

**Overview of our Eco Church Journey**

**February 2022**

As the church family of the Church of St John the Evangelist in Moulsham, Chelmsford, we started our eco church journey about 4 years ago when we worked on discerning our vision as a church – to love, grow and serve. This recognised that as Christians we are called to love God, to love each other and to love our world. We are asked to grow as followers of Jesus, and out of that comes our Christian service. Environmental stewardship grew naturally out of that vision, especially as we are called to love our world. Our journey is rooted in the theology of Creation, and in the Anglican Church’s fifth mark of mission – “*to strive to uphold the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth*.”

Early in 2019, our Archdeacon pointed us in the direction of the ARocha eco church audit tool, something we have found immensely helpful in giving us a focus and a plan for practical action.

The first time we used the ARocha audit, two of our newer members took on the task of filling it in to see how we matched up. Their newness was an added bonus, because they had to have lots of conversations with people about how things are done, rather than have one person who knew the church well fill in the form. As a result, things started changing immediately. “Do you use recycled paper toilet rolls” was immediately answered with “No, but where can I get them and I’ll change that right away.” The grounding in the theology and all the preaching on the care of creation meant that seeds were falling on fertile ground! Changing the way we do things in church showed rapid change. We switched quickly to environmentally friendly products (first using up the “old” ones because “no waste” became important to us). These ranged from switching to recycled paper for office stationery and recycled paper toilet rolls throughout the church and church hall, to starting to twin toilets and stick up signs reminding people to turn off the lights. As a result, when we took the first completed audit to the Parochial Church Council (PCC) we could start by showing that on worship we had reached silver level, and on buildings and land management we had already reached bronze level, and using the ARocha audit tool, we had an action plan to bring the other 2 areas up to scratch. In October 2019, we gained our bronze award and celebrated with our first Green Communion when the Archdeacon presented our bronze award.

In November 2019, our report to the PCC showed a somewhat different picture. The lifestyle section had switched from below bronze to silver level. How had that happened?! Primarily because we had kept our eco team deliberately very small – we didn’t want eco church to become the responsibility of just a few people, but to be embraced by everyone, so that “thinking eco” would become second nature to people. Instead of a specialist study group which attracts a few people, every week we used our after service coffee slot to get everyone talking about things we were changing at home to be more eco-friendly. Not only were we talking about shampoo bars and eco deodorants, but which brands people had found better! One of our members had been talking to her dentist about our eco church journey (we’re a chatty group!) and he knew of a scheme for recycling plastic toothbrushes – the very next week, in came a glass jar for everyone’s plastic toothbrushes, very handy when so many were changing to bamboo brushes.

Our children and their families didn’t miss out either. Things were changing. We saw the introduction of Wild Worship in the churchyard in all weathers – our bug hotel was the result of one of those sessions. Messy Church, which happens each half term in partnership with another church, has developed teaching (and a lot of fun!) on the care of God’s world.

Perhaps the most exciting part of the eco journey was our progress on community and global engagement. We have always strived to be an outward looking church, very aware of our need to serve our community, but the audit had shown us we had a way to go, and new enthusiasm was born. We registered as a Fairtrade church, some of our members regularly go on litter picks, more car sharing was happening, we started to really engage with the local Council on the care of the land. Our grade 2 listed Victorian church sits in its own “God’s Acre” of land, a closed churchyard which is maintained by the City Council. We undertook a community listening exercise and were struck by the things people were saying that we knew we could help with. Students from the local college told us they longed for somewhere they could go at lunchtime and get food or sit outside. Families told us of the need for more child friendly places where they could meet. Older people and younger people alike talked of the strong sense of community and out of it came our vision to develop the church and churchyard as an eco friendly resource for the community, with a strong worshipping community at its centre. We learnt from our mistakes as well as our successes – we used compostable cups for giving our new students a “Welcome to Old Moulsham” cup of hot chocolate at the start of term, and then had to retrieve them with our own litter pick where people had dropped empty cups on the pavement! We also learnt that we need to guard against “green washing” and eventually the PCC went even further and said “no” to using disposables.

