

## Policy Position Statement

### Faiths and the Environment

#### Purpose

This Policy Position Statement (PPS) sets out CIWEM's position on the role and contribution to the environment that faith groups can provide, and that which CIWEM can provide to faith groups.

#### CIWEM's Position on Faiths and the Environment:

1. CIWEM recognises the important contribution of the faiths community in influencing behavioural change for a sustainable environment, for the greater good and increased awareness of humankind and for the benefit of all living things.
2. CIWEM calls for continued cooperation between the world's faiths to provide an ethical and environmental framework that will inspire urgent action on climate change and promote public engagement with the environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
3. Faith groups generally share a concern for the environment, commonly sharing an altruistic outlook. There is increasing convergence on a common understanding with scientists in the need to address environmental issues. It is thus essential that science is communicated well to faith communities.
4. Often with large memberships, landholdings, effective media relations and well established welfare and education delivery, faith groups can play a powerful advocacy and delivery role in tackling climate change and other environmental issues. CIWEM supports faith groups in being more vocal on such issues and encourages them to engage and speak more vociferously on our personal and collective duty to conserve and protect our planet and warn of the dangers of current lifestyles.
5. CIWEM believes that faith group leaders, by virtue of the scale of their audience and legitimacy over the issue, are often in a better position to make an impact on the personal behaviour of their members/followers than are politicians and celebrities. CIWEM urges faith community leaders to embrace and extol environmentalism both for the sake of protecting nature and humankind and of furthering social justice.
6. CIWEM also considers that faith leaders can take a lead where politicians and governments are currently failing. The time is right for faith groups to become more outspoken and so seek to influence political thought and actions, using their unique access to governments, opinion formers and institutions to lobby effectively on environmental concerns.
7. CIWEM will work with members of faith groups to assist in the widest possible provision of information on the environment and sustainability, which is underpinned by sound

and impartial science, and in encouraging debate on the role that faith communities can play in delivering environmental goals.

**CIWEM is the leading independent Chartered professional body for water and environmental professionals, promoting excellence within the sector.**

## Context

Over 80 percent of the world's population profess a religious allegiance. Even in many western countries where there is a growing secularisation in governance, a large proportion of the population still self-identify with a faith group (over 77 percent in Great Britain for example). Faith allegiance is growing fastest in countries where freedom of religion has previously been denied (e.g. Buddhism in Cambodia, Christianity in China) and it is estimated that the Muslim population in Europe will nearly double by 2015.

Islam, Christianity and Judaism all share a belief in a single creator God; and humankind's appointment as stewards who rule with responsibility over the rest of creation. In contrast other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have a more flexible belief in the number of Gods (from none to many) but believe that all living things – including plants and animals as well as humans – are potentially divine.

A recent poll conducted by the Environment Agency in England and Wales, asked 25 leading environmentalists to name the 50 things that will do most to save the planet. The second most popular thing (ahead of the Kyoto Protocol global emissions agreement, green taxes and flying less), was for faith groups to 'fulfil their rightful collective role in reminding us that we have a duty to restore and maintain the ecological balance of the planet' (Environment Agency, 2007).

So why do many environmentalists believe that faith groups have the potential to be so effective at overcoming the world's environmental problems? Perhaps, because solutions to nearly all major environmental problems require, to a significant extent, the following three actions:

- Changes in public attitudes & behaviour (such as reduced consumption of environmentally-damaging goods)
- A concern for the 'greater good' (to overcome the *Tragedy of the Commons*<sup>1</sup> problem)
- Collective action (action by individuals in isolation is seldom enough to solve a problem)

The characteristics of faith groups as communities bound by shared beliefs and behaviour-norms often with an altruistic focus and a narrative that promotes care for the environment, suggest that faith groups could be useful partners for environmentalists wanting to disseminate their message and bring about pro-environmental behaviour change.

---

<sup>1</sup>See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy\\_of\\_the\\_commons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons)

## Discussion of Key Issues

### Changes in public attitudes & behaviour

The teachings of faith groups (whether through scripture, traditions, culture or faith leaders' pronouncements) can exert a considerable degree of influence over their members' attitudes and practical behaviour. Such changes in behaviour and attitude are the transformations that environmentalists often seek from the public.

