

tearfund

A Conversation  
**For All  
The Earth**

A guide to better conversations about  
climate change and the end of poverty



A group of about ten people, including men and women in various attire, are gathered in a dry, open area. In the background, there is a large building with corrugated metal walls and a roof. A tree with several bird nests is visible in the upper right. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene suggests a rural or semi-rural environment in a semi-arid region.

# **Why is it so hard to talk about climate change?**

The old saying goes that there are three things you shouldn't discuss at a party: religion, politics and money. More recently, there's been a fourth thing that could be added to that list: climate change. Yet what many of us know and have experienced personally is that honest and thoughtful conversations about difficult issues – including climate change – are important to have and can change the way we think and act for the better.



**Take a moment to think about a conversation that changed you in a positive way. What characterised that conversation? What influenced you to change?**

Too often, our attempts to persuade others about the reality and threat of climate change become stuck in arguments about the “facts.” As if the barrier to change is simply one of understanding and that shifting someone’s worldview can come about from an exchange of logic and data. Often driven by fear-based approaches about the impending consequences of climate change, these methods fail to appreciate the way human attitudes and understanding develop and change. This guide offers a different approach: one that is personal, is grounded in mutual respect, and seeks to build on commonalities that exist between people from all different backgrounds and cultures. It has been created to help you talk about climate change with the people around you in ways that make a difference.

# Why do we need to talk about climate change?

At Tearfund, conversation and action to address the challenges of climate change have been part of our work for many years. We believe there are three key reasons why talking with others about the impact of climate change is vitally important.

## 1 Climate Change is fundamentally a Gospel issue

As Christians, we need to be talking about climate change because it directly concerns who God has called us to be, how God has called us to live, and the communities God has called us to serve. As Christians, we believe that “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). In Genesis, we read of God’s “good” creation and God’s first instruction to humanity to work and care for the earth. We are not the owners of creation but stewards of it. The Earth is God’s gift to us. When we damage, deplete and pollute it, we fail to care for what God has entrusted us.

And this failure has devastating consequences for the people we share this Earth with - now and for the generations to come. Jesus summed up all the commandments by teaching us to love God and to love our neighbours. Climate change will ultimately affect us all, but for our most vulnerable neighbours in the world’s poorest nations, the increased prevalence of hunger, disease, disaster and displacement that will come about as a result of climate change are making the burden of poverty even heavier. Taking action to address what is driving climate change is an act of love for our neighbour.

The Gospel also gives us a reason to speak and act with hope. One way to summarize the central truth of Christianity is that, through Jesus, our broken relationships with God, with each other, and with all of God’s creation can be restored. Colossians 1 speaks of God, through the cross, reconciling “all things” on earth and in heaven to himself. At the root of climate change is a brokenness that can only be overcome in Jesus. This is the light the church can shine: Jesus’ good news for “all creation” (Mark 16:15).



### **Reflection: Do Christians you know talk about climate change?**

Do Christians you know talk about climate change? What are the specific barriers to these conversations for people in your church (or your family or friends)? How does your theology and spirituality urge you to care about climate change?

## 2 Climate Change is hitting people in poverty hardest

It is one of the greatest injustices of our time: those who are least responsible for climate change are the worst impacted and the least resourced to manage it. Climate change is one of the biggest threats to developing our world into a safer and healthy place for all. It is worsening poverty and hunger, threatening to displace millions of people from their homes. The world is rapidly warming, and our global community is increasingly experiencing its impacts: more intense and frequent droughts, floods, fires and other climate disasters, pressure on food production, increased water scarcity and sea-level rise.

At Tearfund, we see these impacts on the communities we work with. We witness the rains becoming less predictable, crops failing, diseases spreading into new areas, and the frequency and devastation of disasters and floods growing. We hear the plea from our Christian partners around the world and communities in Pacific nations for substantive action to be taken to address what is, for them, an existential threat.

Climate change threatens to displace large numbers of communities from their homes and livelihoods. In some cases, there is a real threat that entire island nations will be lost to the sea. Without coordinated, urgent, global action, the impacts on people and the rest of creation will be substantial.



### 3 Conversations are a powerful instrument for bringing about change

Surveys worldwide reveal that the vast majority of people believe climate change is happening, is human-caused, and will significantly disrupt our lives. On the other hand, most people hold those views quietly and rarely talk about climate change.

This informal social taboo on talking about climate change is known as climate silence and it adds to our anxiety and inaction. Dr. Katharine Hayhoe is a highly respected climate communicator who is also an atmospheric scientist, political scientist and Evangelical Christian. She says that the most important thing we can do about climate change is talk about it.

