

EcoChurch – a model for faith communities

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Abstract

EcoChurch is a model for local faith communities to respond to climate change. It is about a fresh reading of the scriptures with the focus on humankind being caretakers of God's creation rather than being in dominion of the earth. It is about implementing local and practical actions arising from a belief that we are to 'safeguard the integrity of creation; to sustain and renew the life of the earth'.

The EcoChurch model comprises three strategies:

- ensuring local church buildings and activities are environmentally responsible
- to assist church members to get their households in order, and
- to encourage other churches and the local community to adopt eco-friendly practices.

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EcoChurch – a model for faith communities

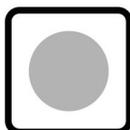
EcoChurch was inspired by the first Earth Hourⁱ of 2007. This imaginative initiative provided a catalyst for St Mark's Anglican Church South Hurstville to take practical action in response to climate change. Armed with many ideas, a small teamⁱⁱ distilled them into three achievable strategies.

The project commenced without a detailed technical knowledge of the relevant science, however the team members were interested in environmental issues generally and came from the position that, practical action was consistent with Christian faith. As the project proceeded, the concept of 'caretakers of God's creation' became more important as the basis of commitment.

EcoChurch, as a once-off project has concluded – EcoChurch is now an ongoing part of St Mark's ministry. Caring for creation, as well as striving for social justice, and reaching out to others is now part of the balanced ministry at St Mark's South Hurstville.

Planning

Along with the small action of turning off the Church's external backlit Cross on Earth Hour 2007, EcoChurch was launched at the main Eucharist the following day – Palm Sunday. The special liturgy focussed on responsible stewardship of creation, and asked for God's blessing on the project. St Mark's sees it as important that EcoChurch, like other parish initiatives, be recognised and celebrated in the weekly rhythm of worship.



The project team comprised four lay persons, with the Rector, Chris Albany as sponsor. An initial task was to 'brand' the project using an appropriate logo. The adopted visual comprises four segments:



- the sun – source of life and energy,
- the leaves – biodiversity of living creation,
- the wavy lines – water and resources,
- the circle of arrows – reduce, reuse and recycle.

The quadrants are contained within a space forming a cross.

EcoChurch[®]

The term, *EcoChurch* is intended to communicate that 'church' is interested in the environment, and has a positive statement to make about our responsibility and actions for the care and renewal of God's creation. EcoChurch is an opportunity to demonstrate eco sensitive leadership and education by example within the broader church, as well as the community generally.

As planning proceeded, it was clear that the project had to be undertaken in a way that implementation was achievable and that the principles could be embraced by ordinary members of the parish and the wider community. EcoChurch started from the assumption that the science of climate change was generally accepted, and that places like Sydney could be struck by drought and water shortages as was experienced in Sydney 2007.

It is also important that every member of St Mark's could participate: from seniors in community living to those in larger separate dwellings. There is an assumption that, whatever the carbon 'footprint' is, it could be reduced. It was important that the church organisation had to respond as well as individuals. Therefore the adopted EcoChurch strategies are:

1. make improvements to local parish church buildings and activities,
2. facilitate improvements in parish households,

3. take the experience to the broader church and/or the local community.

Planning ended, the team commenced implementation from World Environment Day, 5 June 2007. It was planned that the project would run 12 months to World Environment Day 2008.

Implementation

Strategy 1 – the Church

In implementing the first strategy, it was decided that a solid activity was required, in order to capture the ‘hearts and minds’ of St Mark’s members.

Adjacent to the Church and associated Hall is St Mark’s Pre-School Kindergarten, which uses water primarily for toilets, washing and cleaning. The proximity of this water-using facility prompted a decision to commence harvesting rain water from the Church Hall. A water tank was to become the substantial symbol for the beginning of EcoChurch, and came at a time when the dams serving Sydney were quite low. After visiting a parishioner’s tank installation and learning about concrete slabs, pumps, filters and first flushes, the project team decided on a 10,000 litre water tank and associate plumbing and equipment. The parish council endorsed the proposal and an appeal was launched.

St Mark’s members made donations in addition to normal giving. Other usual church activities were also used to raise funds. The total cost was approximately \$8,000 with donations of \$5,000, a government grant of \$1,000, and a parish council commitment of about \$2,000. The tank was installed during the Summer 2007/08 school holidays. It harvests rain water from the church hall roof and provides flushing for the toilets of the adjacent St Mark’s Pre-School Kindergarten, as well as water for gardens.

