

# **Environmental Initiatives by Church Groups in Ireland**

## **Carrigaline Union, Diocese of Cork, Cloyne and Ross**

*Elaine Murray*

### **Introduction**

This is an account of the 'eco journey' of one Country Cork Church of Ireland parish – "Carrigaline Union", which has two churches, St Mary's Carrigaline and St John's, Monkstown.

As a Christian community, we believe that all are accountable to God for what is done with creation, and so we face the question of how we are to fulfil that responsibility in the light of our contemporary problems. At a parish level we must emphasise the need for justice for those places and people who bear the brunt of the damage and pain provoked by our human-induced climate change. For these places and people, a changing climate means droughts, floods, crops failing, and diseases spreading, with no resources to adapt to the changes. As we see the effects of climate change, we are forced to acknowledge the 'carbon debt' owed by the developed countries to the rest of the world.

However, even as we acknowledge the need to respond to the environmental crisis we can also feel overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge: we can experience a sense of helplessness and of being swamped when faced with problems of such magnitude. Yet we recall the words of the eighteenth century Irish statesman and writer, Edmund Burke, who said that: 'Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little'.

As a parish, an existing Christian community, we are already called to be 'hope-filled' and so we are ideally formed to actually do something about the threat of climate change.

At the heart of the covenant of God with his people is a call to 'do justice' and climate change is primarily a matter of justice. To do justice in this area is to change our lifestyles.

### **The Green Charter**

As a vicar in Kilkenny between 2005 and 2011, I was fortunate to be working in a diocese (Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory) determined to do something about environmental issues.

We developed a Diocesan Green Charter<sup>1</sup> which was rolled out to every parish in the diocese. This initiative ultimately led to a motion being brought to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, in May 2005, proposing that an Environmental Charter be adopted by the whole of the Church as a way forward in environmental good practice. The motion was adopted by the General Synod.

The Environmental Charter commits parishes in each of the twelve Church of Ireland dioceses to:

- Identify areas of waste and excess;
- Encourage environmental responsibility in the broader community;

- Support the development of developing countries both spiritually and financially, by supporting fair trade and addressing the effects of climate change;
- Advocate policy change that is environmentally beneficial at both local and national level.

## **Carrigaline Union**

I arrived in my new parish of Carrigaline Union, Diocese of Cork, Cloyne and Ross in December 2011. Initially, we set about becoming a 'Fairtrade Parish' which we achieved in August 2012, and then we began our journey towards applying for an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award. We received the Award in November 2014.

We see our work in the area of ecology as an on-going process, and the Eco-Congregation website has many more resources and ideas which we hope to tap into in the coming years as we continue our work.

Our initiatives over the last three years have included:

### ***Practical:***

- The Select Vestry of the parish voted unanimously in February 2013 to support the concept that environmental issues and caring for God's creation form part of our parish's life and mission. This is important as it recognises the fact that a concern for the environment needs to be a 'whole parish' initiative.
- In our parish's page in the diocesan magazine we have a section called 'Green Matters' where we let people know what has been happening and indicate that we are continually looking for suggestions as to what we can do to become a greener parish. We also have items in environmental issues in our weekly 'Pewsheets'.
- We stopped buying plastic cups and cutlery and began using delph we already had in the cupboard. We sourced 'green', 100% compostable cups, plates and napkins for use at events attended by large numbers; these materials are composted in the rectory compost bin.
- We bought new bins and began separating recyclable items.
- The Sunday School children were all given sunflower seeds, courtesy of Christian Aid, in 2013 and they 'saved' seeds from this original stock in 2014; we hold a competition to see who can grow the tallest sunflower and awards are made at the Harvest Service.
- In 2013, major work was undertaken on the rectory garden which had been left to its own devices for many years. We began by felling some trees which were in a dangerous state; the logs were sold within the parish to bear some of the costs of the renovation and the remainder of the logs were used in the rectory during the winter of 2013/14. We planted bee-friendly scrubs, hedging and fruit trees. The entire garden usage was revised and two separate 'allotment' type areas were developed for growing vegetables. A composting area was set up. The rectory now has a lovely and productive garden, buzzing with bees and butterflies and the members of the rectory family are enjoying the 'fruit of our labour'.

- The surplus from the rectory garden is left in a box at the back of Carrigaline Church with a poster encouraging people both to take produce from the box and to add their own surplus to the box for others to take. This has proved very popular as people put in what they cannot use and then take home other types of produce.
- The wider parish is benefitting from the rejuvenated rectory grounds as the parish picnic is held there in June and the parish barbeque is held in September.
- An initiative which has not yet been implemented but has been passed by the Select Vestry, and has a subcommittee assigned to get it established, is to use our parish hall as a 'community market' each Saturday morning, encouraging local producers to 'take a table' and sell their wares, in particular items such as 'ugly vegetables and fruit' which supermarkets will not buy from them. (We have a number of farmers and market gardeners in the parish, as well as, for example, honey producers, bakers, egg producers, soap makers). The Rector has already met with the local Environmental Officer to expedite this project and now, with their approval, we are negotiating with our insurers and hope to be up and running in 2016.
- We have boxes at the back of the churches to collect clothes, shoes and blankets for Cork Simon Community. We also collect food for Cork Penny Dinners and cosmetics and other items for the Women's Refuge.

