. We will actively choose to change things in our own lives just to care for our neighbours around the world that bit better –and we will take hold of the amazing opportunity God gives us in calling us to be stewards, partnering with him to care for the world.

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* Church of England Confession prayer