We engaged with the Amos Trust, Climate Stewards and Christian Climate Action. When the demonstration was on in Trafalgar Square for climate justice, we not only had a group of church members up in London, we also had a large group of our congregation in church praying for the demonstration and for change, so that climate change could be addressed.

One of our Eco Team listened to young people and their families as they worried about the end of year school prom and the expense of buying a prom dress that would only be worn once. So we organised a pre-loved prom dress sale, which was much appreciated by our local community, and raised money to support women in the Bangladeshi textile industry.

Each month we published a number of “eco tips” in our magazine and it was a joy to hear people talking about them and taking them up.

And it’s worth mentioning Christmas! Not only did people leap at the idea of sending just one Christmas card to the church, we turned our eco noticeboard into a giant advent calendar for someone to open each day, and each day had a new Christmas eco tip. The seamstresses were busy too, making reusable Christmas bags to use instead of the many varieties of non-recyclable paper that are normally used as wrapping. They went down a storm at our advent fayre and sold out in no time. We encouraged our neighbours to be creative and to walk by having an “advent window trail” around the area. And we submitted our first “eco tree” (made of driftwood and decorated with handmade eco items) into a neighbouring church’s Christmas Tree Festival.

Small wonder that early in 2020 when we went back to the audit, we found our worship had reached gold and all the other areas of our survey had become silver.

We gained our silver award in more difficult times. We were in lockdown, the church building was closed for months during the pandemic.

Did our eco journey stop with the pandemic? Not at all! The church is so much more than a building. We were living out our vision to love, grow and serve. Thanks to developing as an eco church, we now had strong links with our community and local charities, including local homeless charities. In very quick time we established the local Moulsham Support Service, staffed by volunteers from the community and the church, recruiting only people with a current DBS check. In even quicker time, we grappled with new technology and got our services online – yes, including our after service coffee slot where we talk all things eco and could support each other through the pandemic.

We engaged with supermarket fair share schemes, avoiding food going to landfill waste when it could be delivered to, and used by, people in need. There was an added bonus when some of our schools and a number of homeless people benefitted from an amazing gift of hundreds of Easter eggs at one point! Special packs of crafts (no glitter – most is not eco friendly!) and pre-loved games and Lego sets were delivered to the children who would normally have been at Messy Church or Sunday School. In January, when we could not gather with others, and the only exercise people could have was a short walk outside, one of our eco team invited people in our congregation and local community to join a “virtual” walk to Jerusalem, with each person donating their daily miles walked and getting sponsorship towards the reflective garden we are planning for the churchyard. It did encourage a lot of people to walk! We set up a group on our Facebook page where people could track their journey, learn a little about each new destination, and pray for people in that part of the world.

Church members were quick to produce eco friendly masks and explain to people the importance of cutting the strings on the type of single use mask before disposing of them – so many birds were injured by picking up those single use masks.

We work very closely with our friends at the Cathedral and were delighted when they took a lead in setting up an online conference on “Greening the Church”, and it was lovely to be asked to do a video about our journey to being a silver eco church. You can find it on <https://youtu.be/OhId8jO4xn0> Little did we realise how many people would see it! As a result, we were invited to appear in a programme on Radio Essex (where they said they would ask us back when we reached Gold!) and several churches got in touch to talk about their journey and to invite us to video-linked conferences. It was such a privilege to be able to talk with, and learn from, others.

We used some of our “outside” time adding hedgehog boxes to the bird boxes and feeders we already have in the churchyard, as well as composting facilities, and the vicarage garden took the bat boxes. We also developed further our plans to transform the churchyard to a place that can be a green place of relaxation for our community. In our community consultation on the plans – which include recycled plastic seating (massive saving on landfill), a community mosaic in a quiet, reflective area, a wild flower meadow, a pathway around the churchyard with a heritage trail, a bike rack and community vegetable gardens – we were overwhelmed by how positive the responses were, and delighted with the way people of all ages were aware of the importance of an eco-friendly green space. Our annual bird watch had to happen in our own gardens in 2020 and 2021 but we were back outside in 2022.

