

ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD

17 OCTOBER 2020

'BECOMING AN ECO DIOCESE'

Introduction

This briefing paper presents background information on the Eco church programme, the online eco survey tool devised by the Christian environmental charity, A Rocha. It provides a context and a rationale for the Diocese of St Albans to show leadership and commitment on the environment and climate justice by registering as an Eco diocese, with the aim of encouraging all churches to enrol on this free programme within 12 months.

Recognising a need for urgent action

At the recent General Synod new targets were agreed for all parts of the church to work to become carbon 'net zero' by 2030. Following the historic vote, lead Bishop on the Environment, Nicholas Holtam said, 'We will each need to hear this as an urgent call to action, but I am encouraged by the statement of intent this makes across the Church and wider society about our determination to tackle Climate Change, and safeguard God's creation. This is a social justice issue, which affects the world's poorest soonest and most severely, and if the Church is to be a voice for change, we have to get our own house in order. There is no serious doubt that climate change is happening, and that people are causing it, so it is very encouraging that Synod is grappling with the most urgent issues of our time.'

Every Diocese will be required to address progress made towards the 2030 target every three years. Reducing the carbon footprint as quickly as possible in the early years will be important in reducing the risk of irreversible climate change, so the Diocese needs to take action urgently on all easily achievable targets, and work on a strategy to tackle more difficult areas.

The Impact of Covid19

The effects of the viral pandemic have been serious and widespread, and in the months following the Synod motion attention has rightly been focussed on the immediate need to combat the virus and supporting those affected. Attention must now return to the environment if we are to avoid an even greater catastrophe, affecting not just people, but the whole of creation.

Covid19 has caused an economic crisis and revealed social inequalities both in our own country and between the rich and poor nations of the world. Yet serious as these are, the restrictions have been temporary, with the prospect of economic recovery and a return to normal life. The effects of climate change, however, will be permanent and irreversible unless action is taken to reduce carbon emissions.

Enabling change across the Diocese

In responding to a challenge of this scale, our Diocese needs to find a means both to evaluate its current position as regards sustainability and also to devise a strategy which will be both inexpensive to introduce and inclusive, respecting the diverse nature of the churches, schools and Diocesan organisations within its boundaries. The Covid19 crisis has increased financial pressures throughout the Church, but also made it imperative to build resilience into all its operations and to devote the same innovative and creative spirit that has been in evidence during the pandemic to planning for the future.

It is also important to ensure that from the outset every part of the Diocesan structure is fully engaged with a shared vision of how working together to build a more sustainable future is an expression of 'Living God's Love'. Among the unexpected benefits witnessed during the

period of lockdown were the clearer skies, reduced air pollution and increased contact with the natural world as people enjoyed daily exercise in beautiful spring weather. Communities were drawn closer together in mutual support and appreciation of key workers. In such desperate times, a new understanding developed of the link between human health and lifestyles, the exploitation of the Earth and the destruction of the precious eco-systems on which all life depends. Churches supported the physical and mental well-being of those in their local areas in a variety of ways, providing a model for a future in which it can be predicted that the church's mission will increasingly include climate change mitigation. By becoming more sustainable, churches can contribute to 'the Green Recovery', protect God's creation and work for climate justice, responding in love to the needs of their neighbour.

Eco Church and Eco Diocese

The Eco church scheme, devised by the Christian charity A Rocha, and its extension, Eco Diocese is ideal as a mechanism for inspiring progress towards a more sustainable future that will incorporate a net zero target. It incorporates an evaluative process, partly to provide a measure of progress, but also to give encouragement, celebrating strengths as well as highlighting areas for action, building confidence and drawing churches and their communities together.

Over 3,000 churches nationally have now registered to work towards an Eco Church award, an online self-evaluation tool that allows church congregations to evaluate their current level of sustainability across the whole of their church life, and to devise future plans for improvement. This is an important element of their Christian witness to their local community.

As a first step, churches can register free of charge and start the process of completing the questionnaires covering five main areas: Worship and teaching, Management of Church Buildings, Management of Church Land, Community and Global Engagement and Lifestyle. The questions provide a ready-made action plan, and the survey answers can be saved and revisited as the church community progresses towards an award. All of these elements are important to give balance, but what makes this scheme ideal for churches is the understanding of the fundamental importance of worship and teaching. The theological element in this scheme underpins and justifies all other actions, and it is what will enable us to move forward in faith. Professor Richard Bauckham is often quoted, "God can make of what we do much more than we can make of it ourselves."

Once sufficient points have been accumulated, the totalisers indicate that a Bronze, Silver or Gold level has been reached, and the church can apply for an award. The strength of this scheme lies in its flexibility, as churches of all kinds (even those with no land or buildings) can take part. There are no time limits for completion and while taking part church congregations can build on their strengths, for example, biodiversity in the churchyard, and also be encouraged to work together on areas which need development, for example, working with local schools on eco projects.

