



**VOL 33 NO 2 WATAC Inc. (Women and The Australian Church) News**

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ABN 83 850 328 569

Address: P.O. Box 952 Petersham NSW 2049

Mobile: 0460 891 290

Website: <https://watac.net.au>

Facebook: WATAC - Women and The Australian Church

Editors: Andrea Dean and Tracey Edstein

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Dear Friends

We held a successful AGM in March over Zoom. Six life memberships were awarded to Margaret Keyes, Rosemary Breen, Dr Carmel Maguire, Anna Flynn, Dr Patricia Hindmarsh and Maureen Short. Congratulations to these valuable members who have given so much to WATAC!

Dr Jenny Close shared her research into initiatives that were implemented in the Townsville Diocese during the time of Bishop Ray Benjamin. We were heartened by the role of women and the respect for indigenous culture that characterised the initiatives. After a fruitful discussion we named our hopes for the Church, the role of women and the Plenary Council. These hopes were summarized in a letter to Archbishop Coleridge, chair of the Australian Catholic Bishops Council, expressing our hopes for the outcomes of the Plenary Council.

A new committee was elected Andrea Dean, President, Dr Tracy McEwan, Vice President, Karyn Green, Treasurer, Dr Danielle Lynch, Secretary, Laraine Jeffs, Margaret Keyes, Rachel McLean, Debra Zanella, Cathy Corbett, Philippa Wicksey. We thank our retiring committee members Dr Cristina Lledo Gomez and Kim Stephen Pope for their contribution.

Angela Marquis, who has been active in the project team for Australian Women Preach, will take on the role of part-time administrative assistant.

One characteristic of the committee is that we now have three members in WA, two in Qld,

four in NSW, one in ACT and with our admin assistant in Tas, which is a great reflection of the national character of WATAC membership. A warm welcome to new committee members (Debra Zanella, Cathy Corbett, Philippa Wicksey) and grateful thanks to those who continue to serve on the committee. Please pray for us as we learn to be more national in our approach and more skilled at planning meetings across time zones.

Some updates

- WATAC will organize a Zoom on ‘Sacramental Life’, part of an international project of the Catholic Women’s Council Saturday 25 June: 8 pm AEST. Originally Catholic Women’s Council planned a major women’s pilgrimage to Rome for this year. This has been replaced by a powerful series of interactive Zoom sessions to reflect on women and Church. I will add details to the WATAC webpage as soon as details are confirmed.
- WATAC Presents continues to be successful and enriching. Episodes are recorded and are available on the WATAC YouTube Channel or via a link from the website.
- WATAC in Dialogue continues this year with Rachel McLean facilitating. These sessions will evolve in response to feedback from participants.

Thank you for renewing your membership and a special thanks to those who have recruited new members for WATAC: **can we double membership again in 2022??**

Blessings,



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## PUTTING ON AN APRON

There's a very ancient way of reflecting on a passage from Scripture that is called *Lectio Divina* or sacred reading. You read the passage slowly, until you come to a word or phrase that sticks in your mind or prods your imagination and says, 'Stop, stay with me for a while'.

Well, I was reading Luke chapter 12 and I got as far as verse 37. You might remember it, a sentence about the master, arriving home way past his servants' normal bedtimes, coming in and being so pleased to see that they were expecting him that that he put on an apron and served them all a late-night supper.

Now there are probably deep theological insights to be gained from a prayerful and studious reading of the whole of this passage from Luke's Gospel, but the apron got me. Here's a macho Jewish man of means putting on an apron and proceeding to wait on his servants.

The image of the apron recalled another passage, the one that tells of Jesus removing his outer garment, wrapping a towel around his waist and proceeding to wash the feet of all gathered around the Passover table. The master is also the servant.

And I wonder what happened to that beautiful model of service in the years between then and now. It seems that gradually Jesus' action just lingered as words on a page, resurrected symbolically on Holy Thursday every year. Meanwhile the titles, housing, clothing and lifestyle of worldly leaders became the norm for Church leaders.



*Vinnies Van*

I once heard a priest suggest that parents changing a baby's nappy a dozen times in a day might be seen as a twenty first century washing of the feet, or put another way, the master waiting on the one assumed to be inferior.

So many ordinary women and men,

wrap symbolic aprons or towels around their middle and serve others in the name and spirit of Jesus – a carer massaging skin cream into the stiff fingers and dry skin of an elderly patient, a hairdresser volunteering time and skill to shampoo and blow-dry the thin hair of a dozen nursing home residents, Day after day, Polish men and women preparing thousands of meals for Ukrainians fleeing the Russian army.

We call our Church leadership the hierarchy; there's a top and a bottom and lots of stages in between. The trouble with this model is that we have used it to opt out of our Baptismal call to be both foot washer and the one whose feet are washed.

Sometimes I think it's our own fault that our Church hierarchy has by and large tumbled off its collective pedestals. After all, we put them there when we didn't insist and expect that they be accountable to the communities they served. There are times when we excuse our clergy instead of reminding them of our expectations that they journey side by side with us.

It saddens and angers me when I hear about Church communities who have been sidelined by a priest leader who has no respect for the needs and gifts of the people he serves. Then I want to know why we let this happen. What if instead of letting our priests and bishops behave like (some) big businesses, we let them know that we need them to respect us as we respect them.

We are the Church. What if we meant it?

Written by Judith Scully, originally published in [Words from the Edge](#) and published on March 31, 2022. Reprinted with permission.

## **CONGRATULATIONS TO WATAC MEMBERS**

### **AWARDED LIFE MEMBERSHIP**

**MARGARET KEYES**

**ROSEMARY BREEN**

**DR CARMEL MAGUIRE**

**ANNA FLYNN**

**DR PATRICIA HINDMARSH**

**MAUREEN SHORT**

## **ADVOCACY: HAS IT BEEN WORTH IT?**

*Early this year, Good Samaritan Sister Clare Condon celebrated fifty years of profession as a 'Good Sam'. The following is drawn largely from an address she gave at an International Women's Day breakfast in March in Canberra.*

It says much about Clare Condon sgs that she regards living in an inner Sydney community with two other Sisters and six young Vietnamese refugee women as “a highlight of my life...This was in the 1990s and these women were the much maligned ‘boat people’; teenagers who had travelled alone across treacherous seas. Their stories of trauma and resilience are profound. They were young teenage women on leaky boats, knowing no one, being misunderstood and abused. Because one had a name similar to that of another family on the boat, Australian officials simply connected her to them – and they abused her.

“She found her way to us through the local school. Another woman had married in a refugee camp in Indonesia and gained a visa but her husband had not. After a few years she managed to go back to the camp to see him and discovered he was not interested in her. He was just using her as a means to come to Australia. She was devastated. Our seventy-plus sister was able to accompany her through the family court in Sydney to have her marriage annulled and she could begin her life all over again with confidence.

“These women lived with us for safety, English language and support with their studies. Two are now successful pharmacists, one runs a café in the city of Sydney, another is a nurse and activist for Vietnamese people. They are all settled as Australian citizens with families and have been able to visit their families in Vietnam. Two have brought their mothers to live with them here.”

**I am certain it was worth it and all these years later, we still need to continue to advocate for justice for refugees.**

But let's go back to the beginning.

Having been raised in Wollongong and educated at St Mary's College, Clare joined the formation programme for the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in 1969, aged 20 – much to the dismay of her father. She recalls, “I had this yearning to seek God and thought I needed to get it out of my system or I would never know what it meant. At that stage I had no idea where the search might lead me.

“I was professed as a Sister on 10 January 1972, just seven short years after the close of the

Second Vatican Council. It was a different world – or was it?

The Watergate scandal in the USA was just unfolding. Recently the USA has had four years of Donald Trump as President.

President Nixon directed that NASA develop a space shuttle. The technological age is certainly here to stay.

22 bombs were exploded on Bloody Friday in Belfast. Russia and the Ukraine are currently at war.

In retrospect 1972 seems like an ‘annus horribilis’!

On the other side of the coin, however, the last troops were withdrawn from Vietnam.

The United States Equal Rights Amendment gave legal equality to women and men.

Women were gaining some freedoms with the widespread use of the contraceptive pill. Germaine Greer had published *The Female Eunuch* in 1970.

So where was the church in 1972? There was post-Vatican II euphoria, since the church had stepped out of its internal myopia and into the modern world. It was beginning to see itself as having something to offer the world.

Let’s return to Clare’s personal story.

She says, “I think I received my sense of justice from my family and the Young Christian Workers (YCW). The YCW principle, from Cardinal Joseph Cardijn, was ‘See, judge and act’, applying the gospel to the reality of the working world of people. I think these factors formed my conscience quite seriously.

“My journey as a Good Sam took me to North Queensland, where several Aboriginal families were part of the school community, though not always welcomed by the parent body. The sister Principal invited the Indigenous mothers to breakfast at the convent on Saturday mornings once a month, and so these women were able to speak freely about their experiences and not feel judged. Small country towns can harbour deep racist attitudes, often without even realising it.”