### ***Spiritual:***

- We arrange creation-themes special services in the church (for example, Saturday Service on 9 February 2013 launching the parish's ecological initiative; Harvest Festival Service in 2013 and 2014; Rogation Sunday Service in 2013 and 2014).
- Billy the donkey joins us for our Palm Sunday Service in Carrigaline each year and the entire congregation walks out of the church, down the road, through a housing estate, into the rectory grounds for an outdoor reading from the day's lectionary and then through the graveyard back into the church.
- On Easter Sunday in 2013, 2014 and 2015, we joined with our sister church in Monkstown for an ecumenical dawn service which celebrated the Risen Christ out of doors by the sea.
- We hold an Animal Blessing Service in Carrigaline on the Sunday nearest the feast of St Francis of Assisi.

### ***Community:***

- We are involved in our parish school's Green Flag initiative.
- Since 2013, we have had an annual sponsored 'parish and school walk' which joins up with An Taisce's National Spring Clean initiative. All of the participants pick up rubbish as they walk. Rubbish bags are then collected free of charge by the local council.
- We had a Flower Festival at Pentecost 2013 in Carrigaline, celebrating the wonderful diversity of flowers. The theme was 'The Fruit of the Spirit'. Plants were sold at this event and we advertised the availability of allotments in our local community

- We have planted daffodil bulbs (a gift from the local Tidy Towns committee) in our properties to enhance the look of the area for the Tidy Towns competition.
- The Rector organised a Dawn Chorus event in Currabinny Wood within the parish boundaries in May 2015. This was an ecumenical event, with the Roman Catholic parish priests from Carrigaline and Monkstown joining in. Over 50 people took part in what we hope will now be an annual event.

### **Global:**

- The parish supports several global charities, some of which are involved in mitigating the effects of climate change on vulnerable communities (these charities include: Christian Aid, United Society and Feed the Minds).

### **Notes**

- 1 For the text of the Charter, see website of the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory. ([http://cashel.anglican.org/?page\\_id=1465](http://cashel.anglican.org/?page_id=1465)).

**Rev Elaine Murray has been Rector of Carrigaline Union since 2011, and prior to that was Vicar of the Kilkenny Group of Parishes, Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory.**

### **Clonakilty Methodist Church**

#### *Clonakilty Eco-Congregation*

In Clonakilty Methodist Church we began our Eco-Congregation journey in 2004 when members met together to undertake an 'environmental check-up'. We started by noting down the existing activities of the church and to what extent the environment played a part in these activities. We chose the following five areas to concentrate on as we worked towards achieving an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award:

- **Creation and Christianity** – in our regular and special church services we highlighted our stewardship of God's creation and included prayers for environmental issues; we held a children's summer club titled, 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle'.
- **Financial Matters** – we switched to a greener electricity supplier and worked on reducing the amount of electricity used, including low energy lighting options in the church. We also reduced the number of lights used and the length of time they were in use for services.
- **Care of Church Grounds and Land** – we cleared the back yard to make a garden (in which we no longer use synthetic chemical weed-killers); we planted trees to commemorate special services such as baptisms and confirmations. At Christmas, we have a living Christmas tree in the church, and then we transfer the tree into the garden for the rest of the year.
- **Personal Lifestyles** – we encouraged church members to reduce, reuse, recycle and compost, to use long-life shopping bags; to plan better for car journeys, including using car-pooling as an option; to use eco-friendly cleaning products; to purchase L.O.A.F. products (this is, products that are locally produced, organic, seasonally available and fresh); and to join local groups such as 'Sustainable Clonakilty' and 'Grow Your Own'.

- **Global Neighbours** – we encourage church members to purchase Fairtrade products; we fostered links with asylum seekers in Clonakilty Lodge; we created an awareness of the impact of climate change on developing countries and hosted an annual charity craft fair (to raise money for Tearfund, Christian Aid, and CAPHA, Centre for Artists Handicapped Physically, Ivory Coast) to which we invited speakers from developing countries and at which we served Fairtrade products.

Thanks to then minister's championing of the cause, the mind-set of the congregation changed over time and we all became more aware of local and global environmental issues. In 2008, we were the first church in the Republic of Ireland to receive an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award.

### **Towards our Second Award**

We were aware that this was an on-going project and there was still much to do so we appointed a member of the congregation as an 'Eco-Champion' to keep us on our toes! He encouraged us by including an 'Eco-Tip' in each Sunday Service and displaying it on our new notice board (made locally with local timber) outside the church so that passers-by could see it throughout the week.

In the church buildings, we continued to make changes so that we as a church community would be kinder to the environment. We began to turn off the lights in the church on the brighter days during spring, summer and autumn. Solar lamps were installed on the pulpit and beside the organ. When our old boiler broke down we replaced it with a new, more efficient one and reduced the length of time it is running. We reclaimed more waste space at the back of the church and re-designed the garden (with more trees, eco-friendly gravel pathways and raised flower beds including plants to attract bees, butterflies and insects). The garden is now a wonderful facility and is used to host outdoor events.

