

## **Environmental Education Rooted in Spirituality**

Environmental education is a process of becoming aware of the world around us; its beauty, its generous life-giving and life-sustaining abilities, its complexities and its restrictions and limitation. It is also becoming aware of our human impact and the creativity and ingenuity we will need to develop so as to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

This morning I am going to share with you how we Sisters of St. Martha - an order of religious women in the Catholic Church - began our journey toward ever increasing ecological awareness and responsibility.

We who are educators know that before something new can be heard there has to be an openness, a readiness to hear. The renewal in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960's called Vatican II set the stage for our readiness. This Council called religious women to two things: 1. Return to the spirit of their founders, 2. Modernize. We took this seriously and began a time of soul searching which resulted in dramatic changes in our structures, dress, ministry and identity. Originally founded in 1900 to do the domestic work at St. F.X. University we had quickly branched out to respond to other unmet needs mainly in the areas of health care, education, social work, and spirituality.

In the late 70's one of our Sisters, Sister Genevieve McArthur, read a paper by Father Thomas Berry, a Cultural Anthropologist, on the Universe Story. His insight is that the evolution of the Universe newly discovered and documented by science is also a sacred story, a revelation of the Creator of the Universe. He sees this revelation and the crisis of Earth's decline as an invitation to all humans to re-examine our place and role in creation. He calls this moving to the "Eozoic Age". We Marthas sensed the truth in that and began a community wide study in the late 90's called, "Marthas, One With the Universe, Responding to Critical Needs". The study concluded with regional gatherings led by Sister Miriam Therese McGillis, a Dominican Sister from New Jersey.

That was our introduction to the Universe Story and also our introduction to the plight of Planet Earth. It was a big story, 13.7 billion years worth ! And the issues raised were overwhelming, especially as our members were aging and our numbers were getting smaller. What were we supposed to do with all this new information? Much of it we couldn't take in, but the awareness that dawned was our oneness with all creation. The seed had been planted!

Where to begin? Being practical women, the decision was made to have an environmental assessment done on our land and buildings on the Bethany Grounds. That was in 2001. The completed study was then presented to the whole congregation at an Assembly in 2002. Part of the preamble read, "We became ever more aware of their( buildings and land) tremendous potential for becoming a Word of God speaking healing, harmony, sacredness and connection to the earth. Their sustainability and transformation, according to suggestions in the environmental report, can be shared with the residents of the area, and with visitors from far and wide."

This spells out our motivation for working toward environmental sustainability.

"becoming a Word of God speaking healing, harmony, sacredness and connection to the earth."

The presenters then concretely linked the known past with the evolving future. They took each of our traditional ministries and showed how these contribute to the new work.

- ✠ Our healing ministry - to model the healing of the earth and all forms of life sustained by it, and to foster individual, family and community health and wellness through promoting body-mind-spirit unity and sacredness.
- ✠ Our educational ministry- to model and to teach the wider community their connection to the natural world and the use of ecologically sound principles for using land, water, natural and human resources.
- ✠ Our homemaking ministry - to be "good stewards of all creation," caring for people, land and buildings with minimal waste or toxic substances, making our indoors "a perfect

replica of that we expect the world to become”

- ✠ Our social work ministry - to enhance quality of life and engage groups and individuals to collaborate with us in managing the natural resources of the earth, healing and being healed by them, re-creating a healthy setting for human community.
- ✠ Our ministry of spiritual development - to model a ministry of presence; our spirituality enables us to become “a spoken word, a sacrament of healing to a wounded earth in which the Congregation is immersed;” and our witness to the rhythms of nature through our reverence for and seasonal celebration of energy, light, water and all living things.

(Congregational Discernment Re Environmental Resource Assessment by Sister Mary Eileen McEachern)

The Environmental Resource Assessment was accepted by the Sisters and a committee was formed to implement this report. We hired a consultant and began an educational process about the environment that we rooted in our spirituality. Foundational to our work was the awareness that interior change was even more essential than exterior change if we were to be successful in moving toward sustainability. Our education needed to address not only how to do things but also why it is important to make the changes.