Much of the urgent and dramatic transformation that is needed with our current systems, will happen when people are informed and understand the problem. That's why our everyday conversations with ordinary people are so important. Many people find that having conversations eases their anxiety by helping them confront their fears and feel less alone when they find out others have similar concerns and a desire for action. Talking about it also helps us move beyond feeling stuck or helpless and motivates us to take action.

Through loving conversations about climate and creation, we can strengthen our relationships with others while also building momentum among Christians to protect and restore God's creation and helping to address injustice against the poor and marginalized. Even the most seemingly insignificant conversation contributes toward the momentum for change, breaking the climate silence and moving people closer to taking action.



**Reflection:** What do you think stops people from talking about climate change? What are the barriers for you personally?



# Climate change, hunger and the need for action

In rural Ethiopia, farmers are increasingly experiencing the impacts of climate change, facing unpredictable rainfall, water scarcity and harsh conditions. These environmental changes present a serious challenge for people who rely on what they grow to feed their families and earn an income. For many, the only option is to move away from their homes in search of work in bigger cities, separating them from their families.

Tearfund, along with its many project partners, is training local people in new ways of farming that help them adapt to the conditions. They're also implementing various strategies to help improve access to water. Farmers are now achieving greater crop yields and are better able to provide for their families.

“Before, even though we put in all the effort, it did not yield results or big harvests. After the church taught us about soil development, I started harvesting much more! We have even been able to sell some in the market,” says Lebiso Labena, a farmer from Ethiopia.

By teaching new farming methods and helping gain access to water, people like Lebiso are able to increase harvest yields. Lebiso and other farmers are now nurturing and replenishing the landscape so families and nature can thrive.

Lebiso's story is not uncommon. There are millions of people that are being forced into poverty because of climate change. It is important we share stories like Lebiso, so people understand that climate change is an issue that affects real people. Please consider sharing stories such as Lebiso when speaking to others about climate change.

To learn more about Lebiso's story visit:  
[tearfund.ca/stories/lebiso](https://tearfund.ca/stories/lebiso)



# The keys to better conversations



# The keys to better conversations

For many years Tearfund staff and volunteers have been having conversations about the issues that affect our partner organizations and their communities with their friends, church communities and community and political leaders. Here are some key insights to help you have fruitful conversations about climate change.

## 1 Understand where people are coming from

We are all somewhere on a spectrum that runs from denying climate change is happening at all to urgently working hard to respond to the crisis. Through our conversations, we hope others will move a little further towards accepting the facts of climate change and taking action to respond - any step in that direction is successful.

The people most likely to change are those in the middle whose minds and hearts are more open. The beauty of a conversation is that we can get a sense of where someone currently sits on the spectrum, and adjust what we say so that we're offering a reasonable step in the right direction for them.



**Reflection:** Where am I on this spectrum? Which of my friends or family members are somewhere in the middle, and might be influenced through good conversations?

## 2 Have the right attitude and tone

Think about **how** you are approaching your conversations, not just **what** you will talk about.

**Be respectful and loving:** Remember that these are conversations where we care about the issue and the relationship with the other person. Assume the best of your conversation partner and find common ground by respecting their concerns, priorities and values. Avoid words that might make them feel blamed or judged, which usually shuts down the conversation.

**Build mutuality and trust:** Ask questions rather than lecturing your conversation partner, and give space for them to reflect on their own views and experiences. Genuinely listen to their views and concerns and check you've understood them correctly. Be a trustworthy source by being careful only to say what you know is true, or admitting you aren't sure and checking facts if needed.

**Be inclusive and invitational:** Aim to bring people on a journey, showing them that they can be part of something much bigger than themselves and that their contribution is valued. Acknowledging your struggle with the complexity and challenge of an authentic and personal response to climate change can be helpful

## 3 Bond through shared compassionate values

One of Dr. Katherine Hayhoe's tips for communicating well about climate change is to bond and find common ground. Understanding the values we share can help us to do this in a way that motivates people to act for the social good.

Decades of research and hundreds of studies have identified a set of human values that occur consistently across cultures. These values play a big role in shaping our attitudes and behaviours. The set of "intrinsic" or compassionate values includes concern for social justice, creativity, self-acceptance, concern for others and affiliation with family and friends. Many of these compassionate values connect strongly with the values that shape the living out of our Christian faith: love for our neighbour, care for the poor, justice and liberty for the oppressed. They can be a strong motivator for all people to act on issues of concern like climate change and its impact on people facing poverty.

