

An Ethnography of EarthSong

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Abstract

In a world of theory around shifting consciousness, especially in the overlapping fields of eco-feminist theology, ecological spirituality, liberation theology and neo-paganism, EarthSong educational project, now in its 13th year, provides a praxis to navigate those shifts. By re-conceptualising tightly-structured traditions in light of the Universe story, the EarthSong coordinating team have become leaders in providing unique programs to explore the practical ramifications of changes in consciousness in the Australian context. Established in Melbourne Australia, by Anne Boyd, a Brigidine Sister, with an initial focus on working with religious congregations, EarthSong's story is one of perseverance in the face of strained relations with the Archdiocese of Melbourne on one hand, and the full support of many religious congregations on the other. Given its place on the creative margins for those "between two stories", EarthSong demonstrates a re-purposing of the role of vowed religious, and now many others, who, in light of their traditions, are challenged to take up "the work not yet being done" to reconnect the human with the more-than-human world as a journey into the sacred.¹ This article draws on interviews with the founders of the Earthsong project as well as participants in describing and analyzing the work of this movement.²

Introduction

EarthSong is an educational project for Earth literacy and Earth ethics established in Melbourne by 6 religious institutes (religious congregations) in 2003. As the first generation of religious to be on a journey of understanding the new Universe story³, congregations were beginning to express its implications for their own purpose and self-understanding in their Chapter documents and directional statements. This type of re-visioning began in religious congregations in the decades post-Vatican II

(1962-65). The congregations were asked to re-examine their purpose in the context of the Christian tradition and the charism of their founders. This prepared the ground for the work of those able to tell a wider Universe story, beyond the Christian story, to re-contextualise the work of religious congregations. One of the first in Australia to lead this re-visioning was Anne Boyd, a Brigidine Sister, who established EarthSong as a response to a new understanding of the basic concern of religion which, in the words of Thomas Berry, must be “to preserve the natural world as the primary revelation of the divine”. (Swimme & Berry 1992: 242). The function of EarthSong has been to draw attention to this call and to make religious congregations accountable to it in challenging, creative ways.

After some opposition from Catholic church hierarchy in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, the EarthSong story is one of perseverance and transition to greater strength. It demonstrates the very purpose of religious congregations, not to be in the mainstream ‘centre’ but on the ‘edges’, supported or unsupported, doing the work that is not yet being done by other groups. Ideally, when the work done by religious becomes mainstream, they shift to find a new purpose. With a vast engagement now not only among religious, but among the academic scientific community, education and conservation groups, EarthSong serves a unique and important part of the spiritual ecological landscape in Australia and internationally.

In understanding the impact of EarthSong among participants, two predominant groups have emerged:

1. The first is rooted in a religious tradition, re-contextualising their formation as Christians, an ‘ecclesial’ group offering education, community and new language for spirituality, re-articulating their tradition and discovering the “roots that hold” (MacFague 2013: xii);

2. A second group is constituted by those for whom the new awareness arises independently and distinctly from any religious tradition and who wish to immerse themselves in the principles of cosmogenesis.

Both groups seek to celebrate their place and responsibilities in the more-than-human world by attending EarthSong's programs, rituals and taking practical action in light of the current ecological crisis.

Earth Praxis

The EarthSong coordinators describe the characteristics of their praxis as an intention to be "Conduits for Earth" through attentiveness to the patterns of Earth's cyclical unfolding of creativity, death and re-birth, in practical ways. They model the processes of evolution which Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme (2013: 50) describe as moving forward with *transitions*, "such as the movement from single-celled organisms to plants and animals, that sweep through the evolutionary unfolding of the universe, the Earth and humanity. All such transitions come at times of crisis, they involve tremendous cost, and they result in new forms of creativity." In managing decision-making processes in their own transitions, EarthSong seeks ever-deeper connections and reciprocity with stakeholders through reflection, wide consultation, and moving with dynamic changes that are life-giving to all. In evaluating their programs, old ways die and new ways continually emerge to address the movement of the thinking of their participants and their response to the global ecological crisis.

In seeking to be "Conduits for Earth" EarthSong's collaborative style demonstrates an alternative to old, hierarchical frameworks critiqued in contemporary eco-feminism and eco-theology. As Anne Elvey (2008: 53) explains, "Women, bodies and Earth have each been treated as the 'other' within a framework of hierarchical dualism which celebrates the mastery of a particular, limited kind of ra-

tionality” characterised by radical exclusion, homogenisation and stereotyping. EarthSong’s praxis challenges the old dualisms by sitting openly amidst the variety of world-views of their Council and participants, allowing this to be the very way they operate as an organisation: “Somehow the feminine spirit is operating in EarthSong. Now is that because we’re women or is it because this is the way? It’s not a hierarchy. It’s a very cooperative way. We do a lot of thinking, a lot of sifting... we very rarely do anything without that.” (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

