

## A Manifesto to North American Middle-Class Christians

### PREAMBLE

It is time for an Ecological Reformation. The Protestant Reformation and Vatican II brought the importance of the human individual to the attention of Christians. It was a powerful revolution with many impressive religious and political results. But our current version of this model--the individualistic market model, in which each of us has the right to all we can get--is devastating the planet and making other people poor. This model is bankrupt and dangerous. We now need a new model of who we are in the scheme of things and therefore how we should act in the world.

### THE INDIVIDUALISTIC MODEL

The model of human being as individual is deeply engrained in North American culture. Its goal is oriented to individuals--to their rights and desires. North American Christianity has also been focused on individual well-being, either as salvation of believers or comfort to the distressed. This model of human life supports that we are a collection of individuals who have the right to improve our own lives in whatever ways we can. We see ourselves as separate from other people, while acknowledging the right of others to improve themselves. But this is not a description of “the way things are”; it is a model, a way of seeing ourselves and nature. It is a way that is proving to be harmful to most of the world's people and to nature.

There is very little public discussion of the key consequences of this model: climate change (global warming), the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the extinction of other species, and the rapid decline in natural resources. We are being kept in denial about the seriousness of these

major global issues by powerful business lobbies and timid politicians, but also by our own reluctance to disrupt the most comfortable lifestyle that any people on earth have ever enjoyed.

## THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL

The individualistic market model has failed us: it has limited religious viability and it is proving to be dangerous to our planet. We need another model of human life: we need an Ecological Reformation. An Ecological Reformation would base its model of human life on how reality is understood in our time. The picture of reality emerging from cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecology today focuses on relations and community, not on individuals and objects. We are all related: we all came from the same beginning.

This story also provides us with a new model of human life. In this story, human beings are not individuals with the power to use nature in whatever ways they wish. Rather, we are dependent on nature and responsible for it. In a sharp reversal, we do not control nature, but rely utterly on it. The rest of nature does not, however, depend on us; in fact, if human beings were to disappear from the earth tomorrow, all plants and animals would be better off.

Our radical dependence on nature means that we are also responsible for it. As the species currently laying waste the planet--and aware that we are doing so--we must accept responsibility for our actions. The ecological model of human life not only tells us who we are but also what we must do: it gives us guidelines on how we should act. In other words, it is a functional creation story, one that has practical implications for how we live at personal and public levels.

We could call these implications our new "house rules." The common creation story tells us that the earth is our home--it is where we evolved and where we belong. It also tells us what we must

do for all of us to live decently and happily here. House rules are what one pins on the refrigerator as guidelines for sharing the space, the food, the resources of the home. The basic rules are: Take only your share, clean up after yourself, and keep the house in good repair for future occupants. The ecological model comes with some definite house rules, clearly seen in the fact that "ecology" and "economics" come from the same word root having to do with laws for living in a household. The basic rule is that if everyone is to have a place at the table, the limits of planetary energy must be acknowledged. The house rules of our home set limits to growth--both of our consumer desires and the size of the human population. We need, then, to become "ecologically literate," to learn what we can and cannot do if our home is to continue to exist in a sustainable way. We must fit our little economy into the Big Economy, earth's economy, if our economy is to survive.

#### CHRISTIANITY AND THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL

As Christians we need to do all this and more. This new model, which could be summarized by a version of Irenaeus's watchword--the glory of God is every creature fully alive--provides Christians with new ways to say that God is with us on the earth and that God is for us, especially the oppressed. This new model suggests to Christians that the way to picture God's presence with us is the eschatological banquet to which all are invited, all people and all other creatures.

The ecological model, then, suggests a new vision of the "abundant," the good life. We must envision models of the abundant life based not on material goods, but on those things that really make people happy: the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter; medical care and educational opportunities; loving relationships; meaningful work; an enriching imaginative and spiritual life; and time spent with friends and in the natural world. In order to move toward this good life, we will need

to make changes at every level: personal, professional, and public--how we live in our houses, how we conduct our work lives, and how we structure economic and political institutions. It is a life that for us North Americans may well involve limitation and significant change in our level of comfort. Christians might see it as form of discipleship, a cruciform life of sacrifice and sharing burdens.

### A CALL TO ACTION

The Ecological Reformation is the great work before us. The urgency of this task is difficult to overstate. We do not have centuries to turn ourselves around and begin to treat our planet and our poorer brothers and sisters differently. We may not even have the next century. But the scales are falling from our eyes and we see what we must do. We must change how we think about ourselves and we must act on that new knowledge. We must see ourselves as both radically dependent on nature and as supremely responsible for it. And most of all, we North American privileged people who are consuming many times our share at the table must find ways to restructure our society, our nation, and the world toward great equitability. Christians should be at the forefront of this great work--and it is a great work. Never before have people had to think about the well-being of the entire planet--we did not ask for this task, but it is the one being demanded of us. We Christians must participate in the agenda the planet has set before us--in public and prophetic ways--as our God "who so loved the world" would have us do.

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