**These breakfasts, and other interventions along the way, were definitely worth it.**

“In the 1980s I spent six years in a girls’ boarding school, trying to make their experience more contemporary. In the mid-year holidays two of us drove all over Queensland visiting families in rural and remote areas in a small Ford Laser! Those encounters assisted us in lobbying government for the needs of rural and remote students. Until, then religious women had staffed boarding schools. Our numbers were dwindling and we needed to employ paid supervisors. There were no industrial awards or pay scales. A small band of personnel worked hard to seek justice for these employees and to seek adequate government funding.”

**I'm sure it was worth it.**

“In the 1990s, I was able to attend the non-government forum at the United Nations Women’s Conference in Beijing. This was an intense experience of the energy and commitment of women seeking human rights across the world. It was probably my first real encounter with the Catholic women’s movement and there was a very tense meeting with the Vatican representatives at the conference. The gulf between the two was palpable. It was discouraging but also held moments of hope.”

**I believe it was worth it and confirmed my own belief in continuing the struggle for women within the church community. Further alliances across countries were formed from this experience.**

“WATAC (Women and the Australian Church) was established in the 1990s and became a strong voice for women, particularly in NSW, Victoria and South Australia. There were small groups in Western Australia and Queensland. It was fostered by Catholic Religious Leaders and my own Sisters and friends were instrumental in establishing it. It gave Catholic women a way to share their faith and pray together.

“A small group of persistent women has continued and it is wonderful to see its resurgence, thanks in no small way to Andrea Dean. My early involvement was in assisting WATAC to form a legal entity, an association which gave it the basis to grow and expand. Women’s Religious Institutes and WATAC were very instrumental in the call for the report, Women and Man: One in Christ Jesus. To me, WATAC is a great example of the persistence, perseverance and tenacity of women when they band together and support one another.”

**Was it worth it? Yes – and we are seeing its fruits now.**

In the year 2000, Clare was appointed to the Archdiocese of Adelaide’s Diocesan Pastoral Team which had been established in 1986 by Archbishop Leonard Faulkner. She takes up the story: “Archbishop Jimmy Gleeson had worked to establish a post-Vatican II church, focused on being a church for the world, an outward looking church. His successor, Archbishop Faulkner, with the support of his priests and people, chose to establish a new governance model instead of appointing an auxiliary bishop. This was a big step! The governance team comprised the archbishop, the Vicar General (a priest), and two women, one a member of a Religious Institute and the other a lay member of the diocesan community. When I joined the team it was well established and I only experienced the last two years of this prophetic model.

“It is amazing that during the current Plenary Council process, no one has sought interest from

eight women about their experience of this model over 15 years. They are beginning to make a noise. They have so much experience to offer.

“Len Faulkner mused about the reasons other bishops did not follow his example. He was isolated by the growing group of bishops who were restorationists and seemed to be moving away from the teachings of the second Vatican Council. I believe this was a deliberate move by Church officials. It is a model that is canonically sound, but it required a capacity for the bishop to share power and to delegate and most of all the capacity to work collaboratively as a team. I’ve not experienced that capacity amongst many clergy. For them, authority and power are too intertwined.

“One of the issues the Royal Commission highlighted was the problem with identifying sacramental power with governance power and the lack of transparency and accountability that this concentration on authority can bring. In Adelaide, I spent the next four years working in the old model. I became a Chancellor of Stewardship. Should I have walked away? Maybe, maybe not. Experiencing both models allowed me to see the difference and advocate wherever I go for the Diocesan Pastoral Team approach. The more I think about it, the more prophetic I understand it to be.”

**In advocacy terms, were these years worth it? Definitely. Eventually the rest of the Australian church might decide to learn from collaboration and become a church for the world.**

Election as leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan presented Clare with an enormous new challenge. The ‘Good Sams’ are ageing but remain very ‘hands on’. The congregation’s main focus has been on education, but following the Vatican Council, leaders enabled Sisters to follow their own gifts and talents and put resources into further education – pastoral ministry, liturgy, social justice, spiritual direction and so much more.

Clare recalls, “As one of my roles I saw it as important to encourage and support the Sisters who were ministering on the edge, e.g. at Santa Teresa in the Northern Territory, Mt Magnet in Western Australia, Three Springs in the WA wheat belt, Palm Island in North Queensland, Kiribati and the Philippines. In many instances I witnessed the challenges facing women in their own society and in the church.

“Being leader provided the opportunity to establish an online newsletter, The Good Oil, and so have an avenue for advocacy which we could manage ourselves, independent of other church newspapers. It gave us, and continues to give us, a female voice for advocacy which is



independent within the church.”

When she became President of Catholic Religious Australia, Clare was able to “lobby on behalf of religious in a variety of social and church issues, though I did have a note from a Sister in another order, telling me in no uncertain terms that I did not speak for her!

“I discovered, to my utter surprise, when I received the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) Medal in 2013, that this award gave me another arena for speaking up and advocating on a broader scale. Gillian Triggs encouraged me to speak up and she gave me the opportunity to give an address about violence in our society at an AHRC conversation.

**I know this award has opened other doors to me.**

“During my twelve years as leader, I was afforded the opportunity to attend the International Communion of Benedictine women. It helped to add our voices to those of women within the church to advocate for change. The American Benedictines are wonderful women, leading in many reform areas in the USA and in the global church.

“It also afforded us as a congregation the opportunity to establish a lay ecclesial community, known as Good Samaritan Education, to continue the governance of the ten colleges previously governed by the sisters. These are uniquely Good Samaritan Benedictine schools.

**Indeed, these 12 years were a blessing and worth every minute.**

“I have recently accepted the role of President of Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH) for two years. ACRATH advocates for change across Australia and the world and is connected to Talitha Cum, an international body and it provides support to people who have been trafficked through forced marriage and forced labour. We have considerable influence at the federal government level.

**This current advocacy is definitely worth it.**

“Finally, we come to our own Plenary Council and a worldwide synodal process. Will anything worthwhile emerge for women in the church?”

**Some strengths of the current Plenary Council:**

There is a new openness and new experience. It hasn’t happened like this before. There was extensive openness to consultation.

There is an earnestness in the members. They want to contribute prayerfully, with a deep listening and with honesty.

The acknowledgement of First Nation Peoples is real and tangible.

Lay men and women are part of the process, even if in a limited way.

There is a shift in accountability and transparency, even with a long way to go.

The closed culture of bishops and clericalism has been invaded. Culture takes a long time to change and requires constancy and persistence.

### **Some observations:**

There are limits to the law governing Plenary Councils, both the composition and the legislative process.

There is the extreme diversity of church experiences within the membership group and how they were chosen. There was no common process for the selection of members.

The concept of discernment and prayerful dialogue is not necessarily part of the practice of members. Catholics in the past have been told to be quiet, not to speak up. It has been the role of bishops to teach, but can they also be listeners and learners?

There is a palpable fear of change in some and the opposite in others who are close to leaving the church because change is too slow and not extensive enough.

There are various understandings of truth, God, teachings and so on. As one scripture scholar said: there are 300 people and 300 versions of a Christ-centred church.

There is confusion around concepts of consultative votes and deliberative votes.

### **So advocacy continues, especially for the influence of women in the church and society.**

I'd like to conclude by quoting Pope Francis towards the end of his book, *Let us Dream: the Path to a Better Future* (2020).

“Let yourself be pulled along, shaken up, challenged. Maybe it'll be through something you've read in these pages, maybe through a group of people you've heard about on the news, or that you know about in your neighbourhood, whose story has moved you. Perhaps it'll be a local elderly people's home or refugee hospitality centre or an ecological regeneration project that is calling to you. Or maybe people closer to home who need you.

When you find the twitch, stop and pray. Read the Gospel if you're a Christian. Or just create space inside yourself to listen. Open yourself....decentre...transcend. And then act.” (p137)

This original article was written by Tracey Edstein for WATAC News.

## MEET THE WOMEN WHO ARE CALLED TO PREACH



*Radhika Sukumar-White*

"Preaching is such a gift", says Reverend Radhika Sukumar-White, a minister and team leader at Leichhardt Uniting Church in Sydney.

"Throughout history, great changes happen through great oratory. Preaching has the ability to change hearts and change lives, call people to action and call people to

account."

Sukumar-White was 20 when she had a call to ministry. It was, she says, a "God speaking to me in Morgan Freeman's voice ... kind of experience."

Sukumar-White had always wanted to work with people and was studying physiotherapy at university at the time. Her life would take another path, however.

With her calling came the realisation that "I was going to be able to walk with people and help people using the gifts and skills that I have in the Church, which I so loved," she says. "That was a really affirming thing to feel."

Sukumar-White, whose parents migrated to Australia from Sri Lanka in the 1970s, grew up in the Uniting Church. "My parents' parents were converted by American missionaries in Sri Lanka in the early twentieth century," she says.

"When they migrated to Australia, the Church was the first thing they sought in making Australia their home."

Once called, Sukumar-White began the "rigorous process" to become a Minister of the Word, including three years' study at United Theological College in Parramatta, plus numerous interviews and field placements.

She was ordained in 2016, and in 2019, joined Leichhardt Uniting Church, an affirming church that welcomes LGBTQI+ people in its congregation. "It's a young community of faith — two-thirds would be under the age of 35," says Sukumar-White. "The community is incredibly switched on when it comes to justice, not just queer inclusion, but climate action, First Nations issues, asylum seeker policy."

