



Aberdeen / Aberdeenshire Eco-Congregation Network

Report of the “MINI GATHERING”

22nd October 2012

Introduction

This was the first time Eco-Congregation Scotland has held an event in one of its network areas specifically aimed at inspiring and equipping congregations for their eco-congregation journey. The event was in response to comments from eco-congregations in the Aberdeen / Aberdeenshire area that all Eco-Congregation events take place in the Central Belt and they are always the ones that have to travel. We therefore also took the opportunity to consult and listen to the views of the network in regard to how we could best support development in the area. This was Eco-Congregation coming to Aberdeen!

The Mini Gathering was immediately preceded by a service hosted by Ferryhill Parish Church, which was open to all eco-congregations in the area, and where Ewan Aitken (Convenor of the Eco-Congregation Scotland Board) was invited to preach.

Attendance

31 people attended the Mini Gathering from 13 congregations. They brought a whole range of experience from those who are currently working towards their third award to a congregation that was just considering registering.



Growing Eco-Congregation in Scotland: Ewan Aitken

Ewan began by admitting sometimes it all seems too much. Can we really make an impact on climate change when most carbon is produced in India, China and the USA? Yet Longannet power station produces more carbon than 3 African countries...

Eco-Congregation began as a science based analysis but the debate is now much more than science. Science is crucial but sterile and we, as eco-congregations, bring something different – a sense of the sacred.

Change happens best from the bottom up and the Scottish Government has recognised this by funding ECS as the most networked organisation in Scotland. This may be because, potentially, we have 4000 members (every congregation in Scotland!) but it is also because policy is now about behaviour change. Behaviour change is based on values and (in this case) on valuing creation in itself and theological language could therefore be seen to be at the heart of political discourse.

In Scotland we now have a huge debate about moral leadership - where it comes from and what it's based on - especially in context of the referendum. In a changing Scotland there is a conversation to be had about the place of faith communities in public debate and action. It is a tremendous opportunity to set a new understanding of what it means to be faithful: to influence and lead public thinking, to value the world for what it is, to look beyond the science debate that brings only limited change.

In ECS, the Centre supports it does not lead, and we see our task as making sure you have resources, helping you to make links nationally but be rooted locally and to help you play to your strengths

ECS is all about helping people make good choices based on beliefs and we are the fastest growing community based environmental movement in Scotland. The Awards are a guide to how we are making change happen and the 16 local networks we currently have are the key to our growth and sustainability.

Questions & Answers

A number of points were raised mainly relating to the lack in availability of good advice and relevant case studies on energy efficiency and renewable energy for church buildings from which local eco-congregations could learn and benefit. Consultants from the Church of Scotland's Better heating scheme (http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/subjects/building_and_property_resources#heating) seemed reluctant to travel to the North East.

An alternative source of help is the local Energy Saving Scotland Advice Centre (SCARF see <http://www.scarf.org.uk/>) but, in the experience of those who had tried it, the quality of advice on offer seemed to vary greatly and is affected by frequent changes of personnel within the organisation.

It was also felt that much more information could be made available through the ECS website by having a database of case studies that could be accessed by a search. Then if, for example, a church wanted to investigate installing photovoltaic panels a search of the website would bring up a list of churches that had already carried out such a project and include a brief description and contact details. This type of information would act as a resource base for congregations on practical issues such as design cost and carbon / money savings. However, compiling and administering such a database is a capacity issue for ECS and, while this seems a really worthwhile project, it is difficult to undertake within current staff resources.

Growing ECS in your Congregation

Three local, active eco-congregations spoke about their individual eco-congregation journeys. It is not possible, in a short report, to include a complete list of all they have achieved but below are some of the highlights:

Cults Parish Church: Donald Brown

<http://www.cultsparishchurch.co.uk/eco.htm>

At Cults their journey started with a union of two churches in the community. The union included agreement for improvements to the church buildings and this led to the congregation install more efficient heating and look closely at the Eco-Congregation resources that gave guidance on property management, which, in turn led to them to become an eco-congregation.