This first significant focus of the water tank, allowed the concept of EcoChurch to be recognised as a practical initiative – one that did not require significant understanding of environmental science. It supported the concept that ordinary people can do relatively ordinary things that achieve environmental improvements.

The second visible initiative around the church buildings was a recycling centre. For many years, like other churches, St Mark’s has had a clothing bin, which supported the welfare arm of the Anglican Church, Anglicare. The EcoChurch team affirmed this principle of re-using and recycling, and established a centre in the Church Narthex (foyer) utilising labelled cardboard boxes. The centre collects items that are generally not accepted by the local Council in the weekly kerbside pick-up.

The recycling centre accepts:

- printer cartridges for recycling.
- mobile phones for recycling.
- candle stubs from church and home for reuse by a former parishioner, Ann Clipsham who manages The Church Candle House – a home based business making candles for churches.
- spectacles for reuse in developing countries.
- postage stamps for resale by the Anglican Board of Missions.
- magazines for reuse by prisoners – distributed by a Catholic sister of the church.

Other initiatives around the church have included the change to linear, circular or compact fluorescent lamps (where practicable), and the change from Sunday morning tea foam cups to recyclable paper.

Strategy 2 – parish households

The second strategy is to assist members in improving their households and in changing behaviours. The focus is to provide information about environmental issues and how to make improvements in homes. Each month the team provided information in the weekly newsletter and/or on the EcoChurch website. To a large extent St Mark's did not reinvent the wheel. There are many guidelines, brochures and the like available from energy and water utilities, the local Council and the state Government. At St Mark's use was made of material from Sydney Water, Energy Australia and the Council. These organisations were very willing to provide hardcopy brochures – much material is also available on their websites. St Mark's inclusions in the weekly newsletter have included brochures on how to choose a water tank, how to save on electricity, how to reduce water consumption, all about green power, and local recycling opportunities.

EcoChurch not only provided information, but also challenged St Mark's members to make a commitment. Worshippers were invited to sign an agreement, setting out their EcoGoals for the year. It comprised a list of initiatives ranging from straightforward and no-cost actions, to more complicated and potentially costly actions. The EcoGoals Agreement is included on The EcoChurch websiteⁱⁱⁱ.

Accessible and straightforward information, combined with a commitment, helps church members move people towards being better stewards of God's creation.

Strategy 3 – promote the experience

The third strategy is to spread the word among the broader church and the local community. The immediate opportunities are with our own denomination, the Anglican Church, and with other congregations who are seeking to act, as well as the residents of the local Council.

Discussions with the local Council, have included use of St Mark's facilities for EcoLiving workshops for residents of the area. In May 2008, St Mark's also was successful in gaining a small grant from Kogarah Council for a new no-dig organic garden, a compost facility, and a second rain water tank for the Pre-School. The project is about increasing environmental learning in the Pre-School, and making connections with others. The children will be involved in tending the garden, including building up the no-dig garden with hay, paper, compost and the like, planting, watering by carrying buckets from the tank, and harvesting the produce. The vegetables will be offered to members of a weekly seniors' club that meets at St Mark's. The garden is a demonstration project for both the church and local community, promoting EcoChurch and the priority that St Mark's, in conjunction with Kogarah Council, places on environmental issues.

EcoChurch initiatives have been of interest to various media. The experience has been promoted through Sydney radio and press. In addition, because of the 'reducing footprint' resolution of the national Church discussed below, EcoChurch has also been featured in Anglican newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne, and in Sky News.

EcoChurch communicates that churches consider environmental issues to be important – and should be very much part of the journey of each community of faith – not just for the passionate.

Church teaching

This paper is primarily concerned with eco-praxis, rather than eco-theology. However it is useful to outline some basic principles that St Mark's EcoChurch people have come to understand.

The 2007 National Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia considered a bill to assist in the protection of the environment. The explanatory remarks introducing the bill comprised the following:

“The bond between Creator and creation underlies our whole relationship with God and it is clear from scripture that this bond is not just with humanity but with the whole of creation (eg John 1: 3; Romans 8: 20-21). As a consequence it is essential that the Church takes the relationship of creature before its Creator seriously and seeks to express it rightly and fully in each time and place.

This Bill seeks to extend the Church’s recognition of a key environmental issue of the 21st century, namely the role of human behaviour in increasing global temperatures, and to establish mechanisms by which the Church may responsibly respond to this threat to the integrity of creation on this planet.

