

Transforming minds and lives to act for creation: the Presentations' enduring presence on holy ground

Mary-Ann Greaney

This chapter tells the story of the Presentation Sisters in *Aotearoa* New Zealand and how they have raised awareness of the environment and humanity's relationship with it. Since coming to New Zealand in 1951, the Sisters have influenced people to adopt an authentic and sustainable transformation in the way they interact with the planet. The influence of the Sisters has been particularly powerful since 1989 when a formal relationship developed with groups of women and men who were attracted to their values and way of life. The groups identify themselves as Friends of Nano. Sisters and Friends of Nano together share dreams and goals and initiate ways of acting that will bring about a better world. The result of this enduring relationship has spawned numerous salt-of-the-earth people who, transformed, can no longer return to their old ways.

Trixie's story

Like others in this document, Trixie is one of those salt-of-the-earth people often found in workplaces and homes all over *Aotearoa* New Zealand. She has a growing understanding of her relationship with the Earth as a planet that human interaction has pushed almost to a point of destruction where human and other life will be unsustainable. Trixie enjoys using organic practices in her garden, she buys less "stuff" and tries to reuse and recycle what she already has. No more disposable cups for Trixie – she takes her own coffee cup to the work cafeteria.

Trixie's awakening came in June 2011 when the Presentation Sisters invited her to an international gathering in Ireland at the birthplace of the congregation's foundress, Nano Nagle. Trixie talks enthusiastically of having an overpowering sense of standing on holy ground. When in Ireland, Trixie participated in a seminar with Brigidine Sister, Anne Boyd. Anne spoke passionately about everyone learning to live rightly and reverently so that all God's creatures who came after us might share in the Earth's riches.

Those at the gathering with Trixie were Associates of the Presentation Sisters and, by the end of their time together, had formulated three core values that all agreed were at the heart of how they wished to be as Friends of Nano. These included a commitment to honour all creation and to live and promote sustainable lives. This value was readily accepted by other Friends of Nano around the world. Back home, Trixie felt compelled to change the way she interacted with *Papatūānuku*, Mother Earth, who gives birth to and nourishes all things.

Trixie continues to find new ways of recycling and reusing and has influenced others. The owner of the café where she takes her own coffee cup has thanked her for starting a small trend. At the polytechnic where she teaches, she has introduced into the programme such topics as 'sustainable relationships', 'ways of living' and 'learning practices'. She is continually working to incorporate more sustainable ways of 'being' and trying to include more in her work environment, especially concerning the use of paper.

Nano Nagle – an educating founder in the face of intense hostility

Nano Nagle, 1718–1784, was a woman in tune with the political and social challenges of her time and responded to the need she saw around her by simply doing what she thought was possible and allowing her ministry to develop. The need was great for Catholics in Ireland in the 18th century. Among other draconian laws, Catholics were forbidden to attend or teach school and religious communities were outlawed. The objective of their English masters was to be able to say, “The law did not exist for an Irish Catholic nor did the law presume an Irish Catholic to exist.”¹ She founded and financed seven schools, paid Catholics to teach in them, and founded the Irish Ursulines and Presentation Sisters. The significance for today’s Presentations is not *what* Nano achieved in a hostile environment but *how* she achieved it. She recognised that education was the key to enable people to help themselves; she collaborated with other like-minded people, ensuring that what she started was sustainable after her death, and made a start one step at a time.

The values Nano modelled 250 years ago are embedded in the Sisters and Friends of Nano who follow in her footsteps, lived out authentically in a new age and in different cultures. Recognising the need for education, collaboration, sustainability, and making a start, however small, is woven through the stories in this chapter. We have moved a long way from believing humankind is the centre of the universe. By delving into Māori mythology, attending Presentation workshops and retreats, and reflecting on Genesis, it is clear we were created last – making humans the newcomers in the creation story. Once Friends of Nano become awakened to their place in the story of the universe, a profound transformation takes place. We recognise the need to care for our environment, taking steps to live more sustainably. Understanding that everything is interconnected, it is not possible to be wholly focused on the environment without also doing something about people being made poor by unjust structures and policies that push them further out to the margins of society. There are many stories about Friends of Nano engaged in budgeting advice, caring for the elderly and frail, founding a multi award-winning teen parent school and early childcare facility, advocating for beneficiaries, presenting oral submissions to parliamentary select committees, lobbying government on issues of poverty, housing, prison reform – to name just a few.

