

# The Ecumenical Church and the Ecological Challenge

By Dr. Larry Rasmussen

Ours is a thrilling, dangerous moment for ministry. We stand at an ecological “tipping point.” The “great transformation”<sup>1</sup> of Earth-human relations that began with a scoop of coal into a new furnace, and the fossil fuel avalanche of the Industrial Revolution, transported generations from “an organic, ever-renewing, land-based economy to an extractive, non-renewing, industrial economy”, the one that now reigns as “a controlling presence throughout the entire planet.”<sup>2</sup> While much of the human world grew rich beyond imagining, the biosphere and atmosphere were fatefully impacted, together. Stored energy in the form of fossil fuels meant that humans no longer *needed* to live in sync with the rhythms and requirements of the renewables—solar and hydrological cycles, or the imperatives of fickle seasons, lazy flora and unimproved fauna. With stored energy we conjured up a *built*

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is to Karl Polanyi’s famous work, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001; the original was published in 1944).

<sup>2</sup> The formulation, not by Polanyi, but Thomas Berry in *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, Mary Evelyn Tucker, ed. (Sierra Book Club, 2006), 107.

environment to replace our more *immediate* dependence upon the *unbuilt* environment, or so we thought. “City” replaced “country” and “organization” displaced “nature” as *our* environment, our habitat, our home.

The churches’ ministries tagged along obediently, as though on a leash. How many of your ministries are *not* carbon-based? How many are automobile-free, air-conditioner-free, and fast-food free? How many have *not* moved all sacred space indoors? Your ordination vows did not include, “I pledge myself to fossil-fuel ministry,” but that’s the pledge you made.

And now we teeter at the tipping point, that “transitional moment when small changes make huge differences” and “predictable processes” give way to unpredictable, non-linear outcomes.<sup>3</sup> A couple degrees warmer and liquid turns to steam, a couple degrees cooler and it turns to ice, though all the while we thought our ministries would never leave the liquid state of our baptisms.

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<sup>3</sup> Kearns, Laura and Keller, Catherine, eds., *Ecospirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), xi.

Thomas Edison once chatted up Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone. This is what Edison said: “I’d put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power! I hope we don’t have to wait until oil and coal run out before we tackle that.”<sup>4</sup> Ford and Firestone (i.e., cars and tires, smokestacks and tailpipes) were admittedly a poor choice of audience. Edison badly underestimated what oil, coal, and natural gas made possible, and the sun did not. None could resist the fossil fuel interlude.

Yet now here you we, poised for another “great transformation,” poised for an ecological reformation, poised for “a root change in human outlook” and practice, poised for a “spiritual phase transition”<sup>5</sup> that effects a *counter* tipping point to Earth-honoring, rather than Earth-abusing, faith.

But *who* are we in this thrilling and dangerous moment? ‘Fess up: we are Joseph the dreamer, and we are rebuked by the brothers who say, “Here comes [the] dreamer” again (Gen. 37:19).

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew C. Revkin, “Budgets Falling in Race to Fight Global Warming,” *The New York Times*, 30 October 2006: p. 4 of 6 as printed from the website: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>5</sup> Kearns and Keller, *Ecospirit*, xi.

And we find ourselves dreaming in Egypt where we, too, may well be prospering in Pharaoh's court, happily seduced by the glitter and glamour of evil. But "way down in Egypt Land" is not our true habitat and these good neighbors are not the pilgrim people to whom we belong. So we sinners dream, we dream of the divine domain, come on Earth as in heaven. We dream Maya Angelou's dream.

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet

Traveling through casual space

Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns

To a destination where all signs tell us

It is possible and imperative that we learn

A brave and startling truth.

When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate

And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean

When battlefields and coliseum

No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters

Up with the bruised and bloody grass

To lie in identical plots in foreign soil  
When the rapacious storming of the churches  
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased  
When the pennants are waving gaily  
When the banners of the world tremble  
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

.....

