

Eco-congregation & CAFOD

Two recent issues of *The Newman* (January 2010 and January 2011) have carried articles about Eco-congregation, the ecumenical project designed to enable Christian discernment about the natural order and to encourage practical action in regard to this in parishes and congregations. In January 2010, we published an article by David Hughes, National Co-ordinator for Eco-congregation, which was the synopsis of a talk given to the Manchester & North Cheshire Circle of the Newman Association, *How many Christians does it take to change a planet?* As well as being a reflection on “why climate change is an opportunity for the Church”, this article outlined the Eco-congregation scheme. In January 2011 we then carried an article about the link-up between Eco-congregation and CAFOD in connection with the latter’s ‘liveSimply’ campaign and the forthcoming launch of that joint programme at **Clifton Cathedral on 20th. May 2011**. In this article, we offer a further contribution on this subject - this time offering some experiences of parishes and congregations who have participated in the Eco-congregation programme. We are most grateful to the contributors to this composite article.

The Eco-congregation programme consists of three phases:- (1) Completion of a ‘Church check up’ (an environmental audit) to establish the current position of the parish/congregation in relation to church grounds, energy consumption, water usage, transport arrangements, study & pastoral work, links with other like-minded groups etc. (2) Having undertaken the audit, the congregation then identify desirable objectives, seeking to achieve these within the three spheres of ‘spiritual’ - worship & teaching; ‘practical’ - things to do with buildings, land and church management, and ‘mission’ - reaching out both locally and globally. (3) Finally, at an agreed moment, the congregation invites an Assessment of its progress. Two assessors are then appointed and in due course, following a visit by the assessors, the congregation obtains the coveted ‘Eco-congregation Award’. To assist in this programme, thirteen modules are available. Module 1 is for the ‘Church check up’; with Modules 2 - 13 available as aids in the achievement of the desired objectives.

This programme is now being widely adopted throughout the U.K. The ecumenical nature of the project ensures that participants are able to contribute to an endeavour of common interest to Christians of all traditions while also enabling them to draw on a wide range of experience and insight. At the same time, by the co-operative endeavours of members engaged in the project, the scheme can help to build up the local parish/congregation.

In recent years it has been my privilege to be one of two assessors for two congregations in Herefordshire, both of which have obtained the Eco-congregation award. On both occasions, one was struck not only by the tenacious and impressive engagement with the various ‘environmental’ aspects selected by the groups for their attention, but also by the sense of how inspirational their work was. Here were small beacons of ‘ecological hope’, evidence of the possibilities for others who might choose to follow in their footsteps.

At the 2004 joint Newman Association - Christian Ecology Link (C.E.L.) conference in Hereford ‘Faith and the Environmental Imperative: responding to *The Call of Creation*’, the then Assistant General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England & Wales, Fr. Frank Turner SJ, spoke of Eco-congregation in his concluding remarks: “We are signed up to the Eco-congregation document, but frankly we are behind most other churches ... There are 200 parishes signed up to Eco-congregation, of which 5% are R.C., well that’s ten parishes. Given that we have a little over 2,000 parishes in England & Wales, that’s half a percent, so I cannot pretend that that is a satisfactory situation”. We trust that the following contributions will help catholic parishes in particular to see the benefits of the Eco-congregation programme and to follow up the new initiative with CAFOD under its ‘liveSimply’ scheme.

**Robert Williams,
Convener of Environment Interest Group**

For further information about Eco-congregation see website: www.eco-congregation.org

For further information about CAFOD and the link with Eco-congregation under the ‘liveSimply’ programme, contact Maria Elena Arana on marana@cafod.org.uk or telephone 0207 095 5417

For the text of *The Call of Creation* see website of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England & Wales

www.catholic-ew.org.uk/Catholic-Church/Publications. Copies of the 2004 conference report ‘Faith and the Environmental Imperative’ available from Robert Williams. Tel. 01544 318999. Email bobwilliams@farmersweekly.net

Small steps to a big goal

A university Vice Chancellor tells of handing out degrees to a thousand graduates in an afternoon. It's hard to think of much to say so he usually just asks the recipients what they are going to do next. One afternoon he was told in quick succession "I am going to be a neurosurgeon" and "I am going to step down off the stage and rejoin my parents".

Reflecting on where we are going with Eco-Congregations I was torn between "Fulfilling God's dream for all he knows we can be" and "Getting 300 award winning churches". It's all too easy to lose site of the big picture while focussing on the minutiae of the next steps. Every small step is important as part of the bigger journey but it is important to keep the long term goal in sight. In fact didn't St Paul say something similar about running a race?

Eco-Congregation has been running the race for 10 years now and we have recently been thinking about how effective we have been. Two hundred awards seems like quite an achievement but set against the context of 3,500 Catholic churches alone in England & Wales we clearly need to up our game to make a real difference. CAFOD have given us the opportunity to do that by developing the 'livesimply' Award – a version of Eco-Congregations for Catholic churches. The 'livesimply' Award is independently assessed by Eco-Congregation assessors, but the resources are tailored much more to appeal to Catholic churches. There is still a self assessment process but we have abandoned the modular structure of the resources.