Eco Diocese

The Eco Diocese scheme was devised to underpin the good work being done at grass-roots level and to provide support, guidance and a structure within which churches could be enabled to communicate good practice, share resources and provide encouragement to others. Registration is free of charge. <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/denominational-awards/eco-diocese>.

So far 29 dioceses have registered and of those only 8 have achieved an award.

There are three levels of award, as for the Eco Church programme: Bronze, Silver and Gold.

- Bronze level: 10% of churches registered and 5% of churches with an award
- Silver level: 20% of churches registered and 10% of churches with an award
- Gold level: 30% of churches registered and 20% of churches with an award

If our Diocese were to register for this scheme, there are eight requirements to reach Bronze level, beginning with registration. These can be worked on in any order, but

1. **Registration for the scheme** (no fee involved).
This is a very simple three-minute process via an online form on the A Rocha website.
2. **Commissioning an individual or group to co-ordinate progress within the Diocese.**
The co-ordination of the Eco church programme within dioceses varies from a volunteer co-ordinator role to an expert committee or Environment Working Group to create a strategy as part of the Diocesan Environment Policy (see below). Taking examples from dioceses that have already achieved Bronze award (discussed below) what is noticeable is that whereas some have had structures in place for some years on which to build (Winchester and Salisbury), others have started with a small advisory team. Guildford started four years ago with only one church registered, but with strong leadership have now achieved their Bronze award. Suggestions for our own Diocese are included below.
3. **Updating the existing environmental policy and submitting it for approval.**
Our current environmental policy is now 13 years old and will be updated in line with recent events, taking account of good practice in other dioceses, advice and recommendations from the Environment Officer of the Church of England, the Environment Working Group of Church of England and others with appropriate expertise and experience. An Environmental Working Group is being established to oversee this task.
4. **Achieve the eco-church award level for the Diocese's own operations**
This would require the Diocese to evaluate its offices, any other buildings and land, their management and working practices. Assessment is carried out by using the online questionnaire for Buildings and Land.
5. **Incorporate environmental education as part of CPD for all ministers and staff**
6. **Manage Diocesan investments ethically in line with the ethical policies of the Church of England's national investing bodies and Ethical Investment Advisory Group**
7. **Work with other Dioceses and/or Faith Groups to encourage greater environmental action.** Eco church is an ecumenical scheme, based on a theology that places creation and Christian stewardship of God's earth at its heart. It is not merely about measurements of carbon but far more wide-ranging, with Christian worship and teaching and the forging of supportive relationships with the wider community at its core.
8. **Establish the habit of recording and celebrating individual environmental initiatives.** Over 37 churches are registered already in our Diocese, with 5 Bronze awards and 1 Silver so far, and there is much to celebrate that can inspire others.

First actions

Organising and resourcing the scheme

The Eco church programme needs to be introduced as quickly as possible with the aim of enrolling as many parishes as possible during 2021. This will require:

- a) Establishing an Environment Working Group. Terms of reference will be drawn up, applications invited, and appointments made. The first task will be to revise the Environment Policy and devise a strategy to reach the environmental targets agreed at Synod.

- b) In addition to establishing an Environment Working Group, it will be essential for our Environment policy and agreed actions to be embedded within the oversight structures of the diocese. Regular attention will need to be given to this work by Bishop's Staff, Bishop's Council and the Board for Mission and Ministry.
- c) The appointment of a small team of volunteer speakers, trained by A Rocha, to support the DEO in the promotion and resourcing of the scheme. This group would report to the DEO and EWG.
- d) Information to be disseminated across the Diocese via Deanery networks and existing channels.
- e) Free resources for parishes (available from A Rocha with additional supporting resources available via the website)
- f) Training and support – Following on from the webinars at the online Eco church conference at All Saints' Church, Leighton Buzzard on Saturday October 10th further information and training will be provided for all churches to learn about the scheme and to register.
- g) New guidance documents on energy and sustainable buildings are available from the Church of England Cathedral and Church Buildings Division, and these will be supported by an extended range of case studies.
- h) Our Diocese will be introducing the Energy Footprint Tool in November to enable churches to measure and reduce their carbon footprint. In addition, the new 360 degrees carbon footprint tool has been designed to work as part of the Eco church scheme, enabling churches to evaluate their carbon footprint across all of their operations.
- i) Funding – Based on the experiences of other Dioceses who have reached Bronze level, any of the changes that are necessary at the outset will be relatively inexpensive. The Diocese will need to consider grants, fund-raising activities, sponsorship and partnerships in order to provide necessary funding for projects involving major expenditure.
- j) In addition to encouragement from the Diocese and personal promotion by the Eco church group to parishes, a third method would be employed to encourage rapid take-up of the scheme. 'Beacon' churches could be established in each archdeaconry to provide examples of good stewardship and witness to local communities. By demonstrating benefits through efficiency savings and providing practical examples, churches may be more likely to register for the Eco church scheme. A useful benefit of this would be an improved perception of the church as being relevant and aware of current issues, particularly among the young (a key target of the current 'Big Conversation' campaign).

