



## To Pastors in training ....

Good morning, and my sympathies for everyone suffering that phase of their ministry which involves as much looking over your shoulder as does this, your initial training. But when the time comes, **being ordained** does mean being responsible for all your own mistakes in public. Scary. That's fun too, especially in a very public ministry.

I'm probably the best known URC minister in Scotland, but most people who think they know me think I'm magically provided by the Church of Scotland. (*As folk even imagine that the Church of Scotland is magically provided from somewhere.*) I work for an ecumenical charity that just occasionally, a church might hold a coffee morning or some exciting event for. Which they enjoy and so do we. For which support, we're hugely

grateful. That's the way it goes when you work ecumenically. But I'm a Special Category minister of the United Reformed Church, working full-time with network which has registered more than 600 Christian communities and colleges, to challenge and encourage us all in our relationship with the rest of Creation, in the special context of the crisis of Nature & Climate which **will** be the backdrop to all of all your ministries.

We get on very well with interfaith organisations too. Sometimes folk think I'm just going to waffle on about heat pumps, but whilst I wouldn't rule that out, my habitat as chaplain is a devotional one: and the very useful title 'chaplain' opens doors at all sorts of levels throughout the churches.

So I'll begin with a short prayer, and then a comment on where it came from. Perhaps I need also to say that the air around me was absolutely full of biting Scottish midges, but maybe I tried too hard to make them visible. Anyway, here goes.

**Prayer in the presence of midges**  
**<https://vimeo.com/735488568>**

Your staff have asked for hints on how a congregation might **become** an EcoCongregation, or in England and Wales, an EcoChurch.

The short answer is: you're clever people: fill in the forms and follow the instructions to do a wee audit of your energy use. You'll get a certificate. Abracadabra, you're an EcoCongregation. Hallelujah! And you can change your light bulbs, cut down waste, ban plastics, install solar panels to your heart's content, and if you do such things, then for God's sake shout about it like Jesus said, so people who notice praise your Father in heaven.

You can be the **Rich Young Ruler of green do-goodery**. And yet, as a priority, as someone said, "just one thing is needed", **from which all else needs to flow**. To follow Christ, with the guidance of the Spirit. Should I need to add, with your eyes wide wide open? To be as well-informed as you can be, but **not to mistake information for prescription**, without prayerful discernment. That's not a bad caveat for Biblical interpretation either. Soak up all the forensic scholarship available to you, but then think how you'll use it..... in a world so **objectively threatened** as this one today.

But the path to that initial step to **become** an EcoCongregation, or on into the dizzy heights of bronze, silver and gold awards requires gifts that you as pastor will bring. Or someone offering such gifts with your blessing.

It may also be that your role will be to step back and regulate and interpret the enthusiasm and the concerns of the congregation, so that it's not just a case of letting your local eco-warrior run riot over everything else and agreeing to join just to shut them up, but rather bringing the whole congregation with you.

In a time when people are used to everything being 'opinion' and nothing being fact, that's also something a local pastor needs help with. Pulling rank may not be sufficient. There are even some academics (even forbid) who have sold their souls and reputations to Big Oil.

I've had to deal with a retired academic in a congregation who was convinced that because retired academics from completely different disciplines had been persuaded that it would be a great thing to double current greenhouse gas levels, then surely that was a reliable authority. Even if it is manifestly complete rubbish. *[note: I never learned to swear, so 'complete rubbish' should be taken as "very strong language"]*. Skilfully and assertively presented in the sheep's clothing of apparent academic discourse.

If you want a trustworthy starting place, google the IPCC. Thousands of pages of peer-reviewed science,

but dig around and you find some short, digestible stuff too.

Now, as you will likely be aware by now, churches move forwards an awful lot slower than the glaciers are retreating, or some of our UK coastlines eroding.

The URC website (!!!) shamefully still carries a pamphlet which is embarrassingly and even harmfully out of touch with a meaningful relationship.... with a Creation **who** is suffering not the expected and natural pangs of birth, [*Romans 8, look it up*] but the knowing disruption of that sensitive, vulnerable process of birthing.

God saw that **with** the very-goodness and the beauty of Creation, also comes fragility in what God has made. God is great, say the hymn writers - so folk think that what is great must be God. It's time to add: God is tiny , too!

That's why your particular position promising to 'give leadership to the church' is key to the "**becoming**" rather than just the "**being**" of an EcoCongregation.

***Not preserving, but sustaining.***

So that you have the confidence to stick your necks out, discern and interpret, rather than regurgitating

unrepurposed commentaries. However eminent the writers of these may be.

