

COMMUNITY

Eco Church leader and conservation volunteer Kristel van Houte with an 81 grey-faced petrel chick at Karioti, Raglan. © Supplied

Conservation A BROAD CHURCH



The arrival of the Eco Church movement in Aotearoa is providing new opportunities for environmental action. **✍ Silvia Purdie**

Over the past 100 years, many Forest & Bird leaders and supporters have connected a strong Christian faith with their efforts to protect and restore nature.

The recent launch of Eco Church here in Aotearoa is opening up new possibilities for churches and their congregations to actively "care for creation" as a part of their life and mission.

Eco Church offers practical guides for nature-friendly actions, including composting, citizen science, cycling, and a newly developed carbon calculator specific to churches. A partnership with Para Kore offers a zero-waste programme. It also provides other resources, including prayers, studies, and seminars.

It's part of an emerging groundswell of interest around climate and sustainability issues, with many churches already working in partnership with conservation organisations in New Zealand and around the world.

Marie Preston, who is part of the Eco Church group at Pāuatahanui Anglican Church, in Porirua, says her group decided to take action to lower their carbon emissions.

"We would act, make a difference, and be a witness to others by our actions," she says.

"One person said: 'I will reduce my use of plastic' and another 'Let's set rat traps in the church grounds'. We had people saying they wanted to find out more about solar power or making composts and growing vegetables. And all these things have happened!"

Eco Church encourages congregations to carry out environmental actions and integrate eco-friendly choices through worship, the management of church buildings and land, community partnerships, and sustainable lifestyles.

Kristel van Houte, who was born in the Netherlands and lives in Raglan with her eight-year-old daughter, describes Eco Church as a way to bring people together to look after nature.

"It creates opportunities to connect and re-imagine what church is all about. I feel strongly that it is not just talk. It's about inspiring practical environmental actions. People reach out to us and ask what can they do."

Kristel is also the director of A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand,

a Christian environmental conservation organisation active in 22 countries around the world.

Eco Church is one of its projects and she loves hearing about all the things congregation members are doing.

"When a church community commits to being an Eco Church, it's a brave step and very inspiring," Kristel added. "I love seeing that positive transformative energy."

"We find hope even in death, and this brings new life. Being caretakers of God's creation is our ultimate calling. People are part of nature, not separate from it, so looking after God's people and creation is our purpose."

Silvia Purdie is a Presbyterian church minister working in sustainability consultancy and counselling. A third generation Forest & Bird member, she is writing a book about 30 Christian women leading in environmental action.

Find out more about Eco Church NZ at www.ecochurch.org.nz, A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand at www.arocha.org.nz, and Para Kore at www.parakore.maori.nz.