

Uturn – Some Ideas for Eco-Mission

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U-turn groups (see <http://www.uturn.uca.org.au/>) are small groups that help churches to build relationships in our communities and help people find hope, fulfillment and a more meaningful life. U-turn groups can involve many types of activities, including activities concerned with ecology or the environment.

Ecology is about the relationships between living things and their surroundings. The scope of ecological activities that could form the basis for your U-turn group is as broad as your imagination, and includes:

- *Discussion groups*
- *Outdoor activities*
- *Sharing skills, possessions and food*

Some specific ideas are given below in each of these areas. Besides referring to community activities that involve people beyond our churches, what these ideas have in common is that in one way or another, they all address how we relate to the earth. And, not surprisingly for something that is about relationships and interconnection, they have many other benefits besides addressing ecological footprints.

As the parable of the mustard seed tells us, the smallest of seeds can become the largest of bushes, and faith as small as a mustard seed can even move mountains. Who knows what might eventually come out of your U-turn group? To get you dreaming, an inspirational story is given in each broad area of activity.

DISCUSSION GROUPS

Every day in the media we hear about the ecological challenges that face us, such as climate change, the devastation of the Murray-Darling basin, and biodiversity loss. Opinion polling and social research suggest that public environmental concern is widespread. With this concern about what we are doing to our planet, many Australians are now grappling with some fundamental questions. How should we relate to each other and to our planet? What gives us meaning in our lives? Does it really come through ways of living that damage the earth and its peoples? How can we better connect with others in our world? These questions are fundamentally spiritual questions, and can provide a point of connection outside of our churches. Whatever their faith background, people can come together to explore these questions.

Books and Films

To anchor your discussion, you could work through a topical book to do with ecology. Or, you could watch and discuss a short film/documentary each time. There are lots available. Some interesting documentaries are:

- The Story of Stuff, <http://www.storyofstuff.com/>
- The Power of Community, <http://www.powerofcommunity.org>
- The Carbon Connection, http://carbontradewatch.gn.apc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=32&Itemid=46

You could also watch something a bit less “serious”, for example, episodes of “Sea Change”.

Lifestyles and Personal Actions

Your group could work through some practical resources on how to address issues of ecology in your day to day lives. For example, you could work on reducing your “ecological footprint” together. At your first meeting, you could explore the concept of the ecological footprint, and agree to measure it using an online calculator. At subsequent get togethers, you could share ideas about how to reduce your footprint, commit to making particular changes in your lives, and share with the group how you went making these changes and what you have learned. Another option could be to meet together to discuss and take part in political activities. For example, you might like to write letters to your MP, local businesses etc on a particular issue, and commit to encouraging your family and friends to do likewise.

Helpful links:

- An Australian ecological footprint calculator is available from <http://www.ecofoot.org/>, and there are also calculators and a DVD explaining the ecological footprint at <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/ecologicalfootprint/calculators/default.asp>
- ACF’s “Green Home” resources: http://www.acfonline.org.au/default.asp?section_id=86
- The Australian Government’s “Global Warming – Cool it” home guide: <http://www.environment.gov.au/settlements/gwci/>
- Your local environmental group can provide campaigning resources (e.g. grass roots Climate action groups: <http://www.climatemovement.org.au/>)

Outdoor Discussion and Reflection

Meet for discussion and reflection in an outdoor setting (see also “Outdoor Activities” below).

A simple reflective technique for the outdoors developed by the EcoFaith Community (<http://www.ecofaith.org/>) involves facing different directions and thinking about:

- New things coming into your life (east, sunrise),
- What is going on in your life now (north, midday),
- Things which are coming to an end, or which you want to ditch (west, sunset), and
- What legacy your life is going to have created when you are gone- or people/things which have left your life (south: night, death).

An inspirational story. The Eco-Faith Community

The Eco-Faith Community meets for worship in a park in Adelaide each Sunday. Originally started as a ministry of Scots Church, the community includes people from churches and others who would not usually set foot inside a church, and provides a space for people to explore what it means to commune with each other, with God, and with the earth. Many of the participants now lead worship, and the community has developed a wide range of ideas and resources that can be used in other worshipping communities.

<http://ecofaith.org/ecofaithcommunity/index.html>



OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

There are many theories about what it is that has caused, and continues to cause, our ecological predicament. One component in the mix is that we have become separated from the natural world – especially those of us who live in cities – and that we may have little opportunity to experience and appreciate the natural world and how closely we rely on it for our day to day living. Through practical outdoor activities which reconnect us with the earth, such as walking, cycling, and bush care, we can start to live and think differently.

Walking Group

Already one registered U-turn group, at Hamilton-Broadmeadow Uniting Church, is a walking (and breakfast!) group. Why not meet for a regular walk in your area? Wherever you are there are interesting places to explore – whether in the built or natural environment. As well as being a fantastic community activity, walking regularly really helps us to get to know our surrounds, to appreciate the changing weather and the turning of the seasons, and all at a human rather than break-neck pace! Not to mention the health benefits of walking. As a part of your walk, you might like to include a reflective activity. For example, encourage people to be open to seeing/hearing/smelling/touching something new and interesting, and to share with the group about that at the end of the walk.

Cycling Group

We see so few bikes on the road. And yet, bicycles have outsold cars for the last eight years in a row. So it's a reasonable assumption that most people have access to a bicycle and would like to use it. The benefits of a U-turn cycling group are of course similar to those for a walking group. And as confidence and fitness improve, maybe your group members might find themselves using their bike instead of their car for commutes or shopping – reducing their ecological footprint.