EarthSong provides a number of programs such as film circles, reading circles, retreats and ‘sabbath days’, keynote presentations, workshops for students and teachers, a ritual group for women, a library and a journal. All EarthSong programs face a rigorous annual review to discern evolutionary movement and areas for growth. In Anne’s words “We’ve always had trouble with strategic planning because the Earth doesn’t strategically plan...” (2014: December 16) and yet EarthSong’s activity, governance, programs and influence continue to thrive through careful planning which is open to innovation. This is evident in their shift in involvement with religious in the early years. A group called RADLEEN (Radical Living in the Ecozoic Era Network), one of the EarthSong programs in 2004, was restricted to religious: “Every meeting we would have a discussion about ‘why are we meeting by ourselves?’ until we decided that we were going round in circles and there was no point in really going much further. So we finished that off.” The women’s ritual group will face the same evolutionary cycle. “There’ll have to be a conversation soon to say ‘Is this what we want to do? Do we want to do something differently?’ How do you *do* ritual? How does nature do spring? It goes on for a long time and it only happens once a year...” (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

Council meetings also reflect this openness to evolutionary processes in their praxis: “...with the Council, the reflective time we have at the beginning of each meeting is an opportunity to deepen connection and understanding and respond to how we’re feeling about things.” (Long 2014: 16 December). Council members enjoy this creative, reflective approach to governance: “to review the

year, we took one of the EarthSong journals, selected a picture and reflected on how that picture had reminded us of what we'd done that year. Anne has really kept that approach going.” (Power 2014: 18 December).

Background

EarthSong emerged out of a desire, in and around Melbourne, for religious congregations to work together towards bringing about a new consciousness in light of their understanding of the new Universe story, the scientific understanding of the origins, the nature and evolutionary emergence of all things in the Universe. In the early 2000s, some congregations began exploring it with their own communities, in reading circles or interest groups. For example, the Christian Brothers had “Walk the Land”, the Presentation Sisters had the “Universe Group”, and the Brigidine Sisters had a “Cosmology Group”, each operating independently but sharing the same aims. Between February and April of 2003, Anne Boyd developed the concept of EarthSong, an inter-congregational approach to this need. In a meeting with the Congregational Leadership of Religious Congregations of Victoria (CLRCV) she raised her desire to amalgamate the existing independent groups and openly invited members of all congregations to unite in this new work. (EarthSong Handbook 2014: 3).

In an initial trial period of July 2003 - December 2004, Anne Boyd had secured the support of leaders of the Brigidine Sisters (Victorian Province), Christian Brothers (St Patrick's Province), Faithful Companions of Jesus, Loreto Sisters, Mercy Sisters (Ballarat East) and Presentation Sisters (Victoria), who united to establish EarthSong as co-sponsors. The Sisters of Mercy (Melbourne) became additional co-sponsors in 2005 along with the Passionist Congregations in 2009. Over this time, EarthSong's momentum grew as the Chapter documents and directional statements of the congregations began to encourage their members to study the new Universe story “as a journey into the sacred” (EarthSong Handbook 2014: 1). Therese Power, leader of the Ballarat Sisters of Mercy at the

time of EarthSong's establishment, recalled that all the leaders felt there was a "bigger story than our congregation's story or our church story" and felt compelled to collaborate with other congregations because they "couldn't do it individually". (2014: 18 December).

Today, the congregations sponsoring the EarthSong project are involved in its governing Council, and "publicly align their name with EarthSong's vision, goals and programs" (EarthSong Handbook, 2014: 3). There is a strong sense of consensus and collaboration among religious congregations for this work: "It's a very good example of a collaborative group with the same aim, same values, same aspirations, coming together for a united purpose, totally funded by those congregations..." but the congregations, from the beginning, predicted the official church leaders would oppose it's aims: "The church didn't give us any support - I don't know that there was even much approach - but we knew that they wouldn't." (Power 2014: 18 December).

Co-coordinating Team

Anne Boyd is one of a small group of Earth literacy pioneers who brought a new cosmological awareness to religious congregations in Australia in the late 1990s. Seeking new opportunities after a long career in education and her role as Family Resource Coordinator in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Anne studied at ecological centres in Ireland and the United States before returning to Melbourne and initiating conversations around the EarthSong concept. In particular, she notes the influence of Miriam MacGillis whose visit to Australia and New Zealand in 1999 stirred a growing awareness in the Brigidine Sisters.

Pat Long (who at that time was also a Brigidine Sister), as well as Carmel Cramer, a Sister of St Joseph, had both spent extended periods studying at MacGillis's centre for Earth literacy, Genesis Farm, in New Jersey. Established by the Dominican Sisters in 1980, Genesis Farm provides inte-

grated experiences of living the new cosmology as part of the Earth community, (such as sustainable building practices, community supported gardens, and wetlands), integrated with communal living, ecological spirituality and ritual. Pat describes the Genesis Farm influence: “There were these rich experiences ... the *land* is so powerful, and the ceremonies we had on the land... The whole thing was just so nourishing.” (Long 2014: 16 December).