The Bishop of Clifton will be launching the new award in Bristol on the 20th May this year after which the 'livesimply' scheme will be accessible from the CAFOD website.

Many churches of all denominations have found the Eco-Congregation approach helpful. We hope this new scheme will enable you to get caring for creation on the agenda in your parish community.

David Hughes,
National Co-ordinator for Eco-congregation

Becoming an Eco-Congregation



Lecture hall at Lauriston Centre: Laurence Freeman OSB speaking

Sacred Heart parish in Edinburgh received an Eco-Congregation award in May 2010, only the second Catholic Church in Scotland to do so, and at the same time our Lauriston Jesuit Centre became the first ever Church centre of any denomination to be so honoured.

We registered as an Eco-Congregation in 2006, and established a 'green team' to help us bring in the required changes and developments that could lead to an eco award. The team worked with the relevant groups and individuals

in the church such as the parish council, the justice & peace group, the children's liturgy group, the finance group, the parish secretary and of course the parish priest. If an eco award was to mean anything it had to be something that the whole parish agreed was important, so each of these all had a part to play, whether by bringing environmental issues into the liturgy, improving the grounds, purchasing recycled goods, gentler detergents, energy efficient equipment, and so on.

At the same time, our adjacent church halls, home to the Lauriston Jesuit Centre, went through major refurbishment work. The Centre is a fairly new outreach ministry of the Jesuits in Edinburgh, with a particular focus on adult faith formation, spirituality and social justice.

One of our early presenters at the Centre was Mary Colwell, BBC Natural History producer and a parishioner at Clifton Cathedral in Bristol, who stressed the faith basis for ecology and the vital importance of changes in life-style, paying attention to how we use resources, and even how we present our public space. This coincided with our planning for the refurbishment, so with the help of a legacy, a large Scottish government grant and smaller grants, we put in as many 'green' measures as we could. So we introduced natural lighting into the building, insulated the walls, floors and ceiling, put in a 'smart' heating and air handling system, as well as the now common energy efficient measures of lighting with motion sensors and water saving taps.

Though two separate entities, the Church and Centre have an essential link. To be recognised by Eco-Congregation as a model for what other churches can do with old buildings, (the church dates from 1859, the halls from 1904) is very gratifying, and that they themselves suggested two separate awards to acknowledge the two separate but connected works was much appreciated.

We worried that we were not 'ready' for an assessment visit and fretted about the many things we could do but have not yet done. In the end though, we should not have waited so long to ask for an award visit, and would encourage other parishes not to wait so long after registration. What matters to Eco-Congregation is what we have done, small though it might seem, which helps us then see the potential for what else we can do.

Fr Chris Boles SJ, Centre Director

Eco-congregation

St John's Methodist Church, Hereford, registered for the Eco-congregation scheme in February 2002 and eventually received the award in November 2009. We had the twelve modules to guide us and a Green Team (now St John's Eco-Group) to co-ordinate the project. We began by carrying out an environmental audit of the church and its activities to establish a base-line and suggesting ways in which we could become more eco-friendly.

Progress has been slow, admittedly. I have always stressed that it's *Eco-congregation* – something for the whole church to be involved in, not something to be left to a few people to do. For me, caring for creation is an intrinsic part of being a Christian, an essential aspect of loving God and of loving our neighbour, in the widest sense – not an optional extra. Each section of the church – every group and committee – should look at what it does and see whether it could do anything in a more environmentally friendly way. I think people often fear that this will require more time and/or more expense, but it doesn't always mean doing extra things – it's more to do with what we're already doing and how we do it, whether it's planning services and events, maintaining the building, or serving the local community and the wider world. Saving energy means saving money, and if some things are more expensive (perhaps green energy, eco-friendly cleaning products, recycled paper, **Local/Organic/Animal-friendly/Fairly traded food**) that's part of 'the cost of discipleship', to use Bonhoeffer's phrase.

To gain the award we had to provide evidence of activities we had undertaken in three broad areas: spiritual, practical, and outreach. Examples of our activities included our custom of transforming some of the elements of the Christmas display into an Easter scene, thus promoting the recycling message as well as emphasising the spiritual link between the two festivals; having an ecology stall at our annual autumn market, selling home-made fabric shopping bags, giving away low-energy light bulbs and water 'hippos' etc.; and providing hospitality for the Christian Aid 'Cut the Carbon' marchers in September 2007. As evidence, we had a scrapbook of photos and written material and the results of a survey which we carried out to assess the impact of the project on the congregation.

St John's is the home of the Hereford Christian Ecology Group, an ecumenical group which presents talks and other events throughout the year, and this was one of the factors that helped us to gain the Eco-congregation award. The group seeks to raise awareness of and disseminate information on environmental issues among the churches and the wider community. We are also a Fairtrade Church and a Jubilee Congregation, which added to our credentials.

The Eco-congregation award is valid for three years, and I hope that we will be able to re-apply for it in 2012. It's a journey rather than a destination – part of a constant striving to express our faith more profoundly and effectively in our personal and communal lives.

Sheila Milne

(Sheila was on the ecumenical organising committee of the 2004 Newman Association–C.E.L. conference 'Faith and the Environmental Imperative'. Ed.)