

# Study Guide

## The Alternative Good Life

**A Study Guide for *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril***

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### **About This Study Guide**

This study guide contains questions for reflection and discussion that follow the eight chapters of the book *Life Abundant*. It is intended to be a helpful supplement and resource for teachers and students who wish to reflect upon and discuss some of the major themes and key ideas of this book. Each cluster of discussion questions is organized under three headings: Connect, Content, and Consequences and Commitment.

- Questions and comments under the Connect heading attempt to help readers identify personal points of contact with the text. These questions are less concerned with "information gathering" and more focused on helping readers bring their feelings and experiential engagement with the text to the fore.
- Discussion questions in the Content section focus on what the text says. Here, questions explore the basic argument and structure of a given chapter reading as they fit into the organization and aims of the book as a whole.
- The Consequences and Commitment section asks readers and leaders to consider carefully some of the practical ramifications of the chapter. These questions seek to help students make connections and draw critical conclusions based on the reading. It also asks students to imagine and identify concrete responses to the reading in the context of their personal, professional, and public relationships. Hence, the focus is on praxis and discerning life situations where discipleship might find responsible expression.

Few discussion groups will have time to read and respond to all or even most of these questions. Group leaders will want to carefully pick and choose those

questions that best fit the context in which the book is being read (college or seminary course, local church, book club, etc.) as well as the personality and level of engagement of students/readers themselves. Group leaders are encouraged to listen to the particular needs and contexts represented in the group and tailor their own questions with this in mind. The study guide is only a help; it is no replacement for the questions that students and leaders alike bring to the discussion.

Like the book, the study guide seeks to help readers work out their own theology in a way that makes a practical difference in their world. In this sense, the study guide is not an objective study aid but rather seeks to help readers discover for themselves the ways that their own theologies might become "flesh" in a life of Christian discipleship. It is not a summary of the text or in any way a substitute for the reader's own disciplined engagement with and interpretation of the book itself. If its questions help readers understand in some small way how an alternative view of God, the world, and others might lead to another way of living abundantly in the world, then it will have done its work.

## Guide to Chapter 1

### A Brief Credo

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw  
and knew I saw all things in God and  
God in all things.  
— Mechtild of Magdeburg

### READING: Preface & Chapter One

#### CONNECT

1. Identify passages in the reading that "struck a chord" or resonated with your experience.

Why do you think these stood out to you?

What feelings did you experience as you read the first chapter?

What do you think the author means when she says that this book is not "a feel-good read"?

2. In the first chapter, the author gives a mini religious autobiography, telling stories of four conversions, or life-transforming experiences, that changed her views about God, the world, and how one should live in God's world.

How does the writer describe these experiences?

As you think back on your own childhood, can you think of any experiences that shaped your picture or image of what God is like?

What other kinds of conversions or "turn-arounds" have you experienced in your life (religious or otherwise)? Did they change the way you see the world?

3. In the last section of this chapter the author shares a credo born out of her experience of God's love. She defines a *credo* as "the thoughtful expression of what one believes most deeply and is prepared to act on" (p. 15).

What are some of your own deep and passionately held beliefs?

In what ways are you willing to act on these beliefs?

Do you share the author's conviction that "right action is more essential than right doctrine"?

4. On page 23 the writer quotes Dostoevsky: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

What kind of feelings does this quotation evoke?

Is it true in your own life?

Can costly love still be desirable? Explain.

## **CONTENT**

1. Take a moment and look at the book's title, the table of contents, the preface, comments on the back of the book, etc. On a card or sheet of paper write answers to the following questions:

What kind of book is this? What is it about?

In a sentence or two, state in your own words what you think the bottom line is for the author (the book's argument in a nutshell).

Outline the major parts of the book and how they fit together to make the author's point.

Is there a particular problem or cluster of issues the writer is attempting to address or solve?

2. Write in your own words the book's basic thesis. (See the Preface, p. xi.)

What roles do deep, often unconscious worldviews play in our acts and attitudes?

