

LENT 2015

Dear Sisters and Associates,

Our Congregational Chapter 2013 committed us to act with urgency to protect Earth's stability and integrity. To guide us in fleshing out that commitment, the Ad Hoc group on Communion within the Earth Community is inviting us to form discussion/prayer groups during Lent to help us move to action on behalf of Earth.

This Lenten Small Group Process will begin in prayer include a reading and discussion time and end with an opportunity to commit ourselves to some Lenten action related to what we learned through reading and discussion.

This Lenten piece is the first follow-up responding to the survey sent last summer in which you asked for more information on certain topics. Other guided group sessions, covering the areas you named, will follow every couple of months: 1. Interrelatedness of a consumer lifestyle, Earth's health, and marginalized people, 2. Climate Chaos, 3. Food, and 4. Water.

Blessing on your Lenten prayer and sharing,

The Ad Hoc group on Communion within the Earth Community

Liz Kerwin
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Embrace

M.C. Honors, CSJ



An INVITATION to a Lenten Earth Practice

“We believe that Creation is a sacred trust given to the whole Earth community.”

“We believe our charism calls us to informed action for justice for the whole Earth community.”

(Chapter 2013)

Lent is upon us! Lent – a time to step back, take a deep breath, and look at the quality of our relationships with God, each other, and the whole Earth community. A time to ask ourselves: “How am I truly living the sacred trust that has been given to all of us?”

This Lent we invite you to ask this question in the largest possible context – “How am I living my Christian life in view of the entire web of life – the whole of creation?” This question is vital because we know that “life” is more than human life and that “neighbor” includes all species, all beings in our Earth community. As we reflect on the integrity of our relationships, we are challenged to realize again how our decisions impact the sacred work of God.

We pray that Lent is a blessing for you and for all our kin in the web of life!

Before coming to the group session please read: “Kenosis, Climate change and Christianity” by Sallie McFague, PhD, found on page 4.

OPENING RITUAL:

Litanies of Lamentation and Change

Place on center table: paper strips and pens or markers, small empty basket, lighted large center candle and as many lighted vigil lights as desired.

LEADER 1: Elizabeth Johnson, in *Ask the Beasts*, Chapter 9, has bluntly outlined what we, the human twig on the branching tree of life, have contributed to the present state of Earth and all beings that live on it.

Her categories include: population growth, resource consumption, pollution, and extinction. She suggests that before we move to action for Conversion to the Earth we must truly deal with and mourn the reality of our negative contributions.

Let us move into this lamentation and then into change using a method suggested by Joanna Macy: grieving first and then moving to action.

“We need to hear within ourselves, the sound of the Earth crying.”

(Thich Nhat Hanh)

The leader invites individual members of group to write an Earth problem on a slip of paper.

OPENING PRAYER: Sacred Mystery, you embrace us in unifying love and we are in communion. Although we barely know how, we love. Help us to grow in that love, recognizing that “respect for life cannot be divided, that not only human life but the whole living Earth is God’s beloved creation, deserving of care.” Amen.

(Chapter 2013; Pope John Paul II)

LEADER 2: After each statement, we will use the “Breathing Through” process used by Joanna Macy in the DVD “The Work That Reconnects”

Each person takes a turn reading a statement and each time everyone takes a DEEP BREATH and lets it out slowly, absorbing the reality and letting it pass through our hearts – “breathing through.” Rather than bracing ourselves against painful information, we let it connect us to those suffering in the web of creation.

(Center candle stays lit; snuff out a vigil light with each statement.)

1. We humans were invited to care for Earth, but often we tried to conquer and subdue it.
2. We humans have poisoned our life-support systems of soil, water and air with toxic waste, heedless of those who depend on them.
3. We humans have destroyed our forests through clear cutting and acid rain, taking habitat from ecosystems and human communities.
4. Our oceans, lakes and streams are littered with plastic and laced with sewage.
5. We humans are annihilating our companion creatures at a rapid rate.
6. Death cuts off life. Extinction cuts off birth.
7. We humans have a history of using natural resources to the point where they are depleted.
8. In per person resource consumption, the United States ranks highest.
9. The burden is not on some divine, external agent who can reverse the destruction we humans have caused.

ALL: The burden is ours to bear.

(Paula Northwood, Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis MN – adapted with permission)

MUSICAL TRANSITION

Play “Somewhere to Begin” by Sara Thomsen, “May All We Do Today” by Jan Novatka or other appropriate “transition” music.

LEADER 1: Write one thing on the other side of the Earth problem slip that the v/province or you, as an individual, are already doing to stem the tide of damage to Earth. Come forward after everyone is finished, read aloud what you/we are already doing, and drop the slip into the basket.

