

Report of key learnings from the MK Eco Church Network meeting



Held at St George the Martyr Church, Wolverton on 28th September

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St George the Martyr Church, Wolverton - 28th September 2024

In attendance: Felicity Beaton, Pat Bell, Mary Borrett, Margaret Broadhurst, Joy Chapman, Ann Dodds, Linda Empson, Jane Entwistle, Neil Harris, Ken Hawes, Richard Hearne, Julie Gillam, Stuart Kean, David Mainwaring, Jenny Mercer, Peter Musk, Jean Peck, Angela Vincent, Nancy Warner.

Apologies: Robert Adern, Wendy Adern, Chris Batten, Terry Collier, Alison Drury, Phil Dunning, Cathy Hampton, Barry Lotz, Paul Lund, Judith Martin, Fran Reid and Ann Slee.

Summary

This was the fourth meeting of the Milton Keynes Eco Church Network and was kindly hosted by members of St George the Martyr Church, in the Wolverton Benefice. The aim of the meeting was to learn about and discuss St George's experiences with implementing the Eco Church framework. Following presentations by members of St George's eco church group there was a Q&A session and then a tour of the church and churchyard. There was a discussion about possible topics for talks that members of the network would be interested to attend in 2025. The meeting concluded with announcements about several opportunities and events related to Eco Church.

Opening reflection and prayer - Jenny Mercer

Participants were invited to reflect on the beauty of the colours of our planet: blue, brown, and green. At the same time God's creation is extremely vulnerable to being devastated by the activities of humankind, though pollution, the expansion of deserts, loss of biodiversity and burning of fossil fuels. As Christians we are charged to be good stewards of creation and must take steps to care for it. The following prayer attributed to St. Teresa of Avila challenges every Christian to take responsibility and act.

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
— St. Teresa of Ávila

Presentation about Eco Church activities at St George's, Wolverton - Neil Harris and Jenny Mercer

Work on Eco Church activities at St George's started 2 years ago and began with a few people working to improve biodiversity in the churchyard. The Eco Church Team completed the A Rocha Eco Church survey as a baseline and found that they were already at Bronze award level. The team has followed the principle that there should be "No sticks, just carrots" and has encouraged members of the church to do those Eco Church activities that they are interested in because they want to do them not because they have to do them. The Eco Church Team is a small group of interested church

members and they are meeting monthly to review the activities being undertaken on each of the 5 Eco Church areas. They are publicising the team's activities by placing notices on the Noticeboard.

- **Worship and Teaching**

St George's has achieved gold level status for worship and teaching, as caring for God's creation is deeply embedded in the churches activities as implied in preaching the message in John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Creation care is an integral part of the St. George's prayers, songs and sermons. St George's has Monday morning prayers on their YouTube channel and the Eco Church Team has used this to include prayers about environmental issues. The Eco Church Team has found the resources of the Church of England Environmental Programme very helpful and these have been a driving force for the Teams' activities: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/church-england-environment-programme>

- **Buildings**

This area has been very challenging for St George's and they have only reached Bronze level status. They have significant challenges with both heating and insulation.

- **Land**

St George's has achieved Silver status and the team said they had found this the easiest of the areas to work on. They have found that issues related to land have acted as an entry point which has encourage the church and its members to consider what they could be doing in the other 4 areas of Eco Church. The Team has created a wildflower meadow to encourage bees and butterflies and have built a bug hotel, called 'Btingham Palace' and also built a composter.



Network members discussing plants for the St George's Cross flowerbed

The area for the wildflower meadow has been roped off and has proven quite a challenge. The team has tried different approaches to encouraging the wildflowers to grow. First, the existing tall grasses were left untouched and wildflower seeds were scattered in the grass, however, they did not survive. The second year, the grass was cut back and the soil was scarified before the seed was scattered, which produced marginally improved results. This year, the turf has been removed and wildflower seeds scattered but it was too soon to know if this has improved growth.



