

Eco Church Story : Christchurch beginnings

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July 2020

I decided a long time ago that one thing mattered more than anything else. And that thing was to be in the flow of God. To see where the Spirit is moving and to be in that.

I started out my adult life in youth ministry, back in the 90s when the churches were very split and in their corner and didn't talk to others outside that. Most of my friends left the church, or explored a little piece of faith that they were comfortable with, or set about trying to reinvent the church based on an idea of what the future looked like. None of which was wrong, but I remember one day walking in the hills north of Wellington and along a mountain river, and I sat and watched the flow of the river. Around the edges the water edied and curled back on itself. There were stagnant pools where the water had receded and the flow had moved elsewhere. And there was the main flow of the river, surging clear and sparkling with life and power. That was where I wanted to be, I decided.

I've learned a lot about God since then, and I'm still hardly begun, but I've learned to notice God at work. It is not always big and bold and exciting. Sometimes it is, but often the Spirit of Jesus is in the little things, humble, gentle things. And sometimes Jesus is in really hard things, in pain and aggravation. Sometimes when God is at work there is an ease to it. Things slip beautifully into place with hardly any effort. Synergy! And sometimes you get a little feel of that, a little glimpse of where you're going, and then it's hard slog for ages.

Anyway, this is the record of how Eco Church got started in Christchurch, Aotearoa, so I had better tell you about that.

So, that story began, for me, in 2017. I was the minister at Cashmere Presbyterian Church, and every year that church held a public workshop. Each year we tackled a topic that felt important and relevant, and late in 2017 we were considering the topic for the following year. It seemed obvious to me, I forget why exactly, that we should focus on the environment. So we got in touch with A Rocha, the Christian mission agency for ecology, and said, let's run a seminar together. And they said, 'sure, good idea', and so we did. That was a conference in September 2018. And it was really good, and we had 120 people attended and heaps of fabulous speakers and workshops.

One of the best things was that the planning was a partnership between 3 quite different churches. Little old Cashmere Presbyterian worked together with 2 big evangelical churches, South West Baptist, which used to be Spreydon Baptist, and Grace Vineyard. First time that had happened! Because, turns out, just the year before that a small group had formed in each of these big evangelical churches, just a few people who knew that God was pushing them into care for creation. They didn't start with any clear mission plan, they just knew that it was bad for churches to leave bins and bins of rubbish behind after a picnic, and they just knew that Christian people are called to do something about the looking after the planet. And they were starting to try some things.

So, we had this conference. We called it Rich Living, after the A Rocha study series, to emphasise the fullness of Christian living in relation to the environment. And it had an impact. Here's some things people have told me:

"That Rich Living was a great weekend. It raised consciousness in our church."

“That was the first time I had heard someone speak on the environment in church. It was amazing.”

“The interaction between different denominations was great. We were there together.”

“We suddenly realized that it we weren't alone in this.”

Heaps of people came to a follow up meeting, and heaps of good ideas spilled out as we talked about what to do next. Evening forums, hosted by different churches, practical environment work, another seminar next year, worship resources, Bike-to-church Sunday, material for home groups. We decided that anything we did needed to include the most important things in life: eating together, sharing together, praying together.

So we did it. The following year, 2019, we did all those things. An evening forum on creation in worship, a video encouraging people to bike to church, a couple of other evenings, a thriving Science and Faith discussion group. The largest event was another seminar, which was shorter, more low key, than the 2018 conference, hosted by Grace Vineyard. we called it The Hope Seminar. Almost 100 people came on a Saturday evening in August, and a freezing blustery winter's night it was too. We had worship and speakers and workshops and it was good stuff. I did a workshop on Jesus and the environment, what Jesus had to say about caring for the earth. Anglican priest Carolyn Robertson's workshop on living simply was very popular, and Geography professor Simon Kingham was fascinating talking about the impacts of pollution on the poor, both here locally and around the world. Environmental justice was a new term to me but a very important one.

So there were big events and regular events, and that helped build a sense of something was happening, that this was a viable and vital network functioning in God's church across the city.

It was great to have the support from A Rocha Aotearoa NZ. National director Kristel came down a couple of times to speak, and that helped the sense that we in Christchurch were part of a bigger movement.

And it is actually really helpful to have a competent administrative structure set up. So Iris in Wellington, who just works from home after her kids have gone to bed, manages the website and financial accountability and nags us for our statistics, because those things do matter, to be part of a competent organisation with high standards for reporting and handling money ... it does not sound super exciting, but God is at work in those things, just as much as in the up-front speakers and headline events.

It's not just about stats though. A Rocha is a highly relational organisation, with international, national and regional networks. Websites and emails are not enough for the Spirit of Jesus – he needs living breathing eating laughing hugging actual people. The Covid-19 Lockdown isolated us, and some events had to be cancelled sadly. But we stayed in touch, prayed together over zoom, kept planning.

And now, thankfully praise the Lord, we are able to go ahead with our next big event, which is this year's Hope Seminar, hosted by Hope Presbyterian in Hornby. One marvellous thing about that church is their commitment to intergenerational community, so we are having, maybe for the first time ever, a all-age whanau time, late afternoon, as well as the worship & workshops format from last year. Hopefully even more people will come, and it will be fabulous.

So how do we spot the hand of God at work?

One of my absolute favourite ways is when different people, separately, are feeling bothered about the same thing. You know, when God prods us, stirs us, makes us uncomfortable with that awkward feeling that there's something here to attend to, to do something about. And then when someone says something, and other people go, 'Yeah, I've been thinking that too!', and zing – the connection happens and the Spirit of God has just brought something entirely new into being, and there's energy and there's mission, right there.

And you know it is God because when you're moving into it the feeling is positive, there's a lightness, even if the topic is difficult.

That's what we are in, just at the moment, with the most unpleasant subject of rubbish. Who wants to bother about the bins? Who cares about church waste? yuck. But, hey, it has got to be done. In fact, God is demanding that it be done. And God is resourcing his people to get on with doing it. Because it is not OK to pile more and more and more stuff into holes in the ground, or burn it and pollute the air. That is not how God made the world to work. We in NZ think of ourselves as clean and green but that is not the truth. The fact is, we create more rubbish per person than most other countries. And if churches are not part of God's solution then we're just adding to the mess.

So, this is, kind of bizarrely I think, where God has taken us, and how we are launching Eco Church in NZ. Not with pretty pictures of native forests and beautiful church gardens, but with the bins out the back.

So, at the moment, I am having lots of conversations with churches about what they do with their rubbish. And churches are saying, 'yeah, we know we have to look at this. Let's get on with it.' And churches are realising that it is about faith and it is about mission.

God reminds us that he's at work in little moments like when I met with a church yesterday and one of the staff had just that afternoon received an email from NZ Rail about the unused railway land beside the church, and after months of getting nowhere suddenly there was an openness for the church to help look after that strip of abandoned land filled with weeds and rubbish. It was wonderful to be with that group of people coming to the decision of, 'yes, actually, let's be an eco church. Let's do it.'

So, there you are. That is a potted summary of the birth of Eco Church in Christchurch. It's a story of people getting together to talk about really important issues for Christian spirituality and our world. It's having a fun time and making friends, and feeling called and motivated and inspired. It is people using their gifts, sharing their talents, and making connections between church and community and planet. And it is a story of how God works, how God forms his people according to his character for his purposes in the power of his presence.

I started off talking about the flow of God. Eco Church is not at the be-all-and-end-all of what God is doing in 2020, heavens no! But it is a part, and I am deeply grateful that I am in it, that I can see it and bear witness to it. Why don't you join in?