As a result of these experiences, leaders of EarthSong have experienced a re-articulation and re-contextualisation, even a complete “shedding” of their religious formation in light of their new cosmological awareness. Pat Long confirmed this shift: “I’d read Thomas Berry’s *Dream of the Earth*, which was required before my time at Genesis Farm, and I was drawn into it. There was something just peeling away and I was letting it fall down.” (Long 2014: 16 December). These experiences of MacGillis’s programs forced them to shift their understanding of the value of any theology or religiosity coming out of an “old” cosmological model: “What I did with the theology was try to critique it against how I was seeing things in terms of the new cosmology and naming the assumptions that were coming out of the theology I was reading.” (Long 2014: 16 December). This type of critique and an integrated new cosmology is evident in the programs of EarthSong today.

MacGillis’s visit to Australia in 1999 provided the grounds for the EarthSong concept to flourish, driven initially by Anne Boyd, Pat Long, Carmel Cramer, and Trevor Parton, a Christian Brother and science educator who had studied at Sophia Centre, Notre Dame University in San Francisco, California. While Trevor, with the Christian Brothers, had concurrently established a site (the Centre for Ecology and Spirituality at Glenburn in the Yarra Valley), Anne Boyd’s aims were different. She recognised that EarthSong’s scope needed to somehow relate to the Brigidine Sisters’ justice orientation in order to secure their support and financial assistance. She was also aware that it needed to include more than one congregation, and that since Glenburn was already established and the

Brigidines did not have a suitable property, EarthSong had to be a so-called “on the road show” (Boyd 2014: 16 December).

Another independent project was underway in Victoria at that time involving Pat Long, whose ongoing engagement over several years at Genesis Farm (including an internship) led her to establish another site-based centre of Earth literacy in the same spirit, together with Jan Morgan, at Dixon’s Creek, known as *Earth Dreaming*. This centre was privately funded and was not sponsored by religious or church groups. It differed in its ideology from the Glenburn centre, “modelled on Genesis Farm, on Thomas Berry’s vision but coming to birth in the uniqueness of the Australian context”. (Morgan 2013). *Earth Dreaming* had a radical approach to sustainability education and aimed “to provide a more than theoretical component”. (Morgan 2013: 3). In particular, it endeavoured to integrate a more “feminine” consciousness into their practices: “We’d had quite a different experience ... Trevor’s foundation came from study in a university setting whereas ours at Genesis Farm had been more an experience of trying to integrate the academic with the lived experience... These were strong reasons why we wanted to go our own way.” (Long 2014: 16 Dec). However, *Earth Dreaming* was a short-lived venture, due to shifting commitments of individuals and financial restraints, considerations which highlight the advantages of inter-congregational co-sponsorship. Approached by Anne Boyd, Pat Long eventually became an integral part of the coordinating and presenting team of EarthSong where her programs reflect some of the intended aims of *Earth Dreaming*.

EarthSong was launched on the banks of Melbourne’s Maribyrnong river on 27th July, 2003. After simple beginnings with Anne Boyd as the sole full-time educator, working from her South Clayton home (in Melbourne’s East), the project’s reputation quickly spread among religious congregations within Australia and New Zealand. The project inaugurated a journal, *EarthSong*, in 2004, and be-

came an incorporated association in 2005 with offices in the Treacy Centre, Parkville (its current home, in inner Melbourne).

Despite this progress, EarthSong's work has been slow and arduous as the project introduced a paradigm shift for those within a tightly-structured tradition. For many of their participants (both individuals and congregations), what EarthSong offers is new, challenging material, which takes considerable time for most to grasp, if they stay with it at all. As Anne stated: "Some of the co-sponsors have a limited idea as to what it's about. It's the leadership teams who make decisions to be generous (with financial contributions) because their documents are increasingly reflecting a commitment to this ministry." (Boyd 2014: 16 December). This commitment is not necessarily filtered down to other members of the congregations. EarthSong leaders therefore confront significant challenges in developing a new consciousness among religious congregations.

Structure and Governance

EarthSong is governed by a structure in keeping with a Company Limited by Guarantee. It has a Council (which oversees all the legal requirements and ensures the EarthSong objectives are being carried out), a coordinating group (who oversee the programs, presenters and the journal) and a presenters group. The coordinating group and presenters group are the highly-respected 'public face' of EarthSong. The Chairperson's report states: "Both groups of people inspire many as they present the vision in ever new and engaging ways...the creators of extensive programs articulating vision, hope and challenge with an enthusiasm that seems to be tireless..." (EarthSong 2014: 1).

Programs

The EarthSong Handbook (2014: 2) states their goals. They aim to:

- a) Offer programs in Earth literacy and Earth ethics in order to promote a more harmonious earth-human relationship;
- b) Present a world-view that is consonant with current scientific understandings of the nature of the universe and the place of the human in it;
- c) Develop a spirituality that honours and celebrates the sacredness of all creation;
- d) Promote a new ethical structure that recognises and protects the integrity of all life forms on planet Earth.