When religious ritual is not perfumed  
By the incense of burning flesh  
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake  
By nightmares of abuse

When we come to [the brave and startling truth]  
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids  
With their stones set in mysterious perfection

.....

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe  
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without  
favor,

Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores  
These are not the only wonders of the world  
When we come to it  
We, this people, on this miniscule and kithless globe  
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger  
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace  
We, this people, on this mote of matter  
In whose mouths abide cankerous words  
.....  
Yet out of those same mouth  
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness  
That the heart falters in its labor  
And the body is quieted into awe  
We, this people, on this small and drifting planet<sup>6</sup>  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That, in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living

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<sup>6</sup> Angelou, Maya, *A Brave and Startling Truth* (New York: Random House, 1995), no page numbers.

Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible  
tenderness

.....

We, this people, on this wayward, floating body

Created on this earth, of this earth

Have the power to fashion for this earth

A climate where every man and every woman

Can live freely without sanctimonious piety

Without crippling fear

When we come to [the brave and startling truth]

We must confess that we are the possible

We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world

That is when, and only when

We come to it.

The brothers said, "Here comes the dreamer." We are  
Joseph, we are Angelou. It's a brave and startling, and  
inconvenient, truth.

And we have been here oft before, with the ancestors, through other reformations and transformations. We dreamed different dreams then, but they, too, were dreams of faith.

Now we dream of Ecumenical Earth. We dream the ancient dream of ascetics, of loving the Earth simply in a disciplined way of life that is spiritually rich and materially simple. This voluntary simplicity offers a counter-world to cultures that are morally corrupting and spiritually vacuous. In the name of life, Earth-honoring asceticism tips full tilt against the global consumerism that may be killing the planet both materially and spiritually.

We dream the ancient dream of the sacramental imagination. All material reality is sacred and bears a value to which we belong but which we do not create and cannot veto. The primordial sacrament is God's ongoing creation itself, the cosmos as sacrament. The second is the human act of bringing all that is into the worshipful presence of God to give thanks for the gift of life—eucharisto—and to renew our lives with the lover's touch of the unfathomable God who is close as the grain and the grape, the

slippery oil and the slippery water. Leaning into life as a sacrament tips against the unrelenting reduction of all sacred things to “resources” and “capital” that leech the sacred from the ordinary and suck the numinous from the common.

We dream the ancient dream of the mystics. We are all born to belonging. Nothing is what it is apart from the rest; all that exists, co-exists. The cosmos is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects shelved as endless rows of commodities at the ready for human use. Mysticism “re-members” us to the fierce communion of all creation. The heresies of “self” and “other,” of “mine” and “thine,” of friend and enemy, fall away as mysticism tips against the alienation of subject to object and restores subject to subject.

We dream the ancient dream of the prophets. Redemption is the redemption of all creation, the liberation and fulfillment of all life, from the cell to the community, a struggle inclusive of the poor, the weak, the marginal, the diseased and disfigured, exploited and exhausted nature. The God of compassion knows

creation's suffering and goes before in the long, hard journey to a teeming land and fertile Sabbath. But there is a rule: when and where there is justice, there will be abundance for all; when and where there is injustice, the land, the oceans, the cities and towns will all suffer. The prophets' dream tips against oppression and degradation of all kinds.

So here our ministries are, teetering at the tipping point in what former U. S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright expects will be the century of the environment, the century of religion, and the Asian century [of the economy]. Or, rather, two tipping points. One is physical and social change of, well, biblical proportions. It is geophysical change bearing a strong human imprint and it is underway. The other is a counter-tipping point, our long-delayed conversion to Earth-honoring faith for the century of the environment, of the economy, and of religion. Its song is a song of myriad voices, traditions and dreams, so it is a song of *songs*. Yet it is one ecumenical song, put quite well by Dietrich Bonhoeffer eighty years ago: "Earth remains our mother, as God remains our

father, and the mother will not lay in the father's arms those who are not true to her. Earth and its distress, this is the Christian's *Song of Songs.*" (Barcelona, "Foundations of Christian Ethics," 1928)