How important are our views of the good life in structuring the way we live out our lives (the things we value, aspire to, pursue, cling to, esteem, etc.)?

3. Discuss what the author means by "a working theology."

How does the writer define "the vocation of sainthood" (p. 3)?

Who is called to this vocation? What does this vocation entail?

4. The author writes: "A bare bones theology, a few beliefs carefully thought through and actually functioning at personal and public levels, may be more significant than a comprehensive, systematic, but loosely embraced theology" (p. 4).

Where in this first chapter does the author identify and set forth her own "bare bones theology"?

In what sense is theology — thinking carefully about God, ourselves, and the world of others — *for the sake of discipleship*?

5. There are four major sections in this book's first chapter. Beginning with the author's own stories as expressions of her experiences of God, the text moves from reflective insights derived from these experiences to a set of carefully considered, deeply held beliefs that affect her acts and attitudes as a Christian (a credo).

How are these beliefs organized (p. 17ff)?

What key assertions does the writer make about God? the world? Jesus Christ? the Spirit of God? sin? salvation?

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. This book raises fundamental questions about how our ways of seeing the world affect what we value, what we invest ourselves in, how we distribute our resources — in short, how we live. It suggests that a change in one particular way of seeing ourselves and the world — the economic portrait of who we are and what's going on — could move us closer to a different view of what constitutes the good life or abundant living.

What is your assessment of middle-class North American Christians?

How is consumerism the "religion of our time" (p. 11)?

Does your sense of identity come primarily from a radical understanding of Christian discipleship or from the market ideology that tells us we are "human buyings" (consumers) who live primarily to acquire and amass wealth and possessions?

Can theology — faith's wisdom serving love — continue to ignore economics without disastrous consequences? Explain your thoughts.

2. *Limitation* and *sacrifice* are scarcely the words that come to mind when we think of abundance. On the other hand, love — willing the well-being of others — seems to be one of, if not the defining characteristics of a Christian understanding of the God revealed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ.

What are some of the benefits and/or dangers of understanding love in sacrificial terms?

What kind of real life changes and limitations would be required to live a different version of the abundant life?

3. Marjorie H. Suchocki has described prayer as the "act of bringing our moment-by-moment connectedness to God into our consciousness" (*In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer*, p. 33).

What role do prayer and spirituality — practicing the presence of God — play in this version of theology and Christian discipleship?

What decisive insight came to the writer through prayer?

4. Christian discipleship is about committing oneself entirely to God and God's will disclosed in our experiences of God's saving, liberating love — a love seen through the lens of Jesus as the Christ.

What are some practical ways that you could give expression to this conviction in your life this week?

If you began to revolt against the consumer version of the good life, who could you trust to support you and hold you accountable to this commitment?

5. If you agree with the author that an Ecological Reformation is one of the

urgent tasks of our time for those who would live as Christian disciples (pp. 205, 210), then think of some specific ways you might start this reformation in your own circle of influence.

## Guide to Chapter 2

### Theology Matters

"Thinking theologically is not an end in itself; it is for the purpose of right action, for discipleship. It is to make our action as close to God's will as we can discern. . . . The purpose of theology is to glorify God by reflecting on how we might live better on the earth. . . . Theology matters! We can neither praise God nor love the world if we have not thought through who God is and how we should love the world." (*Life Abundant*, pp. 15, 25)

### READING: Chapter Two

#### CONNECT

1. Make a "top five" list of things that matter most to you (family members, friendships, possessions, health, meaningful work, etc.). Discuss your list in groups of two or three, giving reasons why you think these things are so important to you.

How are your lists similar?

What does your list reveal about you? your passions? your loyalties and/or commitments?

2. Explain what the author means when she says "theology matters."  
What reasons does the author give to support the contention that theology matters?

In your opinion, what kind of loyalties and passionate commitments would make someone include theology on their "top five" list?

3. This chapter is primarily concerned with the possibility and importance of theology for twenty-first century North American Christians.

What feelings or thoughts do you think the word *theology* evokes in most people today? Some other phrases that might describe this endeavor are *faith's wisdom*, *practical Christian thinking*, *Christian discernment*, etc.