My experience suggests that's a stage many folk don't reach until at best **mid-career** in pastoral ministry: but in the nature & climate emergency, I pray someone is going to **prove me wrong**.

That's a green hermeneutic, by the way: **“recycle, repurpose”**. Maybe **“reduce”** too: what need you carry no longer? All with a responsible recklessness. We haven't got time for anything else. And **you** are needed. **NOW**.

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When I was at Mansfield in Oxford, when the URC still had a foothold there, we had a slot in the week called 'spirituality' and one day we were encouraged to describe our place in the college community.

My honest response was that 'I'm the resident arty pagan'. Which worried the college, it seems. And I also got into trouble back then for how much time I spent and how I spent it, looking at Creation Theology of the late 20th century, both in its **Jürgen Moltmann-respectable** and its **Matthew Fox-dodgy** forms.

Both of these, I now handle with care, as they originated in a time when few people seemed able to digest the science confirmed by extremes of weather and the speed of extinctions. The 'arty pagan' comment *-which was both a joke and sort of accurate, in that care for Creation should be a wholehearted expression of Christian faith* - was overheard and got me into trouble too.

But thank God, things you stumble over in college may be of very great value later on.

As is my final dissertation on the spirituality of St Columba, which introduced me to the real, and not imagined, historical roots of the 'Communion of Creation', enfolding the Communion of Saints. Something which moved me on to looking not so much for the personhood as the **personalities** of Creation when I preached in Rosslyn Chapel, a Christian place of worship full of green men women and children, and more leafy ornamentation than you could shake a twig at.

To **become** an EcoCongregation will involve different people, knowledges, specialisms and lots of very practical advice. One of my colleagues in the charity really is an expert in assessing the energy needs of church buildings and how by careful, and sensitive investment in **church-appropriate** technology at

the right time - *which may mean planning for when your boiler really does break down* - congregations can dramatically reduce their carbon footprint. I do emphasise **“church-appropriate”**. Congregations are a different breed of beast from other “businesses”.

That is **witness**, that is **discipleship** and if you shout about it too, that is **evangelism**, but what it mustn't deteriorate into is **works-righteousness**, which is one of the key drivers of the mess our species has got the planet into in the first place.

Trying to do everything, **even every good thing**, kills the planet.

So what I offer as to ‘help for congregations to become ‘EcoCongregations is this: “Be more church” -recycle and repurpose and get to know in much more depth, and with an awareness of your own slant and bias as well as others, what resources we do have for threat and oppression.

And yes: Find out what you don't need to do, and stop it!

And without needing to take completely literally everything which may be mythologically or poetically



expressed, nonetheless, take Scripture as seriously as this.

The Bibles we use make their own conscientious choice of idiom for their destination translation, but you are, as pastors and preachers not passive consumers of scripture, but enabling fisherfolk of congregations for the wild and also disciplined enterprise of interpretation.

So that we sensitively move on from centuries of compulsively Creation-exclusive language of body and mouth.

**You** will be asked to affirm by oath, at your ordination, your agreement that:

The highest authority  
for what we believe and do  
is God's Word in the Bible  
alive for his people today  
through the help of the Spirit.

That's a statement to read in one breath without added punctuation.

It's one I'm humbly confident I express in my role as EcoChaplain. God's Word in the Bible alive for God's

people today through the help of that Wild Wind who blows where they will.

Just 'Tweaking' usually looks suspiciously like tweaking, but a bold, creative, and well-informed poetic reinterpretation with the knowledge of the implications of nature & climate crisis around you might be what's called for - and most especially during the observances of the defining festivals of the Christian year.

So your folk don't say : 'We've done the **green thing**, but now it's Advent Christmas Lent or Easter, so we'll just forget all that and do the **real stuff**.

Christianity which overcomes our colonial disregard of fellow stakeholders in God's rainbow covenant **really is the real stuff**, for the whole of your lives and ministries.

And I'd go so far, personally , as to say, that no one who **at the end of their training** is a climate denier - *no more than someone who can't come to terms with the ordination of women* - should be given the status of URC minister.

There's just too much scope there for **harm to the faith** of a congregation, who will rather need building up with spiritual resilience for what lies

ahead, and to resist the lies and misrepresentations of UK politics, especially of the right.

The most helpful thing you can offer your congregations in helping them “become” eco-congregations is probably your own spiritual journey, constantly open to recycling and repurposing the treasures new and old which come in the baggage and the package of our one global catholic and apostolic church.

Hosanna! - [God help us!] Amen [Get on with it!]