



ASSISI Overview

A Strategic Systems-based Integrated Sustainability Initiative

Context:

Call for a Radical Conversion

In 2001 Pope John Paul II called those of faith and those of goodwill alike, to live their ecological vocations informed by continual and sustained experiences of ecological conversion.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference [ACBC] responded to this call by establishing Catholic Earthcare Australia [Earthcare] in May 2002 to *encourage and support the "ecological conversion"*¹ within the Australian context.

As the new millennium dawned, Pope John Paul II invited people of faith into a movement of spiritual communion². The encyclical, *Novo Millennio inuente*, painted a picture of communion as the building of community laid upon strong foundations of relationship. Such a community is open to radical conversion, to contemplation, and to engagement with God and all of Creation.

Conversation is a powerful means for bringing to life a spirituality of communion. Radical conversion is what happens whenever authentic conversation occurs. Community is the place where conversation continually provokes conversion.

Call for Communion

¹ Pope John Paul II, January 2001

² *Novo Millennio inuente* [At the Beginning of the New Millennium], Pope John Paul II, 6 January, 2001

The call to communion is a call to relationship and spirituality. *A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us...This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.*³

The call to a spirituality of communion brings us into genuine community beyond soul-less institutional forms, and provides the vehicle for this radical conversion. True contemplation is engagement with God and all of Creation in ways that open the door of radical conversation.⁴

*Talking happens a lot. It is often monologue. Conversation is rarer by far. It is always dialogue. No one takes leave of a real conversation the same as when one entered into it. Our conversations create us. Conversation and risk and conversion belong together. Conversation is dangerous, therefore, to anyone unwilling to embrace or at least to accept transformation*⁵. This linking of conversation, risk and conversion reminds us that the Holy Spirit is present. The ultimate vulnerability – the image of Jesus on the Cross – remains our inspiration.

When people join together in a genuine bond of connection where conversation allows them to participate in one another's lives (*koinonia*), Church happens. The word *koinonia* also connects with meanings around the notion of participation. *Whenever people are gathered in my name... there am I in their midst.*

Call to Participation

In the context of the 'resacralisation' of the world, human and social sciences refer to 'participative consciousness'.. *Sacred experience is based in reverence, in awe and love of creation, valuing it for its own sake, in its own right as a living presence. To deny participation not only offends against human justice, not only leads to errors in*

³ Novo Millenio inuente n.43

⁴ It is no etymological fluke that conversation and conversion have the same Latin roots from which we have pressed both words into English. The etymological connection tells us some important truth. It tells us a story about our humanness and our share in the Divine Life as a gift of Grace.

⁵ Michael Cowan & Bernard Lee SM (1997) *Conversation, Risk and Conversion: the inner and public life of small Christian communities*

*epistemology, not only strains the limits of the natural world, but is also troublesome for human souls and for the anima mundi*⁶

Thomas Berry names the call for a participative worldview as the 'great work' of our time. Berry's goal is to restore the intimacy of humans with the natural world in a 'single community of existence'.

Catholic Earthcare Australia's Response

For more than a decade, Catholic Earthcare Australia has sought to address the urgent and critical tasks of safeguarding the integrity of creation, protecting Earth's fragile ecosystems, and providing a voice for communities and victims of environmental degradation, injustice and pollution in ways that are informed by the best available science and theology of our time.

Earthcare engages with church agencies and organisations within education, health, social welfare and pastoral ministries together with Religious Congregations and all people of good faith throughout Australia.

The Catholic Earthcare Australia Vision and Mission

Earthcare envisions an environment that is closer to the plan of the Creator.

Earthcare embodies the vision by:

- a. inviting others to participate in the journey towards ecological conversion and the holistic care of social, human and environmental ecology;
- b. promoting the understanding among people that creation is sacred and endangered and must be protected and sustained for present and future generations yet unborn.

