

**Date: February 20, 2008**  
**To: CRCNA Synod 2008**  
**From: Classis Niagara**  
**Re: Overture to Synod 2008 for CRCNA Environmental Policy Task Force**

**PASSED in Classis Niagara, February 20, 2008**

**Hopeful Background:**

Long before “ecology” and “environmental protection” became buzzwords, the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship researched and produced *Earthkeeping: Stewardship of Creation* (Loren Wilkinson, Peter DeVos, Calvin DeWitt *et al.*, Eerdmans, 1980), a pioneer in the field of Christian environmental studies. Linking the gifts of students of science, philosophy and Scripture, this volume has proved in the 27 years since publication (and 1991 revision as *Earthkeeping in the 90s*) to be a fertile seedbed for an ever-growing number of projects, articles, books, conferences, academic institutes and teams of environmentally-conscious scholars and activists to understand and work in energy conservation, reduced air, ground and water pollution. *Earthkeeping* and its successors produced much helpful information and suggested many practices for sustainable development and responsible living. Long-time member of the CRCNA and of that team of scholars, Dr. Calvin DeWitt, has developed an international reputation as a scholar, activist and individual example of living modestly and reducing environmental impact personally and in institutions (such as Mancelona, Michigan’s Au Sable Institute) he has led or worked at.

For its part the CRCNA has made significant intellectual, theological and spiritual contributions to environmentally responsible living. Synods in the early 1990s commissioned production by CRC Publications (now Faith Alive Resources) of study guides on environmental stewardship and its ethical framework in response to various overtures. CRC Publications reported in 1994 and 1995 on its recycling efforts and policy. Calvin College has also established the Bunker Interpretive Center on its campus, protects a large natural area surrounding that center and includes an environmental studies program in its curriculum. Several of the college’s scientific departments (engineering, biology, chemistry and more) continue to graduate academics and professionals with deep commitments to respectful treatment of God’s earth, all honouring Psalm 24’s and other passages’ claim that “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” The CRCNA’s influence in this field has extended to other lands and churches, as the international Reformed Ecumenical Synod produced its own study, *The Just Stewardship of Land and Creation* in 1997.

**The Sobering Present—nearby and far**

Yet if we combine all that and the many unmentioned projects with the work of other organizations outside CRC and Christian circles for many years, it seems that those efforts have been futile. Much of humanity is still indifferent to societal excess, consumerism and environmental thoughtlessness. More soberingly, in numerous smaller and larger ways North Americans in the CRCNA contribute to those excesses, as exemplified below. The saddest result of such consumerism that is in our bones is that it makes us foolishly and wrongly feel more in control of our needs, wants, desires, lives and destinies—all the while unwittingly thinking we are less dependent on God.

Whether one believes human-made global warming is changing the world’s environment or if the earth is merely following natural cycles, several worrisome facts are clear and incontrovertible. Figures from 2006 show that demand for oil is at an all time high,” fuelled by the continued economic expansion of the economies of China and India. China overtook Japan as the world’s second-largest consumer of oil in 2003 and is closing in on the US, with demand for oil growing at about 15% a year. Western Europe and Japan are heavily dependent on oil imports as production cannot meet massive domestic demand. The gas-guzzling US is the world’s largest per-capita oil consumer

but produces much of its requirements itself. Producers in the Middle East, where oil costs so little, are also heavy users. Poorer countries consume much less per head. (BBC News January 2, 2008)

Yet North Americans still produce a substantial amount of pollution and contamination. A study of the world's power stations has shown the extent to which developed countries produce more carbon dioxide per head than emerging economies. Australians were found to be the world's worst polluters per capita, producing five times as much CO<sub>2</sub> from generating power as China. The US came second with eight tons of the greenhouse gas per head, 16 times more than that produced by India. The US also produced the most CO<sub>2</sub> in total, followed by China. The Carbon Monitoring for Action (Carma) website is the first global inventory of emissions and looks at 50,000 power stations. Its data was compiled by the Center for Global Development, a US think-tank. (BBC News November 14, 2007)

