

Diocese of Hereford – Environment Community Collaboration

In spring 2021 four church parishes agreed to pilot community collaboration partnerships with the aim of developing and progressing local environmental goals. A core focus for the pilots is environmental stewardship. However, the principle adopted by the pilots is that environmental stewardship is intimately connected with the other Marks of Mission and cannot be considered in isolation but alongside other key themes such as discipleship, community, generosity and stewardship of finances, heritage, and community use of spaces. One of the principles is to strengthen connections between church and community with, for example, parish councils and schools.

The parishes involved in the pilots have been meeting periodically to share learning and to agree how to share it more widely. This group has reviewed the benefits of being part of the pilots and concluded that, even in these very early stages, the networking and sharing opportunities are already proving valuable and a useful stimulus to activity. ‘A problem shared is a problem halved’ has proven to be the case, as people who have been battling to make progress in their own organisations have found renewed energy and focus from joining people in a similar position in other organisations. It has also developed an increased recognition in communities that the church is interested in real-world issues such as the environment, and has strengthened the relationships between the church and the wider community.

Since the start of the project the group has been joined by a fifth parish - the parish of Almeley. If you'd like to find out more about joining your parish into the group, or if your parish already has an environmental community partnership or group, we would love to hear from you so that other parishes may benefit from your experiences. Either way please contact: Liz Mackay
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Case Studies

The five church parishes involved so far in the pilot have offered case studies below outlining their experiences, successes and challenges so far.

Fownhope

Village Website: <https://www.fownhope.org.uk/>

Parish Church: St Mary's

Contact: Jeremy Davy and Christopher Whitmey email: jdavy@swisslynx.co.uk

Fownhope Parish Council declared a Climate Emergency in June 2019 and since then have been putting together an action plan which sets out exactly how to honour the declaration and help make changes possible for everyone in the Parish to reduce their carbon footprint. The council is part of [The Great Collaboration](#), which is available to all parishes whose parish councils commit to carbon net-zero targets. This was launched to the community at an event in September in which St Mary's participated (see photo).



Since becoming involved in the community partnerships pilot, St Mary's church has joined the active Fownhope Parish Council Environment Group. St Mary's Parochial Church Council had already agreed to work towards the Eco Church award, and is currently seeking to gain a Bronze award. It recently changed its old inefficient gas boilers for new "A"-rated gas boilers, recycles as much as possible, and uses recycled paper. Over the next 12 to 18 months the PCC will be working through the Eco Church checklist. There are things a rural church can do to show its concern about climate change. Fownhope's engagement with environmental sustainability (both as a village and a church congregation) makes this the ideal springboard for a wider community conversation which incorporates not only the environment but also the sustainability of church finances and heritage. However, the rate at which any action can be achieved is affected by the number and age of the congregation (average age 70–80?) and the other needs of the church (which in the case of listed buildings often involves time consuming and costly repairs and renovations).

Little Birch

Website: <http://www.littlebirchparishcouncil.org/>

Parish Church: St Mary's

Contact: Rev Mark Johnson email: revmark100@yahoo.co.uk

Informal conversations are progressing well in Little Birch to build connections and develop ideas for environmental sustainability.

Since becoming involved in the pilot, the church has achieved its bronze Eco Church award, beginning with increasing the biodiversity of its churchyard by putting up nest boxes and marking out areas of the churchyard which can be left to become wildflower meadows which attract wildlife.

Others in the community are working to build in greener practices and to use land in a way which reduces the village's carbon footprint, such as by developing allotments. These conversations have encouraged the village hall committee to consider ways to reduce the village hall's carbon usage, and, as they continue to develop, the church hopes to grow a wider conversation about stewardship. An interest is developing in renovating the village hall to make it more eco-friendly, as this is a central part of the village.

As momentum builds across the village, the church plans to make a formal approach to the Parish Council – with the support of its Green Party Ward Councillor Toni Fagan – to declare a climate emergency and become part of The Great Collaboration.



Lugwardine

Website: <https://bartestreewithlugwardinegroup-pc.gov.uk/>

Facebook for group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/218623863676651>

Parish Church: St Peter's, Lugwardine

Contact: Rev Simon Tarlton email: simon.tarlton@gmail.com

St Peter's Lugwardine sees its progress towards an Eco Church award as part of a broader conversation. The PCC has voted to participate in a community-focused approach and is working towards the Bronze Eco Church award. As part of this, it is considering negotiating new deals for heating and lighting, and is exploring the possibility of incorporating solar panels into reordering plans.

The Parish Council has also agreed to work collaboratively. As a result, the Bartestree with Lugwardine Great Collaboration Group has been set up to bring together local groups and individuals who are committed to supporting our thriving villages and work together to address the climate and ecological crises. The first meeting was held in August.

This does not mean it is by any means all rosy! There are members of the Parish Council who are not convinced that climate change is a significant area of concern, and/or who are unconvinced that the Parish Council has a significant role to play. Lugwardine's proximity to Hereford also means that it has a much higher proportion of people who live in the village but socialise in Hereford, whose engagement with Lugwardine is limited.

The Lugwardine Collaboration has therefore decided to start small and build interest, willingness and momentum and hopefully to grow the community's knowledge of climate issues and how we can all help.

The focus is initially on increasing bio-diversity in the churchyard, areas of land maintained by the Parish Council, and people's gardens. The first activity was held on the 27th October to assess the biodiversity of the parish burial ground in Lugwardine. The group also lead a community hedge-planting day on the 27th November in Glebelands (by Bartestree Cross) following a grant from the Tree Council (as pictured). The Parish Council is working with 'Verging on Wild' to re-wild areas of land and provide information so that people understand what is happening and why. Through these initiatives the group plans to train some volunteers who could then offer to help identify species in private gardens, hopefully encouraging community collaboration which could be followed up with an Open Gardens event in 2022.