The tasks and activities of Earthcare include:

⁶ Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury in the introduction to the book which they edited: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration in *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2001). 'Anima mundi is translated as "the soul of the world" from Latin

- a. Researching scripture and Catholic Social Teaching so as to promote a Catholic ecological worldview;
- b. Developing national networks that will better enable the linking, resourcing and support of ecological endeavours within the Churches of Australia, and secondly, to extend the hand of friendship and cooperation to other like-minded groups working in the broader community;
- c. Undertaking initiatives that encourage a reverence for creation, a responsible stewardship of Earth's natural resources and ecosystems, and provide a voice for the victims of pollution, environmental degradation and injustice;
- d. Providing educational support, materials and services to Catholic schools, organisations, religious congregations, agencies, commissions and parishes – particularly information to assist in the carrying out of environmental audits and the implementation of more ecologically and ethically sustainable practices.

ASSISI

ASSISI is one response Earthcare has designed as **A Strategic Systems-based Integrated Sustainability Initiative** to assist organisations on the ecological conversion journey.

ASSISI provides a model and strategic pathway towards greater ecological sustainability. The underpinning framework of ASSISI is relevant and appropriate for all Catholic organisations and agencies, parishes and religious congregations. ASSISI provides organisations with direction and a coherent response to the call for ecological conversion.

Broad aim of ASSISI

The overarching aim of ASSISI is to bring about an environment that is closer to the plan of the Creator by providing a foundation for and a pathway to best practice in achieving greater ecological sustainability in Australian Catholic organisations.

What does a Strategic Systems-Based Integrated Sustainability Initiative (ASSISI) mean?

ASSISI is **strategic**

The work is linked to the strategic intent of individual organisations, thereby overcoming a potential ad hoc and fragmented approach to sustainability.

ASSISI is **systems-based**

The whole organisation and the broader community of which it forms a part is involved. ASSISI seeks to integrate all aspects of an organisation's life, for example, organisational activity, planning and management, resources, grounds and building management,

community networks, learning processes, and the religious dimension. Sound ecological praxis results from participatory processes⁷.

ASSISI is **integrated**

The ecological content and ecological values are integral to ASSISI. Ecological, theological, technical and educational perspectives are integrated through a focus on ecological sustainability.

ASSISI is also aligned with and integrates the National and State Education for Sustainability framework (for schools) and with other relevant State and National sustainability initiatives (for church agencies and religious congregations).

The formation of a *Sustainability Steering Group*, within the organisation, provides opportunity for learning that is based in service, project, inquiry, action-research and other forms of experiential learning that bring ecological sustainability to life and integrate the social justice dimensions.

ASSISI is **Sustainability**

Sustainability forms the core of ASSISI. The ethical principle involved resonates with Pope Benedict's call to a, '*profound, long-term review of our model of development*'. The ecological health of the planet calls for this. This is also demanded by the cultural and moral crisis of humanity whose symptoms have for some time been evident in every part of the world.

Ecological sustainability constitutes both the content of the initiative, and the outcome of the initiative. The participation in learning communities also ensures longevity of the initiative. This provides the basis for what has been termed 'ecological praxis'.⁸

⁷ See appendix 1 for the framework that incorporates all 6 inter-related elements involved in a whole organisation intervention. There will be networks of organisations and their broader communities, each cluster constituting a 'learning community'. Thus individual organisations will engage with the process, as will the entire 'learning community'. Steps 1 and 2 involve the whole community in an emergent, evolutionary and educational planning process that allows them to discern a way forward together. Thus the steps to ecological sustainability are situated in a bigger process of discernment, which allows for the possibility of a 'spirituality of communion'.

⁸ Denis Edwards in *Jesus the Wisdom of God* (1995), and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: the change of heart that leads to a new way of living on earth* (2006) uses the term when he talks about ways of being in the world 'in creative partnership with God', as co-creators.

ASSISI is an **Initiative**

ASSISI constitutes the ACBC sustainability initiative. It is an ongoing, large-scale intervention.

ASSISI provides a theological, spiritual and practical base for implementing Earthcare's ecological vision. It is a useful model and a roadmap for the way to achieve greater ecological sustainability for the Catholic Church in Australia.

The ASSISI Approach

In a sense, ASSISI is a life-long process. It is a process of recognising values and clarifying concepts, developing skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness of all creation, and the deep understanding of creation as a gift from God; a gift that requires equitable sharing and right relationship. It also entails practice in decision making for living a life that is ecologically and ethically sustainable. This holistic approach engages the conversion of hearts, minds and hands of individuals and organisations.

