

CARING FOR CREATION NEWS

Reporting Back: Our Carbon Footprint

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Computer guru, Phil Tanis, has been crunching the data that you all contributed when you filled out your Hope Church Carbon Footprint Survey. It appears that there may be room for some self-congratulatory back slapping. On average, the typical Hope Church household produces 40,601 pounds of atmospheric carbon; and that, according to the EPA, compares to 41,500 pounds for the typical American household. So there you have it, we are all better than average—Garrison Keillor would be so proud!

On a typical Sunday, the average Hope Church member uses 0.4 gallons of gas in order to attend a worship service. Remember, that's an average; we know that some of you walk, bicycle, or take the shuttle. Our records indicate that about 400 persons attend worship each Sunday. So, let's do the math. If one assumes 4 people per vehicle, we then create 100 commuting trips that consume 40 gallons of gas. A gallon of gas weighs about 8 pounds and when burned produces about 5 ½ pounds of carbon dioxide. On any given Sunday then, worship at Hope Church is producing 220 pounds of atmospheric carbon; that works out to be 1,210 pounds annually. Events other than worship, or course, would add to that total.

We may be better than average; but average, unfortunately, is a relative term--the meaning depends entirely upon whom you are comparing yourself to. British writer, Chris Goodall (*How To Live A Low-Carbon Life*) says that the average UK household produces 12.5 tonnes of carbon emissions. It would appear that the British are living comfortable lives on about half the carbon output of the typical US citizen. Americans are unquestionably the world leaders in carbon emission. At 4 percent of world population, we produce 25 percent of world carbon emissions.

Goodall goes on to say that even the UK output is too much. "To hold carbon dioxide levels to a maximum of 550 parts per million in the global atmosphere, the world can probably afford emissions of no more than about 3 tonnes per person." (Current carbon atmospheric levels are at about 380 parts per million.) If he's right, that means that each of our households needs to find ways of eliminating about 17 tons of carbon emissions, or about 85% of our energy consumption.

All these computations of carbon output are stated in household/individual terms, but it is important to understand that the total is a combination of direct and indirect sources. Direct sources are those that you can control—your driving, flying, selection of appliances, etc. Indirect are those that result from manufacturing processes. So, we have work to do both collectively and individually.

Goodall suggests two major ways in which to significantly reduce carbon output. The first is a near total elimination of air travel. Because of the composition of gasses emitted, direct emission into the atmosphere, and the increasing volume of air travel; each gallon of aviation fuel when compared to automobile fuel is more damaging by a factor of three. Assuming that a UK auto travels 9,000 miles annually; one transatlantic return flight exceeds the annual per person emissions of a car.

Goodall secondly suggests a total rethinking of our food production system. “The energy used to provide the food on our tables is about nine times greater than the calorific value of the food itself. Changing food purchase habits can dramatically alter the climate change impact of our lifestyle. The three most important rules are these: buy organic where possible, local when available, and keep away from processed and packaged food.”

Goodall has much more analysis to offer and I suggest that you read his book. But this is enough information to raise the real question: Who wants to live like that? Excuse me, but I enjoy those trips! And I enjoy that steak! Why would I willingly give them up? We’re talking quality of life here! Arguments about glacial melt, tipping points, and responsibility to our grandchildren are too abstract, they never hold up when facing actual daily decisions. Can we really accomplish a reduction in carbon emissions?

In this sort of discussion, part of me always wants to circle back to spiritual values. What are we being asked to do when we hear love your neighbor as yourself? Seek first the Kingdom of God? Trust in the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul? What is the catechism after when it asks: What is your only comfort in life and death?

Perhaps it all means that God can be trusted; that just as God provided manna in the wilderness, God will provide for us too. Perhaps it means that our hoarded resources will spoil just like hoarded manna. God asks to be trusted daily and to be believed when saying that “I have gone to prepare a place for you.” Perhaps it means that our quest for more and more prevents us from understanding how much is enough--from knowing our place. Perhaps it means that crises of faith and the crises of life are the same thing and that if we fail to act we will forfeit our right to be heard.

Can we change our way of living? Can we lower our carbon output? My answer is yes. Yes I can, God helping me.

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