In the church and at home we began to use a wider range of green cleaning and Fairtrade products and recycling facilities. We purchased a compost bin. The plaster on the wall outside the church was stripped to reveal beautiful natural stone.

In 2013, we were the first church in Ireland to receive a second Eco-Congregation Award. Representatives of Eco-Congregation Ireland came to present us with our wooden plaque (made from recycled church pews) and a bag of bio-charcoal for our garden! After the ceremony, members of the congregation, along with local organisations involved in environmental projects, joined together for a L.O.A.F. meal. We received national recognition when RTE Six One News included a short piece on our eco achievements.

Since 2013, we have continued to look for ways to reduce our use of resources – for example, installing a data projector which is operated through a reconditioned laptop; this reduces printing and paper usage. We have installed timers on the water heaters. We encourage all those who decorate the church with flowers for Sunday Service to use what they have in their own garden and/or use what is in the church garden first before buying imported expensive flowers. We have spoken about the possibility of installing solar panels or a wind turbine in the future. We have discussed purchasing a water butt to save rain water, using water hippos to reduce the amount of water used in toilets and installing aerators for taps.

We also continue to encourage members of the church to find ways to 'reduce and re-use' in their own lives – for example, to consider their heating options and reduce the use of

fossil fuels; to use non-peat firelighters; to consider where and how the clothes they buy are produced and when finished with them to donate them to charities, to consider more fuel efficient models as options if purchasing a car.

The journey is not over – we plan to keep environmental issues in the minds of the congregation, to continue the work we have done to date and endeavour to come up with new and fresh ideas. We will continue to encourage one another to take care of the beautiful planet which God provided for us, remembering the words of the Psalm: 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it' (Psalm 24: 1; New International Version).

## **Fitzroy Presbyterian Church**

*Fitzroy Caring for Creation*

### **Origins**

The environmental work of Fitzroy Presbyterian Church in Belfast city emerged from Fitzroy's existing work with Clonard Monastery, under the 'Clonard/Fitzroy Fellowship'. As part of the programme of activities of the Fellowship, we asked Sr Catherine Brennan of Eco-Congregation Ireland to speak to the group on the theme of the environment and reconciliation. This excited the interest of a number of members of the group, so they spoke about it in the wider church circle and from this emerged a desire to expand the Fellowship's work of reconciliation to include the environment.

A meeting open to people from both churches was arranged to see what interest there was in pursuing this issue and what they would like to do. Everyone who attended shared experiences and perspectives and indicated the issues that interested them. Out of this, Fitzroy Caring for Creation group was set up in 2009; all the members of the group were from Fitzroy Church.

### **Inspiring Principles and Core Features**

Fitzroy Caring for Creation (FCfC) started out as a small group of people who shared a passion for creation and a concern for its well-being. Initially, we had a core group of about six to eight, with links to others who also had an interest in creation. This core group met monthly to monitor progress in current projects and to start work or research on any future projects.

From the beginning, an important feature of the group has been that it is led by ordinary members of the congregation – it is not a top-down group initiated by the Kirk Session. After it was set up, the group wrote to the Kirk Session to seek its support; this was given, but the driving force remained the members of the group itself, and it was left to them to decide the direction the work of the group should take.

The group is based on co-operative values without an individual leader. Having various skills and talents, we co-operate and we complement each other. We try to meet each month and tend to arrange our meetings via emails; our minister and Clerk of Session are also included in any relevant emails, as are members of the congregation who have registered an interest in the group but are unable to attend the meetings because of other commitments.

## Activities and Award

We used the resources of Eco-Congregation Ireland website to get us started, compiling the suggested 'audit' to identify where we were strong and where there were gaps. This showed up several gaps in our eco-awareness and practice.

We decided not to be a group that focussed inwardly on Fitzroy but, rather, we would go out and visit other churches in Belfast, as well as individuals, we knew had similar interests. And so we spent time building relationships with other groups and churches – we visited St Molua's parish in East Belfast (this was first church on the island of Ireland to receive an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award) and other churches and church groups to see what they had done and to get ideas for how we could start becoming more environmentally friendly. We were keen also to network with other churches and groups to promote an eco-congregation approach. In addition, we sought to address the wider Presbyterian community in south Belfast through meeting with the South Belfast Presbytery.

Following our self-assessment through the audit and the initiation of a number of a number of eco-friendly initiatives, the group submitted an application for an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award. The subsequent visit and assessment by Eco-Congregation led to Fitzroy becoming, in 2011, the first Presbyterian Church in Ireland to gain an Eco-Congregation Award.

Some of the practical changes that Fitzroy Caring for Creation has been part of include:

**Flowers:** We spent time getting about 20 large troughs built to place around the church premises. These troughs were filled with soil and we then planted them with annual flowers. Fitzroy is located in a rather bleak urban setting – there is little of the natural world evident in the vicinity. Having 20 troughs filled with flowers and shrubs really helped to soften the look of the area, brought along lots of insects and bees to feed off the flowers, drew the attention of passers-by to the church and improved the look of the church grounds.