### **'Gender is just not a factor for us'**

The role of women in the Church — controversial in other denominations and dioceses — has

been resolved in the Uniting Church in Australia. "It's not even a question," says Sukumar-White.

"We ordain men and women equally — there's no difference in ordination, there's no difference in who gets to be in the pulpit or not. Gender is just not a factor for us."

Sukumar-White believes women have a lot to offer as preachers of the gospel. "There's something powerful about women in the pulpit," she says. "I think we bring a different energy."

### **Giving women a platform to preach**

The saying "You can't be what you can't see" has particular resonance for Tracy McEwan, who recently completed a PhD examining the participation of Catholic Gen X women in the church in Australia.

In Catholicism, church law forbids laypeople – including all women — from delivering the homily during Mass. In the dozens of interviews McEwan conducted with Catholic women during her research, she heard a "recurrent story about feeling isolated and marginalised".

The lack of visible female leaders in faith communities "has a huge impact" on the young women in their congregations, she says. "Having another woman in your line of sight makes a difference."

"There is research that shows that girls who have leadership role models have better self-esteem and self-efficacy which takes them into adulthood." McEwan is a member of Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), an ecumenical organisation established in 1984 to advocate for "a church where the full equality and dignity of women are recognised."

In 2021, WATAC and the Grail, a fellow ecumenical women's organisation, launched [Australian Women Preach](#), a podcast that gives women from all Christian denominations a platform to preach the gospel. "We wanted to promote these women who were already doing that in their communities every Sunday [to show] this isn't something new," says McEwan.

Sukumar-White appears in a special Australian Women Preach episode to mark 2022 International Women's Day. She says the podcast "is a great opportunity for other denominations to hear the power of women preaching."

### **'I was never able to fully be myself'**

Like Sukumar-White, Kate Englebrecht was young when she realised she wanted to pursue a life in the Church.

"When I was 15 or 16, I had a strong sense of being drawn into theological thinking, reflection [and] church life," she says. "My parents were quite devout Anglicans, and church was a big part of my life."



*Kate Englebrecht*

Kate Englebrecht gave up her dream of becoming an ordained minister when she converted to Catholicism in her thirties.

At school, she developed a passion for spiritual literature. "I was very interested in reading John Donne and George Herbert and wonderful poetic pieces of work that reflected on God."

She studied Arts at university to become a teacher. "At that stage, there were no Anglican women priests, so it wasn't an option for me then." While she loved teaching, she felt something was missing.

"I was never able to fully be myself in that space as I felt I wanted to be," she says. "It felt like I was firing on four or five cylinders when there was six there."

### **The path to ordination**

In her mid-twenties, Englebrecht started a theology degree. "By the time I'd finished, women were very seriously being considered for ordained ministry," says Englebrecht, who was accepted into an ordination program.

"I was in my late twenties, and I started studying a Master of Theology with a view to being ordained in the Anglican Church."

Englebrecht studied through a Catholic institute, a decision that would change her life. Exposed for the first time to "great classical writers of the Catholic tradition" — Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross — she was transfixed. "I thought, 'Wow, how come I didn't know about these people?'"

By the time she finished her degree, she "felt deeply drawn to Catholic life and the heart of the Catholic tradition". At 31, she converted to the Catholic faith, a "huge decision" that meant giving up her dream to join the ministry. Still, she says, "it felt right, and it always has since".

Englebrecht returned to teaching before pursuing a career in Mission leadership, pastoral care and, more recently, chaplaincy at a prison in central west New South Wales, a role she finds immensely rewarding.

"It's a daily challenge because each inmate that comes through the door is a different story and a different need," she says. "It's my attempt, again, to bring life to a sense of calling that is not ordained ministry but as close to it as I can get."

### **Sharing the 'gift of Christianity'**

Behind Englebrecht's calling to ministry is "a longing to share this extraordinary gift that is Christianity," she says. "At its best ... it's extraordinarily liberating and profoundly beautiful."

Englebrecht counts herself as a feminist, which can jar with her Catholic faith. "It's hard politically, it's hard spiritually, it's hard in the day to day running of business," she says.

"It's hard to be a feminist in a world which is profoundly patriarchal and often deeply misogynistic and too often, sadly, opposing of anyone who would challenge that."

Englebrecht would like to see a future where the Catholic Church allows women to take a more active role. "Wouldn't it be great if women in their twenties were invited to participate in the life of the seminary, to discern as they can what their vocation might be?"

"I fear that it won't happen for a long time yet." Initiatives like Australian Women Preach give Englebrecht hope, however. "It gives me a shot in the arm on a Sunday to sit down and listen to the podcast and hear a woman break open the scripture and reflect on the Word," she says.

Englebrecht was equal parts delighted and terrified to contribute to the podcast herself. "I've written homilies for priests ... but I've never been allowed to deliver it," she says. "Someone asked if I'd do it again — absolutely! I'd do it every week if you let me."

She believes the podcast has the potential "to shake a few cages". "To hear women preach is extraordinarily empowering," she says. "The world is fuller, not lesser, if you allow women to preach."

This article was written by Nicola Heath on the ABC News on 12 Mar 2022.

Reprinted with permission.

## **Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the Resurrection.**

Jurgen Moltmann

## LEADERS THE CHURCH CAN'T HAVE

There is one tragedy that an increasing number of Catholics agree on – the Church's failure to make full use of the enormous wealth of experience and the talents, expertise and special perspective of more than half its members

To mark International Women's Day on Tuesday, March 8th *The Tablet* compiled a list of 50 remarkable women. They are just a tiny fraction of the women who could, in a Church that drew fairly and equally on the gifts of all the faithful, be sharing in its leadership. These are the women who could be running parishes and managing dioceses. They could be leading Vatican departments (a handful of senior officials in the Roman Curia are women, but fewer than one in 10 of the total). They could be serving on episcopal conferences. They could be presiding at worship – though the Church's failure to make intelligent use of the gifts and talents of women is a concern that goes deeper and further than the issue of their ordination to the diaconate or to the priesthood. Women could – and should – be redesigning the landscape in a Church that, in 2022, is in urgent need of fundamental change.

Of course, women are already in important leadership positions in the Church itself and in Catholic schools, hospitals and charities – and the number of them is growing. The women who are dotted around the leadership structures of the Church certainly have authority and influence. Women such as Nathalie Becquart – an undersecretary at the Synod of Bishops office, who will be the first woman with a right to vote during the summit of bishops next year – are making a real difference. But the Catholic Church is led by men. And the men who lead the Church are elected by men in a recruitment process dominated by men.

These 50 lost leaders include academics and writers; spiritual guides and campaigners; thinkers, teachers and entrepreneurs. Some work inside a Catholic Church that they know could be better, if they and others were given more space as leaders. Some no longer live within the Church's visible boundaries but have been heavily influenced by Catholicism. It has shaped their values and beliefs, and if the option had been there for them to put their talents to the service of the Church, we are sure at least some of them would have taken it.

Now don't get us wrong: all the women on this list are living their best lives, and there's no "second best" for them about how the cards have fallen. Given the pitfall of clericalism into which they might have been sucked, they may well have flourished precisely because they've forged their own paths outside the Church's channels. So, these women are winners. But – and here is the tragedy we want to highlight on International Women's Day – it's the Church that has lost out. Even more than having failed to properly embrace women's gifts, it has failed to

open itself up to being changed by their presence.

And change is critical. In 2022, it has not been difficult for us to find 50 women who might, in other circumstances, have been open to being leaders inside the Church; we could easily have found 100, 500, even 5,000. We're looking forward to your letters telling us who else we should have included. But will it be as easy in 10 years' time? Twenty? Younger women are peeling away from the Church; they can see the glass ceiling, and they know it's barely being addressed. So the time for action, most definitely, is now. The alternative is that the tragedy of women's lost gifts will deepen. The entire Church will be more than impoverished; its very future will be threatened if it continues to fail to recognise what it is losing.

### **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

A writer and novelist, born in Nigeria in 1977, Adichie's books include *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). She studied medicine at the University of Nigeria, editing a magazine run by Catholic medical students, before transferring to the US to study communications, politics and creative writing. Adichie has spoken out against sexism in institutional religion, including Catholicism, but has said that she continues to identify as a Catholic.

### **Helen Alford**

Alford, 57, graduated in manufacturing engineering from Cambridge, where she was also awarded a PhD, and is the author of several books on management theory and corporate social responsibility. She is a Dominican sister, and is the dean of the faculty of social sciences and former vice rector of the Angelicum, the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

### **Chiara Amirante**

Born in Rome in 1966, author of several bestsellers, in 1994 Amirante opened the first of what is now a series of New Horizons residential shelter communities in a poor Rome neighbourhood. They offer a home to the many "overlooked" people: sex workers, drug addicts, alcoholics, and ex-prisoners.

### **Tina Beattie**

Beattie grew up in Lusaka and has spent much of her life in Africa. She started university when the youngest of her four children started school, and "somehow, went from being a rather conservative Presbyterian typist with very little education to being feminist professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Roehampton". A ban on speaking in church venues has



failed to dent her determination to change the way the Church is run.

