*Title: From Bronze to Gold in one year - St Helen’s, Isle of Wight receives Eco Church Gold!*

*A* small village church in the rural parish of St Helens has become the first church on the Isle of Wight to receive their Eco Church Gold award and only the tenth church in the whole country – across all denominations – to have achieved this award, out of 2300 registered churches.

Although a small rural parish with seemingly limited resources, the St Helens congregation has demonstrated passion and commitment in response to the climate emergency, under the leadership of Revd Ali Morley. A Rocha UK’s Speakers Coordinator, Simon Brown who visited and assessed St Helen’s efforts earlier this month wrote, “*I found the church in an idyllic setting with an enthusiastic, friendly team only too happy to engage with the environmental issues of the day, and to come up with some innovative ways of addressing them within the life of the church. [St Helen’s is] a wonderful source of challenge and encouragement to others.*'

Some inspiring activities from the Gold awarded church include:

* Surveying the flora and fauna of the churchyard over the year led to plans for the construction of a pond, for tree planting (with help from a free pack from the Woodland Trust) and the protection and monitoring of the resident glow worm population.
* A disused labyrinth in the churchyard was lovingly restored and is used for prayer and contemplation.
* Assessing the congregation’s individual carbon footprints led to a desire to promote sustainable living.
* The need to reduce single-use plastic consumption led to the setting up of the plastic bottle refill station: the church buys eco-friendly products such as shampoo and household detergents in bulk and sets up a stall at church coffee mornings to enable the community to refill their empty bottles.
* In order to reduce plastic consumption at Christmas, an afternoon craft workshop was organised to make sustainable Christmas gifts.
* The pressing need to plant more trees led to a seed-planting project with St Helens Primary School as part of a long-term commitment to the village’s children.
* Revd Ali has also worked with school and youth groups on plastic reduction with the aid of a large dolphin named Trashy, who collects crisp packets.
* Monthly Eco Church Sunday afternoon gatherings – which always include environmentally-themed worship and a shared LOAF (local, organic, animal friendly and fairly traded) meal.
* A monthly steering group to keep all the projects progressing and share the organisational workload.
* A book club and theology group provide opportunities to reflect on the theological implications of the climate crisis and the church’s response.

Revd Ali says, “This is a wonderful achievement for a rural parish of very limited means and a small congregation. But it proves that, in the end, it is the passion of the people that will bring about the changes that we need if the environment is to survive and flourish . . . . This little church, embedded in a 300yr history in the village, looks forward with hopefulness – encouraging and empowering others, with passion and joy, to work together for a future for all the Earth.” Ali hopes that more churches on the Island and through Portsmouth Diocese will now be inspired to take up the Eco Church challenge.

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