Conclusion

It is recommended that St Albans Diocese should register as an Eco Diocese as a clear statement of intent and leadership at a time of climate crisis. The Eco church scheme is free of charge, flexible, affirmational and challenging. The online questionnaire method of assessment is designed to enable parishes in differing circumstances to progress at their own pace.

It is broad in scope, covering the whole of church life, with each strand of equal importance and the inclusion of worship and teaching establishing Christian faith and hope as a vision for the future.

Other dioceses have found the scheme invaluable and transformative, and we can benefit from their experience.

Further information

A Rocha website with information and resources for Eco Church and Eco Diocese:

<https://arocha.org.uk/>

Guildford is an example of a Diocese which has achieved Bronze level within four years
<https://www.cofeguildford.org.uk/whats-on/news/detail/2018/11/21/churches-across-surrey-and-hampshire-are-going-greener-as-guildford-becomes-an-eco-diocese>

(attached at Appendix 1 - Guildford's environment policy which incorporates the elements required of an Eco Diocese)

<https://ecochurchsouthwest.org.uk/> Seven dioceses have formed a partnership bringing together two strands of action: Eco Church Southwest, promoting green energy; and Shrinking the Footprint, the Church of England's campaign and resources aiming to reduce our ecological footprint.

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Appendix 1

Environmental Policy for Guildford Diocese

As Christians, and as part of the Christian community in Surrey and North East Hampshire, we are called to proclaim the gospel, to develop disciples and to be good stewards of God's creation including its beauty, diversity and resources. We recognise the need to operate and live our lives both individually and corporately in ways that are responsible and sustainable, ensuring the impact our activities have on the world and its eco-systems are reduced and mitigated wherever possible.

We recognise that God is in communion with all life, and that all life exists in an intimate, mutually supporting relationship sustained by and reflective of God's love. We recognise our own shortcomings and their effects on creation and the need for prayer, for education and for action to promote more sustainable and environmentally friendly ways of living.

Our Diocesan Strategy "Transforming Church, Transforming Lives" (2016) centres on making disciples and increasing believers, which includes good stewardship of God's creation. Therefore, as a diocese, in line with the Five Marks of Mission (Lambeth 1988) we will:

Proclaim the Good News of the kingdom – to celebrate the gift of creation and show its spiritual and practical value to all. The earth sustains us and God calls us to care for His creation.

Teach, baptise and nurture new believers – to promote environmental mindfulness as an intrinsic part of our approach to Christian life.

Respond to human need by loving service – encouraging a way of living and ordering one's life in community, with care for the land and all its creatures in response to problems such as climate disruption, water scarcity, flooding and habitat destruction as they impact on the world and especially the poor and vulnerable.

Seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation – by seeking to value the preciousness and finite nature of the earth's resources and promoting sustainable ways of living whilst also challenging the economic, political and personal interests that take advantage of them at the expense of creation.

Strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth – by recognising the diocese's own environmental impacts including church buildings and churchyards, offices, housing, schools and glebe land and seeking to reduce our carbon footprint, address land management, and improve environmental performance, thereby reducing our environmental impact and increasing our contribution to sustainability, bio-diversity and local ecology.

In order to promote care for creation our diocese commits to:

- Bring God's great love for the whole of creation to attention by incorporating wider environmental concerns and promoting care and stewardship of creation into the theological and liturgical life of the diocese and encouraging all who worship to engage in these issues for themselves.
- Understand how the Diocesan buildings, land, travel and other activities impact on the environment and devise a strategy which will strive to manage these issues and to minimise their impact.

Appendix 1



- Become an Eco Diocese, working towards the highest award. This will involve us encouraging our Churches to become Eco Churches and support initiatives that improve sustainability and reduce environmental impact wherever possible.
- Support the Shrinking the Footprint team and other C of E national initiatives to reduce our carbon emissions and promote sustainability
- Have a named environmental officer (or lead) and resource an environmental group to encourage environmental action, keep abreast of changes in environmental practice and law and to look at opportunities for whole diocese learning and celebration of best environmental practice..
- Include caring for creation as part of the theological training and education offered to ordinands, curates and lay ministers.
- Provide examples, materials and encouragement, through deaneries and directly to parish churches, schools and offices to engage with broader aspects of their environmental and ethical practice.
- Look to work in partnership with other faith groups, organisations and voluntary groups where we share a common agenda around environmental issues.