

Susanna Wesley Foundation Conference 2017 - *Changing Church*

Case Study: Catholic Earthcare Australia

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What was the situation facing the church/organisation?

[Catholic Earthcare Australia](#) (Earthcare) is the ecological agency of the Catholic Church in Australia. It was established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in May 2002 to bring about an ecological worldview and ethically and ecologically sustainable practices across all Catholic organisations and agencies in Australia (including education and health). It works from the premise that all of creation is sacred and needs to be protected for future generations.

In 2008, the agency intentionally moved away from a single focus on climate change and shifted to a focus on sustainability. This was because the debates around climate change inevitably created an adversarial environment and invoked a 'shallow' ecology approach and a technical response to what are seen as 'environmental' challenges. The shift to a focus on sustainability brought a more holistic understanding, which has since been supported by the issue of the papal encyclical [Laudato Si'](#). Encyclicals are teaching documents, which are not only intended to educate members of the Catholic Church, but to provide a moral inspiration to society at large. This moral imperative has evoked a wide-ranging response as it has placed the ethical dimension centre-stage in the response to environmental issues. The Australian government, for example, responded [this way](#).

This call to an integral ecology has been written by world-recognised natural and social scientists (including economists) and ecological theologians. This is the first papal encyclical to issue an explicit challenge to global economic, social, political and environmental practices and their impact on the planet and on issues of social justice and equity. The call is to what has been termed 'ecological conversion', or a change of heart in relation to our response to all of the created world.

How did you and the church/organisation approach the problem/opportunity (Initial thoughts/method)?

I have been working as Social Process Advisor and consultant to Earthcare since 2008, when a new Director was appointed, who approached me to help her conceptualise and implement a strategy for the Agency.

My brief (with the Director of the agency) was to design a framework to engage the whole Catholic Church in a systemic change initiative. [ASSISI](#) (**A Strategic Systems-based Integrated Sustainability Initiative**) provides a strategic pathway to achieving ecological sustainability in order to foster more ethical and sustainable practices both within schools, parishes, hospitals, congregations and church organisations, and across organisations. ASSISI does not come with 'solutions' to ecological sustainability, but rather provides the learning infrastructure for organisations and agencies - and the broader communities which they serve - to come to understand the critical issues facing them and how they might address them together.

What process was followed/what activities were undertaken?

Having completed a pilot period of working with ASSISI in the education sector, I designed a 4-day leadership formation program, Animators for Sustainability, the purpose of which is to enable the development of an ecological worldview that manifests in sustainable organisations and ethically and ecologically sustainable living.

I was participating in a Masterclass with the [Presencing Institute](#) at MIT at the time and Theory U and other participative methodologies that enable participatory leadership are key informing frameworks for the program. The program also brings Catholic Social Teaching to life in the context of the call to transformative action contained in 'Laudato Si'. The social technologies provide the bridge between the natural and the human/social sciences and are the vehicle for bringing ecological spiritual/theological understandings to life.

Please describe any notable features, events or stages of the process

We encouraged groups or teams from one organisation (whether school, hospital or social service) to participate in the Animators program in order to build capability to engage the whole organisation on the journey of ecological conversion. We also partnered with organisations and accompanied them on this journey. This would begin with formation of a reference group from across the system, which would co-design a workshop that involved a cross-section of the organisation as they embarked on this journey. In schools this also had implications for curriculum.

What outcomes were achieved?

Ten programs have been offered in the various Australian states over the last five years and across various organisations, preparing close to 200 participants to lead transformational change in their own contexts. This

framework of thinking and practice also informed the formation of a National Energy Efficiency Network (NEEN), led by Earthcare: a project to create a national energy efficiency network with the potential to engage thousands of faith-based community organisations and other SMEs across Australia in energy-saving actions.

Looking back, what have you and/or the Church/organisation learned about change from the experience?

Firstly, the importance of actively working with vested institutional interests and power relationships. While we successfully experimented with innovation at the boundaries, bringing these insights and practices into the mainstream of the institution continues to constitute another level of challenge. Secondly, the need for ongoing intentional work to connect pockets of transformation (and transformative action) and enable collaboration across the system, which has been the intention of this work. Margaret Wheatley’s [work](#) shows what is required to enable the shift from networks, to communities of practice, to creating systems of influence. These two learnings are interrelated in the sense that the dominance of institutional interests and power relations has compromised the capacity of the agency to create a system of influence across the country.



Megan Seneque’s career as an academic and as a social process and development professional began in South Africa at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal where she was involved in long-term work on curriculum transformation in the transition to post-Apartheid South Africa. Megan was lead designer and Founding Director

of a Leadership Centre that promoted new and appropriate forms of leadership for sustainable development in the African context. Megan continued her work across the private, public and NGO sectors in South Africa, Australia, the UK and other global contexts - drawing upon principles of systemic inquiry and complex adaptive systems to challenge instrumental understandings of knowledge and to enable collaboration across boundaries. Clients include Ernst & Young, Westpac, BHP Billiton, Qantas, Telstra, UN-HABITAT. She is co-facilitator of the Wellbeing Economies in Africa lab, convened by the Global Leadership Academy (GIZ) and the Centre for Governance Innovation at Pretoria University. She

is currently Honorary Research Fellow with the Susanna Wesley Foundation and the Centre for Organisational Research at the University of Roehampton. She is an Associate of the Presencing Institute at MIT.