They established a 'Green Group' which worked towards obtaining their first Award, for which they undertook activities in the three areas defined by ECS:

Spiritual

- The Minister makes frequent reference to ecological issues in his sermons and Junior Church are active in the garden grounds surrounding the church;
- The Green Group conducted one of the Sunday morning services which focussed on the 'carbon footprint' issue

Practical activities

- Established a 'Monday Group' - a team of volunteers who look after the buildings, make various improvements to the properties, and maintain the garden grounds. This team were responsible for developing an improved strategy for heating of the premises – the installation of electronic timers and low energy light fittings. They have a number of lights in the Sanctuary attached to a dimmer circuit and identifying suitable low energy lamps capable of being dimmed took a considerable time!
- The gardening group made significant improvements to the garden grounds and, as an awareness raising scheme, entered the Aberdeen in Bloom competition – in the first year they received a fourth place award!
- Prepared a talk on the 'carbon footprint' issue and, in addition to the service which featured the topic, gave a presentation to the Guild and to the 0-5-0 group a joint church/community group. As part of the evening's talk had a display of the problems of disposal of plastic bags and offered a series of alternative solutions
- Established a 'Green Notice Board' in the church hall where members of the congregation and many of our user groups could see what we were doing and on which we highlighted current topics including energy conservation topics, jute reusable shopping bags – starter pack to all new members comes in a small jute shopping bag, the carbon bathtub (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/big-idea/05/carbon-bath>) and water issues – the importation of water with food products!

Community involvement

- Many practical activities have significant 'community' links as the church provides accommodation and facilities for a number of local user groups – covering a wide range of age groups – all of which are associated with our 'eco activities'. Recently this involvement has been growing through association with play group activities – e.g. bulb planting and wild life garden
- Took the initiative to offer 'starter packs' to other churches and organisations who were considering starting 'Fair Trade' activities. This involved the church providing £150 of Fair Trade stock to the new business, the only provision being that further stock requirements are obtained through our church. In this way everyone benefits through bulk purchase discounts and potentially lower sales prices. They now have four local churches working with them in this scheme.

Conclusion

- Don't do it on your own! No matter how enthusiastic you may be, to be effective Eco-Congregation development requires to be a group activity;
- Do download the information available from the Eco-Congregation web pages (<http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/materials/>). They are very useful and provide a number of excellent ideas for development;
- Making the first award application is the most difficult – but it is worthwhile and the feed-back from the assessors provides a good steer for further development
- So, to any who are thinking of becoming involved, simply do it. It is a very worthwhile scheme, it's enjoyable and challenging and there's lots of support if you get stuck. Just ask!

Skene Parish Church: Sheila Gray

<http://www.skeneparish.com/eco-congregation-group.html>

Skene Parish, which is one parish, has two buildings – one traditional at Skene and another newer building at Trinity Westhill – one used on a Sunday and the newer one used all week and weekends, as there are three congregations. They have concentrated their efforts on making changes to Trinity in an effort to meet reductions in carbon footprint.

They have recently achieved a second award and following the recommendations made after their first award changed all light bulbs to low energy and contacted local ranger service for advice about their field project.

Other projects include:

- Keeping up existing recycling projects and adding more to the list as and when they come up
- Manse field project – a hay meadow has not been successful due to drainage problems coming from fields above. Now going to try tree planting trees (from Woodland Trust) in November with help from Rangers and labour from youth and other members of the congregation and have a picnic!!
- Always on the lookout for new ideas – work with Cosalt to 'rescue' contents of off-shore life raft first aid kits. So far, over 1000 rescued (over £20,000 worth of items) and large landfill area saved. Have help from Boys Brigade and items sent to Intercare, Malawi (FROM), Burundi (Scottish Episcopal contact), India and South Africa.
- United Nations Year of Biodiversity – Challenge to community to take photos showing Biodiversity of the Parish of Skene. Chose a selection to make a Calendar for 2012. Involved young folk in the congregation in a competition to design the cover
- Steps to reduce carbon emissions – reduced heating by one degree, all light bulbs low energy or LED, started a programme of installing motion sensor lights at Trinity, changed type of hand drying facilities, boiler overhaul and relagging of pipes at Trinity, Skene roof repairs so that we can now investigate loft insulation, applied for SCARF energy audit but awaiting reply.
- Wooden planters from Wood Recyclability at Pitmedden (<http://www.woodrecyclability.co.uk/>) used

Queen's Cross: Bill Craigie

Has a second award and is now working towards a third. It was emphasised that these actions are merely examples and each congregation ought to play to its own strengths and capabilities.

