

31st March 2009

Hello and welcome to our Lenten newsletter.

- Can you make a three minute low-tech video of your environmental ideas?
- Saying grace
- Next time: Sarum College and smaller retreat centres
- Emmaus House in Bristol
- Lee Abbey in Devon

Late last month some of the members of the ARC team went to New York and Washington for a series of meetings with the UN, World Bank and leading members of several faith communities to talk about long-term planning by different faith groups on how to protect the planet for the next generations. (See our website: www.arcworld.org for the latest news on these Generational Seven Year Plans and also to download a guide.)

The ideas are still buzzing around our heads, and I'm sure will be popping up in future newsletters, but one of the possibilities might be of particular interest to some retreat centres. This is the idea of putting together short (three minutes or so) videos about what you are doing on the environment. The technology is such that simple stories can be told quite easily and cheaply – yet effectively - through using small cameras like the Flip Mino, which sells for about £100, together with a small tripod and a bit of creativity in the editing.

Our dream is of collecting small videos from retreat centres and other faith-led environment initiatives around the world, putting them onto a YouTube channel, and letting them inspire others. We hope by the summer to have put together a package of encouragement, advice and examples and even get hold of a couple of cameras that we could lend out to those of you who don't have videos. Our colleagues include a former BBC TV news presenter, and a former natural history film producer, so we should be able to get something useful. More news on this later, but I'd love to hear from anyone who is either keen to try - or even better who already has footage about environmental activities - to start off the process.

This issue we promised to feature two retreat centres - Emmaus House, an urban Catholic retreat in central Bristol – with its five beautiful themed gardens, and some inspiring ideas, including how to work with local primary schools. And also Lee Abbey in Devon, in the dramatic Exmoor National Park - with its own full-time environmental officer, hydro-electric scheme and community outreach.

But first I'd like to include some letters we received after our last email, about grace.

Kathleen Parnell, from Fir Chlis House of Prayer in northern Scotland wrote:

"I primarily live a solitary life of prayer but I do have the occasional guest visit. You may be interested to learn that I too have a private reed bed.....in fact all waste water from the village of Tongue, here on the north coast of Scotland, is recycled through a communal reed bed.

I say Grace each mealtime, either alone or with guests. The words are taken from Psalm 104:

V. The eyes of all look to you in hope, O Lord,
R. And you give them their food in due season. (V 27)

This reminds me always to eat that which is in season rather buy and serve that which my taste buds might fancy i.e. the variety of food we import that is 'out of season' in our own country. Before meals the final blessing says, 'Bless O Lord, this food to our use and ourselves to your service' which is a constant reminder that food is fuel for the body in order to do the Lord's work.

I compost all suitable waste matter for growing vegetables. I am looking to expand my vegetable garden and hope to also introduce an orchard but I need assistance!!! Please send any interested parties...i.e. anyone who would like to dedicate themselves to a life of prayer and to enhancing the land here (almost 3 acres) my way"!!!!

And Ross at Ringsfield Hall in Beccles Suffolk also sent a lovely letter about grace:

"Hello. Although we are not just a Retreat Centre, taking only groups, or the occasional hermit, I am sending you a grace. We were given this grace by a teacher whose father wrote it some years ago

All life is one
And everything that lives is holy-
Plants, animals and people.
All must eat to live and nourish each other.
We bless the lives that have been given for our food Let us eat consciously,
Resolving by our work to pay the debt of our existence.

We also use a book called Stations of the Banquet by Cathy C. Campbell which has some very powerful graces and prayers relating to food justice - very linked with eco issues of course. <http://www.litpress.org/> "

Next time there'll be a profile of the Green Faith modules on the curriculum at Sarum College in Salisbury (which, through this retreat centre newsletter programme has ended up becoming the site for ARC's July Faith in Water conference!) I hope that over the summer there'll be a chance to profile some of the smaller retreat centres around the country so please let us know if you'd like to be featured and we'll arrange a time to chat.

