**The Diocese of Vellore and the Church of South India – Ecological Awareness**

**Background Information for Teachers**

These materials on the Diocese of Vellore and the Church of South India’s Eco Programmes can be used with KS2 pupils in different cross-curricular contexts: in RE they give a small picture of everyday concerns of the Church in Cambridgeshire’s partner Diocese of Vellore and allow for discussions about what local churches and communities are doing about the same issues; if India is studied in Geography, the themes raised draw attention to the nation’s climate issues and responses, and to the question of Climate Justice. In addition, if you yourselves are an Eco School there are materials here which can be used to stimulate your own thinking and actions!

If you are using the “Understanding Christianity” materials in your school you will see that these materials adopt their format of “Text, Impact, Connections”.

**Background Context**

The Church of South India consists of 23 Dioceses covering 5 states and northern Sri Lanka; the Diocese of Vellore lies chiefly in the state of Tamil Nadu, but also extends into Andhra Pradesh. The Church has more than 4.3 million members, and has made Eco Awareness a key part of its constitution and mission. It established a committee for ecological concerns in 1992, the first Church in India to do so. Since that time the Church has engaged in conferences training “green clergy” and “green teachers”, as well as issuing Green Protocols for Parishes in 2018 and creating a Green Schools Programme in 2015. Overall the CSI promotes sustainability through its 94 colleges, 341 high schools, 1,704 primary schools, 47 technical institutions, 24 para-medical institutions, 14 professional institutions, 50 medical centres and 343 hostels.

There have so far been three joint Eco-conferences with delegates from both Cambridgeshire and Vellore, the latest being in India in 2019. The Bishop and leaders of the Diocese of Vellore have particularly asked Cambridgeshire friends to pray for and support their Eco Initiatives as one of their Diocesan priorities – hence this topic.

**Resources**

The website for the Cambridgeshire – Vellore link is <http://www.vellorecambridgeshirelink.org/>

* Photographs and information to accompany these materials are available as a powerpoint and pdf on the website of the Cambridgeshire – Vellore link group and can be used in the classroom.
* On the link group website you will also find a copy of the Church of South India’s “Green Protocol for Green Discipleship” (2018) and a related set of notes on the local context to explain the background of these.
* Videos on the Church of South India’s You Tube Channel are recommended below.
* A list of web addresses for CSI Green Dances and Green Songs is on the link website
* The Church of South India’s Synod Department of Ecological Concerns is also regularly updating its materials and these can be accessed at <http://www.csisynod.com/erec.php>

**Outcomes for this Topic**

* Pupils will understand that Christians throughout the World who believe in God as Creator understand it is their duty to care for the Earth, not ruin it, or exploit it. (Text)
* Pupils will be able to describe some of the ways churches and schools in the Diocese of Vellore are responding to Eco Issues and discuss how it is the same, or different, in their own locality. (Impact)
* Pupils will be encouraged to devise and engage in activities to demonstrate their understanding that the Eco priority of the Diocese of Vellore is also relevant to Cambridgeshire and their personal context. (Connections)

**Suggestions for Questions and Activities in the Classroom**

**Text- Why are Indian Christians concerned about Climate issues?**

Most Christians are concerned about environmental issues and the need to preserve the earth. Biblical teachings which are of importance in explaining this belief are:

* Genesis chp 2 vs 15 – the world is not for human beings alone, but humans have been given the role of caring for the Earth by its Creator. We are trustees, not owners. It is our common home and a gift from God.
* Isaiah chp 24 vss 3-5 the problems on earth have been created by humankind
* Leviticus chp 25 – the Jubilee Year and Sabbath were decreed by God as times of rest, rest for the Earth, they are necessary for global health, yet we continue to plunder it daily.
* Proverbs chp 31 vs 8, believers need to speak up for the poor, and this also means speaking up for the earth
* Micah chp 6 vs 8, we have a responsibility to future generations
* Matthew chp 7 vs 12 – do to others as you would have them do to you – this includes the Earth and Nature.