**Cleaning:** We switched to using eco-friendly hand soaps, cleaning products and toilet rolls.

**Energy Saving:** We changed all of the light bulbs in the main church to energy-saver bulbs (most of the bulbs in the halls were already energy-saving).

**Recycling:** We started weekly recycling of paper, plastic and tins in the church and church halls. Three separate bags are now available beside the main bin, so that people can appropriately dispose of council-recycled products.

**Environmental Message:** We had a notice area in the corridor of the church to promote our message and provide information on new initiatives. We have also led a Harvest Service on Caring for Creation themes, as well as other environmental slots in services throughout the year.

**Reduce:** We have tried to reduce the size of our Order of Service printouts each week. The front page is no longer just a presentation page but also contains the start of the Order of Service. The words of all hymns/songs are no longer printed in every Order of Service handout: instead, there are now just a few copies of the words printed for people

who struggle to read the words from the screen at the front of the church. We have reduced the quantity of paper used by 50%, although there are some larger print versions for those with a visual impairment.

**Fairtrade:** We have maintained our Fairtrade status, encouraging the use of Fairtrade tea and coffee throughout the church. We use ceramic mugs and cups after church services on Sundays and try to use biodegradable paper cups at other meetings.

**Nature:** In 2010 there were five Sunday afternoon church walks with an emphasis on being aware of our surroundings – and some practical recycling! Each walk examined a different eco-system, for example, woodland, wetland, coastline. In 2011, four walks were arranged: Carnmoney Hill (April); Helen's Tower, Conlig (May); Cavehill (June); Scrabo Country Park (September). These walks were led by a member of the congregation who is a keen amateur botanist.

**Eco Network:** As stated previously, we are interested in the wider community outside the doors of Fitzroy. To this end, we initiated the setting up of a wider network of churches and groups to promote environmental/creation work across Belfast – networking laterally. This group meets every six months or so with representatives from about eight different churches and is a forum for individuals and churches/church groups to meet and hear from one another. Our discussions have ranged from practical matters (such as environmentally-friendly cleaning products) to more structural issues, such as the struggle to persuade church authorities and members of congregations to give more serious attention to the issue of care for creation. The support of Eco-Congregation Ireland in promoting these events has been very helpful.

## **Plans**

We in Fitzroy are coming towards the completion of a large extension of our premises; this work has meant that many of our facilities have not been in use for over the last year. We have tried to include a number of environmentally-friendly and cost-efficient ideas in the new build – for example, zoned heating and movement sensors to turn lights on and off.

Like all groups, we have lost some members over the years, and with the church facilities not available during the past year we have not been very active. With the new premises opening in autumn 2015, it will be a time to renew our activities, so we are hopeful for the future.

## **Rathfarnham Quaker Meeting**

*Ciara Harrison*

*Are you concerned that man's increasing power over nature should not be used irresponsibly but with reverence for life and with a sense of the splendour of God's continuing creation?*

*Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford. Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment?*

These are the words of two of the *Advices and Queries* on which members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) are encouraged to reflect from time to time. Quakers, who in the early days were known as Friends of the Truth, have 'testimonies' which point to the way we attempt to lead our lives by putting faith into action. The testimonies have changed over the years, according to the times in which Quakers have lived. At one time, there were testimonies with regards to slavery, capital punishment and taking oaths, but in the past century the focus has been primarily on the testimonies of peace, simplicity, equality and integrity.

In 2009, two members of Cork Quaker Meeting visited Rathfarnham Meeting and delivered an informative and challenging talk on environmental care. Denise Gabuzda linked creation care to the testimonies, emphasising especially those of simplicity and peace. She shared with us also how some Quakers, especially in America, were beginning to talk about environmental care as an emerging testimony. Natasha Harty, who at that time was the Quaker representative in the Eco-Congregation Ireland committee. Shared how Cork Quakers has undertaken practical steps to incorporate earth care into the life of their Meeting, including planting an orchard in the grounds of their graveyard and promoting locally-grown fruit and vegetables.

Natasha and Denise's presentation struck a chord with many members of Rathfarnham and promoted several of us to form an Eco Committee for the Rathfarnham Meeting to consider what steps we could take to incorporate creation care into the life of our Meeting.

One of our first actions was to complete Eco-Congregation Ireland's 'Church Check-Up', which is the first section of its online resources ([www.ecocongregationireland.com](http://www.ecocongregationireland.com)).

We found this an encouraging exercise as it helped us identify what we were already doing – for example, recycling, using low-energy light bulbs, and using delph rather than disposable cups. We met with the warden of the Meeting to work out a plan to take further steps and we found that working through the check-list had already given us plenty of ideas.

In order to save water, we put water containers into the toilet cisterns and, to support renewable energy, we switched to Airtricity. We made a commitment to buy only eco-friendly soap, washing up liquid, toilet rolls and cleaning products and to purchase Fairtrade-labelled tea and coffee.

