

# CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

**SERIES: TAKING A STAND**

**EXPLORING THE ARMY'S INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENTS**

*Members of the International Moral and Social Issues Council (IMASIC) reflect on The Salvation Army's International Positional Statements.*

## STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army believes people are made in the image of God and have been entrusted with the care of the Earth and everything in it. The Salvation Army recognises environmental degradation as one of the most pressing issues facing the world today with its effects felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable communities, particularly in terms of health, livelihood, shelter and the opportunity to make choices. The Salvation Army is concerned about the effects of environmental damage on present and future generations. Sustainable environmental practices are required to meet today's global needs and aspirations without compromising the lives of future generations.

Download the complete International Positional Statement on Caring for the Environment at [salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips](https://salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips)

**T**HE CURRENT International Positional Statement on Caring for the Environment was approved in 2014. According to the UN, the five years since then, 2015-2019, will have been the hottest years on record. The World Meteorological Organization has indicated that July 2019 was the hottest month ever recorded.<sup>1</sup>

This is not theoretical speculation but factual knowledge based on observed temperatures from around the world, stretching all the way back to the 1880s. The vast majority of the scientific community has no doubt that global warming is a reality and that it is, at least to a significant degree, a result of human activity.

The consequences – many of which are already being seen – include more frequent extreme weather conditions, melting ice caps and rising sea levels. If no action is taken and these developments continue, they will potentially cause irreversible damage to various ecosystems and render large areas of the planet uninhabitable. The gravest consequences will befall the world's poorest, such as subsistence farmers whose livelihoods depend directly on climatic conditions where they live.

But environmental degradation is not only about global warming.

**FOR REFLECTION**

- \* What are the main environmental challenges that you see in your context?
- \* What can you as an individual do in order to address these issues?
- \* What can you do at your corps to address these issues?
- \* What can The Salvation Army as an organisation do in order to address these issues?

## “We have been tasked with being good stewards of God’s creation ... and in this we have fallen short in many ways ...”

Somewhere between Hawaii and California, you can find what is known as ‘The Great Pacific Garbage Patch’, where ocean currents have led to the steady accumulation of a massive collection of plastic garbage from all around the world. Activists have estimated that the garbage patch covers an area three times the size of France.<sup>2</sup> Some of the plastic is more than 50 years old. It slowly deteriorates into microplastics, which enter the food chain after being consumed by various marine animals. The effects are detrimental.

Last year, a record number of forest fires burned throughout the Amazon, primarily started by people clearing land for livestock or agriculture, but destroying forests that are the world’s ‘lungs’.<sup>3</sup> A recent UN report indicates that the rate of species extinction is accelerating.<sup>4</sup> The list goes on.

There is a fine line between being overly alarmist and underestimating the gravity of the damage that humanity is capable of inflicting on the planet. Regardless, however you look at it, most readers of this article can easily find evidence of environmental degradation in their community. We have been tasked with being good stewards of God’s creation, all of which God declared as being ‘very good’. And in this we have fallen short in many ways.

How should we respond to this state of affairs as Salvationists? Global challenges need coordinated, global responses. Our commitment to work towards the Sustainable Development Goals that all countries in the world have signed up to is also a commitment to care for the environment.<sup>5</sup> We will do so through advocacy and action. Even more importantly, our belief that God has entrusted us with the care of the Earth and everything in it is a call to repentance, prayer – and personal action.

**THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE**

At the recent UN CLIMATE ACTION SUMMIT, Dr Saleemul Huq, Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Bangladesh, urged people to consider climate change as an emergency, not a slow-moving misfortune.

‘This is no longer God-given impacts on people; this is human-caused,’ he said. ‘An emergency means the house is on fire; it means we need to deal with it right now.’

**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> [public.wmo.int/en/media/news/july-matched-and-maybe-broke-record-hottest-month-analysis-began](https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news/july-matched-and-maybe-broke-record-hottest-month-analysis-began)

<sup>2</sup> [theoceancleanup.com/great-pacific-garbage-patch/](https://theoceancleanup.com/great-pacific-garbage-patch/)

<sup>3</sup> [nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/08/amazon-fires-cause-deforestation-graphic-map/](https://nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/08/amazon-fires-cause-deforestation-graphic-map/)

<sup>4</sup> [un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/](https://un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/)

<sup>5</sup> [undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2015/09/24/undp-welcomes-adoption-of-sustainable-development-goals-by-world-leaders.html](https://undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2015/09/24/undp-welcomes-adoption-of-sustainable-development-goals-by-world-leaders.html)

**DR LAURELLE SMITH**

Research Analyst  
International Social Justice Commission, New York,  
International Headquarters

**COLONEL DANIEL RAJU DASARI**

Territorial Commander  
India Northern Territory

### PERSONAL REFLECTION

Growing up in a country whose motto is 'Clean, Green New Zealand', I have always understood the importance of taking care of the environment. From a young age I knew how to separate recycling, never to litter, and to pick up rubbish on the beach, even if it wasn't mine. New Zealand is a country that takes great pride in how its people take care of the environment. We recently eliminated single-use plastic bags, and if you don't have a reusable coffee cup, expect an extra charge on your takeaway coffee. It is just the culture.

Moving to the US a couple of years ago, however, I saw a huge contrast in cultural attitudes towards the environment. Although there are some states that are now starting to legislate against single-use plastic bags<sup>6</sup>, it is still very normal for an item to be 'double-bagged'. Recycling is not always available, and I have seen many people throw their trash out of car windows while driving. Taking care of the environment is just not of as high value in the culture as it is in New Zealand.