The purpose of the Bill is to commit the Church to changing its behaviour so that it does not contribute to a human-induced increase in global average surface temperature of more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. While such a rise in temperature would be better avoided, it is realistically the smallest increase that can be managed given the present situation of increasing release of greenhouse gases and beyond which major irreversible changes are projected to take place. The Church of England has recently committed itself to a parallel program aimed at ‘shrinking’ its ‘footprint’.

The Bill further attempts to establish a process for realising this commitment in the varying contexts of each diocese through the establishment of diocesan Environment Commissions to advise on standards and mechanisms. Diocesan Environment Commissions are encouraged to share insights and experience in various ways, including through the Australian Anglican Environmental Network.

Examples of the kinds of commitments that may be adopted are:

- (a) all new and major refits of residential buildings to have an initial minimum 6 star rating followed by at least one additional star above the relevant Building Codes of Australia requirements;
- (b) all new and major refits of office buildings to achieve at least a 5 Green Star rating on the Green Building Council of Australia's rating scale;
- (c) the Church’s facilities and operations in Australia to be adapted so as to improve their energy efficiency by at least 20% by 2010 and 50% by 2020; and
- (d) by 2010, all energy to be renewable or offset with new clean energy capacity using companies with the equivalent standards of the Gold Standard Foundation.

The *Protection of the Environment Canon 2007* was subsequently adopted. It is included at Appendix 1, and requires each diocese “to reduce its environmental footprint by increasing the water and energy efficiency of its current facilities and operations and by ensuring that environmental sustainability is an essential consideration in the development of any new facilities and operations”.

The Canon also refers to the “1990 the Anglican Consultative Council (that) gave modern form to this task when it declared that one of the five marks of the mission of the Church was ‘to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to sustain and renew the life of the earth’”.

The Five Marks of Mission^{iv} that a previous Lambeth Conference^v had adopted are:

- To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom;
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
- To respond to human need by loving service;
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society;
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation; to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

A church with a healthy existence and a holistic mission would have activities related to each of the Five Marks. ‘Safeguarding creation’ therefore should be part of the norm, not an option.

The future

On the Sunday after World Environment Day, 5 June 2008, St Mark's celebrated the achievements of the first twelve months. These included:

- EcoChurch dedicated on Palm Sunday, the day after Earth Hour 31 March 2007, and commenced on World Environment Day 5 June 2007.
- Recycling centre established – thousands of postage stamps for Anglican Board of Missions to sell; 400 magazines that Sr Yvonne will distribute to men and women in prison; 28 toner cartridges; 4 mobile phones; 140 optical glasses for distribution by Foresight Australia in developing countries; 28kg of candle stubs to be made into candles by The Church Candle House operated by Ann Clipsham; Lots of clothes through the Anglicare clothing bin.
- 10,000 litres water tank installed for St Mark's Kindergarten toilet flushing .
- EcoGoals commitments made by St Mark's households.
- EcoChurch website established as an education resource and accessible from the Diocese of Sydney and other websites.
- Education flyers distributed to St Mark's members over the 12 months.
- St Mark's represented in the Walk Against Warming November 2007 coordinated by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW.
- St Mark's provided an Anglican response at the Faith Ecology Network seminars 'Climate Faith Change' held at Auburn in June 2007.
- St Mark's led an EcoChurch workshop at 'A Moral Climate' conference at the Uniting Church Centre for Ministry May 2008.
- Grant won from Kogarah Council for organic garden and second water tank in St Mark's Kindergarten, May 2008.
- EcoChurch has been discussed with Kingsgrove Catholic Church (June 2008) and St Luke's Anglican Mosman (July 2008).

During the 2008 Environment Day liturgy, St Mark's gave thanks for the significant contribution by parishioners, and the practical environmental achievements over the 12 months. Commitments were also made for the future:

- An annual observation of the Creation Season^{vi} at St Mark's.
- Establishment of a permanent recycling centre to meet emerging needs.
- Continuous improvement of the EcoChurch website as an education tool for parishioners, other churches and the community.
- Linking EcoChurch with opportunities to connect directly with the local community and working with Kogarah Council in joint educational initiatives in the municipality.
- Working with the Anglican Church of Australia, particularly the Sydney Diocese, and other churches to 'spread the word'.

A representative^{vii} of St Mark's would be pleased to discuss how EcoChurch could be adapted for use in other parishes.