Two programs in particular, the annual symposium and the ritual group for women, demonstrate the diverse experiences EarthSong offers and the various world views of the participants.

Annual Symposium

Because of the public standing and authority of their invited keynote presenters in fields such as geology, biology and other Earth Sciences as well as music and art, the two-day annual symposiums attract wide and varied participants. For many who come, it is a rare opportunity to engage in their field of work or study combined with experiences of ritual to celebrate their place and responsibilities in the community of life. EarthSong's 10th anniversary celebration included a "Council of All Beings" ritual and at each of the symposiums and other programs there is some form of ritual to initiate and close proceedings. A participant commented:

"It's been amazing with the symposiums. They looked at volcanic plains, waterways, Bass Strait... They connect with a lot of people - Conservationists, scientists, Earth Care people - not just Catholic but anybody... I think there'd be some coming from a spiritual angle but there'd be many more from universities, academics." (Power 2014: 18 December).

The EarthSong symposiums, usually attended by those with a particular expertise as well as those interested in learning from the group, are a rare opportunity for this community to experience con-

templative, holistic reflection on the purpose of their work. The impassioned response of participants indicates a deep yearning for ritual.

Women's Ritual Group

As part of a wide-reaching evaluative process and strategic planning meeting in 2014, the EarthSong Council confirmed their strengths: "The thing that was common to all conversations was that EarthSong is unique because we do spirituality, and we say, openly, we will talk about spirituality and that's what people want to hear. But I don't *teach* spirituality. It must be *experienced*." (Boyd 2014: 15 December). So spirituality and ritual, seeking a "movement of the heart", became part of EarthSong's directional statements in 2014: "We will be seen to have spirituality as a strong core element; to be facilitating regular rituals in the context of the Universe Story and the three principles of cosmogenesis." (EarthSong 2014: 2).

As a trial, a group of around 10 women were invited to meet once a month, in one of the properties of the co-sponsors, to experiment with ritual facilitator Margie Abbott. Pat Long describes the purpose of the group as "an attempt to try to find a meaningful way to celebrate, honour, reflect." (2014: 16 December). The women are diverse in age and lifestyle, there are several religious sisters as well as others of a religious and non-religious background. Each of the invited participants were identified as particularly experienced in or inclined towards exploring ritual based on ecological spirituality.

To prepare for these rituals, the women are invited to reflect contemplatively on their experience and sometimes a theme, such as "Summer". Each brings along a form of expression of their contemplation, such as artwork, music, poetry, a plant cutting, soil, or a personal object. A focus is prepared in the centre of a circle, such as a mandala of leaves or a piece of fabric representing "Earth". Once gathered, the women informally share their insights and experiences of the previous weeks

represented symbolically in the object. The facilitator then spontaneously designs a ritual with a structure which incorporates each of the items brought by the participants. Normally the flow of the ritual is punctuated by music, reading, movement, sharing of an insight, remembrance, voicing lament, and giving thanks. The language of these rituals is inclusive, non-hierarchical, related to cosmic or Earth-processes (such as “mystery”, “spirit”, “presence”, “movement”, “heart”, “whole”, “source”, “centre” and “energy”) as distinct from the language associated with Christian ritual (such as “prayer”, “God”, “Lord”, “almighty”).

An important element of the ritual is a shared lunch to conclude the gathering. The food brought by each participant is also an expression of their lifestyle and values; it is celebrated with care and pride, with seasonal, usually home-grown, whole ingredients. A poem, insight or reflection on the food’s origins and place at the gathering is informally shared by the women. The informed conversation over lunch typically includes current events in politics, renewable energy and climate change, developments in ecological spirituality, local community events, seasonal changes occurring in their gardens, recent adventures in camping or bushwalking, their advocacy work and influence in schools, religious communities or parishes. For some of the women of religious background, the group is a space where they may freely share genuine ideas considered subversive in the communities from which they come.

Program Participants

Since EarthSong’s beginnings the intended participants in their programs has shifted markedly. Initially the intention was to educate the members of the sponsoring groups in order that it would flow on into their schools. The current direction is to welcome all people who are seeking deeper understanding in a new context. The image of EarthSong as a Catholic organisation has, according to Pat Long “put people off” in the past (2014: December 16). More recently, EarthSong has attracted

those from a completely secular world view, sometimes with a scientific background, who have “come to have a spiritual appreciation of Earth and life” (Bollhorn 2015: March 20).

The majority of those attending programs are from a church background (Catholic or Uniting).