4. What do you think the writer means when she suggests that "every Christian is called to be a theologian" (p. 25)? Do you agree?

5. As you think back on your own life, what are some of the mostly unconscious but deeply held beliefs that have shaped the way you carry yourself (in relationships, at work, in school, the way you vote, etc.)? What dangers (if any) lie in *not* bringing our deepest beliefs into view? Explain your answers using examples from your own experience.

## **CONTENT**

1. In this chapter the writer makes the case that theology is both possible and important for North American Christians. This is followed by a thumbnail sketch of one possibility or case study for helping persons develop their own "working theology." Read the following quotation aloud: "Religions are in the business of envisioning counter-cultural alternatives on how to live rightly; in fact, that may be one of the few things on which they all agree" (p. 35).

How does this quote fit with the author's aim "to describe a Christian theology of the good life"?

What is the other task of an ecological liberation theology? (See p. 35.)

2. According to the chapter's first section (Is Theology Possible for North American Christians?), two perspectives offer a challenge to the theology of North American Christians.

What two questions do North American Christians face if theology is going to be possible for them today (pp. 26-27)?

How does the author describe the nature of theological statements? Are they/can they be universal in scope?

3. Beginning on page 29, the author describes three key characteristics of her understanding of theology: (1) a central conviction or relative absolute; (2) the context of theology; and, (3) theology's goal and mode of operation (pp. 29-32).

In the author's own working theology, what is the relative absolute, the central insight that shapes all of her convictions?

What is the most basic context for this theology? What is its goal?

4. In the second section of this chapter (Ecological Theology: A North American Liberation Theology, p. 33ff), the author provides a concrete example of the definition and characteristics of theology discussed in the first section. Describing her approach as an ecological liberation theology, the writer suggests that this theology is both "peculiarly suited" to North American Christians yet "rather unattractive" (pp. 33-34).

According to the reading, why does this theology suit North American Christians?

Why is it "unattractive"?

Why might some perceive this as a radically new approach?

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. In response to the valid critiques of traditional theologies by postmodernism



and liberation theologies — highlighting universalism and fixed understandings of human subjects — the author provides the following definition of theological statements: "Theological statements, then, are risky, partial, uncertain assertions made by relative, historically bound creatures about universal matters — God, world, and human beings" (p. 29).

What would it mean in your church or faith tradition if this understanding of faith's language about God were taken seriously?

Can you remember a time when some faith-conviction of your own was set atremble?

How can believers hold strong convictions without idolizing them?

2. Think of a relative absolute emphasized in your own faith tradition (see p. 29).

Of the three classic contexts mentioned on page 30 (psychological, political, cosmological), which do you think has received greater emphasis in your faith tradition?

Is theology an objective enterprise according to the author, or does it take sides?

How would an emphasis upon one of the classic contexts (individual, human community, planet) as the only focus of divine concern take sides in a way that might exclude the others? (For example: If God's activity is confined to the emotional well-being of individual suburban Christians, what is left out or forgotten?)

3. For the author, theology (or Christian discernment) requires the faithful to identify and assess the deep world-pictures that tell us who we are, who God is, what's going on in the world, and thus how we should live in accord with all these realities. Theology — faith's practical wisdom — involves an intentional, self-reflective process of bringing clarity to our deepest, often unconscious convictions that we might assess them and decide if they are worthy of our allegiance.

Imagine that you are responsible for leading a group of budding self-reflective theologians in your faith tradition or community.

What are some of the obstacles to this approach that you would want to consider before leading others in this endeavor?

4. In the first chapter, it was suggested that every Christian is called to a "vocation of sainthood" that involves self-examination, discernment of God's active presence in our experience, and the expression of divine love and power in every level of one's life: personal, professional, and public (p. 3). The current chapter begins with a similar assertion: "Every Christian is called to be

a theologian" (p. 25).

If theology is a necessary part of Christian discipleship, what kind of daily practices would you suggest to help believers: (1) examine their beliefs, (2) discern God's presence and will, and (3) live out this pattern for loving and glorifying God in the real world?