In the garden of the Meeting House, we dug a herb garden and planted four fruit trees. All members of the Meeting – from toddlers to people over 90 – got involved in digging, wheel barrowing, planting and nurturing. Our gardening was a small step towards local resilience, to be sure, but also a great way to strengthen bonds of friendship in the Meeting. It was hoped too that by growing herbs and fruit in our garden, members of the Meeting would be encouraged to grow produced at home, thus reducing food miles to food metres.

In order to encourage biodiversity, we allowed some of the lawn to grow into a natural meadow and in 2011 this became home to three bee-hives. Given the precarious position of bees in the world today and how essential they are to the balance of nature, it is satisfying to be able to accommodate bees in this way and to enjoy the fruits of their labour – including natural lip balm as well as delicious honey. We also installed a water butt, which is convenient for watering the herbs and trees.

From time to time, Junior Meeting sessions with our children and teenagers focus on environmental topics – covering everything from fair trade and recycling to the importance of rainforests. They joined in Stop Climate Chaos's 'Ring the Changes' action in 2009 and over the years have organised fundraising events for environmental charities such as VITA and Rainforest Concern. One year, the children and young people made an Easter Garden using natural materials and, more recently, they made a climate change 'love tree' on which they hung hearts with pictures/words depicting things they love which are currently under threat from climate change – including their families, favourite beaches and chocolate.

We have found too that environmental care is a great way to engage with members of the local community and other churches. We have invited local people to join us in a number of initiatives, including litter picks and candle-lit vigils to mark Earth Hour on the last Saturday of March. We hope the vigils will become an annual event: there is something powerful in joining with people locally and across the globe in switching off lights to save energy and, in so doing, promoting awareness of the urgent need for carbon reduction.

In December 2011, we were delighted to become the first Quaker Meeting in Ireland to receive an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award. Since then, we have continued to strive to keep earth care in our sights. For example, in summer 2014, we held a Plant-a-Seed Day for the children and in the autumn they planted 100 daffodil bulbs. In autumn 2015, they will make lavender bags, using lavender from the herb garden, and they are also intending to make pictures for a 2016 calendar with a 'Save the Earth' theme. We are also planning an eco-stall for the Open Day we will be holding on 4 October 2015 where we will invite visitors to write carbon-reducing pledges on footprints; these we will use to make a giant collage, which will be displayed so that it can be seen by all the different groups who use the premises.

Members of the Rathfarnham Meeting will also continue to take part in events and campaigns organised by Eco Quakers Ireland and Stop Climate Chaos. We believe it is crucial that we continue to work together with other groups – locally, nationally and internationally – especially in the run-up to the crucial UN climate talks taking place in Paris in November-December 2015.

**Ciara Harrison is a member of the Rathfarnham Quaker Meeting Eco Committee**

## **Nurturing Creation in Balally**

*Balally Parish Environment Group*

### **Introduction**

Over many years, there has been a growing awareness in Balally Parish of the threat to humankind posed by climate change; of the reckless way we humans abuse the natural environment and of the fact that the people who suffer most from the effects of climate change are those who live in developing countries, i.e. the people who have contributed least to the problem.

People in the parish began to recognise that, as Pope John Paul II said in 1990, there is a new consciousness throughout society 'that world peace is threatened, not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also

by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life'.<sup>1</sup>

Some parishioners were motivated to come together to seek 'to recover the gift of the Spirit in creation, in the earth, in each other, and in our Christian communities so that we may together be inspired and empowered to heal a planet in peril'.<sup>2</sup>

## **Leadership**

For many years, strong leadership on environmental concerns has been given by the parish team led by Monsignor Dermot Lane, the Parish Priest of Balally. Monsignor Lane has a long history of presenting a Christian theological understanding of humankind's role in the continuing act of God's creation in his homilies, liturgies, lectures and writing. He encouraged the parish affiliation to the Three Rock Churches' Environment Group, an ecumenical grouping of seven church communities located in the shadow of Three Rock Mountain.

Since 2008, the Parish Pastoral Council has included in its objectives a determination to increase awareness of climate change; to engage actively with other local Christian communities in developing a Christian response to climate change and to engage actively with the Eco-Congregation Ireland programme.

## **Balally Parish Environment Group**

Encouraged by this parish leadership, a parish environmental group became active. We participated in the Eco-Congregation Ireland bell-ringing initiative on 8 December 2007 (in connection with the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali); we marked Earth Hour in March 2008 and mounted an exhibition in the church on the effects of climate change; with Eco-Congregation and Three Rocks Churches' Environment Group we hosted an Ecumenical Prayer Service.

The group was formally launched in October 2010 as BEG (**B**alally **P**arish **E**nvironment **G**roup).

## **Mission Statement**

The Group adopted the following mission statement:

*We recognise:*

- that as Christians we have a role to play in God's continuing work of creation;
- that our lifestyles are causing immeasurable damage to the natural environment;
- that we are placing in jeopardy the future of generations as yet unborn;
- that valuable people in the developing world are currently suffering from drought, flood, famine, illness and dislocation as a consequence of our lifestyle choices.

