

Eco Day Conference on 2 October 2021 at St Matthias

by Elspeth Fearn



Martin & Margot Hodson

Elsbeth Fearn

'For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created through him and for him' (Colossians 1:16).

Two years in the planning and originally due to take place in October 2020, a one day eco-conference was held on Saturday 2 October at St Matthias in partnership with the John Ray Initiative, an educational charity connecting the environment, science and Christianity by promoting responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles. The charity's patrons include the Rt Revd Richard Chartres, former Bishop of London, and Professor Sir Ghillean Prance FRS, past director of the Botanical Gardens at Kew. The conference was intended to mark the beginning of RTM's journey to acquire eco-church status. Eco-church is a project run by A Rocha UK, a charity which provides a framework for churches to engage with various climate and environmental issues and progress through staged awards from bronze and silver to gold. Eco-church was launched at St Paul's Cathedral in 2017 and now over 4000 churches have registered to take part in the scheme.

The structure of the conference was an opening act of worship, followed by two sessions then, after a lunch break, two further sessions and then finally, a closing act of worship. People were free to attend the whole day or just to drop in for one or two parts and there were also discussion groups. Leading the conference were the Revd Margot Hodson and her husband Martin Hodson. Margot is the John Ray Initiative's Theology and Education Director, and is also associate vicar of the Shill Valley and Broadshire Benefice in Oxfordshire, and was formerly Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford. Martin, the Operations Director, is a plant scientist and environmental biologist, former Principal Lecturer and now Visiting Researcher at Oxford Brookes University.

The first session was led by Martin which was a guide to the most important environmental issues confronting the world. There are a myriad of problems causing concern and it was difficult not to feel depressed as Martin went through them. Issues include the burning of fossil fuels which release nitrogen oxides into the atmosphere contributing to the formation of smog and acid rain. Land systems are changing, away from natural habitats to agricultural habitats, with inorganic fertilisers being used on the latter, leading to more acidic soil and degradation of its structure. And that agricultural land is further harmed by subsequent building upon it as in the deforestation in Brazil. The natural wildlife is inevitably affected with the World Wildlife Fund's 2020 report showing that, largely due to environmental destruction, there has been a 68% decline in the wildlife animal population since 1970. Things are no better at sea. There has been a worrying rise in global temperature with 90% of global warming heat going into the oceans giving them more energy so more storms, hurricanes and flooding. Recent global years have seen some of the hottest on record.

Martin said that despite this very gloomy picture, there is still time to change things and he pointed to two previous problems in which the world had worked together with a good outcome. Firstly, the hole in the ozone layer. Following the Montreal Protocol of 1989-2000, the first and only UN environmental agreement to be ratified by every country in the world, there has been a dramatic result. Around 99% of ozone depleting substances have been phased out and the protective layer above the earth is being replenished. The second success concerns sulphur dioxide which was a part of many manufacturing



Glacier with Accelerated Ice Loss which results in reduced fresh water
NASA/John Sonntag

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processes but which affected people's respiratory systems and harmed the environment. Following the US Clean Air Acts of 1970 and 1990 (which have been copied by other countries), plus switching to low sulphur coal, the type of emissions that lead to acid rain have dropped significantly.

Margot presented the next session entitled Bible, Land and Creation, looking at the reading from Genesis 11:1-2:4, included in the opening act of Worship, and teasing out its meaning in the context of the Jewish people and their beliefs. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word 'eritz' means both land and earth. She reflected on the the Jewish tradition that places the responsibility for the well-being of the environment on humans. Examples are the concept of rest on the Sabbath, following God's example, which meant rest for everyone including slaves, servants and animals. (There are 150 species of animals named in the Bible.) God told Moses that every 7 years the land of Israel must lay fallow and Jews were forbidden to work on it.

And in turn under the Jewish Jubilee (Yovel), after the end of seven cycles of leaving each 7th year fallow (i.e. every 49 years) there was another period of resting the land. The gifts of harvest were important as was regeneration such as in the Festival of the New Year of Trees (Tu B'Shevat) for the planting of new trees.

The first session after lunch was led by Martin on 'How we can respond to the Environmental Crisis in a practical way' which could be at individual, community, national or international level. From 2009-2019 Margot had been Rector at St Mary's Church, Haddenham, Buckinghamshire which had decided to seek eco-church status and Martin described some of St Mary's experiences. Essentially nobody could do everything but everyone could do something. The types of action included education, advocacy, changing practices in how we live as individuals and as a community and campaigning. Advocacy was particularly important because it meant approaching local and national politicians. And there were awkward issues for the Church of England itself, which still has massive investments in fossil funds. As individuals we could reduce our meat consumption, how we travel, for example sharing transport to church, how and when we use power etc. Buildings are important because of the need to insulate, the type of oil used for heating, the installation of solar panels but one must not get too hung up on buildings in case other areas get neglected. It was very valuable to hear about the experiences at Haddenham and ideas for how we could take things forward in RTM.

The final session was led by Margot and looked at hope for the future. There was, despite everything, optimistic hope that the world would work together to solve its environmental problems, that heaven and earth and its balance would be restored and that there would be harmony between God, people and nature. Our living care of the land is Christian discipleship.

The conference ended with a short service following an important day in the beginning of our journey to seek eco-status for RTM.

A useful aid to climate change and what Christians can do is Martin and Margot's book 'A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues' (Second Edition 2021) ISBN 978 1 80039 005 8 which contains chapters such as Biodiversity, Food, Soil and Energy, complemented by Biblical Reflections and Bible Study Notes.

The eco-church website is: <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/> and details of the John Ray Initiative are at: <https://jri.org.uk/>



View of Africa and Antarctica from Apollo 17 Space Mission, 1972
NASA