Wildflower Meadow

The path through the churchyard is a popular route for people to walk on and those working in the churchyard have had many interesting conversations with local residents, explaining what they are doing. The work in the churchyard has also been connected to other community activities, such as working with Wolverton and Greenleys Council to install some new benches in the churchyard.

Following a survey by MK City Council, several trees in the churchyard had to be cut down or heavily pollarded due to disease or structural weakness. One tree was cut back but left standing for the benefit of wildlife species for whom it is a natural habitat. A sign explaining what was happening was placed on the tree. New fruit trees (apple and cherry) were planted in spaces where more light had become available.



Explaining what is happening to a heavily pollarded tree

- **Community and global engagement**

In this area St George's has achieved Silver status. It is an area where members of the church with a passion for working with people, community groups and local politicians have successfully engaged in a variety of activities. Activities have included organising events for the community such as 'Snowdrop Sunday', and 'Open Churchyard Day', as well as helping with local litter picking. In addition, St Georges' toilets are 'Twinned'.

- **Lifestyle**

Lifestyle activities has been the most challenging areas and St George's has achieved Bronze level status. The church as an 'Eco Church Notice board which is encouraging people to walk and cycle to church. It is also encouraging people to follow the LOAF principles to eat Locally produced, Organic, Animal-friendly and Fair Trade produce, as well as promoting the 3Rs to 'Reduce, Re-use, Recycle' items.

Conclusions

It has taken around 3 years for St George's to achieve overall Bronze award status. The role of the core group of 5 helpers working in the churchyard has played a crucial role to gaining momentum for Eco Church activities. The A Rocha survey was completed by a few people who had knowledge of the specific areas. The Eco Church Team is re-visiting each of the 5 areas and encouraging more people to engage in activities.

Discussion

The Eco Church Team raised several points during the discussion time:

- **Signage:** The team recommended putting-up signs explaining to community members what is going on in the churchyard, such as signs about the wildflower meadow, explaining why some trees had to be cut down or heavily pollarded, and signs for the bug hotel and about some of the wild plants. It was generally recognised as very important to put up signs explaining what activities are going on so that community members can understand and appreciate why things may be looking different. Conversations and consultations before changes are made can also help create positive responses.
- **Managing closed churchyards?** There is useful information on the websites for God's Acre and A Rocha about this issue:
<https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Managing-Closed-Churchyards-1.jpg>
- There was a question about what to do with **excess compost** and a potential use could be erect some raised beds to grow flowers and vegetables.
- There was a discussion about the potential benefits of **working with young people's groups** such as the scouts, Boys Brigade or local primary schools. Several churches have developed good partnerships with such groups and the young people have enjoyed opportunities of working in gardens and raised beds and thereby supported churches with elderly congregations less able to do gardening.
- On some occasions St George's (and Holy Trinity) Eco Church Team has benefited from involving **Milton Keynes Green Gym** which is an independent group of volunteers that meets every Thursday morning, throughout the year, to work on and improve, the green spaces of Milton Keynes for landowners such as MK Parks Trust, MK Council, local Parish Councils, schools, community groups and charities. They carry out works such as tree planting, hedge laying, scrub clearance, pond work, woodland path building, the creation of nature areas, grass cutting and general gardening. Details: <https://miltonkeynesgreengym.co.uk/about/>
- Another organisation that can provide volunteers to work on large scale projects is the **Community Payback scheme:**
<https://www.thamesvalley-pcc.gov.uk/get-involved/community-payback/>
- A general recommendation for those thinking of using volunteer groups is to make sure you know the conservation areas in your churchyard for which special care is needed and rope these off, to protect them from those who may not be familiar with endangered plants such as particular lichens on gravestones.