Jan and Howard – respecting creation

When Jan and Howard retired to the city after 31 years of farming, they already had a heightened understanding and appreciation of the environment and how richly rewarding it was when creation was treated with respect. They have a compendium of delightful stories: Their sows were housed in sheds for a few weeks while giving birth and the effluent was collected in a sump. A tanker, nicknamed the “honey wagon”, was moved to different paddocks so the natural fertiliser could be distributed in small quantities to avoid its draining into waterways. The grass, and the grazing stock, grew profusely.

They collected precious rainwater in tanks and used it sparingly. Taps were never left running and they devised many ingenious methods to conserve water, especially during dry periods. Even when the rural water supply reached their farm, they never lost their appreciation for the

gift of water. There are stories, too, of planting trees to attract birds, provide shade and shelter for the animals and to enhance the farm's environment.

When Jan and Howard became Friends of Nano they felt very comfortable with the Presentation charism that enhanced their connection with each other and with all creation. They were exposed to speakers like Anne Boyd. *Aotearoa* poet and author Joy Cowley also shared her commitment to caring for the environment and Howard, in turn, has led discussions on water at a Presentation retreat.

Drawing deeper into the heartbeat of God

For many years, Presentation Sisters have been exploring their relationship with the environment, constantly inviting each other to “draw more deeply into the creation story and closer to the heartbeat of God”. Lay women and men in *Aotearoa* are included in the consultation before the release of many aspirational statements and we are encouraged to find ways to live them in our daily lives. It is empowering to know that we join a global community to make real what we said in 2003: “Reach out in faith, in a spirit of hospitality, compassion and simplicity to all of creation. The cry of those made poor and the cry of the Earth call us to continue the mission of Jesus to bring forth a sustainable society founded on respect for Earth, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace.”

In 2006, the Presentation Leadership Team called all Presentations to envision the “wholeness of creation” with encouragement to “reverence and nurture the earth and the cosmos”. In *Aotearoa*, as in the rest of the world, we were asked to “radically examine our use of the world's resources and to determine that commodities we use are not produced in violation of human rights”. One of the local Sisters produced a business card with the inscription: “Do you need it or just want it? If you buy it, what impact will it have on your life, on others, on creation? Is it recyclable, locally produced, a Fair Trade product?” Many reported they continued to carry this “business” card.

Stewart – engineering recycling on a larger scale

The call to action has been heard in all kinds of ways. Stewart is the general manager of the engineering company that he has worked in since his teens. He is quick to say that his passion for the environment has been nurtured through becoming a Friend of Nano in the 1980s and the many workshops he has attended as a result.

Stewart's commitment to Presentation values has led to his company making recycling machines the size of trucks that have been exhibited and bought in England. The machines can recycle almost anything, including car and truck tyres at the rate of up to 3000 an hour that can be reused in road making compound. His disposable nappy shredders separate the components, preserving the plastic and padding for reuse and leaving the excreta to break down for composting. Stewart's machines shred computers and, using ancillary extraction apparatus, extract the minerals for reuse. No part of an obsolete computer is wasted. *Aotearoa* has yet to embrace the environment-saving and money-making potential of the recycling

machines and most are sold overseas. Stewart understands the need for everything for which there is no longer a use to be returned to the earth.

Katie – being still in the moment

Other Presentation documents discuss the need to come to a new consciousness of our interconnectedness with the universe. In 2006, Friends of Nano were asked to nurture “a spirituality of being in communion that seeks God in the interconnectedness of the whole of creation and empowers active love for self, others and all of nature, and to grow in awareness of our responsibility to future generations”. This message spoke powerfully to another Friend of Nano, Katie, who has been a guidance counsellor for more than 15 years.

Katie had attended a Presentation retreat with eco-spiritual songwriter Jan Novotka. Jan’s music embraced the new cosmology, quantum physics, an emerging shift in consciousness and cutting edge spirituality, which she linked with traditional Catholic teachings. Katie said, “Being with Jan opened my understanding further and I have gone on to do more retreats and trainings in mindfulness. The idea of slowing down, being present to the moment, being still, has opened my heart and allowed me to be with my God in a fuller and richer way.