China has overtaken the United States as the world's biggest producer of carbon dioxide, the chief greenhouse gas, figures released today show. The surprising announcement will increase anxiety about China's growing role in driving man-made global warming and will pile pressure onto world politicians to agree a new global agreement on climate change that includes the booming Chinese economy. China's emissions had not been expected to overtake those from the US, formerly the world's biggest polluter, for several years, although some reports predicted it could happen as early as next year. (Reported June 19, 2007 by John Vidal and David Adam, [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk))

Environmental pollution is increasing in most places in the world. Cities are smog-bound, the contamination stretching, for example, on bad summer days from Chicago, Illinois, across northern Indiana, southern Michigan, farther east to Sarnia, Toronto, and Belleville, Ontario, north to Sudbury and Algonquin Provincial Park. Chemical toxins contaminate Arctic waters and creatures far from human habitation. Animal species from birds to fish, from tigers to elephants, from apes to insects are disappearing at alarming rates in tropical, temperate, alpine and arctic zones. Over 8,300 plant species and 7,200 animal species around the globe are threatened with extinction, and many thousands more become extinct each year before biologists can identify them. The primary causes of species extinction or endangerment are habitat destruction, commercial exploitation (such as plant collecting, hunting, and trade in animal parts), damage caused by nonnative plants and animals introduced into an area, and pollution. Of these causes, direct habitat destruction threatens the greatest number of species. Species have slowly evolved and disappeared throughout geologic time as the result of climate changes and the inability to adapt to survive competition and predation. Since the 1600s, however, the rate of extinction has accelerated rapidly because of human population growth and human resource consumption. Today, most of the world's habitats are changing faster than most species can adapt to such changes through micro-evolution, or natural selection. The current global extinction rate is exponentially greater than the background extinction rate. Many biologists believe that we are in the middle of the greatest mass extinction episode since the disappearance of the dinosaurs. (MSN *Encarta Encyclopedia*, "Endangered Species")

All that is only a prelude to the recital of disasters stretching the resources of God's good earth to sustain biological life. It is no exaggeration to claim that the planet and its inhabitants are under threat from human habitation and activity. Whatever else is happening this much is sure: We as a human species, made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) are not as a whole reflecting that image responsibly as far as earthkeeping goes. Nor are we "serving" (Hebrew: *'abad*) and "keeping" ("caring for," "guarding"—Hebrew—*shamar*; same root for "keeping commandments") as God charged the first humans (Genesis 2:15). North Americans have led the world in developing technology, but one unintended result is excessive, ultimately unsustainable and sinful consumerism that is tragically imitated all over the world. North American Christians—Christian Reformed people in particular—would do well to add to our

pioneering studies and many local conservation and recycling programs by taking more concerted, integrated action.

Meanwhile even our best Christian effort at producing more articles, magazines and books use more trees and other resources—ironically, even this overture. Our travel to and from conferences, synods, classes, mission fields leave carbon footprints that cannot be bought back by “carbon offsets” or monetary contributions to environmentally friendly energy development projects. Ironically, even our scientific and eco-tourism trips to ecologically sensitive places the world over may be contributing as much harm to those places as the good intended to preserve them; the more well-known they become, the more people want to go see them before they’re compromised or ruined by tourism or resource extraction.

### **The Sobering Present—Very Close to Home**

In addition if we Christian Reformed people look at our own individual, congregational and denominational practices, it is worth asking if—despite all our studies, knowledge, projects, programs and good intentions—our actions match our professed convictions. While, for example, Faith Alive continues to recycle responsibly, while Calvin College’s buildings are designed and built with state-of-the-art environmental technology, while individual congregations are constructing buildings with lower environmental impact (notably Meadowlands Fellowship CRC, Ancaster, Ontario), while many individuals and families recycle, CRC institutions, agencies and individuals, continue to use more and more resources with little intention to lower our environmental impact.

People in the CRC are not exempt from contributing to the overall emissions of green house gases. Many families have more than two cars in the drive way, some times even one car per driver, or more. Vacations are spent at rented or owned cottages which gobble up fragile shorelines. We add to water pollution racing around in boats and seadoos in the summer and snowmobiles in the winter. Our passports gather stamps from ever more distant exotic places where we go for our vacations.