For the first award:

- Eco tips inserted in Intimations each Sunday – these could also highlight forthcoming radio and TV programmes on Green topics. Tips included energy saving at home and eco driving, gardening and nature
- Re-cycling:
 - A “Green Box” was used to collect different items, usually one variety per month eg mobile phones, print cartridges, spectacles (for Vision Aid), batteries (for correct disposal), buttons, braid, ribbons, corks and calendars for Aberdeen City’s Creative Waste Exchange.
 - Computers, laptops, printers were one-off collections – destined for Reboot of Forres (<http://www.reboot-forres.co.uk/>).
 - Postage stamps, plastic bottle tops (beware scams!)
- Opened sanctuary to a public viewing of the film “An Inconvenient Truth”.
- Erected a Peregrine nest tray in steeple (with assistance of Grampian Ringing Group) and 4 nest boxes for smaller birds

Following recommendations after the first award:

- produced (and negotiated) a Purchasing Policy with the Congregational Board (see
- Initiated an Adopt-a-Border scheme to encourage members to “green the cornerstone”.
- Instead of 3 heating zones, created 8 to save energy – at a cost of £22k approx.
- Hedge and tree planting – including buddleia for butterflies.
- 11 bicycle stand erected adjacent to grounds in conjunction with Council.

In anticipation of Third Award – Community emphasis:

- Litter picks – beach and in grounds of local hospice.
- Supporting Aberdeen & Shire network
- Supporting ECS Board

Workshop

In small groups all congregations had a look at the Churches Check Up and discussed ideas for beginning or improving their action plans.

Mentoring

Following a review of the award and registration process aimed at making it easier for congregations to become and maintain their involvement, a mentoring system is being introduced. This means from now on when a congregation expresses an interest they will automatically be registered with ECS. If they wish, they will then be assigned a mentor congregation to help them work through the Churches’ Check Up, draw up an action plan and work towards a first award. It will therefore become a requirement that congregations applying for a second award have offered themselves as mentors. Full details of the mentoring scheme are available at <http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/award/>.

Growing ECS in the North East

The future of the network was discussed and it was agreed it would be helpful to form a small group to plan and organise meetings and activities for the coming year. The following volunteered to be part of that group and agreed to meet before the end of the year:

Bill Craigie	Queen's Cross
Sheila Gray	Skene
Margaret Sangster	Inverurie West
Delia McKean	Crown Terrace Methodist

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Feedback on Mini-Gathering

Everyone who attended received an evaluation questionnaire consisting of seven questions. Thank you to the seven people out of 31 who responded (23% response rate). The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and the respondents appear to have benefited greatly from sharing experiences and being inspired by the activities done by fellow Eco-Congregations. Most respondents would have like to have had more time for discussion as they found these parts of the day of most use. All respondents expressed that they intend to follow up on the Mini Gathering with their congregations and two also mentioned their intention of working with other congregations.

Q1. How successful was the Mini Gathering in meeting expectations?

Three respondents thought it was good while four thought it was excellent.

Q2. Which aspect did you find most useful?

All respondents mentioned that sharing experiences and hearing other churches ideas and achievements was most useful. Two respondents specifically mentioned networking as well. One respondent highlighted Ewan Aitken's talk as a source for inspiration.

Q3. What aspect did you find least useful?

Four respondents did not reply and two expressed that it was all worthwhile. One respondent highlighted the workshop as least useful and another thought the group discussion after the first presentation due to a lack of time and the group being too large.

Q4. How do you intend to follow up on the Mini Gathering with your congregation?

Four respondents will be working towards awards. Two mentioned specifically that they would introduce an award system for children spearheaded by Skene & Queen's Cross congregations. Two respondents highlighted that they would share information with their congregations and encourage further activities. One respondent is planning to meet Fairtrade co-ordinators. Another respondent plans to involve more people in preparing and executing their ECS activities.

Q5. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the format or topics for discussion?

Five respondents felt either that too much was covered or the time should have been extended as they felt there was too little time for discussion. One respondent also suggested that the group discussions could be smaller and have set agendas. Three respondents did not have any suggestions.

Q6 asked for further comments or suggestions. There were none.

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