As a special project, EcoChurch has concluded. EcoChurch is now part of ongoing ministry and activities – a component of St Mark's Fifth Mark of Mission.

A comprehensive technical audit of all parish buildings is still to be undertaken, as does a fuller analysis of all activities.

Conclusion

EcoChurch is a straightforward model that communities of faith can adopt to contribute to the Fifth Mark of Mission, ‘safeguarding the integrity of creation’. EcoChurch is a practical approach, at a local level to what appears to be an insurmountable global issue.

EcoChurch does not require a detailed knowledge of the science of global warming, nor of the intricacies of an emissions trading scheme. It does require local organisation and a commitment to speaking out and acting.

Further information about EcoChurch: www.southhurstville.anglican.asn.au/ecochurch.htm

ⁱ Earth Hour, an initiative of WWF Australia and the Sydney Morning Herald.

ⁱⁱ The EcoChurch team comprised Bridget McKern, Bruce Cooke, Sandra Scott, Robert Nelson, and the Rector The Reverend Chris Albany as project sponsor.

ⁱⁱⁱ EcoChurch website www.southhurstville.anglican.asn.au/ecochurch.htm

^{iv} I understand that the Five Marks of Mission have been adopted by many denominations and ecumenical bodies.

^v The Lambeth Conference is one of the global Anglican Communion's instruments of Communion. It is held every ten years at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who invites archbishops, diocesan, assistant and suffragan bishops to meet for worship, study and conversation.

^{vi} Refer to *Season of Creation* website <http://www.seasonofcreation.com/about/what/> the copyright of which is held by Norman Habel and the Justice and International Mission unit within the Commission for Mission of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

^{vii} Contact Bruce Cooke email cookeb@optusnet.com.au

Appendix 1

PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT CANON 2007¹

A Canon to assist in the protection of the environment

The General Synod prescribes as follows:

Preamble

- A. This Church acknowledges God's sovereignty over his creation through the Lord Jesus Christ.
- B. In Genesis it says that "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." In 1990 the Anglican Consultative Council gave modern form to this task when it declared that one of the five marks of the mission of the Church was "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to sustain and renew the life of the earth".
- C. This Canon gives form to this mark of mission in the life of the Anglican Church of Australia.
- D. This Church recognises the importance of the place of creation in the history of salvation.
- E. This Church acknowledges the custodianship of the indigenous peoples of this land .
- F. This Church recognizes that climate change is a most serious threat to the lives of the present and future generations. Accordingly, this Canon seeks to reduce the release of greenhouse gases by this Church and its agencies.

Short title and principal canon

1. This Canon may be cited as the "Protection of the Environment Canon 2007".

Mechanisms to assist in protecting the environment

2. (1) Every diocese which adopts this Canon undertakes to reduce its environmental footprint by increasing the water and energy efficiency of its current facilities and operations and by ensuring that environmental sustainability is an essential consideration in the development of any new facilities and operations, with a view to ensuring that the diocese minimalises its contribution to the mean global surface temperature rise.
- (2) Every diocese which adopts this Canon undertakes to establish such procedures and process such as an environment commission, or similar body as are necessary to assist the diocese and its agencies to:
 - (a) give leadership to the Church and its people in the way in which they can care for the environment,
 - (b) use the resources of God's creation appropriately and to consider and act responsibly about the effect of human activity on God's creation,
 - (c) facilitate and encourage the education of Church members and others about the need to care for the environment, use the resources of God's creation properly and act responsibly about the effect of human activity on God's creation, and,
 - (d) advise and update the diocese on the targets needed to meet the commitment made in sub-section (1);
 - (e) urge its people to pray in regard to these matters.

Reporting

3. (1) Every diocese which adopts this Canon undertakes to report to each ordinary session of the General Synod as to its progress in reducing its environmental footprint in order to reach the undertaking made in accordance with subsection (1) of section 2.
- (2) Any report will outline the targets that were set, the achievements made, and difficulties encountered.

Adoption of Canon by Diocese

4. The provisions of this Canon affect the order and good government of the Church within a diocese and the Canon shall not come into force in any diocese unless and until the diocese by ordinance adopts the Canon.

We certify that this bill was passed by the General Synod of The Anglican Church of Australia this 25th day of October 2007.

The Revd C J Moroney
Mrs A Skamp
Secretaries of Synod

¹ General Synod, Anglican Church of Australia, 2007