

Our journey to Silver Ecochurch award

Quite a long time ago, back in the early 2000s a group of us at St Paul's formed a Sustainability group and fretted a bit about our energy use. We changed quite a lot of the lightbulbs and we wrote articles encouraging environmental sustainability for our Church magazine. So, when the congregation made the decision to extend our Church buildings we became very involved in identifying sustainable options.

We suggested as many changes as we could in the design of the buildings; we also recommended that the construction processes use recycled materials for hard core and did not demolish existing buildings. We also included a variety of environmental initiatives, for example:

- Where we could we used as much natural light as possible;
- We installed solar panels on the hall and extension roofs;
- We insulated all that we could particularly in the new build sections of the building and also in the original church building.



The building work was carried out during 2009-10. We applied to A Rocha for the Eco Church award soon after it was set up in 2016. We immediately scored highly on our church buildings but there was much more to do! The Eco Church award is a box-ticking process so we could see in which areas we needed to improve.

Of the 5 areas covered, our score on Worship and Teaching was particularly low although we had all contributed prayers focussing on the environment. There was very little clergy input at the time so we organised a guest speaker from A Rocha and also a sermon by a local environmental enthusiast from another church.

We planted a wildflower garden and set up a composting system and continued to support A Rocha, Tearfund and Land for Life in Argentina (a Christian charity that fights deforestation).

We also published more articles on sustainable living to improve our score on Lifestyle. Eventually we achieved our Bronze award in 2017.

Having realised that our scores on the Eco Church award were edging towards Silver in most areas we made an effort to identify what we needed to change to bring the scores up to the Silver mark.

We invited more guest speakers to speak on sustainable living and we continued to pray for creation care. We've done two Eco/Sustainability services and also a Seminar on living sustainably.

We changed our energy supplier to a renewable option and we confirmed that our church used recycled toilet paper and environmentally friendly cleaning products.

We planted perennial insect friendly plants where our wildflower meadow had been as this had become an unsustainable option. We are still composting and we still support A Rocha, Tearfund and other environmental charities.

We've been involved in Sustainable St Albans along with many other faith groups and have organised several events during St Albans Sustainability Festivals in recent years.

We try to apply LOAF principles (Local, Organic, Animal friendly, Fairly traded) to our catering and to encourage our members to apply these principles in their own lives.

We could see that more action was needed in particular in the personal lifestyles of church members – a different type of change to achieve compared to changes to the buildings or use of our land. So, for example, we've encouraged church members to carry out their own carbon footprinting and to use of Fairtrade products through a video shown during Fairtrade Fortnight.

Finally we edged past the score required for a Silver award, which we received in October.

We have been inspired by publications from A Rocha such as *L is for Lifestyle* and *Saying Yes to Life* by Ruth Valerio, and Bible studies by the John Ray Institute and Operation Noah which have been used by our small groups. We have a Creation Care emailing list with about 25 recipients whom we keep informed both about what we're doing as a church and about wider issues.

Next up: we'll see whether we can achieve the Gold award, which has so far only been awarded to around 24 churches in England and Wales. It will be a challenge, especially as we have little land, but we'll do as much as we possibly can to meet the criteria in all 5 areas. We are delighted that our new (job-sharing) vicars are very supportive of caring for God's creation and know they'll encourage us as we press on towards Gold.