



Scepticism and climate change

Conveying the complexity of climate change and how we must respond is challenging. It can present an unwelcome and scary scenario that people feel ill-equipped to respond to. It can sometimes be easier to deny that climate change exists rather than take responsibility for the reality that is being presented by science. Unfortunately, the UK media have in the main not helped to convey a balanced and accurate picture of the urgency and threat of the climate crisis. There has been a 'climate silence' in recent years as well as an over-emphasis on non-credible climate sceptic attitudes. This has contributed to uncertainty and inertia in the general public's response. Most people rely on the media to inform their views rather than being able to do their own research. People also form their views through the influence of their peer group, political commentators and social norms. It is often difficult for concerned individuals to broach the subject of climate change in a way that is non-threatening and non-political, to bring about an open and honest dialogue.

The scientific consensus on climate change is now well beyond doubt. However, the 'climate denier' position is most often driven by political ideology rather than challenging the credibility of the science. For example, environmental regulation may be perceived as a threat to trade and industry so that objections are in fact more about the implications of responding to climate change. Presenting such sceptics with more and more scientific facts is unlikely to change their views and is more likely to cause attitudes to polarise. The language of science may not always be useful when fighting the political battles which are far more to do with societal values (including faith values), cultural worldviews and ideology. That's why it is important to have open dialogue about the real disagreements and dilemmas that climate change poses, which are not really to do with science.

Speaking out among your peers, church community, work colleagues or neighbours really does matter. You do not need to have all the answers at your fingertips. You can gain the trust and respect of your audience through an honest recognition of the many challenges. At times you will be faced with the sceptical, the disengaged, the apathetic or the argumentative person. Here are some tips for dealing with this in a constructive way.

Useful tips for responding to sceptics

Find common ground: Remember that you and your audience are equals who share many common values, hopes and concerns. Don't get into an argument but start from the common ground that most people can agree with (eg wanting a safe future for our families).

Speak their language: Try and use the values of your audience when explaining your concern about climate change and other environmental issues. For example, many Conservatives identify with the need to 'conserve' and protect the British landscape. You can use this language to make your own appeals.

Explain the bigger picture: Acknowledge that changes to the climate and atmosphere have occurred throughout millennia but that what is happening now is unique in being human induced and rapid. It is useful to differentiate between weather events, which are temporary and local, and climate which is a more global and long-term phenomenon.

Hold your own views: Have useful facts at your fingertips from an authoritative source, but avoid too much jargon. See Operation Noah's science briefings.

Share your personal journey: Talk about why you care deeply about this issue and the reasons why you think it is an urgent problem. You can refer to why this is an issue for you as a Christian and your personal journey of how your views have formed over time.

Talk in terms of risk rather than certainty: None of us can say what will happen with absolute certainty but we can talk about risk and our responsibility to guard against risk; for example, most people would understand the need to take out insurance.

Remain positive and avoid scare tactics: Help to create a positive vision for the future rather than focusing on the worst-case scenario. Climate change has often been presented as an overwhelming threat requiring enormous restraint, sacrifice and government intervention. Avoid making people feel guilty and talk about the many positive benefits to society of tackling climate change to create a healthier, fairer and safer world. While it is important not to play down the seriousness of the risks it is also crucial to convey that the solutions are very achievable and the technology already exists.

Play to your strengths and passion: Focus on topics that interest you, eg wildlife, climate justice, food and farming issues, local weather events, human stories, Christian theology, etc.

Avoid judging: Avoid judging people's viewpoint or accusing them; suggesting that sceptics are funded by oil companies may alienate your audience.

Remember that you don't have to convince everyone: Avoid feeling that you have to 'win' the argument or convince someone of your point of view. Just speaking about climate change and why it is important to you is enough to raise awareness of these issues. Not everyone will want to outwardly show support for what you say and there may be many reasons why someone does not want to hear your message.

Understand the psychology: Denial strategies are often used to protect ourselves from unwelcome or scary information, so people may define climate change in ways that keep it as far away from themselves as possible, eg 'it is not a local issue and does not affect me', 'it is something in the future and not in my lifetime', 'I can't do anything about it or make a difference', 'it's not my responsibility'.

Understand vested interests: Responding to climate change may go against the grain for those who believe in free market capitalism and resent government interference and regulation. Climate change can be written off as 'environmental propaganda'.

Be aware of emotional charge: Some scepticism comes across as an emotional reaction, often anger, which can overwhelm a meeting and put the audience off. An emotional reaction could be due to a response to the perceived threat of climate change or the outworking of a personal difficulty in some other aspect of the person's life; it can also be enacted deliberately as a wrecking ploy.

Think back to a time when you attempted to discuss climate change with a sceptic. What question couldn't you answer? What help do you need to do it better next time?

Useful resources

How to talk to a climate change denier, video by George Marshall on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qp-nJBwQR4>

Why should evangelical Christians care about climate change? Katharine Hayhoe's five top tips for handling common Christian questions and objections:

www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=319831143&m=320024765

http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/climate_desk/2014/05/conservative_christians_and_climate_change_five_arguments_for_why_one_should.html

'Skeptical Science' is a website for explaining climate change science and rebutting misinformation:

<https://www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php>

The top ten global warming 'skeptic' arguments answered by the Guardian:

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2014/may/06/top-ten-global-warming-skeptic-arguments-debunked>

'Talking Climate' has a useful set of guides on communicating climate change: <http://talkingclimate.org/guides/>

Climate Outreach Information Network (COIN) has a range of resources on communicating climate change:

<http://www.climateoutreach.org.uk/resources/>