

ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE: A GUIDE FOR VESTRIES AND CONGREGATIONS

Background

At its meeting in 2020, the **General Synod** passed a motion in which it committed the whole of the Scottish Episcopal Church to aim to “achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030”. In so doing it echoed many other public and private bodies who seek to drive down their carbon footprint, but with the added proviso that, for the SEC, caring for creation is fundamental to our very mission.

In rising to this challenge, the Provincial **Church in Society Committee** has produced an **Action Plan on Climate Change to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030** which was endorsed at the June 2021 General Synod. This Guide summarizes key recommendations in that Action Plan and offers advice and guidance for vestries and congregations as they start to develop their own local action plans. The Church in Society Committee is producing a **Tool Kit** later this year to provide more detailed advice on how to implement the recommendations in its Action Plan.

The Diocese now has a **Climate Change Group** which will provide a steady stream of practical advice to churches on how to aim for net zero carbon by 2030. There is a dedicated area on the diocesan website and newsworthy items will be regularly included in the Diocesan Newsletter. Area Councils will be encouraged to provide opportunities for individual churches to explore and exchange ‘best practice’ ideas.

Terminology: the phrase “net zero carbon emissions” may not be immediately self-evident to everyone. “Net zero” refers to the balance between the amount of greenhouse gas (mainly carbon dioxide) produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere. Any individual or organisation reaches “net zero” when the amount added is no more than the amount taken away. In terms of energy, this target can be reached by a combination of using less carbon-based energy and using what we do use more efficiently plus offsetting any residual carbon use (e.g. by planting trees or its equivalent).

Caring for God’s creation – a challenge for theology and mission

A new theology of creation is emerging as Christians respond to the climate emergency and concern over the loss of biodiversity so eloquently reported by David Attenborough. This new theological understanding is encapsulated in Richard Bauckham’s assertion that “our right to use the Earth’s resources for human life and flourishing is strictly limited to conserve ... the rights of the other living creatures who share the earth with us”. Whilst we have a unique place in the created order, he adds that we are dependent upon “the material world and immersed in a web of reciprocal relations with other creatures”. In light of this, Christians increasingly see themselves, as promoting – in the words of our Liturgy – “a creation restored by love”; healing a world in which natural resources have been depleted and whose face has been scarred by human agency.

Viewing creation in this light and extending it to the whole planet immediately raises the issue of justice: succinctly put in the statement “we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children”. But the issue of justice is not just an issue for tomorrow, it is also urgent today. The adverse impacts of climate change on Scotland are likely to be far less than for nations in the global south for whom increased floods and droughts and rising sea-levels are ever-present and increasing threats. Caring for creation is a fundamental component of world mission. Even in 1999 this was recognized by the World Council of Churches in its *Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. More recently this has been given expression in Pope Francis’ encyclical *The Care of our Common Home: Laudato Si* and Christian Aid’s campaign on Climate Justice.

The Big Picture – where to start

At first sight, the challenge posed by the 2020 General Synod motion seems daunting and overwhelming for vestries and congregation. But broken down into bit-sized bits, it can become more manageable. We recommend that each church initially undertakes an **environmental audit** to find out where it stands now. Following that we suggest a realistic **action plan**, initially focussing on **small steps** that can be undertaken almost immediately.

In terms of overall guidance, the following ten steps are suggested by the Church in Society Committee for individual churches:

1. Seeking to reduce energy use in all our buildings and moving from oil/gas to electricity where possible
2. Implementing renewable energy solutions such as heat pumps and solar power on our property
3. Using less polluting forms of transport, moving to electric or hybrid cars, car sharing, wherever possible walking or cycling
4. Developing wildlife conservation schemes in our land
5. Using Fair Trade, environment- and animal- friendly products wherever possible
6. Reducing waste by composting and recycling as much of it as possible
7. Reducing paper usage (and then only using recycled paper)
8. Using on-line meetings often, but balanced with our need for human contact and Christian fellowship
9. Disseminating information on good practice, and seeking expert advice, practical help, and funding possibilities
10. Promoting sustainability through our preaching, liturgy and teaching, and setting a good example

Eco-Congregation Scotland's "**A Church Check-up**" provides a user-friendly way of undertaking an environmental audit of your church covering many of the ten steps.

All of these ten actions can make a contribution towards the "net zero carbon" target, but for most churches steps 1 and 2 will yield the most significant reductions in carbon use.