LEADER 2: “The secret to change is to focus all your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” (Socrates) So I invite you to take turns contin-

uing to read “change” statements with the “breathing through” process, taking time for a deep breath between statements:

1. And so we continue our journey into asking for-giveness and changing our ways:
2. Show us how to take the daily things of life and always see them as sacred.
3. Guide us as we grow in performing simple acts of love and prayer.
4. Move us into more challenging works of reform and renewal.
5. Help us to love deeply Earth which gives us air to breathe, water to drink and food to sustain us.
6. We are all connected and dependent upon one another– all of creation – all that live now, all that have ever lived.

Pause for ten minutes of silent contemplation.

LEADER 1: “To protect creation, to protect every man and every woman, to look upon them with tenderness and love, is to open up a horizon of hope: it is to let a shaft of light break through the heavy clouds; it is to bring the warmth of hope.”
(Pope Frances, 3/19/13)

PRAY TOGETHER: Incomprehensible Holy Mystery, in and through your grace, we know that from the primordial flaring forth, everything has been, is, and will be forever in relationship. This is communion. In union with you, we grow to reverence the Sacred in all that exists in the web of life. Help us to follow the example of Jesus who showed us how to heal with our touch, to love with deep compassion, and to realize in the depth of our spirit that we are all connected and interdependent. Amen.

(Adapted from the Chapter 2013 Preamble)

Ecological Conversion

KENOSIS, CLIMATE CHANGE & CHRISTIANITY

by Sallie McFague, PhD

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When people ask me what I do and I answer that I am a theologian who investigates the connections of religion with economics and ecology, they often give me a funny look. What does “religion” have to do with financial and environmental matters? Money and the earth have not figured large in many Westerners’ understanding of religion.

But times have changed. The 2010 edition of *State of the World*, a highly-regarded annual report, suggests that religions must be major players in the most important two-sided crisis of our time—the economic and ecological one.¹ The report applauds religions for recent attention to environmental concerns—from “greening” church buildings to re-evaluating scriptures for ecological friendly doctrines—but bemoans that religions have not given comparable attention to economics. Somehow they fail to see the intrinsic connection between environmentalism and consumerism. However, we are becoming aware that these apparently different fields are tightly interlocked, for it is the rampant use of energy that creates both our consumer paradise as well as depletes the planet’s resources and contributes to global warming. To put it as simply as possible: it is not sufficient to consume in a “green” fashion; rather, we must consume LESS, a lot less. Buying a hybrid car does not permit us to drive more, although that is often the underlying rationale by many people who believe that quality can substitute for quantity. Quantity still matters; in fact, we are at such a level of consumption in relation to the carrying capacity of our planet that reduction must take a major role in sustainability. No one wants to face this fact; changing from a gas-guzzling car to a hybrid is not enough—we may have to reconsider the use of automobiles, PERIOD.

The statement from the *State of the World* advising “reducing and even eliminating” the use of cars and airplanes causes a global gasp. Surely not. The shock, however, causes us to realize how far we have to go in both our attitudes and practices. We human beings are so embedded in the culture of consumerism that asking us to curb consumerism—let alone eliminate precious forms of it—is like asking us to stop breathing.² It is important to take this seriously: the “culture of consumerism” is not just a form of life we can accept or reject; it has now become like the air we breathe.³ Consumerism is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services. Thus, the well-known comment that consumerism is the newest and most successful “religion” is not an understatement.

I would suggest that religions are being asked to take on what no other field has been willing to assume, yet is at the heart of their own message: “a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns,” particularly at the level of consumerism. As the *State of the World* asserts:

Of the three drivers of environmental impact—population, affluence, and technology—affluence, a proxy for consumption, is the arena in which secular institutions have been the least successful in promoting restraint.⁴

“Restraint,” summed up in the Golden Rule (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*), is a major practice of most religions. It is the one thing needed now and is, I believe, both a gift from religions and the challenge to them. It could be considered a “coming home” for religions as well as their greatest contribution to the economic/ecological crisis facing us. The report sums it up well:

Their special gift—the millennia-old paradoxical insight that happiness is found in self-emptying, that satisfaction is found more in relationships than in things, and that simplicity can lead to a fuller life—is urgently needed today.⁵

Consider these words to be marching orders for religions. Such a position would not only serve the planet, but also be a return of religions to their own spiritual roots and cause them to recognize how far they have deviated.⁶ The insidious message that the purpose of human life is to consume is a “heresy” and should be condemned as such! Religious traditions may find such a return revitalizing of their basic message—restraint, not for the sake of ascetic denial of the world, but in order that “abundant life” might be possible for all.⁷ My small contribution is to take up this challenge with an in-depth study of one form of restraint in one religion—“kenosis” or self-emptying in Christianity.