Best wishes

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“Receive the world that God has given. Go for a walk. Get wet. Dig the earth.”

Archbishop Rowan Williams, from the Forward to Sharing God's Planet, Church House Publishing, 2005.

1. Emmaus House

DOING NOW:

- Recycling
- Composting
- Growing Own Organic Vegetables
- Education Programme with local schools
- A New Year's Eve vigil, focusing on the environment
- Gardens, not just as gardens but as part of theology

PLANNING IN THE FUTURE

- Expansion of information about the environment, including on the website and in the house
- Looking into food quantities in the kitchen – perhaps increasing vegetables and decreasing the meat consumption – as well as taking a further look at food sourcing.
- Extending some of the training to incorporate discussions about environmental change
- Looking further into energy sourcing

Based on a meeting with Sister Ann and Father Michael Healey - November 2008

Emmaus House is based in the very centre of Bristol's Clifton village – an urban retreat centre built from two adjoining 18th century houses, which was a school from 1959, run by the La Retraite community, and which in the early 1980s when the school closed was transformed into a retreat and conference centre. It comes out of a strong Catholic social activism ethos and Sister Ann and Father Michael are keen now to extend that social activism to incorporate a greater degree of ecological activism as well. There are residential bedrooms, as well as four conference rooms, seating between 12 and 70 people, a kitchen which caters for breakfast, lunch and dinner, using much of the organic produce from its own garden, a chapel and a large white meditation room that looks over the gardens.

At their most recent 6-yearly meeting in 2006 the La Retraite sisters opted for Care of The Planet to be their key issue. They see this eco-retreat initiative as “another door opening.”

Father Michael quotes a rabbinical story that the Bible has two stories of Creation: one is of mastering it, the other is of naming it: which one shall you choose? “Sometimes the steward model puts us above creation: but we are involved.”

They currently source many of their cleaning items from the Essential Trading Company in Fishponds.

1. THE GARDENS

There are several gardens on different levels at Emmaus, including a woodland walk, a meditation area, a secret garden and a vegetable garden. Gardens are seen as the keys to many retreat centres, and they are also seen as the key to a Christian understanding of the world around us.

“It is about taking the image of the garden, and using it to understand the cosmos... the key is not to see the garden as something separate.”

2. EDUCATION

They have strong connections with local Catholic schools, particularly Holy Cross in Bedminster and St Bonaventure's, Bristol, and occasionally run Day Away programmes for primary school children. One such programme was run with St Bonaventure's, which had just engaged in a project to convert some wasteland into a garden which could be used for lessons, and with the culmination being a trip to Emmaus House for the oldest primary school children.

They started in the meditation room “because kids love silence” and then expanded out to explore different gardens in groups, with each child invited to bring something special from the garden into the house. They named these things, and looked at them with great care. At the end of the day one of the things these children prayed for is to give thanks for their named stone or flower or snail. They took the Jesse Tree as a centrepiece for the day.

Sister Ann also runs professional training programmes in self-development based on communication, team-building and managing change and the stress that comes with change. These last two areas are really critical in the pastoral side of the Climate Change and natural environment debates, and are areas which might be expanded in future Emmaus House programmes.

3. OTHER

At New Year they hold a midnight mass into the New Year, focusing on the environment.

Their web and e-mail details are:

<http://www.emmaushouse.org.uk> and administration@emmaushouse.org.uk

2. Lee Abbey:

CURRENTLY DOING

- Full-time Environment Officer since March 2007
- Working with Natural England to manage a 115 ha. estate more ecologically
- Continuing plans to install a hydro-electric system
- Working with local networks (especially Exmoor National Park) and international network (mostly A Rocha)
- Education both with visitors to the conferences and with young people at the Beacon Centre.
- Nature Walks
- Recycling 33 percent of waste
- Changed all light bulbs