Updates from MK Eco Church Network members

- Whaddon Way: has organised a series of group discussions on the theme of: 'Creation and Stewardship'
- Christ Church, Stantonbury: has a 'Creation Care' Noticeboard, as well as regular Eco Tips in their monthly newsletter, including a recent focus on lifestyle choices. The church is encouraging people to recycle plastic.
- St James, New Bradwell: Their eco tip for October will focus on recycling, find towards the end of the newsletter:
<https://www.stjamesnewbradwell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SEP-Newsletter-2024-10.pdf>
- Freeman Memorial Methodist: The Eco Church Group had recently taken the Sunday service and had a very positive response with lots of interest in implementing Eco Church activities. They are organising a community café which encourages recycling and reuse of products.
- Queensway Methodist, Bletchley: Reported that over the last 12 months they had earned around £2000 from the sale of bric-a-brac at their community café. They also collect items such as batteries for recycling.

Upcoming events and next steps

Stuart outlined several future events and encouraged participants to get involved:

1. **The new A Rocha Eco Church survey** will go live on 9th October, but those churches who are working towards an award using the old survey will have until 31st January 2025 to apply for an award. For details see: <https://mailchi.mp/arochoa/new-eco-church-survey-go-live?e=115d89a746>
2. The Parks Trust will be organising several **Community Litter picks** in the next 2 months:
<https://www.theparkstrust.com/our-work/volunteering/community-volunteering-tasks/>
 - a. Linford Wood on 4th November
 - b. Walton Lake 3rd December
3. The Methodist Church is organising a **webinar called 'Baby Steps to Bronze'** which take place on Wednesday 29th January 2025 between 7.30- 9.00pm. The aim is to help churches that have registered as Eco Churches to take some next steps to move towards a Bronze award. Please register on the Eventbrite and join the event: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/eco-church-baby-steps-to-bronze-tickets-1026980776147?aff=ebdsoporgprofile>
4. **The COP29 Conference is the UN Climate Change Conference** that will be taking place in Baku, Azerbaijan from 11th to 22nd November when governments will have an opportunity to make bold commitments to provide the financing needed to tackle climate change especially for countries in the global South. The Church of England has produced a guide about the actions that churches and Christians can take in support of a successful outcome: "How Christians can get involved from home with UN conferences this autumn"
<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/how-christians-can-get-involved-home-un-conferences-autumn>. In addition to praying and writing to our MPs, the Oxford Diocese is encouraging us to support the 'Faith for the Climate' calling for action in support of the 'Make Polluters Pay campaign, which is highlighting the unjust impacts of the climate crisis. People are invited to add their voices to this call for climate justice by signing the statement calling on the UK Government to make polluters pay and reminding the UK Government why it needs to make bold commitments to climate finance at COP29. The link to sign the statement is: <https://faithfortheclimate.org.uk/sign-our-open-letter-ahead-of-cop29/>

5. **The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative** is a global effort to foster international cooperation to accelerate a transition to renewable energy for everyone, end the expansion of coal, oil and gas, and equitably phase out existing production in keeping with what science shows is needed to address the climate crisis. Some 600 organisations and individuals in the faith community have signed a letter in support of the Treaty and people are being encouraged to sign the letter: <https://fossilfueltreaty.org/faith-letter#faith-letter>
6. **Advent resources:** There is an Advent section in the Choose Life book freely available: <https://sites.google.com/view/chooselifecreation> and there are printable seasonal liturgies lower down the Choose Life webpage. The Green Christian daily prayer guide: <https://greenchristian.org.uk/resources/prayer-guide>

Discussion of possible topics for MK Eco Church Network talks in 2025

There was a discussion and voting on a list of possible topics for talks that members of the MK Eco Church Network are interested to find out more about. The topics in order of priority are:

1. From energy audits to action plans in churches (13)
2. Reducing energy use and increasing renewable energy in churches and homes (9)
3. Recycling black sack waste and thin plastics in Milton Keynes (9)
4. The future of Milton Keynes' water supply (8)
5. Organising 'care for creation' activities for young people (5)
6. Managing churchyards to increase wildlife and biodiversity (5)
7. Ways to reduce car use in Milton Keynes (2)

Date of next meeting

The Eco Church Group at Queensway Methodist Church in Bletchley kindly agreed to host the next MK Eco Church Network meeting, which will take place on Saturday 5th April 2025. Please make a note of this date in your diaries.

Additional Photos



Composter



"Bingham Palace"