

**Eco Island – Sustainable Communities – Talk at Conference**  
**organised by Isle of White Council at Cowes Yacht Haven Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2008**

Introduction

I've loved the Island since my first visit here over 30 years ago. And I'd like to congratulate David Pugh, Joe Duckworth, and John Owen, and their team for organising this very significant conference. I have no doubt whatever that the Eco Island Project is the most important event in the Island's history since the Island itself broke away from the mainland, those many, many years ago!

Nowadays the world 'ecology' has largely come to be identified in the popular mind with the study of the human relationship to the environment. And that is, of course, an important part of what we are concerned with today. But there are other ecologies too: there is the science of the relationship between organisms and their environments; and there is the branch of sociology that is concerned with the relationships between human groups and their physical and social environments. In each case – environmental, scientific and sociological – the key ecological term is relationship. And so it is from that angle that I want to tackle the question about 'sustainable communities', because I assume that whatever else a community may be, it is a network of relationships – relationships which can grow or go stale or break down, just like any other. And so perhaps that suggests a series of questions as we think about the Island community.

First, what will enable this community to grow? I'd suggest a common vision – owned and understood by a good proportion of those involved.

Secondly, what will immobilize community life? I would suggest fear of the future – as some of this morning's speakers have already suggested, is there one?

Thirdly, what will break it down? Perhaps a lack of common will. For to do nothing is not an option.

So what I sense is that an increasing number of people are catching on to this Eco Island vision, because it's a way of grabbing hold of the future, in order to ensure that there is one. But what sort of relationships does a community need, and how can we make sure that they are good relationships, in order that community life may not only be sustained, but allowed to flourish? I want to answer that overall question in three particular ways.

Short-termism

Environmental ecologists have shown beyond all reasonable doubt that the human relationship to the environment cannot be understood on a short-term basis. The environmental crisis which we face today has been the result of many years of human excess, and the process of reversing its effects will also take many years. And the same is true of community relationships. One of the biggest problems we face in Britain today is a strategy of short-termism, which fails to recognize that building communities takes time, because the human relationships that go to make up community life have to be built on trust, and trust has a lot to do with staying-power – or with what we might more traditionally have called faithfulness. This suggests that the compact between individuals, groups, service providers and government must be marked by a vision that does not look for quick fixes, but for the kind of nurture and collaboration, over time, that can penetrate to the grass roots, and be given the chance to germinate, grow and mature at every level, before it comes to fruition.

## Multi-layered complexity

Another thing that we know from environmental ecologists is that eco-systems are made up of an almost infinite number of finely tuned relationships between constituent parts, so that even relatively slight damage to one part can be catastrophic for the whole. As we learned this morning, this is a never ending process – we're still discovering new dimensions to this complex dynamic. And if we apply the same principle to community life, perhaps we can see that unless we try to meet the needs of all the diverse groups and individuals represented in the human eco-system, the cost of neglecting one section may ultimately be borne by us all. This is surely true when we think about crime or juvenile delinquency. Such anti-social patterns of behaviour are usually the symptom of a broken community life, which turns one member against another.

## People – the greatest asset of all

The environmental crisis has focussed attention on the way in which a purely utilitarian attitude towards the earth's resources is a recipe for global disaster. If our relationship to the natural world is governed only by an attitude that treats it as a tool for achieving our own purposes – to provide fuel for our cars, minerals for our science, vast tracts of deforested land for our beef cattle – then our domination becomes our undoing. The natural world needs time and space to live and grow, to replenish its rich resources, and to blossom for its own sake. And again, if we transfer this to community life, we should be less inclined to see individuals narrowly as functionaries within a wider economic machine, rather than as persons in a holistic sense.

## Conclusion – The Churches' and Faith Communities' contribution

So what motivates people to build community? How do we energize the grass roots? How do we build community? What values does a community need to treasure?

I've always been a great believer in the importance of small beginnings. We can't take on the whole world. But we can certainly take on the Island! We all represent and motivate different interests, and I want in conclusion to say a word about my own work, as a representative of one of the faith communities. You can indeed take us seriously – we're not all religious maniacs – we're sane, contemporary, thinking human beings, with our feet on the ground.

I was intrigued to be described in the conference programme as the '8<sup>th</sup>' Bishop of Portsmouth. The Church of England Portsmouth diocese was founded in 1927, and consists of South Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. On the Island we have 60 churches, many of them tourist attractions. There are 30 full time parish clergy, with 3 prison chaplains, and two hospital chaplains. That places our work right at the heart of local communities, and their needs. And it's furthered by the fact that we run 19 of the Island's schools, 3 middle schools, and 16 primary schools. And we've taken care to engage fully and properly in the process of the current review, and not holding back from it.

There is a confidence about the Church of England community towards the Isle of Wight. Stephen Palmer as vicar of Newport, and his excellent work of chaplaincy to the Island Council, is one example. And I've recently given St. Thomas's Newport the honorary title of 'Minster' – a throw back to Anglo-Saxon times for a major church in a particular area, which has recently been revived elsewhere in England, the first being Sunderland parish church in the diocese of Durham. So St. Thomas's is going to be a Minster Church for the Island, reflecting its already existing work as a centre and not just for Newport but for the whole

Island. And speaking of appointments, I must also mention Caroline Baston, the first woman Archdeacon in the diocese, who has been Archdeacon at the Isle of Wight for the last eighteen months, a welcome and increasingly uncontroversial arrival! Together we are encouraging local churches to be ‘Eco-friendly’, and there is a Diocesan Environmental policy on the way.

The last thing I want to say concerns what might be called the Ambassadorial Role, which many of us exercise through our different networks and walks of life. My experience of talking about the Isle of Wight elsewhere is that for many people, it still conjures up two things – Cowes Week, and a place where some people sometimes go on holiday! Few people are aware of the areas of deprivation, or the percentage of people on the Island who live on different kinds of benefit. It is my sincere hope that the Eco Island initiative will be ‘sold’ to the rest of the country in a way that will educate them better about what this community is really like, and what its future might hold. One of my roles is to speak as one of the Bishops in the House of Lords, the importance of which can be easy to exaggerate, but it is a way of drawing attention to issues of public debate, and to putting government ministers on the spot! Next Thursday there’ll be a debate on areas of outstanding beauty, when I hope to speak. I’m open to any kind of briefing in that debate about the Island.

This is a small way of saying that we in the churches are at your disposal, in developing local ‘sustainable communities’.

**Kenneth Stevenson**