Most of them like to get to a point of talking about ‘Who is God?’ They see EarthSong as a safe place to explore this freely. We don’t mention “God” but those who attend very quickly get to that place. Then they also want to use other words, they’re searching for a vocabulary that goes beyond that. We just hope that word (“God”) doesn’t come in too soon before there’s a context in which to explore it. It’s all a journey into mystery. (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

When asked what her hopes are for those religious who participate, Anne responded:

...that they will be true to their calling... we (vowed religious) are not supposed to be sitting here in the milieu of ordinary things. We’re supposed to be on the edge saying ‘what is the work that is not being done?’ Well, *this* is the work that’s not being done. (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

EarthSong belongs to an extensive network of groups doing similar work, many without a religious background. One such network in Victoria was “Green Lights”, which connected Environment Victoria, Friends of the Earth, the Catholic Education Office Melbourne, EarthSong and others. What emerged was the unique role of EarthSong to be able to provide a “spiritual” focus for the work of other, secular, organisations. This posed a challenge for the ways in which EarthSong would come to express ideas in new, non-religious, language:

They were saying they wanted a spirituality to underpin it, they want a “faithless” spirituality and this is what I’m always trying to find... What are the words? If you come out of a tradition you’ve got context in a way... but if you don’t come out of that and if you’re working in

a secular environment it's very hard. They don't use the word spirituality but they want something heart-centred for the work that they do... (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

As one participant commented, this authentic exploration of a “faithless” spirituality led by respected ‘elders’ drew her into the EarthSong programs:

Having been familiar with Thomas Berry and the Universe Story prior to joining EarthSong, I felt very at home and grateful for this group's existence. After meeting Anne and Pat and becoming familiar with EarthSong's work, I soon began to look to Anne and Pat as my foremost respected elders with admiration for their work and deep understanding of an Eco-spiritual love and appreciation for life. Henceforth my Earth-based spirituality has deepened (Bollhorn 2015: 20 March).

Two predominant groups can be identified amongst those who attend EarthSong programs. Anne Boyd describes the first group as:

People who are of a tradition but are not bound by it. They are setting themselves free of it. They still want to maintain ways of valuing it but to re-articulate that. They are all practicing a lifestyle that would nurture this way (they'd be bike-riders, by choice they'd be simple-livers). They'd be fairly well educated, they've kept reading, they reflect, they like to talk with others and listen to others, they're into a praxis. They take in what others say, reflect on it and then contribute from their own wisdom (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

One participant, from a Catholic background, now aged in his 80s, reported “no direct involvement” in church groups but described his strong engagement with EarthSong programs and spirituality. When asked if his understanding of faith, spirituality or religion had changed as a result of any insight from EarthSong programs, he replied:

Yes... by deepening my understanding and insights through personal exchanges and exposure to relevant literature at EarthSong retreats, workshops and the reading circle. I felt that the mission of EarthSong and what it was offering resonated strongly with my search for

meaning, relevance and direction. It assisted me to grow and feel more at ease with my spirituality (Anonymous participant 2015: 20 March).

Among the participants are a younger group who might attend a one-off program but are unable to attend regularly:

They're ripe to help their kids with the story. They'll have their kids out camping and growing food and understanding the impact of everything. They're out enjoying the beauty of nature. If they do come again it's like an injection and off they go again... (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

The second group may be characterised as vowed religious who are experiencing a “restlessness with the tradition”, conscious that their congregations are dying out:

They realise that that's happening and ask themselves, ‘So what will be a legacy?’ For these ones who come, the legacy will be that we leave the Earth as well as we can. They're yearning for a way of coming together as community, a way of bringing belief systems to a safe place to be shared but not in the traditional way, and you know, our belief systems are all evolving too... (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

By working with these two groups, EarthSong addresses the opening that occurs when “worlds” overlap, when old life narratives are no longer adequate in the context of a new cosmology. When participants encounter a new reading of reality which contradicts the old, their self-assumptions are questioned and begin to fall away. EarthSong therefore engages participants in the practice of what Sallie McFague (2013) calls “Wild Space”, which occurs when individuals reach insights that do not conventionally fit within their own existing cultures. Nurturing this “Wild Space” is necessary in EarthSong's aims for transition to a new consciousness. Their approach in this task is guided by the patterns observable in the natural world: at times slow and careful emergence, at times challenging and abrupt, but ever nurturing of the creative act of movement between the two stories.

Responding to Challenges

Archdiocesan Inquiry

Strained relationships between EarthSong and the Archdiocese of Melbourne, caused by misinformation and assumptions that EarthSong programs were heretical, necessitated caution about efforts to get involved with parishes, schools and Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) staff. By contrast, the congregational co-sponsors have given their full support. A “unified goal” with “no dissenting” was unusual for an inter-congregational group at that time (Power 2014: 18 December). When it became clear that the EarthSong programs were not well supported by the Archdiocese, EarthSong was encouraged to take them to country dioceses, particularly by the Ballarat Sisters of Mercy who believed strongly in EarthSong’s work: “It’s always continued to inspire me. I never got tired of it when we were battling on to try and see our way clear...” (Power 2014: 18 December). The movement between the “two stories”, for Christians discovering the Universe story for the first time, was the basis of the controversy, the challenges which EarthSong constantly found ways to navigate.