- Addressing paper use

PLANNING IN THE FUTURE

- Target to recycle 40 percent of waste by mid-2009
- Considering a biodigester – dependant on cost and viability
- Changing the insulation, although with big renovation plans for the future it's important not to re-insulate now only to pull it all apart in a couple of years
- Planning renovations to be sustainable
- Looking at a biomass boiler – verifying that there will be sufficient woodchips that can be sustainably harvested from the 70ha woodland
- Looking at solar panels to heat water
- In initial discussion about wind turbine, though it is still at viability stage
- To improve food sourcing

KEY ISSUES

- Interested in comparing experiences with others wanting to run large kitchens more environmentally. Perhaps with MIC.
- Interested in the Seven Year Plan (www.arcworld.org)
- Interested in other retreat centres' experiences with/viability studies of bio-digesters
- Want to improve education and outreach
- Recognise the need to put more information about sustainability onto the website etc. Currently there is nothing.

DETAILS

Lee Abbey is a Christian-run conference centre in a Victorian house in the middle of Exmoor National Park, running a 115ha estate, including a 70ha forest and a farm with around 150 sheep. It has a capacity of some 120 guests at any time (not including residents at the Beacon Youth Activity Centre) and some 9000 visitors a year, some of whom come for day-conferences, but mostly residential.

ENVIRONMENTAL WORK

There has been a full-time environmental coordinator – Martyn Lings – employed since March 2007. Martin had been working with A Rocha for some three years before that, and his employment was part of a partnership between A Rocha and Lee Abbey. Before that, Lee Abbey's estate manager had been vocal and active about environmental issues, so several schemes were put in place.

FOOD

There are environmental representatives on each team of operations within Lee Abbey. The kitchen for example has targets of more local and seasonal food and less waste, although this is an area that could be improved. The centre uses lamb and beef from its own farm (150 sheep, 40 cattle) which although not organic certified, is low pesticide. "Sometimes I find New Zealand apples and shake my head," Martin admits. Food sourcing is one of the trickier areas of environmental excellence for Lee Abbey. "It is hard sometimes with suppliers to get down to the true details of where the food comes from." Free range eggs are used.

HYDRO-ELECTRIC PLANT

This could be one of the key success stories for Lee Abbey. There are two streams flowing through the estate, with a significant height differential from where they emerge to where they flow. The plan for a hydro-electric plant is quite advanced, and stems from discussions with a group of residents and administrators from Exmoor National Park. It is estimated that there will be an eight-year payback of costs, which is more than acceptable. Lee Abbey will be one of the first groups in the park to have a working HE system, and will consequently be something of a model for other residents. They hope to finance this with grants, although zero-interest loans, perhaps through the carbon trust, are a second possibility.

EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

The Beacon Centre is run separately as an outdoor activities centre for schools/youth clubs/church groups. Activities include climbing and archery – Martin helps to expand the nature programme including pond-dipping, bug-hunting etc. Some schools ask for no element of Christian theology – others want the Christian message to be part of the experience. For both groups, the message of working together, learning from each other, experiencing the natural world is there, at the heart of the Beacon Centre. Recently the message has also been about fair trade and fairness and climate change and how what we do affects other people.

Lee Abbey itself also runs nature walks – looking at the estate and its natural history. Education programmes include looking at the estate, sustainability, theology of creation, partnership with A Rocha etc. Martin recognized that there was no particular message about the environment on the Lee Abbey website – this is an area that could be more strongly communicated.

NETWORKS

As well as A Rocha links, Lee Abbey is actively working with Church groups and local resident groups within the park. They are looking in the future to carbon offsets with a group called Climate Stewards operated in collaboration with A Rocha. For more details, visit: <http://climatestewards.net>

OTHER NOTES

They have considered a reed bed system but because of the way their water sourcing is structured (at a fixed rate from the reservoir above the estate) there would be no cost saving. The current system is not an ecological model, but it is low environmental impact. "It meets the standards, but is not ideal". The cost of changing it would be high, and finances might be better used elsewhere.

For more information, please go to: <http://www.leeabbey.org.uk/devon/>