

Summary of talk by David Bradwell Angus and Dundee Eco-congregation Network 17th March 2016



When we think of Eco Congregations we think that Eco relates to ecological, that is having concern for the environment.

But the word derives from the Ancient Greek oikos, which can mean both house (as in dwelling) as well as household (the family who live there). You'll probably know that the word economy also has this common root; it is about how the household lives, to make sure there is food and warmth, security and the chance for rest.

Oikos also lends itself to the origins of the word ecumenical – oikoumenē– meaning the whole inhabited earth.

So, for tonight, when we think about Eco Congregations I want you to bear in mind that we are rightly concerned about God's creation, but that includes dwelling-places, families, peace and justice, and the wellbeing of the whole inhabited world.

So the question of how we will open our homes to the whole inhabited earth, for the peace of everyone, becomes one which reaches to the heart of our faith. It is one so far removed from the egoist, self-centred and materialistic priorities in public discourse in this society today.

But anyway, lets think about the environment for a moment.

I saw a presentation recently which suggested that in the four years preceding the so-called Arab Spring, Syria had suffered four years of drought – the worst since records began. Nearly a million rural villagers lost their farms, and 85% of livestock died. Many people moved to already overcrowded cities, putting pressure on water supplies just when the reservoirs and aquifers were low. Sudden urban population growth meant there was not enough jobs to go around. Once prosperous farmers were lucky to find work as street sweepers.

An extended drought meant people couldn't live in rural areas anymore: a massive population displacement from rural areas into urban areas may have contributed to social unrest. After decades of cruel leadership Syria in 2011 was a tinderbox. A murderous regime inspired an equally murderous response in the form of IslamicState-Daesh.

Climate change may not have caused the refugee crisis:

Assad, Daesh, the Free Syria Army, Putin, Obama, Cameron, NATO; they are all responsible in a way large or small for contributing violence to Syria, and creating the greatest humanitarian refugee catastrophe in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Climate change may not have caused the refugee crisis, but a drought which beats all previous records is just another example of how the environment is being changed. Climate Change did not cause the refugee crisis, but it has contributed to an additional stress on a fragile nation. For this reason I see a direct link between greenhouse gas emissions and humanitarian protection for refugees.

Although our churches have had a concern for refugees and asylum seekers for many years, last year something changed.

The litany of misery and stories of desperation which nightly we watch on the television has forced us to wake up and see the humanity of those who languish in camps, or whose valuables are confiscated by Government agents, or whose eyes are blinded by teargas, or who drown in the sea, or suffocate in the back of a lorry, or are electrocuted on railway tracks.

It was within this context, of a long history of speaking out for refugees and asylum seekers, renewed by the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe seen in Europe in 2015, and our faiths' focus on justice and peace and the integrity of creation that we resolved to do something collectively to respond to, and walk with, those refugees and asylum seekers in desperate need.

And so last autumn the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Catholic Bishops Conference, the Scottish Episcopal Church joined with other Christian denominations as well as Action of Churches Together in Scotland, Interfaith Scotland, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities and the Muslim Council of Scotland to agree to work together on refugee issues as Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees.

We are from different faith traditions; we are deliberately working together as a symbol of our shared humanity. Our differences are small compared with our common desire to help restore that dignity and fullness of life which we believe is at the heart of God's plan for us all. As Christians we bring a particular story of Syria and Iraq, the cradle of our faith and now where in places it is dangerous to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jewish people have their own stories of exodus and holocaust, they know the importance of being granted sanctuary from terror, and many take seriously their obligation to offer sanctuary to those in need today. Muslims bring their own experience – of a growing normalisation of Islamophobia, and where even in the supposedly civilised world they are frequently collectively mocked, patronised and blamed for the actions of others.

When it comes to work with refugees and asylum seekers, there is so much already going on. Part of the work of Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees is to encourage and support, and where necessary challenge, faith groups in Scotland, to try to get a sense of co-ordinated action, so through our response we all pull in the same direction.

At a local level across Scotland many local authorities are working with the Home Office to welcome Syrian families. You might recall David Cameron's promise in September to take up to 20,000 vulnerable Syrian people from refugee camps between 2015 and 2020. The first 1,000 arrived before Christmas, with Scotland taking around 400 people. The Scottish Government expect that Scotland will receive between 2,000 and 3,000 by 2020.

In some places, like Moray and East Lothian, local community groups have been set up – ordinary citizens setting up meetings and working out how they can best respond. In other places, like Fife, the existing Migrants Forum has been asked to take the lead in liaison and offering practical support. In Aberdeenshire and Midlothian it is the local authority which is convening a stakeholder group of statutory agencies and voluntary groups to co-ordinate a local welcome. In many places church groups have been at the heart of the local response – offering volunteers for befriending or English language classes, donating Middle Eastern food to the foodbanks so there are some familiar tastes for people when they arrive, to giving vouchers for shoe shops so the kids can get the right kind of shoes for school.

In Glasgow the city has been a dispersal centre for asylum seekers for around 18 years. Unlike the Syrian families recently arrived, asylum seekers have no right to work, are given restricted and limited financial support through the Azure Card, and are engaged in the legal process of an asylum claim. The fear of dawn raids, detention and destitution is very real. Recent allegations about mistreatment by the company sub-contracted to manage their housing have triggered calls for an independent inquiry.

Many charity and faith based projects work in the city, and have done so for many years. The Scottish Refugee Council offers advice and support to refugees, and the Refugee Survival Trust is able to make emergency grants to destitute asylum seekers. Interfaith Glasgow runs a Weekend Club project for asylum seekers to meet one another and eat together. Many of these projects are short of cash and in need of volunteers. I think supporting Glasgow's asylum seekers should be a concern for everyone in Scotland, not just Glaswegians.

In Europe, in the Mediterranean, and in the countries around Syria – and those other regions of the world where there is unrest and violence – many charities and Governmental agencies are working to relieve humanitarian suffering.

I'm frequently asked what individuals and congregations can do to help. It can really depend on where they live, but we can all think about offering time, donations, cash, prayers. They are all practical things we can offer to help. We can also make sure that we use our power to inform and influence, whether that is our friends in the café or the pub or on social media, politicians, the press, in church meetings. Let's make sure that the rhetoric which is deployed when discussing refugee issues stays respectful of the individuals, and that people are looking for ways to help rather than ways to blame.

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees www.sfar.org.uk

Dundee, contact Amina (Women's Support Group): 07719 640 733
Angus, contact the Local Authority: 03452 777 778

Scottish Refugee Council: 0141 248 9799
Scotland Welcomes Refugees www.scotlandwelcomesrefugees.scot