This is all outlined by Bishop Sharma of Vellore in a sermon which can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfMs5CPL1MQ This sermon is 13 minutes long, so probably too long and complex to use in totality in the classroom, but you can see two slides on his message on the powerpoint. Alternatively, to set the scene, you could look together at some of the Bible verses above. (Pupils may have covered this topic earlier in work on Creation or Eco Issues.)

Christians talk about humanity’s role upon Earth as one of “Stewardship”, but in the class you could also **discuss** “What is the difference between an owner and a manager?” (football or shop links possible here for example!). If you believe God to be the Creator of the Earth (“the owner”) and humans are His Stewards (“the manager”), what difference should that make to the way you treat Nature? If every person is one of God’s managers / stewards then everyone is responsible for their own living space and behaviour.

Alternatively, think about “Are we Earth’s bullies?”- what happens to children when they are bullied, and what happens to the Earth if it is “bullied”?

**Impact - What are the Eco Issues which particularly affect South India / Tamil Nadu State / Vellore Diocese?**

The Diocese of Vellore has a particular concern for the poor, and supports many small village congregations in a variety of ways. The Diocese is very rural with 56 % of its population engaged in agriculture and of these 91% are small farmers. In a normal year the area can expect approx. 93 mm of rain a year ( India’s national average is 1195 mm a year), but recent changes in rainfall patterns from climate change have caused uncontrollable flooding which has resulted in growing crops being submerged and lost.

See the powerpoint /jpeg for photographs of some of the issues to think about and discuss, these revolve particularly around water, deforestation and general pollution:

* India is the nation with the second highest population in the world, yet has access to only 4% of the world’s available fresh water. For South India, climate change has caused a shift in the pattern of the Southern Monsoon, which could once be relied upon to arrive at the beginning of June bringing the bulk of the area’s annual rainfall. Monsoons have often failed in recent years, bringing drought. Poor rural villages do not have water on tap and village wells have had to be dug deeper as the water table falls – the groundwater level is currently at 1,500 feet, whereas most wells were originally dug for a level of about 300 feet. Rivers have been dry for years – the Palar River which runs through Vellore has been particularly affected by sand mining and the fact that industries and farms upstream on the river and its tributaries have taken the water before it reaches Vellore. Large cities such as nearby Chennai can run out of tap water and have to truck water in. The staple food crop of paddy (rice) is normally grown for some of the time in flooded fields, taking up valuable water supplies.
* More extreme climate events such as Cyclone Nivar in November 2020 have brought flooding – at this point the Palar River did start to flow again, but swept along all the garbage and sewage industries such as local tanneries had dumped in the river bed. Low lying villages were inundated, but there were insufficient dams to help store the much needed water for long term use. Some 600,000,000 people in India live at risk of the effects of extreme weather conditions, especially those in the Himalayan States.
* Deforestation leads to drier climate conditions and soil erosion. Trees are used for paper, industry and fuel. Fruit trees are of importance for wildlife as well as humans and these are being affected by pollution so that their growth is restricted, and sources of valuable nutrition for animals and humans are lost. Travelling on the main roads around Vellore District you will see trees with wide bands of paint around their trunks and sometimes painted numbers – this is to remind villagers that those trees belong to the State, and that anyone taking them must face the consequences. Re-greening the country by the planting of saplings has become a national focus.
* General pollution is often linked to plastics while, in addition, many villages and towns do not yet have an organised system of general rubbish collection, so waste can be dropped or left in the streets. India as a whole generates about 26,000 tons of plastic waste every day. The UK has been among the countries sending plastic waste to India for recycling (this was increased after China refused such imports) – India has now banned the import of waste for this purpose, as well as committing to completely phasing out single-use plastics by 2022. Plastic items which are light and durable have almost everywhere replaced traditionally made items such as clay pots.
* Indian cities hold nine out of the top ten spots in the WHO database of air pollution. This is caused by many different issues: because garbage is not collected local rubbish tips in the street can be dealt with by being set on fire; frequent electricity power cuts mean that diesel generators are in common use, especially for big events and in rural communities; villagers and urban homeless will burn wood, dung, even plastic, to cook and to keep warm; clearing fields after harvest is most easily done by setting fire to them. In its turn, air pollution brings acid rain, which affects vital water supplies.