What existing resources does your own faith tradition bring to this enterprise?

5. The author suggests an "economic paradigm at the heart of the Christian alternative good life," one that involves imagining the entire earth as the household of God (p. 36).

What kind of "house rules" do you have in your own home?

## Guide to Chapter 3

### The Matter of Theology

". . . Theology is *interpreting* who God is and what God does. . . . A working definition of Christian theology, as I understand it, goes like this: Theology is reflection on experiences of God's liberating love from various contexts and within the Christian community." (*Life Abundant*, p. 40)

### READING: Chapter Three

#### CONNECT

1. The author describes the basic work of theologians — and, therefore the vocation of all believers — as that of bringing "the perspective of the Christian faith to bear on the current and pressing issues of our day" (page 39). Can you think of a time in recent history when someone brought their faith perspective to some important issue with powerful and transformative results? What role did their faith play in changing their world?
2. What do you think the author is getting at when she uses the following quotation by Erich Heller: "Be careful how you interpret the world. It *is* like that"?
3. On page 47, the writer describes a normative or "hegemonic human being," a generic or typical consumer that looks little like most of the world's people, but a lot like many North American Christians. Describe the basic traits of this normative person and respond together to the following questions:  
How do you measure up to this type?  
What is your "wild space" (things about you that don't fit this type)?
4. Think of ways that your own "context-glasses" or ways of seeing — class, race, gender, sexual orientation, education, regional/cultural experience — have shaped the way you view God and a world of others.  
Which of these would you describe as inherited (from family, place of origin)?  
Which would you describe as acquired (perspectives you have come to on your own journey)?  
Can these lenses be changed?
5. Can you think of any experiences in your life that you would describe as revelatory, that illuminated your world in a way that changed the way you think and act? If you feel comfortable, discuss one such experience in pairs or groups of three.

## **CONTENT**

1. This chapter is divided into three main sections (Contexts, Content, Criteria), each of which is expressed in the writer's definition of theology quoted above (reflection, experience, Christian community). Assign one or more of these to groups of three or four, asking them to work together to identify and outline the section's main points and how it fits into the author's working definition of theology.

2. How does the text describe the relationship between experience and revelation? What is it that is experienced and revealed?

3. Seeking to steer between idolatrous absolutism (only one legitimate interpretation) and "anything goes" relativism (any interpretation is legitimate), the author suggests several criteria or norms that help believers assess what revealing experiences of God's love "measure up" as Christian.

What are these three "norming" criteria?

What is the source of their authority in the lives of believers?

4. Look again at the section "Characteristics of the Christian Paradigm" (p. 60ff). Here the author notes "some more-or-less identifiable historical continuities," some distinguishing and recurrent features of Christian theologies over the centuries gathered under the headings of God, World, Human Being, and Christ.

Of these four, which do you think is most important?

Which one is identified as the one qualifying the other three?

5. Read aloud the numbered summary of "the matter of theology" found at the bottom of page 65 and continued on page 66. Listen for key ideas that stand out in the chapter, noting any points you would contest or agree with. Discuss their relevance for working out one's own theology.

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. It is a central contention of this chapter that all interpretations of Christian faith — from the expressed beliefs of early Christians in the biblical texts to contemporary liberation theologies — are constructed in and through the worldviews and sociological contexts of particular times and places.

What, in your opinion, are some of the anxieties and possibilities that might accompany this realization among believers?

Can you agree with this contention and hold strong convictions? Explain using an example from your own life.

2. On pages 54-55, revelation is described as *illuminating*, *transforming*, and *expansive*. With these three ideas in mind as they are discussed in the text, how might your own revelatory experience(s) function as a relative absolute giving direction to your theology (p. 56)?

3. In approaching the normative role of scripture in shaping a working theology for our time, the text suggests that the Bible be considered as a classic, constitution, and thus model that provides "our primary interpretive framework, our best pair of glasses, for saying something about God's relationship to the world" (p. 59).