In the world today, it is common to see people segmented into distinct groups (left, right, conservative, liberal), but the evidence suggests that people are more complex and fluid than these simple categories. Surveys and questionnaires show that most people value compassionate values more than selfish values (even though their perception of others is the reverse). Finding the compassionate values, concerns and experiences you share and connecting these to the issue of climate change are much more likely to lead to a fruitful discussion than a barrage of facts and figures.



**Reflection:** How does the climate crisis connect with my life, and what matters most to me? What practical solutions have I seen or tried that might be attractive or inspiring to others?

## 4 Share your own story

Sometimes we think experts, mass media, politicians or articulate public speakers will be the most influential messengers. They all have their place, but most people are influenced mainly by the opinions and actions of people they know through personal stories that highlight our shared values.

It's natural to think that people will be convinced by clear logic and information about climate change or perhaps by correcting some theological misunderstanding. However, people rarely change their minds based on persuasive arguments and information alone, whether scientific or theological. To influence people, we need to communicate about the issues in ways that connect with people's hearts.

Your own story of why you care about global poverty and climate change can be enormously powerful. Talk about why it matters to the people and places you care about. Facts in isolation are unlikely to convince anyone but sharing our stories - our passion and lived experience - can help to build empathy and inspire others.



### Reflection:

**Which of these tips and guidelines do I use naturally in my conversations? Which ones will I need to work on a bit to develop my skills and build good habits?**

## 5 Keep it simple and real

**Keep it simple:** Use language suitable to your conversation partner, avoiding complicated phrasing or technical terms and jargon unless they use that language. Don't assume facts in isolation will convince anyone. Instead tell a story and, where appropriate, use statistics and science to support it.

**Keep it real:** Climate change impacts our planet in ways we can touch and feel, like increasingly severe and frequent bushfires and floods. Ground your conversations in real events and experiences, not just in ideas. Don't forget to include examples of how real-life climate solutions are working. To change minds and bring people on board, we need to do more than just talk about the problem. We need to inspire others with the practical, viable and attractive solutions that are available to us.



# Yes, but...

## HELP!

What do I do when the person I'm talking to completely disagrees and won't listen to anything I say?

There is no magic way to make these conversations easy or to change other people. All the tips in the previous section can help you find points of agreement and connection. A few additional points might help:

**Define “success” generously** – even a brief respectful conversation may result in a small shift, or a sense of increased trust and positivity between you. It's also a “success” if you come away with new insight into someone else's world, or increased ability and confidence to have difficult conversations.

**Avoid “myth-busting”** or actively trying to correct misinformation about climate change; people can easily feel judged or attacked, and may become defensive and hold onto their views more strongly.

**Be prepared to back away** – There are several reasons people might feel defensive or uncomfortable before your conversation begins. There needs to be a level of trust in order to have a constructive conversation. Be mindful of this - sometimes, it's better to back away from the topic.

**Remember the spectrum of views** – The strongest critics and deniers of climate change are unlikely to be open to change, so it's better to focus mainly on having conversations with people who are less fixed in their views.

**Pray for these conversations** – Before you have a conversation about climate change, prepare by praying. Pray for the person you will be speaking with and pray that you both will speak with love and listen to one another.



### Reflection:

**Think of a conversation you've had with someone who disagrees with you (about climate change, or any other topic) and ask yourself: “Did we listen and connect despite disagreeing? What might I try next time, to have a better conversation?”**



# More useful resources on climate change

## **The most important thing you can do to fight climate change: talk about it**

How do you talk to someone who doesn't believe in climate change? Not by rehashing the same data and facts we've been discussing for years, says climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine\\_hayhoe\\_the\\_most\\_important\\_thing\\_you\\_can\\_do\\_to\\_fight\\_climate\\_change\\_talk\\_about\\_it?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it?language=en)

## **Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World**

Katharine Hayhoe knows how to navigate all sides of the conversation on our changing planet. A Canadian climate scientist living in Texas, she negotiates distrust of data, indifference to imminent threats, and resistance to proposed solutions with ease.

<https://www.amazon.ca/Saving-Us-Climate-Scientists-Healing/dp/1982143835>

## **L is for Lifestyle**

How can we live more responsibly? In this A-Z, Ruth Valerio highlights the main threats to people and our planet, God's beloved creation. She shows us how, by making small but significant changes to our lifestyle, we can learn the secret of a life that is both fair and simple.

<https://ruthvalerio.net/publications/l-is-for-lifestyle/>

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*Following Jesus where  
the need is greatest*