

Environmental Initiatives by Church Groups in Ireland

Throughout Ireland, many individuals, families, schools, businesses, and voluntary groups are endeavouring to take action to protect and enhance the natural environment. In this section, initiatives by four Church groups are described.

Eco-Congregation Ireland

Catherine Brennan

For you love all things that exist ... For your immortal spirit is in all things. (Wisdom 11:24; 12:1)

God saw everything that God had made and indeed it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

*Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. ... all things flow and are indirectly linked together... If you push here, something somewhere will move; if you strike here, something somewhere will wince ... (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)*

The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands – with the added injustice that it is poor people who suffer most from environmental destruction. The work of loving, protecting, healing, celebrating and taking care of God's creation is foundational to the Christian gospel and central to the Church's mission. We truly live God's love for the whole of creation in the way we pray; celebrate Eucharist; educate; plant trees, vegetables, seeds and bulbs; deal with energy and litter; decorate; and make links to the local community and the wider global family.

An Ecumenical Initiative

In 2005, the Church and Society Forum of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting initiated Eco-Congregation Ireland – an all-Ireland programme supported by the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church and the Religious Society of

Friends (Quakers). The programme is facilitated by a committee representing these five denominations and appointed by the respective denominational leaders. All five committee members work in a voluntary capacity; a part-time Communications Officer is employed. The committee is in liaison with Christian ecological groups in Britain and Europe as well as throughout Ireland.

The vision of Eco-Congregation is to see churches of all denominations throughout Ireland – north and south – celebrate God's creation, recognise the interdependence of all creation and care for it in their life and mission and through members' personal lifestyles.

Eco-Congregation Ireland aims therefore to encourage churches to rediscover the connection between the environment and Christian faith. Christians are invited to reflect on the beauty and integrity of creation and to consider what practical steps can be taken to heal and protect the natural environment. Eco-Congregation encourages and promotes an eco approach to worship, lifestyle, community outreach and contact with the developing world. The programme emphasises the connection between environmental destruction and injustice and poverty in our world; it emphasises also the needs of future generations of humanity and of all other species.

Resources

Eco-Congregation Ireland offers support to individuals and faith communities as they endeavour to adopt an eco approach. Members of the committee are available to visit congregations and parishes if requested.

A wide range of resources is available to download from the website.¹ These are packed with ideas and suggestions which aim to integrate environmental care into different areas of church life. The resources include sections on worship, theology, work with children and young people, property and grounds management, finance, purchasing

and waste management, working with local communities, and ‘thinking and acting globally’.² A section on climate change will be added in the near future. Links with a range of other environmental groups, including those associated with churches, are provided. Visitors to the website are invited to sign up to receive a monthly email newsletter.³

The website also includes a section on ‘Eco Examples’ and one on ‘Eco Tips’, which provide examples and suggestions showing practical and imaginative ways in which individuals, groups and communities can go about adopting a more environmentally friendly approach to life.

Environmental Audit

A church or congregation which wishes to take definitive steps towards a more eco-conscious way of being can start the process by assembling a group to undertake an ‘environmental audit’. The Eco-Congregation Ireland website provides a checklist which enables groups to identify both existing good practice and areas which need to be addressed. This comprehensive checklist covers issues such as worship, theology, education, church management, personal lifestyle, community outreach and overseas concern. The environmental ‘check-up’ is done through using an easy ‘tick box’ format and it need take only an hour.

Groups often find themselves pleasantly surprised as they realise the number of ways in which their church or congregation is already being eco-friendly. The process also helps generate ideas as to how new and additional steps can be taken.

Eco-Congregation Award

Churches which have been working on environmental issues for at least two years are invited to apply for an Eco-Congregation Award. Applicants are assessed by two independent assessors. In total, ten awards have so far been presented in Ireland, the most recent being to Kilbridge Presbyterian Church, Co. Antrim, in May 2013. The Oblate parishes of Inchicore, Dublin, received an award in September 2012. The other churches which have received awards are: Whitechurch and Rathfarnham Church of Ireland; Dundrum Methodist Church; Churchtown Quaker Meeting – all in Dublin – and Fitzroy Presbyterian Church in Belfast. Clonakilty Methodist Church in Cork is the only church to have received two awards. Two dioceses have received awards – the Catholic Diocese of Kerry, which has more than

twenty ‘eco active’ parishes, received an award in May 2012, and the Church of Ireland Diocese of Cashel and Ossory received its award in April 2013.

Whether the application is from a parish, community or diocese, the assessment criteria are the same. Evidence needs to be shown that eco progress has been made in four areas – spiritual, practical, community and global (for example, involvement with a development organisation such as Trócaire or Christian Aid).