*Our mission:*

We intend to act on our responsibility as Christians to care for God's creation by:

- making appreciation of and care for God's creation an integral part of our parish liturgies;

- participating in ecumenical environmental initiatives;
- informing ourselves and our parish community of the ways in which we can participate in initiatives to promote sustainable living, both local and global;
- promoting awareness of our duty to future generations as well as towards the poorest people of the world who are suffering the adverse effects of the unsustainable lifestyles of richer countries.

## **Activities**

Responding to its mandate from the Parish Pastoral Council and its own mission statement, BEG engages in a range of activities with the aim of raising awareness of the environmental crisis, and awareness of how we as Christians together might address the situation.

## ***Liturgy***

- We contribute prayers on an environmental theme to be regularly included in the Prayers of the Faithful at Sunday Masses.
- We organise special 'Creation Masses', in consultation with the parish liturgy committee, on significant dates each year (for example, World Environment Day) when the homily, the offertory procession, the hymns, the Prayers of the Faithful and the Communion Reflection are all chosen to reflect an environmental theme.
- With Eco-Congregation Ireland and Three Rock Churches' Environment Group, we hosted an Ecumenical Prayer Service for the success of the Durban Climate Conference in December 2011. We attend similar liturgies organised by other church groups.
- To coincide with the Summit on Climate Change in September 2009, we organised a climate change lunchtime prayer service accompanied by the ringing of the church bell.
- To mark World Environment Day in October 2010 we erected in the church a simple structure made of light branches, bamboo, and golden netting, and covered it with leaves, flowers, fruit and Fairtrade items. The inspiration for this initiative was the Jewish feast of Sukkot, marking harvest time and the wandering in the desert of the ancestors of the Jews (Lev. 23: 42-43). Our aim was to draw attention to the plight of so many Africans today who are being driven from their land by advancing desertification.
- After our Creation liturgy in October 2012 we organised a public talk, 'Treading Lightly on the Earth', by environmentalist and broadcaster Éanna Ní Lamhna, followed by a question and answer session.
- We distribute bulbs to all members of the congregation as they leave Mass on 'Balally Plant a Bulb Day'. We encourage people to plant the bulb at home as a symbol of our appreciation of the beauty of creation and of our belief in the future flourishing which will result from hopeful seeds sown in darkness. This project commenced in 2010 and our purpose was to lift spirits at a time of deep depression in our country. In 2014, people had the option of planting the bulbs in a new flower bed which had been

prepared for this purpose outside the church. In 2015, they were encouraged to plant the bulbs at home.

- For Creation Time in 2014 we held an evening of music, poetry and prayer to accompany a PowerPoint presentation of the many wonderful facets of our natural world.

### ***Information***

We recognise that, in order to make a meaningful contribution to environmental protection, we and our parish community need to keep abreast of changes and proposals for changes that have the potential to impact on the environment for better or for worse. There is, therefore, an information element in all our input to liturgies and community projects.

- Individually, we attend conferences, seminars, public meetings; we visit relevant websites and read books and articles on environmental issues.
- We regularly publish climate change material in the weekly Parish Newsletter and also in the monthly Three Rock Panorama Community Magazine (circulation 1,700 in the area from Dundrum to Enniskerry and from Leopardstown to Glencullen).
- We display posters relating to nature, the environment and climate change in the church from time to time.
- We display notices in the church to inform parishioners of events and activities of environmental interest.

### ***Community Projects***

- In the lead-up to the Copenhagen Climate change Conference in December 2009, we organised a petition, which was presented to the then Minister for the Environment, urging that the Irish Government representatives at the Conference would press for a meaningful agreement on climate change. A book for signatures to the petition was available in the church over a number of weeks to give parishioners an opportunity to be associated with the initiative.
- We publicise and support initiatives by agencies, such as Trócaire, which work for climate justice.
- Each year, as our Lenten priority, we adopt the theme of that year's Trócaire campaign and plan our initiative around it.
- We engage our schools in a variety of ways. Surplus bulbs from the annual 'Balally Plant a Bulb Day' are distributed to the schools to assist them in the greening of their school.
- Following the building of our Parish Pastoral Centre we worked with a group of children from Queen of Angels School in planting a flower bed outside the church/pastoral centre in preparation for the visit of the President of Ireland for the official opening of the Pastoral Centre, in January 2013. Subsequently, at a school

assembly, a member of BEG presented each child who had participated in the work with a certificate signed by the Parish Priest and the Chair of BEG.

- Our two parish schools partnered us in our Lenten Project, 'A School Child's Environmental Pledge for Lent in 2013'. The children were asked to select a simple task from a list and pledge to do that selected task for the week, then select another task for the following week, and so on for each week of Lent. Different lists were prepared for the younger and older children. The lists also contained a gentle reminder, to those who could afford it, to put a little money in the Trócaire box that week.
- We worked with residents of Wedgewood Estate in a clean-up of the area surrounding the local Scout Den and in preparing the ground for planting.
- On an on-going basis, we collect used batteries and used stamps in the church porch. The batteries are delivered to the Laura Lynn Foundation and the used stamps to a local school. Both batteries and stamps are used for fundraising.
- We have been represented on Three Rock Churches' Environment Group (TRCEG) and have participated in its activities over the years. In summer 2008, our church was the venue for a display of posters created by children from seven local primary schools who participated in the TRCEG-organised 'Make a Poster' initiatives, the theme of which was 'Cherishing Creation'. Two ecumenical Eco Services were held in Balally Church under the auspices of TRCEG and more recently some meetings of the group were held in our new Pastoral Centre.