The photographs on the powerpoint show:

* Slide 3 – a permanently dried up river bed near Vellore – drought
* Slide 4 - unexpectedly heavy unseasonal rains – Bishop Sharma visiting a village where low-lying houses have been flooded
* Slide 5 – in both towns and villages many people rely on community wells for water for both drinking and washing
* Slide 6 – the staple crop of rice is grown in standing water, using up valuable resources
* Slide 7 and 8 - many towns and villages do not have rubbish collecting services
* Slide 9 – newly developed rubbish collecting system at Palamaneer (2019) with waste being burnt, or recycled in the small building shown. Small trucks collect rubbish each morning from around the surrounding area
* Slide 10 – there are pavement dwellers in the larger centres who have to live amongst others’ rubbish
* Slide 11 – air pollution over Chennai. Chennai is not in the Diocese of Vellore, but is the city into which you will fly to go on to Vellore. (population over 7,000,000)

**Discuss:** How are the issues faced by Christians in the Diocese of Vellore the same, or different, to what is happening in England? (These are all world issues after all!)

**Impact - What can ordinary people do? How does the Church of South India say Christians and Churches should act?**

The Church of South India’s Green Protocol Guidelines looks at the areas of: energy conservation; water conservation; plastic; tree planting; construction; fellowship meals; waste management; church services; farming; transportation; printing. The guidelines are available on the link website, with an additional information sheet to explain the importance of some of the suggestions raised in relation to the CSI. They encourage **“Green Discipleship”.**

*For Info: In 2009, CSI received an award for Long Term Commitment to Protect the Living Planet from UNDP and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation presented by then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The programme, Eco-Ministry of the Church of South India, was also among nominees for the 2019 UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which rewards outstanding projects as part of UNESCO's broader work on ESD. See:* <https://en.unesco.org/news/church-led-eco-ministry-spreads-sustainable-environmental-education-southern-india>

The photographs on the powerpoint show:

* Slide 12 – Recycling paper into saleable items
* Slide 13 - 15 – a distribution of saplings following a conference, for delegates to take home for planting in their own church or school compounds. Bishop Sharma encourages the giving of saplings as a mark of respect, rather than shawls or flower garlands as in the other two photographs. Where saplings cannot be transported home, honoured visitors will plant them at the venue.

You will probably not have time to look at all of these areas of concern listed in the Green Protocols in the classroom, unless this is distributed as small group work; you may decide to choose issues which are close to your own situation or, conversely, issues which are of the most importance in the hotter climate of India and because of the nature of Indian village life.

The Diocese of Vellore runs an Agricultural Institute at Kassam and you can see an interview with a previous director of the Institute by the pupils of Buckden School at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhjVX7vtSf4&t=135s> As well as training local workers, the Institute promotes a return to traditional methods of organic farming, with less dependence on soil degrading chemicals.

For a famous story on the importance of tree planting, look online for the name of Saalumarada Thimmakka e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlCLWzkotsY>

**Discuss:** think about the Green guidelines in the Vellore context, but also whether they are applicable to your own local churches and families.

**Impact - What can schools in Vellore Diocese do?**

The question about what schools can do links closely with your own school’s priorities especially if you are an Eco School. The teachers trained by the Diocese of Vellore always link their school’s Eco practices to Christian teaching, as well as world issues, and to building a more sustainable environment for their pupils’ future. *(You may like to look for personal interest on a report on some of the teacher training carried out in Vellore Diocese at* [*https://csisynod.com/news\_view.php?Id=5772*](https://csisynod.com/news_view.php?Id=5772) *and an online example of a CSI conference talk at* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEzXZoDGo2E*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEzXZoDGo2E) *The second video is a wide ranging talk by Sultan Ismail which tells CSI teachers what they should be teaching and includes a powerpoint, some parts of which could be used with classes as screen shots.* )

Although the CSI does not give levels of awards to all its schools, (as in our Eco Schools’ Awards and Green Flag system), there are annual awards for the most effective projects; Voorhees School in Vellore came third in the whole of South India in 2019. CSI also ran a “Green Dance” initiative in 2020 as a way of attracting interest and spreading the Eco message. In 2021 the particular emphasis was on children becoming “Water Warriors”: a school makes a presentation on their efforts at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bivbgFIqo90>