In parallel with this, an ongoing audit of community assets hopes to identify groups, businesses and individuals who may be interested in collaborating on an environmental initiative. As part of this, the Lugwardine Collaboration plans to work closely with the school, potentially involving them in the re-wilding projects.



The hope is that by starting small it will be feasible to engage people and build relationships and that this will then lead on to bigger and better things in terms of community involvement and partnership-working. This would include wider social and heritage issues and the environment, such as the aspiration to set up a community garden and to use the village's proximity to pilgrimage trails to explore links between the natural world and spirituality.

Orleton

Website: <https://orleton-pc.gov.uk/> and <https://www.orletonvillage.co.uk/>

Parish Church: St Georges Church

Contact: Liz Mackay email: liz.mackay@hereford.anglican.org

Orleton is an active and engaged village with a wide range of community activities, but it can be easy to get into a comfortable groove and keep doing what has always been done, especially as most of the work is reliant on volunteers and change takes more effort. In church, for example, it is difficult to make a significant difference to the carbon footprint without a large-scale re-ordering project to install under-floor heating, insulation etc., so while there has been considerable discussion of environmental sustainability within various different groups, the scale of the ultimate task can lead to inertia.

A major benefit of this pilot for Orleton has been the impetus to join up activities across the village, and to realise that it is worth doing the small things in order to get things going. LED lightbulbs, a green energy supplier and a churchyard that supports bio-diversity may not save the world, but they are a step in the right direction.

In spring 2021, a few things happened in parallel.

- St George's Orleton received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to map and develop community assets, needs, events, and individual areas of interest and expertise. From this will emerge a five-year plan to build environmental, financial and social sustainability for the church. This will include how the church building is used as a community space.
- The Parish Council developed plans to review community support as part of Herefordshire Council's Talk Community programme.
- The Parish Council adopted an Environmental policy and the church received its bronze Eco Church award.
- Various other groups such as the Recreation Association were considering how to re-open following lockdown in a more sustainable way.

As a result, a project was established to discuss across the village what people value about Orleton and also what changes they may like to see. Through a village-wide survey and various discussions, some themes are emerging, one of which is environmental sustainability. A group has been formed to co-ordinate activity on this topic across the village, which has various plans including mass bulb-planting, planting perennials around the village, allowing areas of the churchyard, recreation ground and land maintained by the Parish Council to be re-wilded, and setting up an after-school club to work with the school's 'Eco Champions' and other interested children. The group also plans to link in with groups such as Evergreens (for over-60s) and the craft group to bring together the children's work with that of older people in the village, and to share ideas and skills for reducing the carbon footprint of our buildings (for example, church, school and village hall).

A Village Festival took place on Saturday 18th September, followed by an ecumenical Harvest Festival in St George's Church on Sunday 19th September. St Georges also held an environment themed service on the 3rd October. The after-school club has now started which 12 children have signed up for and are attending very enthusiastically (see the attached photo of their innovative bug shelter), and a village community fund is in the process of being set-up.



It has not all been plain sailing. There has been resistance to working with other groups and a sense that running events in collaboration may result in less interest in (and less income for) the church. Inevitably in a small village, personalities and politics take on more weight than they might in an urban area and can prove tricky to navigate successfully. It is certainly sometimes tempting to stop the attempt to work together, but overall much more is being achieved – and much more rapidly – than any group could have done on its own, as evidenced by the fact that no group working alone could have put on such a substantial village festival in such a short period or time, and no one group could be establishing an inter-generational programme of planting and re-wilding throughout the village.

Almeley

Website: <https://almeleypc.org/> and <https://stmaryalmeley.org.uk/>

Parish Church: St Mary's

Contact: Rev. Guy Wilkinson & Vanessa Faulkner email: guy@gwilkinson.org.uk

Whilst not being one of the initial parish pilot group, the Parish of Almeley have recently formed a community green group to develop ideas and projects of an environmental nature and hence its inclusion here. The idea of a community green group, which was initially floated by Rev. Wilkinson from St Mary's Church, received a promising response with ten people from across the community joining the initial meeting in May 2021. It now has a membership of around 20. For its first activity the group joined the national churchyards 'Count on Nature' in June, and 3 working parties assessed the grounds of St Mary's with people from the community and the village primary school spotting over 95 different species of plants, 39 creatures from ant to toad, 17 birds and 13 trees.



Since then the group has clarified its aims (see below), approached the Parish Council to discuss joint working, and initiated a project to clear and rejuvenate one of the parish commons including a pond (see picture below). Although it is early days, we are encouraged by the wide variety of interests represented in the group.

“The Almeley Green Group is a voluntary group of local people who have come together with a shared interest in helping the Almeley community to respond and adapt to the climate and ecological emergencies. We aim to help Almeley address and adapt to these challenges through community initiatives, local projects and by supporting and encouraging individual actions. Through positive actions we aim to create and protect wildlife habitats in and around the village, rebuild natural environments and raise awareness. We seek to do this by reducing consumption and waste; encouraging recycling and reuse; creating and protecting wildlife habitats in and around the village; and in time adapting our energy use and transport to build a greener community for the future. In doing this we will work with other groups in the village including the school, the church, the Parish and District Council, farmers and others.”

St Mary’s church are members of Eco-church and in the process of trying to achieve a Bronze Award. The church is also in discussion with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (planning authority) about plans to make the church a more flexible space for community activities. The church considers the environmental group part of its mission to build a greater sense of community as well as building resilience for the future.



29th November 2021