### ***Practical Parish Arrangements***

- Use of paper is kept to a minimum in the parish office, by employing alternatives such as texting and emailing where appropriate. When printing is necessary, it is done on both sides of the page, if feasible. Waster pages are used when preparing machines for print runs and for testing before printing commences.
- BEG encourages the use of Fairtrade products by providing the Pastoral Centre Café with Fairtrade tea and coffee.
- A member of BEG was actively involved in the planning and overseeing of the development of the new Pastoral Centre. Sustainability was a key consideration in its design and construction. Heating is provided through the use of solar panels.

### **Current BEG Activities**

- In late spring 2015, Balally Parish applied for an Eco-Congregation Ireland Award, and in the subsequent assessment was successful. This Award will be formally presented in autumn 2015.
- For Earth Day 2015 (Wednesday, 22 April 2015), fourteen posters, one for each Station of the Cross, and containing relevant (climate change related) quotations by a variety of well-known philosophers were mounted on the walls of the church, and remained there throughout the summer months.

- BEG was involved in supporting Balally Parish in hosting a conference in Balally Pastoral Centre (18-19 September 2015) on Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*.

## Notes

- 1 Pope John Paul II, 'Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation'. Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990. ([https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html)).
- 2 Dermot A. Lane, 'Discerning the Holy Spirit in the Life of Creation', *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 62, No. 2, February 2012. The article is the text of Fr Lane's sermon at an ecumenical service organised by Eco-Congregation Ireland in the Church of the Assumption, Balally Parish, 1 December 2011, in the context of the UN Climate Change Conference, Durban, South Africa.

## Environmental Initiatives by Church Groups in Ireland

*Throughout Ireland, many individuals, families, schools, businesses and voluntary groups are endeavouring to take action to protect and enhance the natural environment. In this section, initiatives by four Church groups are described.*

### **Eco-Congregation Ireland** **Catherine Brennan**

*For you love all things that exist ... For your immortal spirit is in all things. (Wisdom 11: 24; 12:1)*

*God saw everything that God had made and indeed it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)*

*Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things ... all things flow and are indirectly linked together ... If you push here, something somewhere will move; if you strike here, something somewhere will wince ... (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)*

The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands – with the added injustice that it is poor people who suffer most from environmental destruction. The work of loving, protecting, healing, celebrating and taking care of God's creation is foundational to the Christian gospel and central to the Church's mission. We truly live God's love for the whole of creation in the way we pray; celebrate Eucharist; educate; plant trees, vegetables, seeds and bulbs; deal with energy and litter; decorate; and make links to the local community and the wider global family.

### **An Ecumenical Initiative**

In 2005, the Church and Society Forum of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting initiated Eco-Congregation Ireland – an all-Ireland programme supported by the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church

and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). The programme is facilitated by a committee representing these five denominations and appointed by the respective denominational leaders. All five committee members work in a voluntary capacity; a part-time Communications Officer is employed. The committee is in liaison with Christian ecological groups in Britain and Europe as well as throughout Ireland.

The vision of Eco-Congregation is to see churches of all denominations throughout Ireland – north and south – celebrate God's creation, recognise the interdependence of all creation and care for it in their life and mission and through members' personal lifestyles.

Eco-Congregation Ireland aims therefore to encourage churches to rediscover the connection between the environment and Christian faith. Christians are invited to reflect on the beauty and integrity of creation and to consider what practical steps can be taken to heal and protect the natural environment. Eco-Congregation encourages and promotes an eco approach to worship, lifestyle, community outreach and contact with the developing world. The programme emphasises the connection between environmental destruction and injustice and poverty in our world; it emphasises also the needs of future generations of humanity and of all other species.

## **Resources**

Eco-Congregation Ireland offers support to individuals and faith communities as they endeavour to adopt an eco approach. Members of the committee are available to visit congregations and parishes if requested.

A wide range of resources is available to download from the website.<sup>1</sup> These are packed with ideas and suggestions which aim to integrate environmental care into different areas of church life. The resources include sections on worship, theology, work with children and young people, property and grounds management, finance, purchasing and waste management, working with local communities, and 'thinking and acting globally'.<sup>2</sup> A section on climate change will be added in the near future. Links with a range of other environmental groups, including those associated with churches are provided. Visitors to the website are invited to sign up to receive a monthly email newsletter.<sup>3</sup>

The website also includes a section on 'Eco Examples' and on 'Eco Tips', which provide examples and suggestions showing practical and imaginative ways in which individuals, groups and communities can go about adopting a more environmentally friendly approach to life.

## **Environmental Audit**

A church or congregation which wishes to take definitive steps towards a more eco-conscious way of being can start the process by assembling a group to undertake an 'environmental audit'. The Eco-Congregation Ireland website provides a checklist which enables groups to identify both existing good practice and areas which need to be addressed. This comprehensive checklist covers issues such as worship, theology, education, church management, personal lifestyle, community outreach and overseas concern. The environmental 'church-up' is done through using an easy 'tick box' format and it need take only an hour.