We have reached the point in public discussion of the planet’s twin monetary and ecological crises where we have one major need—not more information but strategies, practices, for moving into action. Can religions make a contribution by sharing their profound, counter-cultural, and often unpopular message that abundant life at both personal and public levels is found not by expressing one’s ego as our market-oriented, individualist culture encourages, but by losing one’s ego in service to others? Can we see this much-neglected aspect of many world religions—counter-cultural kenosis—not as the only answer to the issues, but as one, important, and needed perspective?

Increasingly, the issue of how to live well has become one of *changing from how we are living now to a different way*. As our ecological and economic crises have become worse, more people are questioning the reigning culture of insatiable greed. They are coming to the conclusion that the prospects of consumer culture have been greatly overrated and serious change at a fundamental level—of who we think we are in the scheme of things and what we must do—is necessary. Change at this level is incredibly difficult. Yet, it is precisely change at this fundamental level that most religions are about—it is called “conversion” in Christian circles and demands thinking and living differently than conventional society recommends.

But *how* do people change behavior? Behind our decisions of how to live stand our most basic beliefs: who do we think we are in the scheme of things? What is our worldview? One thoughtful person puts it this way: “Be careful how you interpret the world. It is like that.”⁸ We live within our

models, our worldviews, and they deeply and subtly influence the decisions we make, including ones about the environment.

For instance, if we hold views of God, the world, and ourselves that are dualistic, individualistic, and anthropocentric, we will “naturally” decide that climate change, for instance, is not a serious matter. If we see God as a distant, supernatural, all-powerful being who rules the world, then it is not our responsibility to change our behavior so poor human beings and other animals might live. Rather, we say, “Let God do it.” If, however, we see everything, including God, as interrelated and interdependent, a worldview supported by contemporary science as well as the wisdom of many religions, then we see we are responsible for the well-being of the whole, including less fortunate human beings and other life-forms.

We need to change our images of God, from seeing God as king and master over the world to imagining the world as *within* God, like a baby in the womb. *We live and move and have our being within God*. We need to wake up from the lie of the current worldview of individual, selfish fulfillment through consumerism to the reality of fulfillment by sharing with needy fellow creatures and the earth itself. Religious understandings of limitation, detachment, self-emptying, and compassion can help us do this. The Christian notion of self-emptying and the Buddhist understanding of compassion are two illustrations of the contribution religions should be making to the crisis of climate change. What we need is to move from one worldview of self, of who we are in the scheme of things, which encourages narrow, individualistic, greedy behavior to a view of self as “*universal*,” in which all are included. The Dalai Lama has said that we ought to think of the needs of strangers in the same way that a mother responds to the needs of her child, and Christians say much the same thing with “love the neighbor as yourself.” We might put it this way: *the world is my body*. Who I am does not stop with the limits of my own skin, or with my own family or nation or even with all human beings, but stretches to include all living creatures. Only with such a radical change in “who we think we are” will we be able to make the deep changes necessary to turn us around from ruining the planet to helping it flourish. This change needs to

happen at all levels of our life from the personal—what we eat and how we get to work—to the public—how we tax carbon emissions and distribute scarce resources fairly.

Thus, I am suggesting that the religions of the world have a major role to play in the climate change crisis. Religion should answer the call to return to its deepest roots of restraint, limitation, sharing, and self-emptying so others might live.

This process of change from belief to action contains the following steps:

1. **Experiences of “voluntary poverty”** can shock middle-class people away from self-fulfillment through possessions and prestige and toward self-emptying as a pathway for personal and planetary well-being.

2. **The focus of one’s attention on the needs of others**, especially the most physical, basic needs, i.e., food. Freed from finding fulfillment through accumulation, one is able to really pay attention to others, not as objects for one’s own goals, but as subjects in their own right. These subjects are other human beings or life-forms, and even the processes that sustain life such as rivers, trees, and climate patterns.

3. **The gradual development of a “universal self.”** As the line containing one’s concern for others (compassion) moves from its narrow focus on the ego (and one’s nearest and dearest) to reach out further and further until there is no line left: even a caterpillar counts. This journey, rather than diminishing the self, increases its delight.

4. **The model of the inclusive self operates at both personal and public levels.** For instance, the Planetary House Rules operate at both public and personal levels: 1) Take only your share; 2) Clean up after yourself; 3) Keep the house in good repair for future occupants.

In conclusion, while other fields contributing to our planetary crises often end with the despairing remark, “Of course, it is a spiritual, an ethical problem,” the religions of the world should offer their distinctive answer: “Yes, it is, and let us look at that process of change from belief to action.”

¹ Gary Gardner, “Engaging Religions to Shape Worldviews,” *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures from*

² *Consumerism to Sustainability*, ed. Linda Starke and Lisa Mastny, 2010.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27

⁸ Gary Gardner, *Inspiring Progress: Religions’ Contributions to Sustainable Development*, 2006,3.

⁹ Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*, 1961, 211