Without picking on any particular CRC agency or institution, a brief glance at a typical day at Synod, at conferences on our campuses, in worship services or office practices in our churches shows an ever-growing mountain of resources used to promote our various brands. The results is that that CRC institutions don’t really live much more modestly than the society whose morally deadened atmosphere soaks deeply into us. For example, many institutions and churches purchase pens (as the staff at Covenant CRC did last Christmas, shortly before this overture originated there) as souvenirs for members or delegates. We receive lunchbags (reusable, but plastic, made from oil) with logos at conferences. We are sent presidential reports of 126 pages containing helpful, useful information about programs, but bulked up with 93 pages of names of donors. We can buy sweatshirts, ties, t-shirts, windbreakers with logos of agencies, institutions and projects. We eat in cafeterias with vast choices of menu items from the cholesterol-laden to the flavour *du jour* of yogurt.

What happens to most of the non-edible stuff we get? We collect it, hang it on walls for a few weeks or years, toss it in closets, eventually throw it in the garbage, or unload it to Bibles for Missions stores. Oddly, that often gives us more room for more stuff we get at church events—not to mention the merchandise we buy or receive thoughtlessly in non-Christian places. Most of this and more activity sampled from typical well-run CRC events really look no different from the consumer world. It might show appreciation for participation, help recruit students or volunteers, produce stunning events and conferences—but how much of it considers the Lord’s creation? How much of it even remembers people in our own and other lands who struggle for daily bread while our obese culture takes up more space and gobbles more and more resources? Are we building bigger barns for our stuff and egos, for our marketing schemes, for ever more excessive lifestyles?

### **Potential Responsible Action**

Reviewing this agonized and discouraging background, it would be easy to dismiss this complex issue as beyond help from the CRC, even though we take part in the problem. It would be tempting to label the foregoing as anger, hostility, cynicism about modern Western life that has given the world and humanity many undeniable benefits such as vaccines, affordable and abundant food supplies and international transportation networks. Nevertheless, we might wince at any number of the foregoing examples because they hit close to home, the intent is not accusatory; we all share responsibility. Rather the hope and prayer is to lift up common, uncritical practices we all take part in without counting consequences, without weighing them against the privilege God gives us to keep his earth, to live modestly, carefully, humbly.

Furthermore and finally, the goal of this resume of thoughtless consumption is simple:

*Classis Niagara overtures the 2008 Synod of the CRCNA to instruct the Board of Trustees to develop guidelines for CRC institutions, agencies, congregations and affiliated organizations to implement practices, programs and habits that respect God's earth by changing attitudes and consumption of excess in all areas of daily living in order to honour God and respect creation.*

Grounds:

- The topic of care-full use of resources as a denomination has not been discussed at a Synodical level since the 1990 Report of the Task Force on CRC Publication and the Environment and the resulting CRC Publication board reports in 1994 and 1995. As stewards of God's creation, it would be beneficial for the denomination to have a conversation on this topic again.
- CRC institutions and members don't really live much more modestly than the broader society, yet as the redeemed image-bearers of the Creator, we are called to keep and guard God's creation as stewards awaiting the return of our King.

NOTE: This overture does not request establishment of yet another study committee. We really know enough of what is happening. We know what God wants for his earth and people in this issue, for we have diligently studied and prayed.

What is needed is a continuing and linked series of concrete guidelines, steps, suggestions of how to live more simply, with less damage and impact that can be implemented by individuals, congregations and agencies. A beginning list of such activities might include both such simple and more extensive suggestions to churches and agencies and employees to reduce consumption as the following:

- Discontinuing entirely the use of paper plates, polystyrene and plastic utensils and using only reusable mugs, plates, and flatware.
- Use long-lasting, low-energy consuming compact fluorescent bulbs that are Energy Star® rated to replace incandescent.
- Provide denomination-wide guidelines for denominational and congregational properties to build, maintain or refurbish with environmental sensitivity.
- Walk, car-pool, use public transportation whenever possible

*And more and more—all with the aim or actually reducing, recycling and reusing—in all areas of personal, congregational and denominational responsibility.*

We recognize that Synod cannot impose or enforce compliance with any policy. But we pray that God move in our individual lives and hearts and our institutions to convict us how to live in ways that respect and love God, our neighbours and ourselves in the earthly home God has given us. God graciously sustains us despite human abuse. May we prepare for Christ's return by helping to clean up the beautiful home God has given us.