Making an Action Plan for your Church

One of the best ways of imagining our impact on climate change is to think of it as a **carbon 'footprint'**. This is made up of all the ways in which the church, its clergy and staff, and its activities contribute (both directly and indirectly) to emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. This is what we aim to reduce to net zero.

Actions on buildings

For most congregations, the biggest part of the footprint by far is the energy used to heat the buildings in which people gather and reside – the church, its halls, rectory, offices and other buildings. We recommend that most congregations and dioceses start their journey to zero carbon with their buildings. It is about how we heat them, where and when we heat them, and by how much. Because this is challenging, we need to look at it step by step, starting with what can be done now.

The following notes outline the process we are asking those responsible for any building to follow. The provincial **Tool Kit** will provide a lot more detail, but here we give some initial guidance to get started.

Understand your buildings:

- How do you heat your church, halls, and rectory? Are any heating systems in need of replacing?
- What is your current energy usage? Look at past and present utility bills
- Work out your **carbon footprint** using one of the recommended websites listed in **Useful Resources**

Develop an action plan for the buildings:

- Assess where you can make savings: conduct an **energy audit** to identify areas for action
- Identify things you can do now
- Identify medium term things you can start to plan, and longer-term goals
- Seek advice on what are your best options and where to find funding
- Identify actions, taking into account the views and experience of current users

The **action plan** for your buildings will ensure you set goals, help you to work towards realistic timescales, and allocate specific people to specific tasks. Identify **measures of success**, so that you can track your progress. An action plan may be very simple or require multiple steps to define what has to be done, when and by whom. As part of the action plan and to gain momentum and confidence, identify **quick wins** (easier actions you can do now that do not cost the earth).

Some Easier Actions

Here are some easy actions to improve energy efficiency and increase the comfort and sustainability of your building. Consider which ones are relevant to your situation.

- Get better thermostats, use better thermostat settings, refurbish radiators
- Reduce draughts, use curtains, repair faulty windows
- Insulate pipework
- Replace lights with LEDs, review floodlighting times
- Add pew cushions
- Consider if you can reschedule the use of buildings to reduce how many times you need to heat them from scratch
- Clear gutters

Tougher Actions

Start now to identify the harder actions which will take longer and be more expensive. Here are examples of a low carbon 'replacement list' which will require greater investment. The provincial Tool Kit will suggest sources of good advice, for example.

- Move to a heat pump or electric heating system
- Use a renewable device alongside the existing energy system
- Buy energy efficient electrical equipment
- Install renewable energy generation such as solar panels
- Replace petrol or diesel cars by electric or hybrid models

An Action Plan for all your activities

In this guide we focus on actions to reduce and optimise energy use, but the environmental audit will have identified there are many other ways in which a church can reduce its carbon footprint. Below we outline what this might involve and will return to these areas in future guides helping churches work towards the net zero carbon target by 2030.

- **What we consume:** paper use, food purchases and their packaging, cleaning products
- **Circular economy:** recycling and reuse, not using disposable cups and teaspoons
- **How we meet:** more use of on-line or hybrid meetings

- **How we travel:** reducing car use for clergy, vestry members and congregation; sharing cars; planning meetings around rural bus times; avoiding long drives for scattered rural vestry members; installing a bike rack
- **How we respond as individuals:** actions each of us can take to reduce our personal carbon footprint

Useful Resources

We encourage local churches to join **Eco-Congregation Scotland** as part of putting into practice the recommendations of this report. Eco-Congregation Scotland is a network of over 500 congregations across 15 denominations, which has been working for 20 years to be a catalyst for individuals and churches to act together in caring for God's creation. It works ecumenically and has financial support from the Scottish Government in promoting environmental action at a local level. Over 30% of SEC churches are already members, as is the Scottish Episcopal Institute. Eco-Congregation provides resources, worship and teaching material, and importantly provides a network to help churches work together, share good practice, and drawing upon each other's experience in caring for God's creation.

Eco Congregation Scotland <https://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/>
<https://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/materials/ideas-for-action/practical-living/greening-the-cornerstone/>
<http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/materials/ideas-for-action/church-check-up/>

Carbon footprint calculators

<https://360carbon.org/>

<https://www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx> Climate Emergency Toolkit

<https://www.climateemergencytoolkit.com/>

Church of England practical path to non-zero carbon churches

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/net-zero-carbon-church/practical-path-net-zero-carbon-churches>

Church of Scotland better heating guide

https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2998/heating_guide.pdf

Diocesan Climate Change Committee

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