

Living Sustainably Locally

Edwards Echlin

In this article I will briefly explore some of the practical ways in which we can live in sustainable sufficiency at personal, congregational, and global levels, so that we leave the precious part of God's earth entrusted to us as healthy or even a little healthier than we found it.

I prefer sustainable sufficiency because it emphasises quality rather than 'growth', 'development' or quantity of consumption, and means our communities have circular metabolisms. To do this we need to change our 'ecological footprint' – i.e. 'the land area required to supply a city or nation with food or timber products, and to absorb its output of waste gases such as CO₂'.¹

Individuals and families

In practice the most important fundamental is living sustainably locally. The four Rs are helpful — reduce, reuse, repair, recycle.

Where possible, shop locally (e.g. at farmers' markets). Supporting local producers reduces import miles and preserves climate and biodiversity. Obviously, we still depend on trade and imports, but we can follow the proximity principle and buy food, drink and clothes that are produced in our own region. For example, fairly traded Seville and Morocco citrus, and Spanish and Greek olives, are kinder to the earth than are air and lorry miles equivalents shipped from California.

We can also grow some of our own food either in a vegetable bed in the garden, in a window box or at an allotment. Working with soil, seeds, compost, micro-organisms, plants, weather, water and insects, contributes to sustainability, partial self-sufficiency, eco-therapy, supports wildlife and reduces food miles. We can return whatever is biodegradable as compost to the soil, thus kitchen and garden 'waste', far from being a methane generating land-filler, becomes precious.

Throughout history parents have taught their children soil wisdom, food gathering and growing. My father, for example, taught me the value of grass clippings. This brings us to possibly the most important contemporary challenge to our sustainably sufficient lifestyles: relating our children to Earth. The alienation of urbanised children from their habitats seems unprecedented. Many think, for example, that chips originate in supermarkets. Richard Louv writes, 'Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature ... [they] spend less and less of their lives in ... natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically.'²

As well as growing our own fruit and vegetables, we should also learn to appreciate and harvest rain. Every home should install rain butts and, where possible, a grey water butt for watering fruit trees, or simply returning used water to aquifers.

We can also make our homes more energy efficient. Insulate, turn the heating down, dress warmly, use efficient bulbs and appliances. Use radiator heat reflectors, and thick underlay and carpets. Maximise solar warmth from west and south facing windows, and switch to 'green' electricity suppliers.

The local church

The Church should be the best friend of the earth in the wider community.

Each congregation needs a small group to co-ordinate the community's sustainable lifestyle. Contact Eco-Congregation and undertake an environmental check-up/audit of your church to identify its existing good environmental practice and prioritise areas for development.³ Eco-Congregation offers resources that are designed to fit into and enhance church life and mission; support, through newsletters, phone and email contact, the web and linking churches with local specialist help such as local authority environmental officers; and awards to affirm churches good environmental work and witness this to the local community.

Again, be as energy efficient as possible through the use of energy-efficient light bulbs and insulation. Use recycled paper, have recycling bins, use only washable, renewable china. Conserve water and consider baptising with 'living' rain water collected in water butts. A vegetable bed is sometimes feasible, and is always useful for instructing children to relate food to the Eucharist, to intercessions, reconciliation rites, prayers, and baptisms. In prayers and affiliation, support local farmers and environmentalists.

Churches can also become more eco-friendly by encouraging the use of green burial sites. There are a number of sites opening throughout the country. They can offer a natural form of burial and can provide important environmental benefits as well as giving a true sense of creating life from death.⁴

If we are to reduce our 'ecological footprint', we must learn to live in sustainable sufficiency at personal, congregational and global levels. Local sustainability is a counter-cultural alternative to our globalised culture. By respecting the natural gifts God has provided, we can leave his Earth a little healthier than we found it.

ENDNOTES

¹ Herbert Girardet, *Creating Sustainable Cities* (Dartington, Green Books, 2001), p. 27

² Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, Algonquin Books, 2005), pp. 2–3.

³ EcoCongregation, Arthur Rank Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire CV8 2LZ, www.econcongregation.org, or telephone 024 7685 3061.

⁴ Useful websites for information on green burials are www.arborytrust.org and www.naturaldeath.org.uk.

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