

# Introduction

---

Westchester is a part of Los Angeles that most people just drive through on their way to the airport. It is an area not known for progressive politics. But all that is changing...

— *la.indymedia.org*, April 2007<sup>2</sup>

This is the story of a neighborhood, a fairly unremarkable small section within the sprawling metropolis that is Los Angeles. It's a story about neighbors and families, an open-minded priest, a charming little church, and an idea from a novel that quickly grew far beyond its pages to flourish in real life.

In spring 2005, I was writing about the environmental future of Los Angeles. My story included a circle of fictional characters who worked together on environmental issues. "We're a loose affiliation of people who are all working toward a Sustainable future . . . There are times when this journey gets really challenging, and it's good to know you're not alone."

When my friend and neighbor Melanie read the early manuscript, she declared, "We need a group like that!" And she set out to make it so.

Our homeschool network often used a small neighborhood church hall for our gatherings. It's a cute little place built in 1946 with a picturesque white steeple. When the homeschoolers began using it, it was somewhat run down. Then a new priest came to the parish—Father Peter. We knew him by name, but that was it. At that time there was little connection; few of us homeschoolers knew the churchgoers. And few in either group were active in environmental efforts within the local community.

At a reception following the children's music recitals, amid boisterous kids and flying brownie crumbs, Melanie cornered me and introduced Peter. Melanie's idea of environmental meetings caught Peter's attention. A young member of his parish had recently completed a college report on the evils of

styrofoam, and Peter hoped to build upon this. With an expansive vision of what constitutes a community, he dreamed of offering environmental movies and awareness-raising gatherings.

In January 2006 our still-nameless environmental group held its first meeting to a sparse gathering: Melanie and another of our friends, plus five church parishioners Peter had enticed to come.

*We are the change-makers, who adopt features of Sustainable living ahead of the crowd.*

*We seek the ideas out; we try them. We engage in the conversation of how to refine solutions.*

*We massage the solutions into practicality, and we model them for others to see.*

*We show the mainstream, through our actions and our everyday living, that environmental change is possible, it is enticing, it is fun, and it is desirable.*<sup>3</sup>

In the face of global warming and climate change, the end of cheap oil, toxic buildups in our soils and air and waterways, and related social impacts, humanity is at a turning point in history. The message is coming at us from all directions: *We must change our societal ways.*

"Think globally; act locally," the bumper-sticker wisdom, is advocated by many scientists and environmental thinkers. Yet our massive economic and political systems don't reward corporations and governments for taking this course. It comes back

to people. We need aware consumers, committed groups of citizens, and courageous local leaders.

In our neighborhood in Los Angeles, we discovered that people are waking up. Many people want to “do something.” But in many cases, they don’t know what to do or how to do it. Our community group—the Environmental Change-Makers—shares environmental solutions and helps each other embrace these solutions in our everyday lives.

Environmental Change-Makers is a unique hybrid. It is a partnership between secular environmentalists and progressive church people. We

---

The converging challenges of peak oil and climate change mean that change—on an almost unimaginable scale—is coming whether we want it or not.

—Rob Hopkins, founder of the  
*Transition Towns movement*<sup>4</sup>

---

focus on positive solutions, emphasizing “What We Can Do” about our environmental issues. Environmental Change-Makers is about action: creating grassroots lifestyle changes and rallying our collective voices for top-down impact on society. We live the “think globally; act locally” slogan. As we consider the impact of global warming and other pervasive environmental issues, we implement positive solutions within our personal lives and our neighborhood.

In an area rich with guzzler SUVs and oversized houses, the Change-Makers have become a peer group where “greener” is the thing to do. We no longer feel like lone weirdos doing “that enviro stuff.” We’re a peer group where it’s cool to talk about the about the crawly critters you found in your compost or to share a tip about discounted rainwater barrels.

We celebrate individual victories, small and large, as our Change-Makers switch to cloth napkins or plant a dwarf fruit tree in a pot on the patio. Regular attendees now include local environmentalists as well as leaders from other churches in the area. Our online mailing list reaches several hundred people throughout the Los Angeles area.

Our growing list of accomplishments brings us great pride. We have fun together at Edible Landscaping Garden Tours, 100-mile potlucks, and Vegetable/Herb Seed Swaps. We rallied local support

for some of the Union of Concerned Scientists’ efforts toward global warming legislation. We hosted one of the sites for the groundbreaking “Step It Up” national campaign calling for action on global warming. We’ve been guests on Los Angeles radio and television. Our Earth Care Fair showcases environmental solutions for our local community on an annual basis.

Our monthly meetings have included topics like Greener Vehicles, Water-Wise Landscaping, and What We Can Do About Global Warming. And we’ve grown far beyond our humble nine-person beginning. A meeting featuring actor and environmentalist Ed Begley, Jr., drew more than 150 people. At another session, more than 65 attendees (including 22 children) constructed 35 solar cookers and learned how to use them.