### **Myra Brown**

A racial justice campaigner for many years, Brown is pastor of the Spiritus Christi Church in New York, an inclusive, independent off-shoot of the Catholic Church in which she grew up. She has said she fell in love with Catholicism, and felt a call to ministry, but knew it could not be fulfilled if she stayed within the institutional Church.

### **Simone Campbell**

A lawyer, a member of the Sisters of Social Service, and a leading US campaigner for social justice, Campbell was one of the main instigators of the Nuns on the Bus project, in which she and fellow Religious toured the country to highlight social issues. Investigated by the CDF under Pope Benedict, she has described the Church's failure to address sexual abuse by priests as "outrageous".

### **Noella de Souza**

A campaigner against sexual violence towards women and girls and the exploitation of women Religious, de Souza has helped get justice for victims of sexual abuse at the hands of priests in Mumbai. A psychotherapist and counsellor, and a religious sister of the Missionaries of Christ Jesus, she has said: "We don't have a say in the decision-making of the Church. We are aiming at gender equality as equal disciples, and inclusion at the decision-making table."

### **Ingrid Betancourt**

Betancourt, 60, hopes to become president of Colombia at the national elections in May. Last time she stood, in 2002, she ended up being kidnapped, and spent the next six years as a prisoner of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – she was held in a camp in the jungle, often tied to a tree. Celebrated for her determination to combat corruption, she wants "to claim the rights of 51 million Colombians who are not finding justice because we live in a system designed to reward the criminals". She has spent much of the time since her release in 2008 – she was freed by security forces posing as humanitarian workers - at Oxford University, where she studied for a doctorate in theology.

### **Celia Deane-Drummond**

Director of the Laudato Si' Research Institute in Oxford, Deane-Drummond graduated in Natural Sciences from Cambridge University and obtained a doctorate in plant physiology at Reading University before switching to theology. Her work today embraces the meeting-point of faith and ecology. She is co-editor of the journal *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences*.

### **Marianne Duddy-Burke**

The executive director of DignityUSA, Duddy-Burke works for the full inclusion of LGBTQI people in both Church and society. She has called it “tragic” that the Catholic Church at its highest levels cannot recognise the grace in faithful same-sex couples, or offer them any sort of blessing.

### **Teresa Forcades**

With degrees in medicine and theology, Forcades is one of Spain’s leading intellectuals. A Benedictine nun, she took a leave of absence from her mountain monastery of Sant Benet de Montserrat to campaign for Catalonian independence. She is known for her mistrust of pharmaceutical companies and was a high-profile opponent of Covid vaccine mandates. She has been a critic of the Catholic Church for its misogyny and patriarchy.

### **Ephigenia Gachiri**

An educator and activist working to eradicate female genital mutilation, Loreto nun Gachiri has devoted her life to the welfare of young women in Kenya. The author of four books on FGM, she has a doctorate from Kenyatta University, Nairobi, and an MBA from the University of Birmingham.

### **Joan Chittister**

A Benedictine Sister of Erie and the author of more than 50 books, Chittister has spoken out tirelessly for peace, human rights, justice – especially for women – and church renewal for more than half-a-century. She currently serves as co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women. In one much-read blog, she wrote about how many women told her that they had left the Catholic Church out of a sense of disillusionment and abandonment by an organisation they once believed promised them fullness of life – “and then let them know it is their very persons that deny them that”. So, having felt unwelcome and uncared-for, the women leave Catholicism, and “they go away to where Jesus waits for them, arms open, in someone else’s Christian church”.

### **Mary John Mananzan**

An activist, educator, author and theologian, Mananzan helped develop an Asian feminist liberation theology. “In the Philippines, we were political activists before we became feminists,” she has explained. “We were talking about comprehensive social transformation of the Philippines. And then we realised, how can you have a comprehensive transformation of society when one half of the people are oppressed by the other half?” Mananzan – a Benedictine

sister – has a doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome and she has supported women’s access to contraception, saying bishops’ fears that this would lead to increased abortions were an overreaction.

### **Ivone Gebara**

Born in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1944, Gebara, an Augustinian religious sister, has two doctorates – one in philosophy, the other in religious studies – and worked alongside Archbishop Hélder Câmara for many years, honing the principles and practice of liberation theology. A leader in the eco-feminist movement in Latin America, she lives and works in a poor neighbourhood of Recife. In the 1990s, she was silenced by the Vatican for two years following remarks she had made about the legal regulation of abortion.

### **Jeannine Gramick**

An advocate for LGBT and transgender rights, Gramick co-founded the Maryland-based New Ways Ministry, which attempts to broaden the way Catholics traditionally dealt with LGBT issues. Prohibited by the CDF in 1999 from working with LGBT people – an order she ignored – last year Pope Francis described her as a “valiant woman”. She has served on the boards of many organisations, including the US National Assembly of Women Religious and the National Coalition of American Nuns.

### **Mary Haddad**

Haddad has served since 2019 as president of the Catholic Health Association of the US, the country’s largest non-profit healthcare provider, with an annual budget of \$30 million (£22m). Haddad, a Sister of Mercy, has described healthcare in America as being at a crossroads. Acute care – where funds have long been focused – is being reappraised, and the emphasis is moving to lifestyle and preventative medicine. Under Haddad’s leadership, Catholic health services have begun to team up with social-service providers.

### **Nontando Hadebe**

A lecturer at St Augustine University in Johannesburg, South Africa, Hadebe is a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and international co-ordinator of Side by Side, a movement for gender justice in the Church. She co-edited an anthology of stories from South African women during the Covid pandemic.

### **Hille Haker**

Born in 1962, Haker is a German theologian who holds the Richard McCormick SJ Endowed Chair of Catholic Moral Theology at Loyola University Chicago. Her work focuses on ethics,

moral identity and feminism, with a focus on issues around sex trafficking.

### **Margaret Hebblethwaite**

Writer, scripture scholar and journalist, Hebblethwaite has worked in prison chaplaincy, catechesis and parish work. She was assistant editor of *The Tablet* from 1991 to 2000, when she gave up her job and left her home in Oxford to live in Santa María de Fe, Paraguay. She founded the Santa Maria Education Fund to fund tertiary education for the rural poor.

### **Martha Heizer**

Head of the Catholic reform movement We Are Church in Austria, Heizer and her husband were excommunicated in 2014 for holding what the local bishop called “private celebrations of the Eucharist without a priest”. She vowed to work on for change, and has said laypeople share equally with ordained men the right to shape the Church.

### **Teresia Mbari Hinga**

Born in Kenya, Hinga’s degrees include a doctorate in religious studies and African Christianity from Lancaster University. She teaches at Santa Clara University in California on African religious history, the ethics of globalisation and women’s issues.

### **Sheila Hollins**

A psychiatrist and former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Hollins has since 2014 been a member of the Vatican’s child protection organisation, the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. She is also a campaigner on disability issues, and a cross-bench life peer.

### **Soline Humbert**

Aged 17, Humbert was studying history and politics at Trinity College in Dublin when she first felt a calling to enter the priesthood. A cradle Catholic, born and raised in France, she knew that it was not something she could pursue; instead, she graduated, obtained an MBA and a master’s in theology, married, and had two sons. She worked as a management consultant and volunteered in her diocese as a marriage counsellor. Eventually, the sense of being called to the priesthood returned; one day, a friend gave her a chalice and Communion plate and told her: “The Catholic Church isn’t ready – but you are.” In the mid-1990s, Humbert began to celebrate the Eucharist informally in her Dublin home.

### **Elizabeth Johnson**

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Johnson, 80, is a former president of both the Catholic

Theological Society of America and the ecumenical American Theological Society. She once observed that, during her own theological studies, she never read a female author or met a female professor because there were none: it was a totally male world.

### **Colette Joyce**

Originally from Great Dunmow in Essex, Joyce was appointed Justice and Peace Co-ordinator for the Archdiocese of Westminster in 2020, having previously served as a catechist in several parishes. She was co-ordinator of the St Mary Magdalene Centre for Refugees and Asylum Seekers – now the Islington Centre – for five years.

### **Helena Kennedy**

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws is a Labour member of the House of Lords. Born in Glasgow, raised in a Catholic family, she studied law and was called to the bar in 1972. Through her long career in criminal law she has acted in many high-profile cases, including the Guildford Four appeal, and she campaigns on women's rights. She has said she would like to see the Catholic Church completely rethink its attitude towards women: women do a lot of the work, she says, but cannot aspire to the higher positions of power in the Church. She says institutions that have appointed women to leadership roles have been improved by doing so; diversity in leadership is the catalyst for improvement. At a recent conference organised by Root and Branch, the Church reform collective, she gave this warning to the Church: "You will wither on the vine if you don't do something about [the women issue]. People will simply go elsewhere for their spiritual sustenance."

### **Lucy Kurien**

Having become a nun at a young age in her native India, an event when she was in her thirties changed the direction of Kurien's life. A pregnant woman with an abusive husband sought her help: Kurien promised to do something, but that night the woman was murdered by her partner. It was an appalling crime, but it led Kurien, now 65, to found Maher, an organisation to help women in need. Today Maher homes provide shelter for women and children who have suffered from abuse, poverty and both. Kurien has been showered with awards for her women-centred approach. She also works in interfaith relations. Maher runs peace camps for young people in India, Africa and the US.

