

Care for God's planet is vital part of faith

During Lent, our churches will focus on how worshippers can preserve the environment and combat the climate emergency

A SMALL group of volunteers add bird food onto feeders before hanging them from a tree outside the church. Later, they'll be surveying the different types of birds that visit their churchyard.

As they crouch behind hedges with their binoculars, one thing is clear: delighting in nature and thanking God for it is an integral part of their Christian faith.

This is **St Helens Church** on the Isle of Wight, where a dozen or so worshippers meet once a month on a Sunday afternoon for an Eco-Church service. It includes a few minutes of informal worship with an environmental theme, a practical task that helps sustainable living, and a shared ethical meal around a table inside the church.

Those practical tasks might

include surveying plant and animal life, assessing carbon footprints, making sustainable gifts, pressing apples or planting trees.

'It's prompted a different dimension to our spirituality'

A clear focus on responding to climate change and conserving God's world has invigorated this 300-year-old parish, and also inspired congregation members to renew their spiritual focus.

The parish is now one of just four churches in the south of England – and one of only 10 in the country – to receive a Gold Award from the Eco-Church scheme run by the charity A Rocha.

And both the national Church of England and our diocese will be encouraging all of us to focus on the environment during Lent. Worshippers will be encouraged to reflect on God's world, take practical steps to conserve the planet, and to campaign to prevent climate change.

The Rev Ali Morley, vicar of St Helens Church, said: "There are around 12 of us who decided that we wanted to gather monthly to develop our love of nature and take some practical steps in response to the global climate emergency. Between 20 and 30 people have been involved in our other Eco-Church activities.

"The fact that we don't just talk about it, but also take action, makes a massive difference, because we're not just sitting in pews being passive. It's also

prompted a different dimension to people's spirituality and enriched our worship. Our acts of worship are mostly led by lay people, and are based on our Christian response to God's creation.

"It's easy to assume that a small, rural church with limited resources can't do a great deal to combat a massive issue like this, but we've shown what can be achieved with a little enthusiasm and passion."

At St Helens Church, one project has quickly led onto another. Surveying the flora and fauna in the churchyard led to numerous plans: the construction of a pond at the far end of the churchyard, and planting trees to replace hedgerows and to protect and monitor the resident glow worm population. A disused labyrinth has been lovingly restored and is used for prayer and contemplation.

Assessing the congregation's individual carbon footprints led to a desire to promote sustainable living. The need to reduce single-use plastic has led to the setting up of a plastic bottle refill station. The church buys eco-friendly products, such as shampoo and household detergents, in bulk and sets up a stall at church coffee mornings where locals can refill empty bottles.

The need to plant more trees led to a seed-planting project with St Helens Primary School, as part of a long-term commitment. Each pupil in Year 1 and 2 planted a seed which is now germinating in a seed bed at the church. When they leave as 11-year-olds, they will plant their saplings elsewhere.

Ali has also worked with school and youth groups on plastic reduction with the aid of a large dolphin, Trashy, who collects crisp packets.



Above left: members of the Eco-Church congregation create bird feeders inside St Helens Church; top: the creation of the labyrinth in the churchyard; below: pressing apples inside St Helens Church

Worshipper Mary Jackson said: "At our Sunday afternoon services, we tend to worship in a non-formal way, linked to the task we are going to do. Anyone can lead it, and it's good to hear new voices leading. We prayed in the autumn holding beautiful leaves that had changed colour."

Fellow worshipper Rose Gillett said: "For our service on the solstice, we deliberately didn't use any electricity. We had one lit candle in the church and nothing else. It was amazing how the light crept into the far corners of the church, and was a real help as we worshipped."

And Andrew Bradstock said: "The links with the local community are also significant. People who might never come to church join in with tree-planting or plastic recycling, and we have no qualms talking about why we are getting involved. Showing that we share other people's values on these issues can be a point of contact. The church might also be helping others find answers."

Those values are also evident in the meal that the Eco-Church community shares each month. They aim for their food to be local, organic, animal-friendly and fairly-traded each time.