

## **Introduction**

In the publicity for this event a quote by Rowan Williams was used, he said the "We meet as people of faith in the context of this critical moment in human history.....[and] to take "the right decisions for our global future". The programme I work for Eco-Congregation hope to help people make those right decisions and show while most of us can only think globally we can all act locally.

So how does Eco-Congregation work to deliver change on a local scale

## **What is Eco-Congregation?**

Eco-Congregation is a structured programme designed to enable the Christian community, to respond to our environmental concerns. The key aim of Eco-Congregation is to **encourage Churches and their members to celebrate the gift of creation and care for it in appropriate practical and spiritual ways.**

For the last 10 years Eco-Congregations across Scotland, the UK and increasingly in other countries too, have been working to reduce their environmental impact. As more and more churches realise the seriousness of our environmental problems, they are joining the Eco-Congregation programme. Small actions add up to big results and with 240 congregations signed up, representing around 24,000 people, Eco-Congregation Scotland is now a major movement for environmental change in Scotland. Its reach is both national and truly ecumenical with churches from Shetland to Dumfries of nine different denominations coming together on an issue of common concern.

The programme gives a whole variety of ways in which to change lifestyles and tackle the issues, including climate change in the church, the community and in our own lives. Designed collaboratively with churches it has something to offer every church context, regardless of size, geographical location or denomination. At the heart of the programme are the written resource modules, which are free to registered churches. These contain information on environmental issues, a Christian perspective and suggestions for action.

In order to register as an Eco-Congregation churches are asked to complete a simple environmental audit to help and then there are 12 other resource modules to help inspire and inform action.

The first part of the programme looks at the Christian basis for caring for creation: making the link between our faith and our environmental concerns. Having looked at the basis for action with the help of some of the first six modules, we hope that the second section of modules will provide practical advice on the measures that can be taken in and around the church buildings. The third section then looks beyond the four walls of the church and is about taking action at home, in the local community and on global issues.

In September 2009 Stewart Stevenson MSP, Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change in Scotland launched a new module on Managing our Carbon Footprint. The module encourages eco-congregations and their members to commit to a 5% year on year cut in carbon emissions. This is in line with the targets set in the Scottish Government's Climate Change Act.

As well as the written resources, there is an Eco-Congregation website and blog, regular newsletters and local networks of churches across the country, sharing ideas and information.

### **Responding to Climate Change**

Because of the way in which the programme is structured, beginning by building a faith base for action in the church and community, we believe Eco-congregations have a special role to play in responding to climate change. We can work with secular environment groups to help us take on practical challenges to reduce our carbon footprints but we have, as the basis of action and as our motivation: our Christian beliefs.

Alistair McIntosh in a keynote address at our recent conference urged us not to lose sight of that spiritual dimension. He said it “is of the greatest importance: eco-congregations should challenge the materialist culture in which we live and the idolatry of consumerism.”

Alistair further claimed that “We are all complicit in the idolatry of consumerism. We plunder the earth’s resources in order to sustain our high level of consumption and at the same time condemn a large portion of the world’s population to poverty. We continue to exploit nature and people in other parts of the world. This is sustained by a consumer economy and political system that panders to our greed and avarice. Retail therapy may offer us a short term high but it creates more craving and fails to offer any real depth of satisfaction. It also deadens our compassion for others. We become individual consumers and lose our ability to feel for others. This greed leads to violence, both against the earth and against each other: to sustain our current level of consumption we need to plunder the resources of others”

He went on to encourage us, as ecocongregations to challenge this idolatry, to cultivate the spirituality that helps to fill the gap in our lives. We can then move to practical action.

### **Practical Action**

Practical action in churches can be at an individual level or as a congregation – both can be inspirational: Jack Vincent, an 11 year old boy from Carllops Church in the Borders, inspired his congregation to reduce their carbon footprint by committing to “electricity free days”. Whilst as a congregation Radnor Park Church in Clydebank took advantage of a taking surplus heat generated by a Combined Heat and Power plant (CHP) serving seven blocks of flats adjacent to the Church. They can now claim to have zero carbon emissions from their heating system, making it an unqualified success both environmentally and financially.

At Sacred Heart Church, here in Edinburgh, following a successful grant application to the Climate Challenge Fund, a major project is being undertaken to insulate the main hall. The project will provide under floor and wall insulation as well as lowering and insulating the ceiling

On a larger scale congregations can also set an example to a whole community. Westray in Orkney installed a ground source heat pump and their own wind turbine in the church and has then gone on to work with other community organisations aiming to make the island carbon neutral. They have also used a bequest to establish a Trust fund

which has resulted in many other church buildings across Orkney reducing their carbon footprint. Bankfoot Church in Perthshire took the opportunity provided when their 18<sup>th</sup> Century building was destroyed in a fire to rebuild the church and provide the community with a building that is accessible and relevant to all. The Church now includes, in addition to the sanctuary, a soft play area for parents and toddlers, a games hall shared with the local school, youth café and day care centre for the elderly. It also has two wind turbines, a ground source heat pump and a carbon footprint equivalent to a two-bedroomed bungalow.

### **What next?**

Parliament has already recognised the movement in a debate when congregations up and down the country lobbied their MSPs, who gave unanimous support for the programme. In June 2009 eco-congregations again showed their influence by successfully campaigning for public engagement to be included in the Scottish Government's ground breaking Climate Change Act.

At the Wave, Scotland's largest ever climate change demonstration, which took place in Glasgow, just before Christmas in advance of the Copenhagen Summit, Eco-Congregation Scotland played a key role in facilitating the ecumenical service that immediately preceded the march. The service was attended by over 250 people with participation from the leaders of the three largest denominations and an address from Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community. Eco-congregations were also well represented among the marchers.

Beyond Scotland, an international movement is emerging with nationals from nineteen other countries having expressed interest in the programme. Eco-Congregation programmes are already established in the remainder of the UK, Ireland and in Canada and the materials have been translated into Dutch, French and Norwegian.

I would like to conclude with a quote (slightly adapted!) from the Moderator of the Church of Scotland about Copenhagen "The failure of world leaders to reach a binding agreement on climate change has spurred further action in churches and communities. If governments cannot lead, and it seems they can't, then faith groups, churches and others must step forward to do so. Eco-congregations cannot alone change the world but they can show, community by community, that where politicians have failed the people can succeed. They believe it is in our hands to choose the way we treat the planet. They recognise the power we have as consumers, as activists, as members of churches and global organisations, as digital citizens and as believers in hope over adversity, to change the way we live on earth. They want to lead our leaders and show them the way."

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