### **Mary McAleese**

President of Ireland for 14 years, McAleese pulls no punches when it comes to speaking to the men who run the Catholic Church. A lawyer by training, after leaving office as president she

studied in Rome for a doctorate in canon law at the Gregorian University, and is now professor of children, law and religion at Glasgow University. She is a lifelong campaigner for LGBT rights. While she is unable to preach in Catholic churches, she regularly gives homilies at the Church of Ireland's Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin.

### **Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**

Having served in many government roles, including as Deputy President of South Africa and as a member of parliament during South Africa's first democratic government, Mlambo-Ngcuka is the executive director of UN Women, and works with a host of organisations devoted to education, women's empowerment and gender equality.

### **Kate McElwee**

Executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, a grass-roots movement that promotes activism, dialogue and prayerful witness to call for women's ordination and gender equity in the Catholic Church, after battling for change in Rome for several years, McElwee has now relocated to her native US.

### **Eva Menjivar**

In the 1970s, Menjivar worked closely with a Jesuit priest, Rutilio Grande, in her native El Salvador; he was a friend of Archbishop Oscar Romero. But after Grande was assassinated in 1977, Menjivar was ordered to leave her community base and return to the safety of a larger convent. She refused to go, and to this day remains in a base community with three fellow nuns in San Martín, El Salvador.

### **Penelope Middelboe**

Historian and film-maker, Middelboe is one of the founders, along with Mary Ring and Pamela Berry, of Root and Branch, the UK-based international collective calling for reform in the Catholic Church. Last year, Root and Branch organised the world's first lay-led Catholic synod, amid worries that the current worldwide church synodal process risks silencing voices calling for radical change.

### **Chidinma Nnoli**

Born in Nigeria in 1998, Lagos -based Nnoli is an artist who channels the patriarchal constraints she faced as a woman from a Catholic background into her art. She works predominantly in oils, focusing on patriarchal power and the meaning of safe spaces. Nnoli studied at the University of Benin and has participated in exhibitions at home and abroad.

**Donna Orsuto**

A professor of spirituality at the Gregorian University in Rome, Orsuto lectures and leads retreats worldwide. She is director of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas, which focuses on the formation of laypeople and the promotion of Christian unity and understanding among religions.

**Norma Pimentel**

The daughter of Mexican immigrant parents, Pimentel, for three decades a Missionary of Jesus, and executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, has been supporting more than 100,000 migrants seeking refuge in the US along the border with Mexico. She provides emergency food, shelter, housing assistance, clinical counselling and pregnancy care. In 2018, she was included in *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world.

**Helen Prejean**

Louisiana-born Prejean became a nun, a Sister of St Joseph of Medaille, aged 18. After a master's in religious education, she taught in schools but the pivotal experience in her life came in the early 1980s, when she started first to correspond and then meet regularly a convicted murderer, Elmo Patrick Sonnier. When he was executed in April 1984, Prejean was with him, and that formed her life's work as a campaigner against the death penalty. Her book *Dead Man Walking* became an Oscar-winning movie, and later an opera. For several years, Prejean lobbied hard in Rome for the Church to condemn the death penalty. In 2018, the Catechism of the Catholic Church called capital punishment "an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person" and finally deemed it "inadmissible" in all cases. Prejean says that the Church is "impoverished" because far too much of what happens in it is decided by men speaking to other men: "If we don't have full dialogue, with women represented ... we are never going to be able to embody what the Gospel of Jesus is about."

**Rosemary Radford Ruether**

Perhaps the leading Catholic feminist theologian of our time, Ruether, born in Minnesota in 1936, is an advocate of women's ordination whose academic critique of the male-centric nature of Christianity and, specifically, Catholicism, sprang from her experience with the civil rights movement in Mississippi and collaboration with Latin American liberation theologians. She has written pioneering studies of eco-feminism and important studies of the Christian roots of antisemitism. Her struggle to deal with her son David's mental illness is chronicled in *Many Forms of Madness*, a devastating critique of the mental-health system in the US.

### **Deborah Rose-Milavec**

Director of the organisation FutureChurch, Rose-Milavec has a quarter-of-a-century's experience of working in community and church-based organisations. She has a master's degree in theology, and trained as a lay pastoral minister in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. She has worked for organisations assisting victims of domestic violence. FutureChurch focuses on the shortage of (male) priestly candidates, and how parishes can be kept alive.

### **Virginia Saldana**

Saldana is a theologian and journalist based in Mumbai, and the former executive secretary of the Office of Laity and Family at the Asian Catholic Bishops' Forum; she also headed the Indian Women Theologians' Forum. As a campaigning journalist, she has written about abuse in the Catholic Church in Asia, especially the abuse of children and of female Religious. Women Religious, she wrote in a recent blog, give the Church its credibility: yet many nuns suffer grief and harassment at the hands of clerics. She quotes one nun as saying: "We need to stop this male domination in our Church. We are equal and need to stand together for our rights."

### **Lucetta Scaraffia**

A history professor and journalist, in 2012 Scaraffia founded a Vatican magazine called *Women Church World*. Seven years later she and the entire editorial team resigned after what they described as a campaign to discredit them after the publication of an article on the widespread abuse of nuns by priests and bishops. She told *The New Yorker* in 2018 that she does not want women to be priests, nor does she want the Pope to upend the Church's positions on sexual mores, but she believes that women can and should take on a larger role in the Church's decisions – they need to make "concrete political moves", and ask "for things we can actually obtain".

### **Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**

As a young woman in post-Second World War Germany, the Romanian-born Schüssler hatched a plan to become a professional theologian in the Catholic Church. She was the first woman to study the philosophy course she took – it had been designed for seminarians – and she quickly began to combine rigorous scholarship with a feminist reading of the Bible and the recovery of the contribution of women in the early Church. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* has been translated into 13 languages.

### **Anne Soupa**

When Soupa, a theologian and biblical scholar, put herself forward to be the Archbishop of



Lyon in 2020, 18,000 people signed a petition backing her candidacy. “Is there only one model of a bishop – that of a single, elderly man dressed in black?” she asked. Of course, Soupa had no possibility of being offered the role, but her stand focused attention on the Church’s attitude towards women, and has sparked a movement in France under which women put themselves forward for church posts that are only open to men. After the election of Pope Francis in 2013, Soupa had high hopes for women in the Church; seven years later, she said: “Nothing has changed.”

### **Casey Stanton**

Stanton, 35, is the founder of Discerning Deacons, a project that engages Catholics in active discernment about women deacons. She says she seeks ordination as a deacon because it would expand the possibilities for her to serve in the Church. She believes the focus should be on the Church’s most urgent needs, and the relevant question is: Could women deacons help the Church of today further its mission in the world?

### **Shanon Sterringer**

A pastoral minister for more than two decades in a parish on the shores of Lake Erie, in Ohio, Sterringer now leads an inclusive Christian community based in a converted Byzantine church. One of her two doctorates was on women’s leadership in the Church; the other was on Hildegard of Bingen. The non-profit organisation she set up, called the Hildegarden, developed into Hildegard Haus, the home of the Community of St Hildegard, which offers retreats, workshops, educational programmes and worship led by Sterringer – all available online.

### **Natalia Teguhputri**

Born in Indonesia, to parents who had converted to Catholicism, Teguhputri moved to Australia aged 17 to study commerce at university. A few years later, she founded The Waterjars, which uses a combination of business profit and donations from workers’ salaries to support charities. The name of the initiative refers to Christ’s first miracle at Cana.

### **Marie-Jo Thiel**

A French medical doctor and theologian, Thiel teaches at the faculty of Catholic Theology in Strasbourg. An ethics expert, her works include the award-winning *Where is Medicine Going?*, and she teaches and lectures around the world.

### **Doris Wagner Reisinger**

Reisinger, a philosopher, theologian and writer, is a critic of the structures and cultures within Catholicism that keep women in a position of unquestioning obedience to a religious superior.

She joined a religious community in Germany aged 19, and after what she has described as several years of spiritual abuse she was sexually assaulted by her superior, an Austrian priest. Reisinger is at the forefront of the #NunsToo movement.

### **Carolyn Woo**

Woo is ex-president of Catholic Relief Services and the former dean of the business school at the University of Notre Dame. She headed an organisation of 5,000 employees working in 93 countries on anti-poverty programmes, with an annual budget of \$600 million.

### **Phyllis Zagano**

Zagano, 74, is an acclaimed lecturer on contemporary spirituality and women's issues in the Church. A member of the Papal Commission for the study of the diaconate of women, she has argued forcefully for many years for the ordination of women to the diaconate. An adjunct professor of religion at Hofstra University in New York, her books include *Women: Icons of Christ* (2020).

This article was written by Joanna Moorhead and was originally published in [The Tablet](#) and published on March 2, 2022. Reprinted with permission.