The committee established five strategic directions that reflect the spiritual and practical nature of our work. They are:

**Slide Celebrating and Deepening the Consciousness of our Connectedness:**

**Enhancing the Contemplative Dimension of life**

Some of the things we have done to make this real are:

Created more contemplative places and sacred spaces

**Slide** Built a Contemplative Trail through our woods, fields, and back to the lake. (Picture)

- Built two hermitages where people could immerse themselves in nature for 3 days to one month (Picture) **Slide**
- Built a labyrinth - a walking prayer that helps a person connect with their center. Building it outdoors also helps one get centered in nature (Picture) **Slide**
- Bought a golf cart so Sisters who have difficulty walking could get out in nature. (Picture) **Slide**
- Camp Bethany: Ran a day camp in the summer to help children connect with nature.
- Created prayer experiences around the changing of the seasons.

Offered programs and retreats to learn the Universe Story and integrate our faith with it. **Slide**

- Sr. Miriam Therese McGillis developed an effective tool to teach the Universe Story called the “Cosmic Walk”. It allows a person to follow the unfolding of creation, opening up the immensity of time and space that has gone before us, engendering a sense of awe and wonder while raising questions about our place and role in the planet. We use this for our own education and that of others. (Picture)
- Bethany Center - our retreat center hosts experts so that we keep up with the latest thinking. This May we are offering a workshop that integrates the spiritual and practical. **Slide** The presenter is Jim Profit, a Jesuit Priest who is director of their farm in Guelph. He grew up in PEI and got his agriculture degree in Truro. He will speak about how, “To be a Healing Presence for the Human Heart and Earth”. His insights around agriculture are very important and timely. (Picture of Workshop info)

**Slide** Besides bringing in experts we develop programs for ourselves and then offer them to the public. The one that was a turning point for us is called “Shifting Worldview”. It came about as a follow-up to a presentation to our Congregation by another visiting Sister. We designed an

experience of two rooms; a mechanistic worldview based on hierarchy and dualism, and an organic worldview based on community and empowerment. The question for participant's reflection as they were in these rooms was, "How does this worldview affect my image of God and my place in the world?" At this point we were no longer giving information, we were providing an opportunity for reflection and decision making.

An inner change in consciousness needs to find outer expressions and that is where we move into decisions and practices around our next two strategic directions.

### **Slide Living More Sustainably and Land Planning and Management**

Our education took on a different focus. We collected facts by doing studies and audits. We changed a lot of our lighting over the past four years including changing 798, 60 -100 watt bulbs to compact flourescents at Bethany this past November. Our smaller houses use cloth bags for grocery shopping, buy more local foods, and are reducing waste including the use of paper napkins. **Slide** Bethany gardens and some of our local house gardens are organic. (Picture) **Slide** We've installed one set of solar panels for hot water heating at a local Community house (picture) and purchased a hybrid car with the view to purchasing more in the future.

**Slide** A major project for us at Bethany was moving toward Green Landscaping. (Picture) We

**Slide** consolidated flowerbeds adding more native plants and those that do not require frequent watering, (picture) reduced mowing by 50%, planted trees, watched more butterflies appear and put up nest boxes for owls. We also survived through the two years of adjustment as the (Picture)

**Slide** manicured look of our grounds gradually gave way to more natural beauty. Neither growth or learning happens overnight so there are "ragged" times while transition and education take place. Presently we are engaging in a water study on Bethany property.

In April 2008 we completed our CSM Sustainability Plan, as part of the Antigonish Early Adopters

Process. It has as its vision, “By the year 2020 we will be living in right relationship with all of creation” Will we reach it? I don’t know. But it gives us something exciting and critical to aim for.

**Slide** Our final strategic direction is **Collaborating and Networking with Others**

This comes out of our need for others, our belief in the power of community, and our history of working collaboratively in all that we do. We would not be where we are today if it were not for the expertise of consultants, government workers, university personnel, and environmental activists in the community. This strategic direction always leaves us with a profound sense of gratitude and hope.

(Picture)

**Slide** Ecological awareness and responsibility is a long, slow educational process, a little like a dance with two steps forward and one step back. Changing things is much easier than changing human consciousness, attitudes and behaviours but in the long run it is the latter which is more fundamental and enduring.

Rooting environmental education and action in spirituality moves it out of the realm of economics and into the heart realm of human identity and relationship with the Creator and all of creation.

This creates space that allows for risk-taking, shared discovery, respect, patience, forgiveness and accountability. At least that’s been our experience.

Donna Brady, csm

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