Looking back it seems incredible that two short years ago, as church parish members and unaffiliated neighbors, few of us knew each other. Banding together around environmental causes has created a new sense of community.

### Solutions for Precisely These Times

As we were writing this book, climactic disruption was becoming painfully obvious. Early 2008 saw catastrophic storms in Burma and the U.S. Midwest. Forecasts for summer 2008 anticipated record levels of melting in the Arctic permafrost.

Meanwhile, we saw major stumbling in the economic markets, housing markets, the banking world, and the stock market. Unemployment figures climbed to the worst in decades. World food prices climbed and oil prices skyrocketed. Economic “growth” has slowed to a crawl.

Life as we’ve always known it is crumbling.

It’s tempting, in times like these, to hold on more tightly to the ways we’ve known. *I’ll think about the environment after I get my job back on track. Later.*

We’re here to tell you that “later” is now.

The crises we’re seeing are mere symptoms. Holding on more tightly to the ways we’ve always known is wishful thinking; it won’t solve the root problems.

As we’ll explain in these pages, environmental change-making gets to the core of those underlying problems. Environmental change-making is much more than “buying greener.” Environmental change-making is about transformation. It’s a change in our

underlying attitudes about ourselves, our surroundings, our fellow human beings, and this small planet we call home. Environmental change-making means helping cultivate a shift in our entire society: *a shift to a life-sustaining civilization.*

It's precisely the kind of change we must make at this point in history.

### **A Handbook for Creating Change**

The Environmental Change-Makers quickly became an established group within Los Angeles environmental circles. In March 2007 the Change-Makers were recognized by the City of Los Angeles and Councilman Bill Rosendahl for our "great work for the environment of the Westchester community, the City of Los Angeles, and the entire planet." When nearby Culver City began drafting its Sustainable Community Plan, they asked the Environmental Change-Makers to contribute. We were among the invited guests when Westchester's Loyola Marymount University signed the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment.

As we were welcomed at earth fairs and green events, people expressed their yearning to have a group like ours in their own local neighborhoods. I drafted a four-page handout to describe how we created the group. Then, the bishop of the Los Angeles Episcopal diocese, the Right Reverend J. Jon Bruno, learned about the Environmental Change-Makers and asked us to write this book.

In these pages we have tried to capture the essence of the Environmental Change-Makers. Chapters 1 and 2 provide an introduction to change-making, including personal examples of why those of us in the Westchester group feel we are called upon to do it.

Chapter 3 is about leadership. Here we explain what Peter and I do and what it takes to rally and lead change-making within your local community.

Chapter 4 explains why "local" is important, both as a starting place and as an environmental solution.

Chapter 5 reveals how we run our group. We offer concrete how-to's so that you can do it too. As you form a group of your own, you'll find even more "nuts and bolts" information in Appendix 2. Appendix 3 offers a selection from the handouts we've created—specific greening tips, "What We Can Do" about significant portions of our modern life.

Chapters 6 and 7 include guidance on leader-

ship and group dynamics. If you're intending to "green" an existing circle, hop to Appendix 1 for a guide custom-tailored to your situation. You'll find plenty of suggestions and tips.

Chapters 6 through 9 present an in-depth discussion of the environmental change-making concept. In this part we provide background information about environmental issues and Sustainability. You'll learn that "greener" is much more than just the latest fad or hip fashion. It's the necessary direction of our future. It's the basic survival of the human species.

Scattered throughout the book, you'll see many "green living" examples, identified with Change-Makers' first names. These are not hypothetical instances; they are very real achievements. These lifestyle changes were enthusiastically reported by our Westchester members during the Positive Environmental News sections of our meetings. We hope they give you a sense of how much positive forward progress is possible within a peer group over a relatively short period of time. Perhaps you're not interested in a group at all. You'll find between these covers much more than a list chiding you to switch to CFL bulbs and plant a tree. This book offers concrete steps for cultivating paradigm shift. Throughout this book, particularly in Chapters 8 and 9, we share our view of paradigm change: what it means, how it starts, how it unfolds, and where we think it's headed in the near future.

Paradigm shift is a long-term, ongoing process. At Environmental Change-Makers of Westchester, we're still going through it. The most famous environmental leaders you see on the news are still going through it. As a society, we'll be continuing to shift our paradigm for the next generation or two. As you'll learn in Chapters 8 through 10, we won't see "done."

This book is about change-making. We show you not only how to get started but how to reach beyond beginners' baby steps into much deeper level change. A huge part of change-making is creating a shift within our hearts, minds, and spirits. That shift is what motivates and guides our environmental actions and makes them potent, contagious, and lasting. Welcome to change-making. We promise you will not emerge unchanged.

*Joanne Poyourow  
Los Angeles, California  
November 2008*