## **SR JOAN CHITTISTER – AUSTRALIA 2022**



Joan Chittister osb, an American Benedictine, and a Practical Theologian embodies the voice of wisdom and experience. Her prophetic views on justice and equality, especially for women in the church, challenges those who would silence women and people at the margins. Through her call to uncommon courage she can help us re-discover the place of religion in our society through a spirituality of engagement, so that we can all work together to reform the clerical culture that has shattered so many and damaged us all.

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## HOW MOLLY BURHANS IS HELPING THE CHURCH FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE



At first, Molly Burhans thought she'd be a ballet dancer.

It had been her dream through middle school, her focus in high school, and her major in college—until a foot injury caused her to drop out and move back home to Buffalo, New York.

Although that seemed like a setback, it placed her on a path to becoming possibly the most awarded and well-known Catholic environmentalist in the world at this moment. She is almost certainly the most well-known cartographer. In 2021 the Sierra Club honored the then 32-year-old with its EarthCare Award, previously awarded to the likes of David Attenborough and the John Muir Trust. In 2019 Burhans was named Young Champion of the Earth by the United Nations. In 2018 she was elected to the Ashoka Fellowship for her innovations in applying new technology to help the Catholic Church respond to climate change. She has participated in the Vatican Youth Symposium, the Vatican Arts and Technology Council, and the United Nations Youth Assembly. She has been an invited speaker at Harvard University, Yale University, and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Stories have been written about her in the *Boston Globe*, *America* magazine, *Forbes*, and *The New Yorker*. She is planning a TED Talk.

When she was 18 and back in Buffalo, she squatted in an old, abandoned mansion with a group of fellow Freegans—a commune-style community loosely organized around not spending money and living off what other people throw away. The Freegans became urban guerilla gardeners, and the seeds of Burhans' future were sown: She started to see how to make land work for good.

In Buffalo her mother, Debra, taught data analytics, cybersecurity, and computer science at Canisius College. Her father, William, was a senior cancer scientist at Roswell Park Cancer Institute (he died of prostate cancer in 2019). Molly Burhans grew up teaching herself software programs and building computer graphics, a foreshadowing of her future profession.

Although she attended parochial school and Canisius, a Catholic college, neither she nor her family were particularly religious. As Burhans studied philosophy, theology, and physics and read about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, she experienced one of what she calls her “two conversions.”

“I thought all these people who believed in God were nuts!” says Burhans. “But I began to think, ‘What if science could cure every disease and we could live forever?’ Why would we want eternal life if it was anything but love? And God is love.”

Burhans began having long discussions with a Jesuit spiritual mentor and working through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a collection of meditations and prayers to deepen one’s relationship with God.

She wondered if she was crazy. “I went to the doctor. I said, ‘I believe in God,’ and thought I might have had a concussion or something,” she admits. The doctor asked her, “Do you believe you are God?” When she said no, he pronounced her healthy.

She traveled to Guatemala to work for six months with several NGOs, where she met “real saints, not television ‘Christians.’ They were mothers, supporting villages that had been decimated by genocide. They were doctors, bringing their expertise to help people without resources,” she says. In the healing work of these workers, caring for the land and using it to provide sustainably played a critical role.

Burhans wondered if she was being called to become a nun. Back home, she continued her undergraduate studies and volunteered at a local convent. The convent’s sprawling grounds of forest and grass lawns made her imagine other ways to use that land that might benefit the community, such as growing food and managing the woodlands responsibly.

“I thought, if I’m going to be a nun, I need to study sustainable land management and design and bring that to the order,” says Burhans. She imagined becoming some kind of regenerative land steward, perhaps a nun park ranger or nun farmer.

Her second conversion was an ecological one. She researched how the Catholic Church used its properties and discovered it is the largest nongovernmental landholder on the planet. No one is really sure how many acres it has, she says, but some estimates say it is more than 177 million

acres—more than France and Spain put together.

If climate change is to be addressed with intelligent stewardship, never mind simple effectiveness, the Catholic Church would have to get involved, Burhans reasoned. Her faith and professional passions merged, and she saw a new path forward for herself.

She enrolled in a master's program in ecological design at the Conway School in Massachusetts, where she worked with ArcMap, a software that organizes information geographically, layering data onto maps in ways that help visualize connections and relationships. She built a school project analysis of the habitat conditions of urban corridors that might attract bees, butterflies, and other pollinators.

Her ability to work so inventively with the complex program impressed the faculty—and the software manufacturer, Esri, which provided her an essential program license and other support as she began to move toward the work she increasingly felt called to do.

Since the largest worldwide networks of health care and education were Catholic, Burhans assumed there would also be a Catholic network of nature conservancy. If so, she wanted to work with it. She saw applications for how the church might make use of visual storytelling and data sharing.

Her passion for her faith is inextricably bound up with her passion for environmentalism. To her, the church is ethically required to care passionately for the earth as well.

“I asked my little network of Jesuit and nun friends and my renegade laypeople interested in environmentalism: ‘Who in the church is doing this work? I’m sure since we have the largest network of aid in the world that we must have the largest network of conservation,’” says Burhans. “And the answer was, ‘No, we don’t.’ Wow! What a gap!”

She appeared uniquely positioned to fill this gap. She founded GoodLands, a nonprofit organization aimed at visually mapping the global landholdings of the Catholic Church, creating visual data that would assist in decision-making and strategic planning around sustainability efforts.

The advantages of making this happen were clear to Burhans. “[The church owns] more land than pretty much anyone, the planet is in dire straits, and in the next century we will see migration across borders,” she says. “A transnational property owner can help with peacekeeping and supporting refugees in a way that no nation alone could do. We can help with biodiversity preservation, with all these environmental factors that are so determinative of human health and multiply our Christian vision.”

But first, the church needed to know what it owned, where its lands were located, and what geographic constraints and challenges existed nearby. In short, it needed a map.

And Burhans discovered by working locally that even for one individual parish tracing land ownership and use could be confounding. Most records were not digitized or accessible; many were out-of-date.

In 2016 Burhans spoke at a Catholic Relief Services conference in Nairobi, Kenya about how digital information, including mapped data, could support and plan sustainability efforts. On her way home, she stopped in Rome, and the then 26-year-old bravely began emailing officials at the Vatican, hoping someone might point her toward where to find more comprehensive digital records of the church's holdings.

"I had this sense at 26 that someone should get their hands around this," she says. "I had no powerful network. I was in Buffalo working with some nuns at a soup kitchen. I knew this idea was way too big for me."

Remarkably, the Vatican's Office of the Secretariat of State agreed to meet with her. Burhans asked for the cartography department—there wasn't one—and where church maps were kept. Two priests pointed to ancient painted frescoes. And then there was the *Atlas Hierarchicus*, published in 1901 with hand-drawn and now largely inaccurate boundaries.

She'd been thinking there'd be a room like NASA has with giant monitors and dashboards of continually updated digital information. At a time when a few keyboard clicks can access the great libraries of the world, it was startling to discover that the Vatican was not yet highly digitized and that some of its own data was not readily accessible.

"They couldn't make a global map because there wasn't a global church," says Burhans. "But even governments don't know what they have. The church is not alone in this."

Her focus switched from analyzing data to searching out data.

Adding to the complexity, there's a wide variety of land usage among church properties: monasteries, rectories, convents, agricultural lands, strips of urban real estate, and surprisingly eccentric holdings such as an "entire commercial district in one of Germany's largest cities," an "entire mountain in the Middle East," and "oil wells in Los Angeles," according to Burhans. "The network is mind-boggling when you dig into it. There's this diversity of investment, and tracking it can go awry."

Pope Francis—with whom Burhans met briefly in 2018—expressed interest in establishing at

least a pilot Vatican cartography effort with Burhans at the helm. This past fall, GoodLands developed a full proposal for what undertaking such an endeavor would require. The proposal is still with the Vatican.

Meanwhile, individual Catholic relief groups, orders, and dioceses have brought projects to Burhans—many of which she undertook pro bono. Five people out of her current staff of eight are volunteers.

“There are bishops all over the world, religious orders all over the world, asking for our work,” Burhans says. “I’ve worked with half the Ivy Leagues and am scraping by financially, but my poverty is a microphone. I claim that poverty with pride. We do not sell board seats. We will not work with funders that have ties to real estate agendas. We never had a dime of unrestricted funding, ever.”

She’s had offers of funding that were linked to GoodLands turning over data, and she’s turned them down. “I am not an anticorruption activist—that’s work for investigative journalists and Catholics who care about their church. But I will not sell out the church. The integrity of our data must be pristine,” she says. Burhans is focused right now on creating a business model that will allow GoodLands to generate enough income on some projects to keep the doors open and allow her to hire staff while still focusing on nonprofit work.

Some data can be shared publicly. On the [GoodLands website](#), more than 100 interactive maps are available, exploring topics like which dioceses have the largest carbon footprint and which regions have the most significant shortages of priests.

She does this work with an awareness of how colonization, politics, and corruption helped shape and influence the scope and nature of the church’s landholdings—and how palpable the current sense of shame around those issues can be for both church officials and parishioners.

The work of communicating what any large organization owns can run the risk of exposing information that has comfortably slumbered for decades—even centuries. “It’s not our job to trace colonization or corruption,” says Burhans. “There may be some shame in knowing what we have, but we must face it intelligently and respectfully if we are to make things better.”