Community use of our churchyard has grown enormously since we started our eco journey. Wild Worship is popular and growing and our “Spooky Saints” trail around the churchyard for Hallowe’en was fully subscribed when we put the tickets out. This year a couple getting married very kindly donated a number of bulbs which the church family planted after a Sunday service. Our allotment society was in full swing at the autumn fayre, showing and selling their locally grown produce, as they do twice a year.

This year we also opened “JubiLatte”, our interim community café serving Fairtrade tea and coffee and home made cake (pending more work as part of a major programme of development), which we are making as eco friendly as possible, within the constraints of the Food Hygiene Regulations. The future JubiLatte is hoping to provide snack meals and we will be sticking to the LOAF principles for those.

Earlier this year when the COP26 climate conference was taking place in Glasgow, we organised another “virtual” walk to Glasgow for the church and community to show their support, and with each destination we reached we looked on Facebook at what was happening in that place to tackle climate change. It is something we feel passionate about. One of our online morning prayer leaders appeared one day in her Christian Climate Action t-shirt during Creationtide.

Much of 2020/21 meant that we could not invite external speakers, as we had committed to do before the pandemic, but I am pleased to report that is being rectified this year. We have a local environmentalist and storyteller coming to the church in March and others will be planned for later in the year. Following on from our successful prom dress sale, we are running a “swishing” event in the first quarter of this year (clothes swaps to avoid fast fashion and waste). We have undertaken the first of our annual lifestyle surveys and are very grateful to a gold eco church that had already done the work on the questionnaire. It was a rewarding exercise, and has made us think about running a “surgery” to help people measure their carbon footprint. We first measured the church’s carbon footprint in 2019 when we just measured energy use. In 2019, the church used 33,000 KWh and the hall 4,850 KWh of 100% renewable electricity. The hall is heated by gas and used 3.08 tonnes of carbon, which we offset using Climate Stewards offset arrangement. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, when the church and hall were closed for long periods, we used the tool from 3600 Carbon (which measures much more than fuel use) where our total annual emissions were 4.38 tonnes, which we will again offset using Climate Stewards. We had set a 5% reduction target on our fuel, but obviously we have not had a normal year to compare to 2019 (for the church alone our electricity use was down by 40%). Our 2021 measurements will be done in April when we have all the utility bills.

We have looked in great depth at whether we might create our own electricity. As there are many people buried in our churchyard, it proved impossible to consider ground source heat pumps, and as a community we face the occasional share of inner city vandalism so we were unable to consider air source heat pumps. We looked into the possibility of a biomass boiler but, apart from the impossibility of delivering the fuel on our site, we also became increasingly concerned about the potential damage of releasing particulates into the atmosphere. Whilst we have under pew heating, as we develop the inside space we are considering radiant heating, which heats the people rather than the air and means it is possible to keep people warm even in a grade II listed Victorian building and will help our energy reduction goal. We also explored the possibility of solar panels but, at the moment, we have been told we will not be given planning permission.

**Concluding comments**

Our eco journey has been rooted in our faith, in a sincere belief that God is calling us to take seriously the stewardship of creation. Our journey goes on and will not stop if we are fortunate enough to gain a gold award. Out of our theology and partly out of our eco journey, we now have a major development programme in place and are determined it will be an eco development at all stages, as we strive to transform our church into a vibrant community resource, with a strong and committed worshipping community at its heart.

The annexes tell more of the story, and they present the evidence through documents and photographs. What it can never quite get over is the deep sense that God has walked this journey with us, the sense that the Spirit is moving in St John’s. Our grateful thanks to ARocha for enabling us to join them on this eco church journey, to grow the Church’s discipleship in caring for God’s great gift of his world.