Groups often find themselves pleasantly surprised as they realise the number of ways in which their church or congregation is already being eco-friendly. The process also helps generate ideas as to how new and additional steps can be taken.

### **Eco-Congregation Award**

Churches which have been working on environmental issues for at least two years are invited to apply for an Eco-Congregation Award. Applicants are assessed by two independent assessors. In total, ten awards have so far been presented in Ireland, the most recent being to Kilbride Presbyterian Church, Co Antrim in May 2013. The Oblate parishes of Inchicore, Dublin, received an award in September 2012. The other churches which have received awards are: Whitechurch and Rathfarnham Church of Ireland; Dundrum Methodist Church; Churchtown Quaker Meeting – all in Dublin – and Fitzroy Presbyterian Church in Belfast. Clonakilty Methodist Church in Cork is the only church to have received two awards. Two dioceses have received awards – the Catholic Diocese of Kerry, which has more than twenty ‘eco active’ parishes, received an award in May 2012, and the Church of Ireland Diocese of Cashel and Ossory received it award in April 2013.

Whether the application is from a parish, community or diocese, the assessment criteria are the same. Evidence needs to be shown that eco progress has been made in four areas – spiritual, practical, community and global (for example, involvement with a development organisation such as Trócaire or Christian Aid).

### **The Importance of Action**

Speaking at an Eco-Congregation Ireland event in Kilkenny in April 2013, the Columban priest, eco-theologian and author, Sean McDonagh SSC, encouraged parishes to take tangible steps to help safeguard and improve the environment: ‘Take even very small steps and keep at it. We have to live in a way that supports the plant into the future’, he said.

The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Group in Inchicore, Dublin has been doing just that for the past five years. Members of the group, who come from the three Oblate parishes in the area (Mary Immaculate, St Michael’s and Our Lady of the Wayside, Bluebell), have worked hard to raise awareness of the interconnectedness of all life. One way in which they have done this is through holding ‘Earth Days’ where the local community is invited to special events such as nature appreciation walks. A ten-week gardening course to encourage people to grow their own vegetables proved popular with non-churchgoers as well as with parishioners. During Tree Week 2012 the group launched a unique Tree Gift Card to support an ambitious re-forestation project taking place on the Indonesian Island of Nusa Kambangan.<sup>4</sup> This has proved hugely popular as the cards make ideal gifts.<sup>5</sup>

Eco-Congregation Ireland itself is an active member of Stop Climate Chas – a coalition of civil, development, youth, environmental and faith organisations working together to prevent runaway climate change. Eco-Congregation supporters are encouraged to take part in Stop Climate Chaos campaigns.

### **‘Creation Time’**

Each year, Eco-Congregation Ireland strongly encourages churches of all denominations throughout Ireland to observe ‘Creation Time’ – from 1 September to 4 October – on either

one Sunday or all of the Sundays during this time. The setting aside of a five-week period to celebrate a Time for Creation emerged from a proposal adopted at the Third Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, Romania, in September 2007. The start and conclusion of Creation Time reflect significant dates in both the eastern and western Christian Churches: the Orthodox Church year begins on 1 September and 4 October is the feast day of St Francis of Assisi – the patron saint of those who promote ecology.

Each year excellent resources on the selected theme for Creation Time (including sermon notes, prayers, of intercession and fact sheets) are made available by the ecumenical network, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI).<sup>6</sup> The theme for Creation Time 2013 is 'Water Justice' corresponding with the United Nations International Year of Water Cooperation.

## **Concluding Comments**

Though the Eco-Congregation programme is designed to help churches work on environmental issues, participating churches find that it also boosts church life and mission, links people to those who suffer most from the degradation of our fragile planet, contributes to community building, stimulates church life and is enjoyable and fun.

Christians committed to ecological practice need to be mystics, finding God not only in boundless beauty of the natural world but also in the painful dark night of loss and failure and in the enduring, life-long commitment to the earth and its creatures.

## **Notes**

- 1 The website of Eco-Congregation Ireland is at: [www.ecocongregationireland.com](http://www.ecocongregationireland.com).
- 2 For support and network administrative purposes, and for updating of the website, it is helpful for Eco-Congregation Ireland to have feedback on the resources it provides. Email comments to: [info@ecocongregationireland.com](mailto:info@ecocongregationireland.com).
- 3 The monthly email newsletter can be obtained by sending an email with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line to [info@ecocongregationireland.com](mailto:info@ecocongregationireland.com).
- 4 See <http://oblatemissions.ie/jpic/gifftree>.
- 5 For further practical examples of environmental actions by parishes and dioceses see Eco-Congregation Ireland website ([www.ecocongregationireland.com](http://www.ecocongregationireland.com)).
- 6 See the website of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI): <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/creationtime>. See also European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN), a church network promoting co-operation in caring for creation (<http://www.ecen.org>).

***Sr Catherine Brennan SSL is the Roman Catholic representative on the committee of Eco-Congregation Ireland.***