Importantly it has allowed me to be more relational and present for myself, with the others I work with and with creation.” Katie, Trixie, Stewart and others have successfully integrated Presentation values into their workplaces.

God emerging within us

As I researched this chapter, I heard so many people say they didn’t really do much; however, they were surprised when they stopped to think about the changes Presentation values had led them to make. There are myriad stories about saving water, composting, worm farming, using organic products in the home and garden, buying produce that is grown locally and in season and sharing surplus vegetables with neighbours. People spoke about being brought up on the adage “waste not want not” so they recycle, reuse, refuse packaging; they refill bottles (for shampoo and detergent) and take their own containers to takeaway outlets and coffee shops. Sometimes, at the end of a reflection day, individuals make a commitment to plant a tree or clean up litter, or pass information on to another generation and then ritualise the commitment with prayer. One Friend of Nano remembers being a pupil at a Presentation school in the 1950s and being made to pick up the longer threads from the floor after sewing to wind back on a spool for reuse. Underpinning the lives of the Friends of Nano is an ever deepening understanding of the Presentation charism where God is emerging within us to act in ways we would never have dreamed possible.

Hope abounds

In 2012 the Presentation Leadership Team invited me, a Friends of Nano from Zimbabwe, and a Sister each from Australia, Newfoundland and Ecuador to represent the poor of the world at the United Nations Rio+20 Earth Summit on Climate Change and Sustainable Development. Reflecting on this summit, I am convinced that our relationship with creation is the concern of every person – not the business of governments alone. In fact, if we left it to the governments, it would not happen. I left Rio knowing there was a *tsunami* of individuals

and small groups in every corner of the world recycling, reusing, refusing. There is an unstoppable grassroots movement and we are part of it. Twenty years ago, I often heard individuals say that the little they could do would not make any difference “so why bother?” I do not hear people saying this today. When Pope Francis addressed the World Meeting of Popular Movements in July 2015 he affirmed what “little” people are able to do. He said, “You can do, and are doing, a lot. I would even say that the future of humanity is in great measure in your own hands, through your ability to organise and carry out creative alternatives, through your daily efforts . . . you are sowers of change”.²

Other Friends of Nano reported a variety of environmental actions that entailed collaborating to set up or join other like-minded groups. Some belong to The Friends of the Hutt River seeking its restoration and protection. One group set up an award-winning recycling centre. Another collaboration is with Forest and Bird to plant on a strip of land to combine two ecological areas. The strategic planting creates an ecological corridor allowing wild-life to migrate between the areas giving greater habitat, species and genetic diversity. Others promote action through social media, delivering flyers, letter-writing campaigns and a variety of advocacy work.

A long row to hoe

For the most part, the changes we are making are the things our parents or grandparents always did. Recent generations, including ourselves, have been caught up in a consumerist society – buying whatever we want, without recognising the havoc we are creating. While some Friends of Nano reported making more use of public transport, most of us drive thousands of kilometres each year and many take international flights. Certainly some of us are buying more environmentally friendly cars, but most have still to achieve a carbon-neutral footprint, let alone put right some of the damage we have caused. Perhaps one of the more significant actions we are taking is to model a sustainable way of living respectfully with creation.

Grateful thanks to the Presentation Sisters

Most of the Presentation Sisters who ministered in *Aotearoa* came from Ireland. Some might wonder if it was worth their sacrifice to come to the end of the earth in 1951 when few New Zealanders followed them into religious life. I pray that when the current Presentation sisters read this chapter about how they have influenced so many by the power of their presence and the witness of their lives, they will feel that God has blessed their ministries abundantly. Many lay women and men have been transformed by the Presentation charism in *Aotearoa*. In turn, Friends of Nano have touched the lives of others to bring about change.

There is still a long way to go, but we are on a journey towards living our Direction Statement: “As Presentation people impelled by the radical gospel of Jesus and on fire with the spirit of Nano, we consciously choose to be drawn more deeply into the mystery of God, the mystery of Oneness and the reality of people and Earth made poor. Energised by this evolving consciousness we engage in expansive partnerships that move us to personal and systemic transformation” (2012).

¹ Claude Meagher, *Nano Nagle – An Historical Perspective*. Unpublished paper, 1984.

² <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/pope-francis-brings-back-seamless-garment> [accessed 10 July, 2015].