The Importance of Action

Speaking at an Eco-Congregation Ireland event in Kilkenny in April 2013, the Columban priest, eco-theologian and author, Sean McDonagh SSC, encouraged parishes to take tangible steps to help safeguard and improve the environment: “Take even very small steps and keep at it. We have to live in a way that supports the planet into the future”, he said.

The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Group in Inchicore, Dublin has been doing just that for the past five years. Members of the group, who come from the three Oblate parishes in the area (Mary Immaculate, St Michael’s and Our Lady of the Wayside, Bluebell), have worked hard to raise awareness of the interconnectedness of all life. One way in which they have done this is through holding ‘Earth Days’ where the local community is invited to special events such as nature appreciation walks. A ten-week gardening course to encourage people to grow their own vegetables proved popular with non-churchgoers as well as with parishioners. During Tree Week 2012 the group launched a unique Tree Gift Card to support an ambitious re-forestation project taking place on the Indonesian Island of Nusa Kambangan.⁴ This has proved hugely popular as the cards make ideal gifts.⁵

Eco-Congregation Ireland itself is an active member of Stop Climate Chaos – a coalition of civil, development, youth, environmental and faith organisations working together to prevent runaway climate change. Eco-Congregation supporters are encouraged to take part in Stop Climate Chaos campaigns.

‘Creation Time’

Each year, Eco-Congregation Ireland strongly encourages churches of all denominations throughout Ireland to observe ‘Creation Time’ – from 1 September to 4 October – on either one

Sunday or all of the Sundays during this time. The setting aside a five-week period to celebrate a Time for Creation emerged from a proposal adopted at the Third Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, Romania, in September 2007. The start and conclusion of Creation Time reflect significant dates in both the eastern and western Christian Churches: the Orthodox Church year begins on 1 September and 4 October is the feast day of St Francis of Assisi – the patron saint of those who promote ecology.

Each year excellent resources on the selected theme for Creation Time (including sermon notes, prayers of intercession and fact sheets) are made available by the ecumenical network, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI).⁶ The theme for Creation Time 2013 is 'Water Justice' corresponding with the United Nations International Year of Water Cooperation.

Concluding Comments

Though the Eco-Congregation programme is designed to help churches work on environmental issues, participating churches find that it also boosts church life and mission, links people to those who suffer most from the degradation of our fragile planet, contributes to community building, stimulates church life and is enjoyable and fun.

Christians committed to ecological practice need to be mystics, finding God not only in the boundless beauty of the natural world but also in the painful dark night of loss and failure and in the enduring, life-long commitment to the earth and its creatures.

Notes

1. The website of Eco-Congregation Ireland is at: <http://www.ecocongregationireland.com>
2. For support and network administrative purposes, and for updating of the website, it is helpful for Eco-Congregation Ireland to have feedback on the resources it provides. Email comments to: info@ecocongregationireland.com
3. The monthly email newsletter can be obtained by sending an email with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line to info@ecocongregation.com
4. see <http://oblatemissions.ie/jpic/gifftree>
5. For further practical examples of environmental actions by parishes and dioceses see Eco-Congregation Ireland website (www.ecocongregationireland.com).
6. See the website of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI): <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/creationtime>. See also European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN), a church network promoting co-operation in caring for creation (<http://www.ecen.org>).

Sr Catherine Brennan SSL is the Roman Catholic representative on the committee of Eco-Congregation Ireland.

An Tairseach, Dominican Farm and Ecology Centre

Marian O'Sullivan

At the General Chapter of the Dominican Sisters held in Mexico in 1992 the Sisters chose 'Care of the Earth' as one of the priorities for their lives and mission.

Arising from this, the Regional Council in Ireland established a committee to explore the possibilities for an initiative in the Irish context.

It did not take long to decide that Wicklow would be the location for an initiative as we had a 70 acre farm there. This farm is within the town boundaries – you could say the town grew to surround the convent with its primary and secondary schools and large boarding school established in 1870.

Considerable time was spent clarifying the vision and the possibilities for an initiative to be based on the farm. One of the members of the committee, Julie Newman OP, was appointed to take responsibility for the project. Julie, with others, looked around for models and found one in Genesis Farm, New Jersey, established and run by another Dominican sister, Miriam Therese MacGillis.

After spending some time in New Jersey, Julie returned to Wicklow and started working to make the dream a reality. A five-year plan was drawn up and approved by the Leadership. The plan proposed:

- The conversion of the farm to organic production of vegetables.
- The establishment of a ten-acre wildlife sanctuary.
- The establishment of an Education Centre.

Organic Farm and Wildlife Sanctuary

The first tasks were restoring the farmyard, rebuilding the manager's house, and getting the land back to fertility. Organic farming was seen as the way forward since conventional farming, dependent as it is on petroleum-based fertiliser, is not sustainable into the future. It is also highly questionable in terms of human and indeed planetary health.