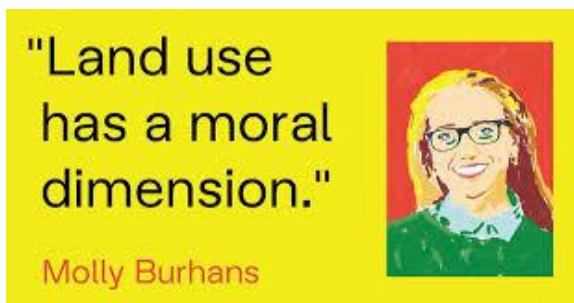
Take the oil wells in Los Angeles. “Oil is obviously a huge environmental issue,” says Burhans. “But before we start blaming, we need to recognize that those oil wells are not owned by a massive corporation, and they enable kids to get a good education. Instead of saying, ‘You guys are terrible!’ we need to meet in the middle and all get better together, discussing things like, ‘How can we help this company divest its holdings and become greener?’ ”

Most historical conflict has been about land and/or religion, so wading into this arena is bound to raise anxiety, Burhans realizes. Land activists around the world receive death threats—Burhans included—and there are security issues to confront when accessing and analyzing information that some people may not wish to be made visible. “Land and religion are the two things we probably fought most about,” she says. “But these are also the two things that have been the most powerful, transformative levers of change.”

There are important uses for map data that reach beyond Burhans’ environmental focus. *The New Yorker* reported on GoodLands’ mapping of abuse cases involving about 450 Catholic priests, tracing them geographically and depicting layers of visual data including accusations, convictions, and sentences. The maps help reveal that in dioceses where formal policies protective of minors were in place, the numbers of cases dropped.

Mapping data about Catholic health care and education may also help the church track usage, identify future needs, and place resources where they are most effective, suggests Burhans.

One-off projects for specific dioceses or regions are meaningful and helpful, but Burhans looks beyond those to her vision of being able to globally envision where the church is on the planet and how it might play a pivotal role in addressing migration and climate change and maximizing the productive potential of its lands.



“We are brought here to be excellent and show big love—that’s what being Catholic is about,” says Burhans. “We are brought here to respect the science of Gregor Mendel and others. We are brought here to not regress in fear—but to take the best science, the best technology, the best

understanding of the world and create novel collaborations and move forward with integrity. I have so much hope that if we can make our land work for good, we will not only solve the climate crisis but also fix and revolutionize our relation to God’s creation.”

Her spiritual and ecological conversions were symbiotic, each sparking and deepening the other. At this moment, Burhans remains in an ongoing process of discernment about whether to become a nun and precisely how her spiritual and vocational lives might interact. Although not quite ballet, it is, after all, a sort of dance.

This article was written by Pamela Hill Nettleton and originally published in [US Catholic](#) on March 22, 2022. Reprinted with permission.



## A ST BRIGID PILGRIMAGE: WOMAN OF FIRE

One way that the pandemic has affected me is to prompt more walking. But if the struggle for gender equality in the Church means anything, I need to exercise it myself, and so it was that after a couple of pilgrimages to the sites of male saints, I decided that my next pilgrimage must be in honour of a woman.

When I heard from a Brigidine sister that the fifth-century Irish saint, Brigid of Kildare, had been ordained as a bishop, my ears pricked up.



My friend advised me to make the pilgrimage for St Brigid's Day, 1 February, when a week of events begin in Kildare, and suggested that I could begin in Glendalough. It was an odd time of year to begin a pilgrimage (long before Chaucer's April-showers weather), but at least it meant that this walk would be different in more ways than just being female-centred. Winter not summer. Ireland not Britain. Self-planned, not following a prepared route.

When I began my pilgrimage in frosty January, I was just beginning to discover Brigid through a little book (now out of print but being updated), *Rekindling the Flame: A Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Brigid of Kildare* by Rita

Minehan, whom I later met in Kildare. Brigid had been born a slave, daughter of a slave mother and a chieftain father, but became a towering figure in Irish history, travelling the country and setting up innovative religious houses all over the land.

In Kildare, she founded a double monastery (i.e. monks and nuns), which became a model for future European monasteries, exceptional not only for its hospitality and advocacy of the poor, but also for its learning and artistic excellence. It had a dairy, a hospital, schools and a high-quality scriptorium.

But Brigid was also a shepherd, a milker of cows and a churner of butter; and she became a skilled midwife. Her generosity to the poor was such that her father tried to sell this slave girl on before she bankrupted him – and even as he spoke about this to the King of Leinster, she

was giving away his valuable sword to a leper to sell. The king told him she was “too holy and exalted to be either bought or sold” and donated another sword in replacement.

Most of the Brigid legends are laced with miracles, but one that we can take at face value shows her opposition to legalism. When a kind but poor host had prepared a meal for two of her nuns, and they had refused to eat it because it was Lent, she was so cross with them that she drove them out of the refectory.

Glendalough embraces the ruined “monastic city” of sixth-century St Kevin, who had lived as a hermit among the rocks at the lakeside. I began my pilgrimage with a full day in the spiritual ambience of this historic place nestling in the Wicklow Mountains, staying in the Mercy Sisters’ Hermitage Centre. There was a creative prayer time twice a day before a blackened yew-tree tabernacle, thousands of years old and vaguely evocative of a pilgrim walking and stretching an arm to the heavens.

Next to us was a meditation garden and a labyrinth: I walked the spiralling path, diverted this way and that as I reflected on the ebbs and flows of my life, and finally discovered myself at the centre.

Daylight hours are short in winter, so I set off on 29 January just before sunrise. I was walking alone, and had arranged for my luggage to be driven over to my next B&B. I began by entering the ruined cathedral in the monastic city and asking St Kevin to accompany me in my search for the woman who just one generation earlier had inspired him.

Some short prayers from Rita Minehan’s book were apt:

*Circle us, Lord, keep protection near and danger afar.*

*Circle us, Lord, keep hope within and doubt without.*

*Circle us, Lord, keep light near and darkness afar.*

*Bless to us, O God, the earth beneath our feet.*

*Bless to us, O God, the path whereon we go.*

*Bless to us, O God, the people whom we meet.*

Then I was off, following the little yellow monk with a staff and a cowl who was the waymark symbol for St Kevin’s Way, which was to form my route for the first day. It led me along the course of a mountain stream, and when I came to a dozen large stepping stones, I could not resist crossing the river and back, from sheer delight. Cold was never a problem, for walking builds up body heat and I was well wrapped up, but wind and damp were challenging as I rose higher and higher towards the Wicklow Gap.

The views were stunning, but at times the wind knocked me backwards, and I was glad to have put on waterproof over-trousers as wet, cold jeans are a misery.

From the Wicklow Gap, the route followed a broad path alongside a forest, but there were big muddy patches, and it was slow work searching for footholds between the barbed wire on one side and the spiky pine branches on the other. I passed only one other walker in all my journey, who was coming in the other direction and sounded French. He had camped out overnight. “It was cold,” he said cheerfully. When I reached a stretch of road, I decided to stick to tarmac from then on: it would be a longer distance and the gale was strong on the road, but given a choice of wind and mud, I preferred to suffer wind.

Luckily, I wavered in my resolve when I came to the next little yellow monk, and could not resist exploring where he would lead me. I was so glad I did, as the next stretch proved the most delightful part of the walk, and a double row of firm boardwalks studded with non-slip nails made progress swift over the irregular forest floor. The words ran through my head, “A highway for our God ... the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain” (Isaiah 40: 3-4). The path took me to the most enchanting picnic spot – a grassy bank, with a flat stone for my feet, by the bend of a stream that formed a clear pool and then tumbled over rocks, and to the side a pretty footbridge.

When St Kevin’s Way emerged on to road again at Ballinagee Bridge, the route divided and I took the stretch to Vallemount, where I had booked a B&B. All was road now, but with sweeping landscapes and almost completely free of vehicles. I reached the house comfortably before nightfall, and settled warmly in front of a stove to study the map and choose the quietest roads to walk the next morning.

I then heard on the news from Britain that there had been such a severe storm that two people had been killed, and another storm was forecast for the morrow. I assumed that the wet gales buffeting me had been the fringe of this tempest, and I saw my local weather forecast was predicting rain and wind the next afternoon. It was, therefore, crucial that I should start early and make all speed. As I set out, I checked my walking speed – it was 3.5 m.p.h. – and I did not dare stop even while eating my sandwiches. I told myself to keep going, because even when I was tired my speed only fell to 2.8 m.p.h., and any time spent resting would not be made up.

Just before one o’clock, the first patters of rain began. I went on walking while taking off my rucksack, opening the pocket, unfolding my rain cape and searching for the holes for my head and arms – all while trying to juggle the crumbly sandwich that I was still eating and my mobile phone on which I was checking my route.

Despite the distance walked that day, which my Strava app revealed to be 22 miles, I reached my destination by 3 p.m. I was now within the grassy Curragh plain, also known as Brigid's Pastures, with its lightly rolling hillocks and yellow gorse bushes. My B&B was tucked away from the road with nothing in view but sky, grass and sheep.