*For Info: researching Green Schools in Tamil Nadu State online you will also find references to the “Isha Foundation Green School Initiative” which since 2018 has been run in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu School Education Department; this initiative is chiefly about re-greening the local environment by planting saplings, and is open to all state schools.*

In schools the CSI programme starts with a three-month green audit which involves all teachers and students and uses practical methodology to touch on many parts of the official curriculum as, for example, data is produced on how much water is wasted and how to reduce that waste, or what are the best plants to grown on campus. The audit touches on air, water, energy, waste, land and food, and the evidence is added together to create a database for the school. The Green School Programme has empowered students to use natural resources responsibly and efficiently and optimise energy efficiency. This includes harvesting rainwater; propagating plants which enhance groundwater recharge and avoid soil erosion; making schools plastic-free; planting saplings in the school grounds; using sustainable construction materials to build environment-friendly schools. In addition, it promotes the ‘Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle campaign; encourages the use of walking, cycling or public transport to get to school; and publishing paper communications less often.

On the powerpoint are examples of what some of the schools in Vellore Diocese are doing:

* Slide 16 – Voorhees is a Higher Secondary Boys School. This is the school which came third in the CSI listings in 2019 and is a local beacon of good practice. Although some of the initiatives may seem obvious to English pupils, remember that things such as collecting waste and recycling are not universal in this area. The initiative to get families and church members to buy and reuse items is something that frequently happens in England through the medium of charity shops, whereas in India such items would often be thrown away. With the school being in the centre of Vellore, some pupils are brought in by car – the no drive day referred to does not mean that pupils have to walk or cycle, they can use public transport.
* Slide 17 – Tirrapatur is a Higher Secondary Girls School in a large town in the south of Vellore Diocese. As well as the practices mentioned on the slide the school also has colour co-ordinated days for special projects, such as wearing blue for water saving day, or orange for energy conservation day. They will also have occasional food day celebrations when all pupils bring in rice and vegetables and there is a grand food sharing. These examples are also deliberately designed to share knowledge and the Green message with the girls’ families. The girls also make presentations on their Eco learning to their fellow students.
* Slide 18 – Sipcot School near Ranipet is a large school with nursery, elementary and secondary education all on the same site. It is situated in a high polluting area where there are many tanneries. Pupils are drawn from a large rural area and the school has a number of buses to bring them in. This school is particularly aware of the effects of industry in its own immediate environment, hence the emphasis on planting “green lungs” for the district. A number of the students at this school have family members who are working in the local polluting industries, so the messages to stop pollution impinges on family life here in an even greater way than in the other two schools shown.

Although there are as yet no videos of Vellore Diocese Green Schools online you can see some from nearby areas of South India at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnjRXR5RGEE> Agnes from Trichy explains the issues and the Christian message

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OOSBUhkpQs> Examples from an elementary school

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-66SEulQiNs> brothers Shiva and Suraya explaining “carbon footprint”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-yvo0I5BnQ> Presentation to “All things bright and beautiful”

As well as their School based programme, CSI has thought about how young people can be engaged in spreading the Green Message through song and dance. Bollywood movies are based around song and dance and are extremely popular with everyone (more so than Musicals are in England), so this is a very effective medium. *(For info: Bollywood films are in Hindi, in the Diocese of Vellore films in Tamil are known as Kollywood and those in Telagu are Tollywood.)* India has a rich dance heritage and individual and group dances will be a part of many celebrations.

Slide 19 of the powerpoint has some still shots from the Green Dance videos.

**Connections - Spreading the Green Message from the Diocese of Vellore with your class:**

* On the link website there is a list of CSI’s Christian Green Dances and Green Songs performed by children and to be found on You Tube. You could simply enjoy these, copy and dance with them, or create equivalent songs and dances yourselves! Alternatively write / plan / make your own video messages.
* Or what about devising a tree planting service – and actually planting one? (If you put “trees” into the search box of [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org) you will find a wealth of resources from different faiths to draw on.)
* Or carry out the CSI Green School audit with your school or church to compare to the Diocese of Vellore. Think about whether there is anything you can action as a result.