

Havens for Nature

Martin Hayes is bishop of Kilmore.

Biodiversity is the variety of living things on Earth. As some of the thousands of different types of life in Ireland are in decline, we must take steps to take care of our wildlife, plants, animals, insects and birds. The *Havens for Nature* publication of the Heritage Council provides excellent guidance for parishes who are prepared to engage in the 30 per cent return to nature of church grounds by 2030 initiative of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Our church grounds in general have the potential to be rich in biodiversity, as they are not subject to routine cultivation practices. You can begin by simply gathering some like-minded people, like avid gardeners, among your local community. Using the mapping guidelines from *Havens for Nature*, you can survey your church grounds. Advice is available from the local authority biodiversity officers of the Irish Heritage Council. You can then move to involve parishioners, create plans and take actions to enhance biodiversity on your church grounds.

We pride ourselves in keeping these grounds neat and tidy, usually by adopting a regular mowing of lawns. However, in accord with this initiative of the Irish Church, you are invited to



leave some of your church grounds to go wild!

This does not mean necessarily cultivating your church grounds, rather, it can simply mean allowing the natural wildflowers that are already part of your lawns to emerge and bloom in all their beauty. Again, it is about acting on the results of your initial survey to identify what can be achieved, e.g., allowing a wildflower meadow to emerge and then erecting suitable signage to explain to parishioners the value of nurturing biodiversity. As you advance in the care of creation in your parish, you can consider reducing the trimming of your hedgerows and of planting more native hedgerows as well as a community orchard!



Havens for Nature offers detailed guidance on the care of church grounds to ensure biodiversity by keeping mowing to a minimum along the edges and to ensure access for walkers to the wildflower meadows. Our care of creation on our church grounds also includes buildings and walls, which are refuges for a variety of animals, insects, birds and plants. The building of a pond – a rich source of biodiversity – might be considered particularly in those church grounds with wet areas.

The purpose of this *Laudato Si'* driven initiative is to encourage the recovery of the numbers of pollinators, mainly bees who can benefit with the installation of 'bee hotels' and by

the clearing of spaces for the various species of solitary bee, as outlined in *Havens for Nature*. The efforts to increase the biodiversity of plants leads to a corresponding variety of insects, which in turn provide nurture for birds who function to promote balance in the natural environment.

Havens for Nature includes encouraging details of how different parish and faith communities have embraced the 30 per cent return to nature by 2030 initiative with the support of Trócaire. In the spirit of *Laudato Si'*, written by Pope Francis 'to enter into dialogue with all people' (*LS*, 3), *Havens for Nature* includes projects pioneered by Eco-Congregation Ireland as well as the Muslim, Buddhist, and Sikh faith traditions.

Havens for Nature is well-researched, well-written and customised to parish life, involving parish grounds and parishioners. It elaborates on the controlled use of pesticides, legal duties, the details of funding and training, and the contact details for professional advice, as well as a seasonal action plan.

The *Laudato Si'* Working Group (LSWG) of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference are most grateful for the work of the Heritage Council who initiated and financed the production of this most valuable resource.

'Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another' (*LS*, 42).

Havens for Nature is available at https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Havens-for-Nature_Supporting-Biodiversity-in-Faith-Grounds.pdf