There are six phases of development culminating in leading ecological sustainability.⁹ These phases have been outlined in relation to the six dimensions identified in the ASSISI model. There are nine principles of Earthcare that provide a guide for building collaborative relationships.¹⁰

ASSISI adopts a 'learning communities' approach¹¹. A collaborative process is the central mechanism for change. Learning communities enable organisations to work within relevant frameworks and constraints while making autonomous decisions appropriate to their own context. Ownership and the embedding of ecological sustainability into all aspects of organisational life occur within the context of, and in collaboration with, the broader community.

The potential exists for the evolution of local learning communities into regional and national learning communities.

⁹ See Appendix 2 for the phases of development in each of these 6 areas, from awareness through to leading ecological sustainability.

¹⁰ See Appendix 3 for the Nine Principles of Earthcare.

¹¹ A **learning community** is a group of people who share common values and beliefs and are actively engaged in learning together from each other (also called Communities of Practice, supporting the idea that knowing and knowledgeability are better thought of as cultural practices exhibited by practitioners belonging to various communities). This approach ensures greater integration and coherence (including in matters of curriculum).

Goals of ASSISI for Organisations and Their Broader Communities

- a. That all members within the organisation develop values, beliefs and attitudes that support the living out of their ecological vocations;
- b. That the organisation develops awareness, knowledge and skills that facilitate whole of life ecologically sustainable decisions that will bring about an environment that is closer to the plan of the Creator;
- c. That organisations engage with the processes of ecological conversion and achieve greater ecological sustainability in all 6 dimensions identified in the ASSISI model.

Key Strategies for Achieving the Goals of ASSISI Within the Organisation

- a. Develop ongoing reflection and learning processes that include articulating, monitoring, evaluation and sustainability indicators;
- b. Undertake an audit of their ecological footprint including carbon, energy and water;
- c. Form a Sustainability Steering Group to lead the organisation's initiative;
- d. Develop relationships with other organisations and the broader community that foster ecological conversion and greater ecological sustainability;
- e. Further develop a learning and collaborative culture within their organisation and participate in learning communities;
- f. Continue to evolve creative ways of working together so as to achieve greater ecologically sustainable solutions to suit their particular contexts.

Available Resources and Support

The following resources are available through the Catholic Earthcare Australia website - www.catholicearthcare.org.au:

- a. 'On Holy Ground';
- b. Graphic representations of the ASSISI model, the ASSISI Pathway and a poster mapping indicators of ecological sustainability;

Team members from Earthcare offer the following programs and support processes:

- a. Co-initiating process with the organisation's leadership
- b. Formation for leaders – ASSISI Formation – *Animators for Sustainability Program*
- c. Setting up and formation of a *Sustainability Steering Group*
- d. Spirituality Formation experience for staff – *Caring For God's Creation*

- e. Co-facilitating action planning and developing a plan for sustainability as part of the organisation's overall strategic plan
- f. An intensive immersion program called Creation and Reconciliation

In partnership with Carbon Systems

- a. ESP tool for measuring, tracking and recording the organisation's ecological footprint

Benefits for Organisations

The organisational community will benefit from ASSISI through:

- a. Developing and articulating values, beliefs and attitudes that support the living out of one's ecological vocation;
- b. Experiencing aspects of ecological conversion, co-creation and collaboration;
- c. The opportunity to embed ecological conversion and ecological sustainability in all materials, resources and strategy and planning processes;
- d. Becoming well informed about their ecological footprint and strategic decision making about resources;
- e. Developing their grounds and facilities which reflect the local ecosystem;
- f. All members of the organisation engaging professional development and working on real-life problems and outcomes;
- g. Becoming a model for sustainability within the local community;
- h. Participation in learning communities and networks;
- i. The promotion of environmental credentials.

What Participation in ASSISI Requires of Organisations

ASSISI is a long-term journey, inspired by Catholic teachings, values and beliefs and the call to a spirituality of communion. This far-reaching and considered approach to whole organisation culture change requires both leadership commitment and commitment of time and resources to enable an authentic experience which is sustained over time. The outcome of such commitment is transformation at both a personal and systemic level.

The collaborative learning communities approach ensures that "we choose the path of dialogue, solidarity and cooperation that helps all sectors of the community go beyond sectarian interests, secular and religious differences".¹²

¹² Paper presented by Bishop Christopher Toohey at the National Climate Change Conference in Canberra, November 2005.