It is interesting how the culture you live in influences your attitudes, behaviours and actions.

As Christians, although we live *within* the culture based on the country or area where we reside, we ultimately live *from* our identity as citizens of the Kingdom – we live out Kingdom culture.

I love the opening line of the IPS on Caring for the Environment which states: 'The Salvation Army believes people are made in the image of God and have been entrusted with the care of the Earth and everything in it.' Wow, what a privilege! God invites us, as humans, to partner with him, not only to love and care for fellow human beings, but to do the same for all of God's creation. This is Kingdom culture.

A healthy environment is essential for human survival – it provides drinkable water, unpolluted air, energy and food, but we are putting the planet under enormous pressure.

The human population is on track to reach nearly 10 billion by 2050, and without profound and urgent action the planet will not be able to support this.

So what can we do to make a difference? We can take God's command to be caretakers of creation seriously (Genesis 1:26). We can do more than what our governments are telling us to do, we can go above and beyond what our worldly culture expects, and we can inform, inspire and partner with those around us to do likewise. We live out Kingdom culture.

### ENDNOTE

<sup>6</sup> [ncsl.org/research/environment-and-natural-resources/plastic-bag-legislation.aspx](https://ncsl.org/research/environment-and-natural-resources/plastic-bag-legislation.aspx)

### PERSONAL REFLECTION

My first corps appointment, Surayyavani Palem in India Central Territory (1991-94), was unforgettable in many ways. Among several challenges, the biggest one we faced during those days was that there were no toilets in anyone's house. So everyone had to go out early in the morning, in the open environment, with a tumbler of water to go to the toilet. After one year, we introduced a bio toilet at the corps officers' quarters. People slowly started understanding the importance of privacy, as well as caring for the environment.

For years this practice has been common in India – the second most populous country in the world with a population of more than 1.3 billion. In 2011 only 46.9 per cent of the 246.6 million households had lavatories while 49.8 per cent defecated in the open. The remaining 3.2 per cent used public toilets. But recently, the Indian government has started using the slogan 'Swachh Bharath', meaning 'Clean India'. Many are now constructing their own toilets with the support of the government, and the majority of people are no longer using open toilets. We are making good progress towards Sustainable Development Goal Number 6, Clean Water and Sanitation.

My second appointment was at a town corps called Nagavarapadu. There we became aware of the importance of planting trees.

**BO CHRISTOFFER BREKKE**

Head of Office for International Development  
Norway, Iceland and the Færøes Territory

With the support of our young people in the corps, saplings were planted along the roadsides. Also in this area we are currently seeing progress on a national scale, and India has committed under the Paris Agreement to increase its forests by 5 million hectares before 2030 to combat climate change.

Our country still faces several environmental challenges, including climate change, terrible heatwaves in the summer, a water crisis, the destruction of forests, a lack of safe drinking water, exploitation of natural resources, and dust, air and water pollution. Among other ways, The Salvation Army in our territory is responding through Community Empowerment Teams, who regularly visit villages to support Self Help Group meetings and teach how to care for the environment by sharing about issues such as cleanliness in the household; use of water, electricity and other commodities; preventing wastage; planting saplings and the problem of using plastic.

The Creator God out of his love and eternal plan has created the beautiful Earth, a dwelling place for all humanity. One of the important responsibilities given to people is caring for our dwelling places. We need to respect the Creator God by taking care of the environment.

'The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the waters' (Psalm 24:1-2).

### PERSONAL REFLECTION

I once heard the expression: 'If you think you're too small to make a difference, you've clearly never spent the night in a room with a mosquito.' Nevertheless, we can feel small when faced with big issues such as climate change.

In Norway, as elsewhere, thousands of young people have skipped school this year to attend demonstrations demanding more ambitious environmental and climate action. There appears to be a growing realisation that we must do more to safeguard the environment for future generations. Incidentally, this particular wave of demonstrations started with the initiative of one young Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg.

However, not everyone is convinced that action is necessary, and even many of those who care about the environment are slow to act, perhaps out of a reluctance to compromise their own standard of living. A common argument I hear is that our country is so small that whatever we do won't make much of a difference anyway. Policy changes in big countries such as China, India and USA could have a significant impact on carbon emissions, for example, but our impact is miniscule in comparison. So we might as well keep extracting as much oil as possible to maintain our high standard of living.

Although we are a tiny country, our carbon emissions per person are

among the highest in the world and if everyone on earth had the same consumption levels as us, the world's resources simply would not suffice. To me, this means that action is nothing less than a question of moral obligation and of justice. If we don't do our part, how can we expect others to do theirs? Can we reasonably demand of those who haven't yet attained our standard of living that they sacrifice their potential future development, while we – among the richest of all – refuse to risk anything at all?

In my own life, I try my best to recycle, avoid excessive consumption and consider environmental issues when choosing which political party to vote for, for instance. But from my position of privilege, I know that I could, and must, do more.

As for The Salvation Army in my territory, we are also trying to step up our action regarding the environment. There's an ecumenical 'green church' initiative in Norway that my corps signed up to a few years back. Territorial headquarters has established a working group, tasked with finding ways of helping us to become more environmentally friendly. We're on our way, but need to do much more.

At the very least, we must all start by trying to do our part. It's a question of justice, and I believe it can make a difference.