Whilst offering programs in Shepparton, in rural Victoria, in 2006, EarthSong first encountered opposition from a vocal conservative minority whose complaints were eventually taken to the Archbishop of Melbourne. The accusation was that EarthSong was “New Age” and “Anti-Catholic” at a time when this was condemned in a 2003 Pontifical document *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian reflection on the “New Age”*. The Archdiocese launched a secret inquiry into both EarthSong and the Centre for Ecology and Spirituality, finding from their websites that the programs “were not sufficiently based in scripture”. Correspondence ensued between the two parties. In one letter, EarthSong and the Centre for Ecology and Spirituality were prohibited from sending any material to Catholic parishes or Catholic organisations. By 2008, EarthSong Council had

developed a Charter which was an attempt to create documentation acceptable enough to keep the group alive. It included the line “...commitment to discipleship of Jesus”, and quotes from the US Bishops Conference and Pope John Paul II. According to Anne Boyd, “...with some reluctance the Archdiocese accepted this as our statement of being within the teachings of the Catholic Church.” (2014: 16 December).

Despite the Archdiocesan suspicion, EarthSong continued to find ways to move on. Regarding the Archdiocese’s attitude to EarthSong programs, Pat Long reveals the sensitivities: “I don’t want to spend any energy on it. I know in Anne’s position she needs to navigate those things. And all the work she’s done with Religious Orders, the province days, schools, I know she’s sensitive in the way she does things.” (2014: 16 December). Anne Boyd recalls the precarious nature of invitations she had received to work with the CEOM that were suddenly withdrawn after the guest lists were “vetted” without explanation at short notice, and then other times they “subtly got in”. For example, “Someone asked us to do a workshop for the Catholic Education Office Sustainable Schools awards at the Zoo. Pat and I went over and did the workshop, so a workshop for that large gathering mustn’t have been vetted.” (Boyd 2014: 15 December). Throughout all of these challenges, Anne recognises it was the “feminine” spirit of EarthSong that characterised their non-violent, collaborative, informed, response.

Part of the constant challenge for EarthSong is creatively confronting an anthropocentric model of justice, engaging participants in practical ways that demonstrate their responsibilities as part of a community of life. However, these anthropocentric attitudes are prevalent in the culture of church-run institutions: “Any human issue, like trafficking, any social justice issue is so much easier for people to get a hold of, feel passionate about, adopt and away they go. This is so much bigger” (P Long 2014: 16 December). For those who understand the “new story” of the Universe, an all-encompassing worldview of the human in the context of the fragile, more-than-human world is pos-

sible, but this work is difficult and slow in a Christian framework: “If the majority of people who come to us are from a strongly religious Christian background, then opening up a new perspective requires deep sensitivity.” (Long 2014: 16 December).

Programs for Educators

An important concern for EarthSong has been their work with teachers, to share the ‘new story’ with the next generation, challenging the perpetuation of the old, damaging paradigms in education. However, Religious Education curriculum and teacher training in the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne have not yet begun to grapple with the implications for religious understanding in an era in which we seek to understand the journey of the Universe and the place of the human in it. The curriculum follows a catechetical model, promoting a narrow orthodoxy using a prescribed text book, *To Know Worship and Love*, characterised by dualistic, anthropocentric, masculine images of God. EarthSong’s work with teachers has begun to address the necessary shift in school culture: “If the teachers don’t know the story, how can they teach it?” This also has implications for policies in Catholic schools in which...sustainability is often seen as a ‘value’, put right at the end, because it’s all caught up in the old cosmology, an old system, the faith traditions, all of them support the old cosmology.” (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

Engaging within the Catholic education system has been characterised by the usual challenges faced by EarthSong in the Archdiocese of Melbourne: “We used to run a three-day program called *New Heart: New Mind* which was a residential program for teachers and for the first few years we went really well, then it became increasingly difficult...” (A Boyd 2014: 15 December). One of the EarthSong Council members, a former director of Catholic Education, commented: “It really should be in the schools. We’ve tried... but we couldn’t get anyone in the Catholic Education Office (Melbourne) to take it up. It wasn’t that we didn’t know anyone there...” (Power 2014: 18 December). Despite these challenges, EarthSong programs are currently conducted within a small number of primary and secondary schools who invite them to work with staff and students on understanding

the Universe story and adapting their practices accordingly, some for extended periods over several years. This work seeks to expand the current priority of sustainability awareness in schools towards an understanding of the Universe story as a “journey into the sacred” for all learners in school communities.

An “Ecclesial” movement?