Consider the possible reactions to the following quotation about the Bible by (1) average persons in your faith tradition, and, (2) those outside the church: "This text is not primarily a book of true statements about either God or the world. Rather, it is a collection of reflections on experiences of salvation, of God's liberating love, that change people's lives" (p. 60).

4. The author lists three reasons why "Christians need to reconstruct their theology in terms of the world in which we actually live": (1) to avoid being a scandal to the intellect; (2) to avoid irrelevance; and, (3) to avoid living in denial about our responsibility for the well-being of the world of others (pp. 64-65).

Which of these is the greatest danger or obstacle to Christian discipleship in your faith community? Why?

5. Read the following quotation: "The goal of such theology is not theology as such; that is, it is not refinements on the doctrines of God or Christology. The goal is the well-being of the planet and justice to its people, especially the oppressed. The goal is understanding what salvation — the liberation of the oppressed — means in our time, and, as disciples, following in that way" (p. 66).

Reflect on the meaning of *salvation* in your own life and think of ways that it might be broadened to include the well-being of those experiencing the specific diminishments and bondages of current local and global crises. Do something today or this week to relieve the suffering of others.

## Guide to Chapter 4

### The Contemporary Economic Model and Worldview

"What has happened to a society's sense of proportion when "too much" is still not enough? What are the prospects for a people when they lose their sense of limits?" (*Life Abundant*, p. 71)

**READING:** Part II: Introduction and Chapter Four

### CONNECT

1. Think about a recent shopping trip to a mall, supermarket, bookstore, department store, etc. Describe the situation and its required responses leading up to the point of sale (the arranged shopping environment, what you must do in selecting an item to purchase, the kind of items selected, checking the cost, use of currency, etc.). Then discuss the following questions:  
How do you usually feel when you shop for something you want?  
Are you conscious of the role you play as a buyer when shopping?
2. Think of examples from your own experience of persons or institutions that exemplify the "Miss Piggy" economic philosophy (more!) and/or the "Goldilocks" perspective (enough). Discuss.
3. Read the following quotation out loud (in unison, if you like): ". . . We have allowed economic theory to tell us who we are; we have let it become our ideology, even our religion. We have allowed the economy not just to produce things but people — the people we have become at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We have become consumers — not citizens, or children of God, or lovers of the world, but *consumers*" (p. 96). Then ask:  
To what extent do you agree with this statement?  
Think of specific examples of how middle-class North Americans might be more "human havings" and "human buyings" than human beings.
4. Picture someone you love (friend, brother or sister, parent, companion, etc.). Think of all the storied complexity, nuance, and mystery that make them who they are.  
What important features of their humanity are screened out when they are defined solely or primarily as a consumer?  
Do persons without money to buy things show up on the radar of this market view of humanity?

## **CONTENT**

1. Part Two, The Context of Planetary Theology, explores two powerful world-pictures that would tell us who we are, what the world is like, and what actions are most fitting for us in such a world. Both are described as "economic at base," but one, the neo-classical economic worldview, is dominant in our time. What definition of economics does the author provide? What is economics primarily about (see p. 75ff)?

2. Take a few minutes and in groups of three or four write down the specific features of the neo-classical economic worldview (pp. 76-77). Who are we and what is our goal as human beings in this worldview? What is the nature of the non-human world in this perspective? What ideas do the three historical trajectories of thought identified (Reformation theology, Enlightenment political philosophy, Newtonian science) provide to the neo-classical economic worldview?

3. What cultural realities once served to provide balance to this worldview's emphasis upon individualism and unfettered growth? Why are they failing to do so in our time?

4. How does the writer offer criticism of the neo-classical economic worldview "on its own terms" (p. 94)?

5. Read aloud the following passage: ". . .In the neo-classical economic worldview, two values predominate — the individual and growth, or perhaps it is more accurate to see just one value: the satisfaction of the desires of individuals through the means of constant growth." How could the values of (a) an equitable distribution of resources and (b) sustainability by facing limits serve as a challenge to the one-track mind (insatiable desire through unlimited growth) of the contemporary economic model?