The second objective was to restore hedgerows, waterways, wetlands and plant 10,000 trees. Peter Bateman, a lecturer in an agricultural college in England and a qualified bio-dynamic farmer, was appointed farm manager in 1998. In brief, biodynamic farming acknowledges that the Earth is part of a much larger life system which inevitably contributes to its dynamism and life-giving possibilities.

Within a few years, An Tairseach had a fully certified organic vegetable garden and vegetable field. It now also produces chickens and pigs and has a suckler beef herd. The produce of the farm – vegetables, eggs, beef, lamb and pork – is sold in the An Tairseach Farm Shop, as well as in some shops and at a farmers' market in the area; produce is also supplied to some local restaurants.

Educational Dimension

However, the fundamental purpose of our initiative is educational. The name An Tairseach (the threshold) suggested itself. As a human species we are living on the cusp of a new dawn – a major threshold in time. Many theorists argue that we are at the end of the Cenozoic Era which began over 65 million years ago when an asteroid hit the Earth causing the extinction of the majority of plant and animal species then living, including the dinosaurs. We are privileged to be alive and to be part of the shaping of a new era. Will it be a 'technozoic era', where technology virtually takes over our lives, or will it be an 'ecozoic era', where humanity will learn to live in harmony with the rest of the community of life, respecting all species as modes of divine presence? Such thoughts prompted us to move as quickly as circumstances would allow to establish the educational dimension of the project.

It was decided that we would refurbish an existing building on the campus rather than construct a new building. While the refurbishment was under way we began offering programmes on a small scale to the local community. We also offered educational visits to schools and welcomed adult groups that were interested in what was happening and in the whole question of ecology and sustainability.

The Ecology Centre opened in 2005. Its purpose is to raise awareness about the perilous state of the planet and our responsibility, as humans, to be a more benign influence as participants in the community of life rather than continue to act as if we were 'lords of the universe'.

The Centre offers a wide range of courses including new cosmology, sacred dance, scripture, meditation, organic gardening, cookery, yoga, Tai Chi and art. Twice a year, the Centre offers a ten-week residential sabbatical programme exploring spirituality in the light of an evolving Universe, an endangered Earth and the Christian tradition. The Centre also hosts conferences.

Concluding Comments

We in An Tairseach realise that we have much to learn ourselves if we are to live sustainably. We find inspiration in the indigenous traditions, including our own Celtic tradition where our ancestors discovered the divine in the world around them. The mystics of all religious traditions are sources of inspiration, as is the best in our own Christian tradition. By means of advances in science we now know that the Universe began 13.7 billion years ago with a single explosion of energy so that we all come from the same source. We are intimately connected at every level of our being. We are in fact all One. We remember that Jesus said: "I came that they may be One". We are already One but we are a long way from realising it and acting out of that awareness. At An Tairseach we try to explore some of this richness in day and residential courses and we find it an exhilarating experience because it rings true.

Marian O'Sullivan OP is a founder member of An Tairseach and continues to be involved in developing the project.

**An Tairseach, Dominican Farm and Ecology Centre
Wicklow Town
Web: www.ecocentrewicklow.ie**

The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy

Carmel Bracken

Marcella O'Connell

The *Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy* is one of nine congregations of Mercy Sisters throughout the world. While a majority of members of the Congregation live in Ireland members are also working in the following countries – Brazil, Britain, British Columbia, Kenya, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, United States and Zambia. In Ireland there are four Provinces – Northern, Western, South Central and Southern.

Out of a growing awareness of the need to re-connect with our deepest roots, and find our rightful place in the web of life, as a means of addressing the urgent environmental crises of our time, our Congregational Mission Statement of 2000 called us to a greater consciousness of the interconnectedness of the whole community of life and our place within it. This embraced the recognition that when we abuse our planet we primarily victimise people who are poor – those to whom we, as Sisters of Mercy, have a special mission.

To reclaim our sense of awe and wonder at the sacredness of all life, our congregational policy for Ecological Responsibility encourages us “to foster among us a contemplative stance towards the mystery of God as revealed in the on-going story of the universe. A spirituality rooted in this contemplative stance influences our way of being in the world and informs all our actions and choices.” Therefore, in each of the four Provinces in Ireland Mercy sisters are involved in educational and ecological initiatives which highlight the importance and potential of this way of living.

Northern Province

In the Northern Province, the Sisters explore together imaginative and respectful ways of living out of a new world view, re-connecting with our planet in an ever-deepening consciousness of the oneness of all life. At Glór na Mara in Bundoran, Co. Donegal, a sense of the Sacred is promoted and sustainable lifestyle choices are explored out of the context of the evolutionary story of the Universe. Organic growing is promoted among the

local people as a more sustainable and wholesome way of relating to the earth. Part of a two-acre field has been developed into a Community Garden in collaboration with the Organic Centre in Rossinver and a plot of land has been offered to the Transition Year students of the local secondary school, as a way of re-skilling local people for a future without oil, when all food may have to be grown locally without chemicals.