An inspirational story. Ward Street Mission Bike Ministry

Ward Street United Methodist Church in High Point, North Carolina, USA, has a Bike Ministry which involves weekly rides with people of all ages, especially children. The ministry also repairs bikes and accepts donated bikes for distribution into the community. As well as bringing happiness and health to the children of the town, other outcomes of the Bike Ministry are cohesion in a relatively poor and ethnically diverse area, the reclamation of abandoned industrial streets for the use of the community, and a growing church.

<http://www.acctv.com.au/article/detail.asp?id=6140>

<http://www.wardstreetmission.org/WardStreet/Default.aspx>

Bush Care Group

There are many bushcare, landcare, or bush regeneration groups in Australia, in both urban and rural areas. Through activities such as weeding and planting native seedlings, these groups working to restore and protect biodiversity in their local area. If there are people in your community who have an interest in improving the local environment in this way, why not start a bushcare group?

Helpful links:

- Landcare online: <http://www.landcareonline.com>
- Catchment Management Authorities coordinate many bushcare projects. Find your Catchment Management Authority: <http://www.cma.nsw.gov.au/>
- Local councils also coordinate bushcare projects. Find your local council: <http://www.lgsa.org.au/www/html/134-council-websites.asp>

SHARING SKILLS, POSSESSIONS, AND FOOD

There are many stories on the Bible about the multiplication that comes through sharing. This includes the abundance that Jesus' followers experienced when they held things in common (Mark 10:28-31, Acts 2:43-47), and the accounts of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. The hospitality of sharing skills, possessions and food builds up relationships, and can also help us to reduce our ecological footprint.

Sharing Skills

By learning from each other how to mend our clothes or furniture rather than throwing them away and replacing them, we can reduce our consumption of material resources. But sharing skills has many other benefits as well – building our capabilities, confidence and satisfaction in developing new skills and sharing what we know with others.

Some ideas for skills sharing:

- Making preserves or baking bread
- Gardening
- Sewing, darning or knitting
- Furniture repairs
- Bicycle repairs
- Craft activities

An inspirational story. Berry Men's Shed

Berry Men's shed is a ministry of Berry Uniting Church, which was started to provide retirees in the Shoalhaven with opportunities to share in meaningful community projects. The Shed welcomes all people of all ages, helping to build their practical and interpersonal skills and to improve their sense of self worth, while at the same time contributing to the broader community. The Men's Shed has a fully mechanised wood workshop, and has completed scores of community projects, including the design, construction and landscaping of a memorial garden at Shoalhaven District Memorial Hospital. The Shed also has regular Men's Health talks, and a youth education and mentoring scheme. The Men's Shed project grew out of small beginnings – the donation of tools from a church member.

<http://www.berrymensshed.com.au/projects.htm>



Sharing Possessions

Instead of buying new clothes or new books, why not get together to swap them with others? As well as saving money and resources, you can also have the satisfaction of giving some of your possessions to a new owner and receiving some in return. A clothes or book swap is probably not the sort of thing that you could do eight times a year (one of the requirements for being a U-turn project). But maybe you could do it a few times a year.

Sharing Food

Many of the above suggestions for U-turn projects can be linked together with the sharing of food (for example, walks followed by breakfast). But perhaps you could make meals the focus of your U-turn project. You could focus on the ethical issues associated with food production, for example, animal welfare issues, oil dependency in agriculture and in the transport of food, soil and waterway degradation, the plight of farmers, fair trade concerns etc. A very practical way to do this would be for your group members to try to source food that is sensitive to these concerns and then use this as a point of discussion over the meal. Christian Ecology Link's LOAF principles can help (locally produced, organically grown, animal friendly, fairly traded).

Helpful links:

- CEL's LOAF resources: <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/loaf.htm>
- Locally produced – find a farmers' market near you: <http://www.farmersmarkets.org.au/>
- Organically grown – a directory: <http://www.organicfooddirectory.com.au/>
- Fairly traded – find fair trade products: <http://www.fairtrade.com.au/>
- A list of food cooperatives in Australia: http://www.asen.org.au/index.php?p=campaign_food_coop

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What does ecology have to do with churches' mission to the broader community?

In Colossians 1:15-23, Paul tells us that the gospel is good news for all of the creation – it is about God's reconciliation of and with all things, and it is of this gospel that Paul became a servant. The Uniting Church has always understood its mission to have an ecological

dimension: “God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself” (Basis of Union, paragraph 3). Addressing issues of ecology in the way we run and use our buildings and property is a part of this witness, but it is not the whole story. “Greening” or “earthing” the life of the church also includes how we practice our worship. And it is also about how we understand ourselves in relationship with our broader community, and how we reach out and build links with them.

Aren't there groups outside the church that already do ecological activities? What else can churches offer?

It is certainly true that there are other groups that address issues of ecology in the practical ways that have been suggested here. But if we understand these issues not only to be legitimate concerns for Christians, but also to be fundamentally linked with spiritual questions about how we all understand and live in this world, then ecological projects don't just present a mission opportunity for churches. They are also something to which we can offer a particular contribution from our faith perspectives.

Do I have to know all the answers about ecological issues?

U-turn groups are about meeting together around activities and issues of common interest for people outside and within our churches. Participating in these groups is about sharing, learning, and growing together. Far from us telling people outside our churches all the answers, one of the outcomes of U-turn groups could actually be that those of us who already attend church start to learn, think and experience a lot more about how our faith relates to ecology.

My church is already running one of these activities in our community, but it isn't registered as a U-turn group. What should we do?

Fantastic! Why not consider registering your group with the U-turn project? In doing so you can network with people across NSW/ACT who are involved in community outreach, and receive support from the Board of Mission. And why not take the opportunity to share what you have learned with others who might be interested in starting a U-turn group along similar lines? Get in touch with Peter Hopkins at the NSW/ACT Synod Board of Mission, uturn@nsw.uca.org.au, 02 8267 4361.