Stemming from within the Christian tradition, as a collaborative effort of 6 religious congregations, EarthSong’s efforts and creativity are similar to other fringe “ecclesial” movements in the history of the Christian church. The work of Alison Forrestal (2008) explores the early modern period as a time of unexpected creativity. By shifting the focus away from the story of the popes, bishops and the front-line “Reformers” and unearthing the story of those on the non-institutional, liminal margins of the church, Forrestal reveals the threads of reform already emerging and being embraced amongst lay and monastic Christian communities of the 16th Century. Furthermore, she argues, when Protestant Reformers applied the dualistic labels of “true” and “reformed” to the Christian churches, the Catholic church became belligerent and defensive, anxious and determined to assert authority, which may have undone some of the organically evolving reform movements already underway. Forrestal describes these movements or confraternities (including the Meaux circle, the Oratory of Divine Love, The Barnabites) as driving innovations in expressions of piety, charity and spirituality in men, women and married couples, seeking to imitate Christ in community without vows and without awaiting instruction or approval from the institutional church.

EarthSong’s place on the creative margins of the Christian community is reminiscent of those historic movements. When asked whether EarthSong could be described as “ecclesial”, Anne challenged the current mainstream notion of “church” to describe the community arising from EarthSong and the intended movement to the future beyond the involvement of religious congregations:

When you say “church” people start complaining about bishops. Well, really, that’s not church, that’s not church at all. Religious Orders were always “churches” as in communities of action, faith and mission. And that’s where I think now new ‘churches’ will emerge. Whatever the word ‘church’ means, community, shared faith, (not faith in God but faith in in the sense of shared dream), we’ve got to get away from religious, because as time goes on they will be a less powerful influence.” (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

From time to time, EarthSong participants have independently asked themselves whether they are “Post-Christian”. For the coordinators of EarthSong, such a question seems redundant because although they are supported by religious congregations and come from the context of a tradition, the need for EarthSong’s work arose without any special relation to Christianity. EarthSong’s work could be more closely defined as part of the development of a new consciousness which Joanna Macy (1998) and David Korten (2006) called the “Great Turning” and Paul Raskin (2005) called the “Great Transition”, a shift from the “master narrative” of domination evident in the hierarchical structure of Western societies for thousands of years, especially since the 16th Century. Such a pattern has also characterised the eco-feminist and neo-pagan movements of the 21st Century which, according to Rosemary Radford Ruether (2008: 42), calls for “a double-conversion or transformation into egalitarian societies which recognise the fullness of humanity of each human person and a major restructuring of the relations of human groups to each other, together with a basic restructuring of the relations between human and non-human.”

EarthSong nurtures a new consciousness that is an Earth-centred, non-dualist, world view which stands in contrast to what most participants have experienced in their Christian upbringing and religious formation. Participants are invited to bring together what they might typically separate (male/female, mind/body, heaven/Earth, human/nature, feeling/thinking, light/dark, one/many, transcendence/immanence) in an interactive, non-hierarchical, relationality. As one who describes these

conversations or “category shifts” as “confusing” and “rugged terrain”, Jan Morgan (2013: 7) writes: “Letting go of long held assumptions proved uncomfortable and challenging. Yet I can only report that the journey became one of fresh encounter, a discovery of the utterly irreplaceable gift of a still living tradition.”

EarthSong’s distinctiveness lies in its primary goal of education around the new cosmology, without the need to work within a traditional Christian framework coming from an “old” cosmology. It is a group devoted to re-examination and re-articulation of biblical and theological discourse with a view to allowing excluded, marginalised and oppressed perspectives to emerge. Part of this sometimes includes exploring the layers of the word “Christ”, emerging from reflections on his personhood and significance through the “politics and power play” that are now beginning to shift as a result of post-modern debate (Isherwood 2008: 201). “We need a whole new Christology, to separate Jesus of Nazareth with the deepest insight and intimacy of the source of being from whatever people want to name “Christ” (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

When asked whether EarthSong could be characterised as an “ecclesial” group, one participant, a former leader of a religious institute, responded:

Yes, I’d see it as ecclesial. If the church was defining it they mightn’t own it as ecclesial.

But I think it is because it’s so much part of my prayer life and I belong to a church where that prayer life originated and was hopefully nourished. But this nourishes me more than a lot of the church prayer life would. So it’s got to be an arm of it somewhere. If church means ‘Namaste’ and ‘the mystery we call God’, it’s got to be part of all of that. (Power 2014: 18 December).

EarthSong participants share a deep grappling, deep conflicts between competing ways of thinking as their consciousness changes, or as Elizabeth Stuart (2008) describes, as meta-narratives of the

past break down and competing multiple narratives emerge. EarthSong's work in reinterpreting or rejecting language that perpetuates the old delusion of separation and encouraging practical engagement in the lifestyle of religious has been remarkable, considering the conservative climate of Melbourne. Anne Boyd draws heavily from the tradition itself for support in this: "We have forgotten it's *in* the tradition, that the more than human world is revelatory it's *in* our tradition. When I work with Religious Orders I just bring that out all the time..." (Boyd 2014: 15 December). She describes the way EarthSong can find a subtle balance between multiple narratives:

There's no value in being scandalous about any of this or saying things in the wrong place. That's hard because if you're a true prophet you don't not say things, you get out there and say the lot and they put you at the bottom of the well and they leave you there. I'm not as good as that. (Boyd 2014: 15 December).