Courses are offered to the local people on the new cosmology, biodiversity, energy, organic growing, cooking, herbs, health, spirituality, ritual and sustainable lifestyle choices. Other ministry areas of involvement include school environmental projects, developing retreat days on the new cosmology for Leaving Certificate students and writing introductory sessions on the Universe Story as the context for the ‘Lifestart’ Programme (for parents of 0–4 year olds).¹

Western Province

In the Western Province, Sisters are committed to raising awareness of the interconnectedness of all of life and strive to educate themselves and others in the promotion of:

- sustainable living with prudent use of the Earth’s resources;
- conservation of land;
- the protection of all species on Earth and their habitats.²

At ‘An Gáirdín’, in Portumna, Co. Galway, an education programme and organic growing are facilitated by a team of six people, two of whom are Mercy Sisters, along with volunteers as the need arises. A small group of those who share the vision of An Gáirdín meet regularly for support, study and reflection. The dwelling house was built from carefully sourced natural, renewable and recycled material, with a geo-thermal ground-source heating system. A recent undertaking has been the provision of a building adequate to meet the needs of the expanding range of courses and events. This has been a work of collaboration and every aspect of the building is a demonstration of sustainable practice.³

South Central Province

In the South Central Province, Tearmann Community Garden at Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow is a community-based organic garden where efforts are made to reduce environmental harm and

increase the care and sensitivity towards Earth's inhabitants and systems. There is a continuous call to a greater awareness of the interconnectedness of all of life and, in collaboration with others, through further education there is a greater understanding of the story of an evolving Universe.

Sisters from the South Central Province brought the 'Be the Change' Programme to Ireland in 2007. Four sisters went to England to train as facilitators and following their return, facilitated a one-day Symposium for the public in various venues throughout the Province. The following year, a workshop for the training of other facilitators (religious and lay people) took place in Dowdstown House in Navan. This was subsidised by the Province. Since then, the 'Be the Change' programme has been rolled out throughout the length and breadth of Ireland and continues to inspire and spur to action many people of all ages.⁴

Southern Province

The Southern Province has set aside land in Rosscarbery, West Cork to be used for ecological development. Conscious that intensive agriculture has greatly reduced the range of species in our fields, and of the need to support an increase in biodiversity, native woodland trees and wildflower areas have been planted, gardening is organic and sustainable living is practiced at the Ecological Community there.⁵

Over the 2011 and 2012 growing seasons (March to September), twenty-eight people participated in a gardening course. In the Community Garden in Rosscarbery, people enjoyed the learning aspect; they loved taking the food home, and, as time went on, the companionship became very precious to them. Alongside the Community Garden, there is a regular gardening course with a new group of participants. The awareness of being gifted with the efforts of myriads of organisms over billions of years evokes a sense of wonder, and respect for the life of the soil. This respect for the soil is what organic gardening is all about.⁶

General

In recent times, Mercy Sisters have been promoting and supporting the 'Transition Towns Initiative' which involves the town/village/community planning towards a future without oil. Transition Towns lead to the rebirth of local communities, which will generate their own sustainable energy systems, local food, organic growing, housing, local

enterprise, small businesses and the development of local currencies to keep money in the area. An important part of the movement is the whole town working together on an 'energy descent' plan, seeing how to reduce its carbon footprint.⁷

Another initiative in which Sisters have been involved is the Green Sod Land Trust. This was set up to protect Irish ecosystems and educate people to be proactive in the preservation of nature.⁸

Notes

1. http://www.sistersofmercy.ie/ireland_britain/northern/2011_w_earth_wisdom.cfm
2. http://www.sistersofmercy.ie/ireland_britain/western/cosmology.cfm
3. <http://angairdin.ie/index.php/about-us/>
4. <http://bethechangeireland.com/wp/>
5. http://www.sistersofmercy.ie/ireland_britain/southern/2011_ecology.cfm
6. http://www.sistersofmercy.ie/news/article_display.cfm?article_id=2446
7. <http://transitiontownsireland.ning.com/>
8. <http://www.greensodireland.ie/>

Carmel Bracken rsm is a member of the Northern Province of the Sisters of Mercy and lives in Tullamore.

Marcella O'Connell rsm is a member of the Southern Province of the Sisters of Mercy and lives in Mallow.

Brú na Cruinne

Tom Costello

The Christian Brothers' monastery in Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary was due to be closed in 2001. Around that time, two Christian Brothers who had completed a course in cosmology in Australia approached the Provincial Leadership Team seeking suitable accommodation to bring the fruits of their learning to others. There was widespread delight in the Irish Province when they were asked to establish a new community in the 200 year-old building. They spent most of that year repairing and renovating the monastery's interior. A third brother joined them in late August 2002; he too had studied cosmology in Australia.