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) notes that the pronouncements and guidance of faith leaders is often more highly-respected than that of other public figures such as politicians, although some studies have indicated that in certain countries with, for example, more secular communities or highly consumptive behaviour, this effect may be less pronounced. They also point out that the faiths are major land owners (owning more than 7% of the habitable land surface of the planet), have large media networks and are major providers of education and health care worldwide (ARC, 2007).

*Faith Groups therefore are potentially powerful advocates and role models for good environmental stewardship.*

Whilst historically there may have been a degree of indifference and even hostility between the religious and scientific communities, a number of high profile faith group leaders have openly expressed concern regarding environmental and social issues from water scarcity and poor sanitation to climate change, displaying significant common ground both between faiths and with more traditionally secular communities. Archbishop Bartholomew of Constantinople, a leader of over 300 million orthodox Christians, is working to bring faith leaders and hard scientific evidence together for action on climate change and other environmental issues, and espouses a new economic model that prioritises replenishment, compassion, nature and nurture. The World Council of Churches has been actively championing the issue of action on climate change worldwide since 1992.

With increasing commonality amongst faith groups regarding the importance of environmental stewardship and the need to examine in detail the way society lives, CIWEM believes it apposite for leaders of faith groups to challenge politicians and governments more openly on the policy directions they are taking, justifying this approach with the size of their constituencies.

### A concern for the 'greater good'

Whilst not exclusive to the faiths, concern for others is a principle in the teachings of many faith groups. In the UK major faith groups are involved in the provision of social care, humanitarian aid, education and training to peoples at local, national and international scales. Long-established faith-based charities include Cafod, Islamic Relief, Muslim Aid, Christian Aid, Tearfund and World Jewish Relief. But it is not just the major faith groups that undertake such action; smaller faith-based charities in the UK include United Sikhs and the Baha'i Agency for Social and Economic Development.

Many individual faith group members exhibit concern for others by giving alms or tithing and being active volunteers in their local community; The Church of England for example is the largest voluntary organisation in the UK.

*Messages invoking humankind's moral responsibility for their environmental impacts; the 'injustice' of climate change emissions principally impacting on the global poor; and the need to act selflessly may be effective at persuading faith-group members to have an increased concern for the 'greater good' and modify their behaviour accordingly.*

## Collective Action

John Donne, the 16<sup>th</sup> century English clergyman and poet famously noted that "No man is an island". Community is a theme common to both theistic and non-theistic religions. Notions of 'brotherhood', 'sisterhood' and 'fellowship' appear in Islam and Christianity and in Jainism and Buddhism there is the community – *Sangha* - of monks, nuns and lay people.

Faith-based communities are effective in encouraging behavioural change since channels of cooperation and peer-group encouragement are already likely to exist; conversely there may be social-stigma attached to non-cooperation with the community in undertaking a particular action e.g. by a Buddhist harming wildlife (against the Buddhist principle of Right Livelihood - not harming others directly or indirectly).

Clearly other communities will also be effective units of collective action – for example *geographic* communities may be more effective at developing solutions to *local* environmental problems, but for global environmental problems, the major global faith groups could be more effective in undertaking collective action. There may also be particular resonance where members of groups have families in homelands which are experiencing the impacts of climate change directly.

Faith groups, then, are ideally placed, with their large memberships, to form a framework with which to mobilise action on the positive contribution humankind can make to conserving the planet and developing sustainable lifestyles.

Environmental projects that engage whole communities or emphasise our connectedness with communities overseas are likely to be effective because many faith groups have links with counterparts in other countries.

## June 2009

*Note: CIWEM Policy Position Statements (PPS) represents the Institution's views on issues at a particular point in time. It is accepted that situations change as research provides new evidence. It should be understood, therefore, that CIWEM PPS's are under constant review, that previously held views may alter and lead to revised PPS's. PPSs are produced as a consensus report and do not represent the view of individual members of CIWEM.*