Has EarthSong been successful?

In the 2014 Chairperson's Report for the Annual General Meeting, Anne Ryan describes the difficulties of evaluating a project like EarthSong: "It can be difficult to accurately evaluate the progress of a project which aims to find new ways of articulating this ancient wisdom - how do we know if we really are creating a difference; if the message is finding a vibrant home in many more lives and actions?"

For the coordinators, their own perceived success lies in anecdotal feedback about EarthSong slowly building relationships of trust, being a "safe place" for small groups to deepen their consciousness:

I'm getting a sense now, with the reading circle, the group that's formed there who've been meeting over the last 4 or 5 years, that has become very significant for those people. It's only a handful of people. Nonetheless, they do say things regularly about it, 'this is the only place where I can come and talk about things

that I really care about'. To me, that would be a sign of success." (Long 2014: 16 December).

These communities of trust, built among people who are usually aged 50 years or over, who have time to participate, are challenged to take action on a practical level. As a result of EarthSong programs, one participant's comments express the outcomes for many:

I have taken numerous small steps to reduce our family's consumption patterns, for example we downsized our motor vehicle; water – power – gas usage; greater reliance on public transport; taking holidays closer to home... I feel encouraged and empowered to share the message and engage with others. (Anonymous participant 2015: 20 March).

This practical action is the mark of "success" for Pat: "If it doesn't result in the kind of action that's leading somewhere and it's less harmful than the common unconscious practice, then is it really successful?" (Long 2014: 16 December). They also serve as a means of supportive companionship for people in transition who are likely to spread new ideas: "If you change your own heart and mind and you find others whose hearts and minds are on the same journey and you connect with them, then there's little fairy rings growing all around the planet and that *will* have its effect." (Boyd 2014:15 December).

It is evident that the work in developing a spirituality which Miriam MacGillis (2013: 74) describes as "reclaiming our deeper knowing that we are part of the oneness of creation" has been successful through EarthSong programs. Therese Power describes the typical impact of EarthSong for their religious participants:

I find it is my way of prayer, and it never has ceased to be that. I would thank God lots of times that I've been open to this cosmic idea. I could never go back to how I prayed before. I like to pray somewhere I can see trees and sky and birds and just sit in the

wonder of it. I had it in my bones somewhere. The natural world was part of me, but I hadn't got to this stage of praying. We were trained to Ignatian prayer and all different ways of prayer but that's not the way I pray. It's more of a contemplative, just 'being with' creation. And I think living in the present moment is also part of that. (2014: 18 December).

The slow movement between "being open to a cosmic idea" and complete awareness of an integrated cosmic spirituality of inter-relatedness is what EarthSong strives to nurture: "That small work of building the influence of Earth connections is something that I think is worth continuing because it's one sign that it is actually having an impact." (Long 2014: 16 December). Anne Boyd also recognises the value of this "small work": "That's the gift of EarthSong, we're a small little organisation who are hardly doing a scrap to change the world, but we're doing a scrap." (2014: 15 December).

Future

While the coordinators acknowledge that EarthSong, too, is part of a cycle of creativity, death and re-birth, there are three possible directions they see for the future. The first is a move into tertiary education. Anne Boyd in particular expresses this development: "There's something about working with students who want to go somewhere with their learning... That's the dream." (2014: 15 December). Another is finding a way to move beyond the religious congregations currently holding positions on the EarthSong Council: "We're working on creating the 'Friends of EarthSong'. This will be another group whom we hope will participate in creating the future for EarthSong." (Boyd 2014: 15 December). Pat Long describes her hopes for the changing face of EarthSong:

When I started in the reading circle, they were pretty well all from Religious Orders and now there's only one from a Religious Order and that's a sign of hope for me. They are people who are searching who don't have a really strong formation, they are open. Most of them have let go of the whole

church thing and yet they've had some connection somewhere with a Christian background. So maybe there's some potential for engaging people who are at that stage... perhaps they will be the ones who will be involved in the future (2014: 16 December).

A third possibility is to develop EarthSong as a site-based project:

If EarthSong had a place and a base where people could come and do things then that would create a whole different scenario because people are coming in at that practical level and from there we can actually lead people into a sense of connection and the sacredness of all. Does the nature of the entry point matter? (Long 2014: 16 December).

In spite of the ceaseless struggle and conflict that defines their work in leading the human transition to a new consciousness and preserving the natural world as primary revelation, EarthSong remains resilient and ready to take their work well into the future.

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Endnotes

¹ The new scientific cosmological understanding of the origins, the nature and evolutionary emergence of all things in the universe, including earth and humanity.

² Interview material cited in this paper has been used with full permission of the EarthSong coordinating team, their participants and co-facilitators named herein.