Brigid had been responsible for making the Curragh free grazing land for the poor, after acquiring the territory through an alleged miracle. The King of Leinster had agreed to give her as much land as her cloak would cover, and according to the legend her mantle spread out until it covered the entire Curragh region of nearly 5,000 acres.

For the final day's walk, I set out eagerly, and I loved being able to walk across the pits and furrows of the grassland instead of along roads.

I needed to arrive at the Brigidine Sisters' Centre of Solas Bhríde (Light of Brigid) in Kildare in good time, for the celebrations of Féile Bríde (Feast of Brigid) began that evening of 31 January.

Again, a prayer from Rita Minehan's book fitted my journey:

*O Brigid, Mary of the Gael,  
May your protection never fail.  
Spread your mantle over me,  
Where e'er I pass, where e'er I be.  
Weather foul or weather fair,  
Keep me in your loving care.*

The title "Mary of the Gael" is an ancient one, and reflects the supreme importance of Brigid for Ireland, alongside Jesus' mother. The imagery of a protective cloak forming a shelter for the people is associated with both women. There is also similarity in the way that Brigid's intercession is sometimes elided into language that identifies her influence with God's action, so that it evokes the divine feminine in the same way as much Mariological language:

*Woman of fire, woman of light ...  
Set our bones ablaze with the fire of your love  
for the poor, the dispossessed.*

"Woman of fire" refers to a perpetual flame that had apparently burned in Brigid's abbey for over 1,000 years, until it was extinguished in the sixteenth-century suppression of the monasteries. Fire had been associated with a pre-Christian goddess of the same name, but St Brigid had transformed the ancient Celtic tradition into the light of Christ.

That evening at Brigid's Wayside Well, we bore lighted candles and sang to her as herald of the spring, as the goddess before her had been:

*We sing a song to Brigid, Brigid brings the spring,  
Awakens all the fields and the flowers, and calls the birds to sing.*

There were splashed blessings of well water and a procession back to the centre, where clumps of the first snowdrops confirmed the start of spring. We gathered in front of a bronze statue by Timothy P. Schmalz, which shows a young and lively Brigid in a monastic cowl, blessing with one hand and holding her crozier in the other. Around her are small panels of Brigid milking a cow, delivering a baby, giving away her father's sword, attending to a beggar, sharing spiritual conversation with a soul friend, overseeing the double monastery and being ordained bishop.

The ordination also features in a stained glass window in St Brigid's Cathedral, Kildare, and the verger proudly pointed out that since they are an Anglican cathedral, they have a woman bishop over them once more. Over the next days I was able to read more about Brigid's alleged ordination, which inevitably will arouse the curiosity of readers, as it did mine.

The story is found in a ninth-century life of Brigid called the Bethu Brigitte (among other sources), and lest anyone suspect me of doctoring the account, here is what it says: "The bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognise what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigid with the orders of a bishop. 'This virgin alone in Ireland,' said [Bishop] Mel, 'will hold the episcopal ordination.' While she was being consecrated, a fiery column ascended from her head." It would be anachronistic to suggest that the bishop was intending to extend ordination to women: he barely realised what he was doing until he had done it. The point of the story is that God chose Brigid for this office because she was exceptional, and confirmed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with a divine sign. It was no mistake.

It is clear from the ancient accounts that Brigid took part, along with other bishops, in their episcopal activities, and some hold that, as abbess of a double monastery, her rank was equal or more than equal to that of bishop.

The Bethu Brigitte story is repeated in an eleventh-century Life with the explanation: "Wherefore the men of Ireland from that time to this give episcopal honour to Brigid's successor." But in 1152 (six centuries after Brigid), the Kells/Mellifont synod ruled that abbesses of Kildare should not be accorded episcopal honours.

But the Irish people do not feel bothered by the controversy. They just get on with honouring

Brigid, and increasingly so, for from next year there will be a new annual public holiday on St Brigid's Day.

Many speakers said that 1993 had been a turning point for them, when Brigid's fire was lit again in the Market Square of Kildare in an inspiring liturgy. Since then, the Brigidines have kept the flame burning.

A virtual reality show in the Kildare Heritage Centre declares that while Patrick is "the saint of the Church", Brigid is "the saint of the people".

There are many folk customs associated with her, especially the making of the Brigid cross, woven out of rushes and with a pretty, lopsided shape, as though dancing. Brigid had made such a cross with rushes from the floor while attending a dying chieftain, and telling him about the love of the one who died on the Cross, which led him to request baptism. Now there are Brigid crosses everywhere, and I was given three.

I also saw how much Brigid was "the saint of the people" in an *Irish Times* article of 30 January. It spoke of the tours, debates, films, podcasts, concerts, exhibitions and rollerskating events in Dublin, all celebrating women's role in Irish history and Brigid as a feminist pioneer – but not a whisper of anything to do with the Church.

Brigid's iconography, too, is changing. The older portrayals have her in an all-encompassing nunnish habit, but always with a crozier; the new images are wild and colourful, showing her with flowing red hair in flaming red or Irish green robes. "Inspiring descendants past and to come, her creative flame fires eternal," said Irish singer Imelda May. "It's time to thank her. It's time to heal. It's about time."

This article was written by Margaret Hebblethwaite, and first appeared in [The Tablet](#) on and published on March 16, 2022. Reprinted with permission.



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*Margaret Keyes is on the WATAC Committee and is our pastoral care officer. Marg is keen to keep in touch with WATAC members who may be ill or need a chat. You can call Marg M: 0401 119 112*

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Extract from the weekly newsletter of [Discerning Deacons](#), April 20, 2022

*We are moved by Pope Francis' Easter Vigil homily in which he invites the faithful to “allow the women of the Gospel to lead us by the hand, so that, with them, we may glimpse the first rays of the dawn of God’s life rising in the darkness of our world.” Through this light of resurrection which the women saw, heard and proclaimed, the pope said, we can experience the risen Christ in which death becomes a passage to the stirrings of new life.*

*Sr. Joan Chittister reminds us that Easter calls us to our own resurrection by being willing to find God where God is and opening ourselves to the world around us with a listening ear.*

*And as we enter the third year of the pandemic, Kimberly Lymore on Catholic Women Preach, asks the question, “What have you put in a tomb over the last two years that needs resurrecting?” Easter, she says, “is a reminder that we are a resurrection people who have the power to resurrect those things in our lives that have been buried.”*

WATAC Committee 2022

Andrea Dean, President, Dr Tracy McEwan, Vice President, Karyn Green, Treasurer, Dr Danielle Lynch, Secretary, Laraine Jeffs, Margaret Keyes, Rachel McLean, Debra Zanella, Cathy Corbett, Philippa Wicksey.

Angela Maquis: Administrative Assistant

**Many WATAC members have renewed their membership for 2022, thank you!**

**Easiest option is to renew via our website**

**[www.watac.net.au](http://www.watac.net.au)**

# WATAC GROUPS

**SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND:** For more information contact *Denise O'Shea*

Phone: 0423 207662 or email: [2shea@inet.net.au](mailto:2shea@inet.net.au)

## NSW

**EASTERN SUBURBS:** This Group hasn't met since the Covid restrictions. Maureen Brian and Faye Lawrence are planning to share the hosting. Please let us know of your interest in our starting up again and share any ideas for the group. You can telephone Faye if you wish to enquire more or make any suggestions on 9665 2580 or email [flawren@bigpond.net.au](mailto:flawren@bigpond.net.au).

**ENGADINE:** Group meets on the third Monday of the month in a member's home at 7.30pm. For more information contact *Margaret Keyes* - Phone: 9520 4240 or email: [keyes888@bigpond.com](mailto:keyes888@bigpond.com)

**INNER CITY:** Group usually meets on the third Monday of each month. For more information contact *Margaret Cody* Phone: 9692 9384 Mob: 0419 426 174 or email: [margaret.cody1@bigpond.com](mailto:margaret.cody1@bigpond.com)

**LEURA:** Group meets on the fourth Saturday morning of the month at 227 The Mall, Leura, at 10 am. All welcome. For more information contact *Monica Bright* Phone: 4757 3943 or email: [mbright45@bigpond.com](mailto:mbright45@bigpond.com)

**MILTON/ULLADULLA:** If you are interested in meeting in this region please contact *Andrea Dean* [chair@watac.net.au](mailto:chair@watac.net.au)

**PARRAMATTA:** If you are interested in meeting in this region please contact *Andrea Dean* [chair@watac.net.au](mailto:chair@watac.net.au)

## ACT

**CANBERRA:** Group meets on second Sunday of the month, 3.30-5.30 pm at Narrabundah. For more information contact *Andrea Dean* Phone: 0487 388 873 or email [andrea@futurematters.net.au](mailto:andrea@futurematters.net.au)

## VIC

**CASTLEMAINE REFLECTIONS:** We welcome this new group. For details please contact Trish Sharkey. Mob: 0414 937 357 Email: [patricia.sharkey63@gmail.com](mailto:patricia.sharkey63@gmail.com)

**ONLINE BOOK GROUP:** Meets monthly via Zoom. Contact *Tracy McEwan* [events@watac.net.au](mailto:events@watac.net.au)

Australian Registered Body Number: 655 965 450

Registered office: C/- Public Officer 8 Station Street, Petersham NSW 2049