

## A Rocha

In a town where the train station sign appears in both English and Punjabi, where streets are teeming with life from foreign cultures and where church, mosque, temple and gurdwara compete for local followers - A Rocha is a unique voice. Despite working in a community with 52 separate places of worship, relatively few of these churches, the project has succeeded in uniting a diverse community around the biblical theme of caring for God's creation. "A biblical view of creation recognises the command God gives to people to care for and "rule over" the earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:26-28)," explains A Rocha UK Founder & Director Dave Bookless. "This command is given to people of every faith and none. It demands cooperation between all people."

In partnership with several local faith leaders, two local councils and numerous volunteers from across the community, A Rocha has succeeded in transforming the local environment of the West London suburb.



The journey of A Rocha into the heart of multi-cultural, multi-faith Southall began with Revd Dave Bookless placing recycling banks on his church premises. Already an active member of several council committees, Dave was eager to tackle some of the areas' many environmental problems, which included high levels of air pollution and large amounts of litter in public places. "In addition to these problems, I was shocked to discover that some parts of Southall had the lowest ratio of public green space per household in England," recalls Dave. He also uncovered research by the King's Fund that revealed an increased likelihood of mental health difficulties among those deprived of access to green spaces.

These shocking findings prompted Dave into action. In 2001, with the help of several other Christians, he established a UK branch of the international Christian environmental charity, A Rocha. As well as conducting primary school assemblies on caring for the environment, the project began investigating the potential of nearby Minet Park as a place where local residents could appreciate the local wildlife and environment.

However, with burnt-out cars and piles of tyres and industrial waste littering the 90-acre park, many locals viewed the Minet site as nothing more than a dumping ground. After discovering a diverse range of birds, butterflies and other wildlife within the site, A Rocha decided to approach Hillingdon council and propose a council-funded project to create a Country Park and wildlife reserve on the Minet site.

Following lengthy discussions, which included several other community groups, the council accepted A Rocha's proposals, and appointed the organisation as Ecological Advisors on a project that would transform the disused site into one of the largest public access parks in urban West London.

With a budget of over £1m and the support of local Hayes MP John McDonnell, A Rocha formed a taskforce of environmental contractors, churchgoers and volunteers from all sections of the local community, to undertake the transformation of Minet Park. Their efforts were rewarded on June 14, 2003, when local residents joined council officials, community leaders and volunteers to celebrate the opening of Minet Park.

"We were successful because we engaged both the structures and key individuals within the council," explains Dave. "We could not have done much of our work without the backing of both Hillingdon and Ealing councils."

The celebration concluded with Ram Gidoomal speaking on Ezekiel 36:33-36, which tells of the land that was laid waste becoming like the Garden of Eden. "That really summed up everything we had been working towards," says Dave.

Being clear and upfront about motives has also been beneficial for A Rocha Living Waterways, a Christian project operating in the diverse, multi-faith setting of Southall, West London. Set up in 2001 by local vicar Dave Bookless, A Rocha has succeeded in uniting Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus of various ages around the issue of caring for the environment.

"In a place like Southall, every churchgoer has daily contact with people of other faiths," explains Rev Dave Bookless, the Director of A Rocha UK. "The environment has proved to be an issue we can come together on. We will never agree on everything, but we've found we can work together on this."

The more visible achievements of A Rocha include partnering with the local council and others in a multi-million pound refurbishment of a derelict park and weekly environmental awareness lessons in several primary schools. The less visible success has been uniting a rag-tag group of faith leaders, churchgoers and local volunteers while being clear about the project's Christian identity. As one local Imam put it: "I could not work with multi-faith groups because they fail to take the separate integrity of each faith seriously. But I could work with A Rocha

because they were clear and honest about what they believed."

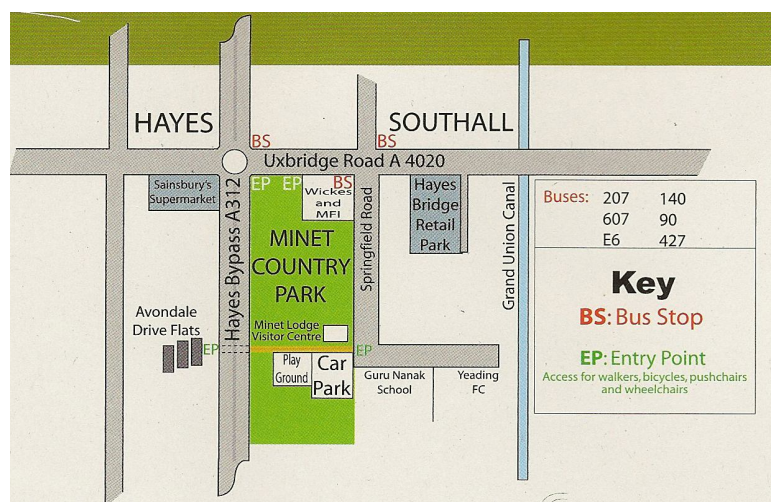
Although staff and volunteers at A Rocha have been able to establish good relationships with people of other faiths, relationships where conversations are "honest and robust", Dave is only too aware of the obstacles facing churches who want to connect with people of different faiths. "Because most people of other faiths are also of other cultures, there is an extra barrier there," Dave explains. "It's a case of working hard to overcome not just religious differences, but cultural ones too."

By focusing on the shared needs of the wider community instead of similarities in theology, A Rocha has avoided some of the obstacles that often dog churches looking to make connections with other faith groups.

*(Original text by Jonathan Evens)*

Minet Country Park is 20 minute walk from Hayes & Harlington Railway Station and a 30 minute walk from Southall railway station. Surface line trains to Hayes and Southall can be located on the Paddington to Reading/Oxford/ Greenford/Heathrow Connect routes. Trains also leave from Ealing Broadway on the District Line.

For more about A Rocha go to [www.en.arochoa.org/uk](http://www.en.arochoa.org/uk)



Dave Bookless has also suggested some other ways that churches can reach out to people of different faiths living in their local area:

1. If you have neighbours of a different faith, why not take some food around and say 'Hello'? The chances are they will appreciate your efforts and welcome you into their home. It could be the start of a long-lasting friendship.
2. Contact your local mosque/gurdwara/temple/synagogue and find out whether a group from your church could come and visit one day. It will provide you with an opportunity to find out more about their beliefs and establish a relationship with the leader of that faith community.
3. Consider hosting a 'Fun Day' in the grounds of your local church where you invite the wider community, including people of different faiths. The event will be a real blessing to local families and also help you build relationships with those of different faiths.
4. Your church might be able to host basic classes on conversational English for people from different cultures and faiths. This works especially well if it is delivered by women for other women in the community.
5. For more ideas and to find out about taking part in courses on understanding other religions, contact the Faith to Faith Network on 0121 633 8860 or visit [www.faithtofaith.org.uk](http://www.faithtofaith.org.uk) or The London Inter Faith Centre [www.londoninterfaith.org.uk](http://www.londoninterfaith.org.uk)

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