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. Compare a healthy, just style of consuming with the out-of-control, "more is better" one that is dominant in the current economic worldview. List features of each.

2. The contemporary economic model seems so natural, so unchallenged in our time, that it is hard to imagine that change is possible. Few of us possess the kind of credentialed expertise in the field of economics that would give us confidence to offer criticisms of the current market system to the chairperson

of the Federal Reserve. And yet we know that many eighteenth century North American colonists did not need to be experts in theories concerning the divine right of kings or the complexities of the colonial trade system to protest and transform the world order of their time. Similarly, the passion and activism of abolitionists — often lay economists at best — played a decisive role in radically transforming an economy that some believed could not survive without the institution of slavery.

Read the following quotation out loud, and think of ways that believing citizens might bring the values of their faith to bear on an alternative vision for a sustainable and fair allocation of our planet's resources: "We, the people, have the right and the duty to decide what the good life is for us and our planet and then to ask the economists to devise ways of allocating scarce resources so as to bring about this good life. . . . Economics is a discipline, a field of study to help people attain their goals; it is not, or should not be, the ideology that sets those goals" (p. 95).

3. The author speaks metaphorically of the contemporary economic model and worldview as the new religion of our time. Indeed, matters of faith and the distinctive identity of religious communities are often domesticated as mere cultural differences, while the market economy is depicted as ubiquitous and universal.

How is consumerism the invisible religion of our time, and how do the faithful express their devotion in this religion (p. 84)?

Why might the metaphor of religion be a helpful way to bring criticisms of the current economic worldview to a church setting?

4. Write an obituary for *Homo oeconomicus*? "the mass person, the consumer who lives amid unprecedented material splendor and the producer who bends the earth to virtually unrestrained human purpose" (Max Oelschlaeger quotation, p. 75). Include accomplishments, failures, survivors, cause of death, etc.

5. Review the discussion of "synergism" and global warming (p. 90ff). What are some of the possible consequences for our earth's health?

What kind of changes in the lives of North Americans (and others) might be required to address the potentially devastating impact of global warming on earth's climate?



## Guide to Chapter 5

### The Ecological Economic Model and Worldview

"As members of the household called Earth, we are relational beings, defined by our needs that make us dependent on others and by our joys that make us desire one another. We are not just self-interested individuals; in fact, according to the ecological economic picture of reality, we are basically and primarily communal beings who become unique individuals through help from and response to others." (*Life Abundant*, p. 110)

### READING: Chapter Five

#### CONNECT

1. Recall a time of need in your life, a time when you were very dependent on the care and help of another.

What did it feel like to be so dependent on others?

Why do you think dependence is often a less-than-cherished value for North Americans?

2. Most of us know what it means to share a home or household with family members, roommates, partners, etc. Consider the following absurd scenario and imagine a healthy alternative. Discuss any connections you see with the reading:

Picture a family of five — three adults and two small children — who share a weathered home in need of repair. One well-educated adult family member enjoys a meaningful job, health insurance, hearty meals, and sports entertainment on his satellite-dish-wired widescreen television. Another adult cares for one of the children on the unheated back porch, nourishing this child with occasional scraps and whatever food is left in the dog's dish. The remaining adult does most of the work necessary to the house's upkeep: tending the garden, cleaning, making clothing, etc. — all to insure the comfort of our sports fan. She has no time for school or other soul-nourishing activities. Finally, a small child sits hungry and cold in the basement, suffering from a preventable illness and yearning for a full stomach, clean clothing, and the promise of a better life.

3. Find and highlight a passage or two in this chapter that "struck a chord" with you. Why did this particular text stand out to you?

4. The author quotes Robert Bellah on p. 120: "That happiness is to be attained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and

philosophy known to humankind, but is preached incessantly by every American television."

In what way do you see television affecting the public's perception of their needs?

How do you feel when advertisers promise that the purchase of some consumer good will solve your problems?

## **CONTENT**

1. Take a moment and write down one or two sentences summarizing the central themes or key issues in this chapter of the book. How does this chapter fit into the aims of the book articulated in the Preface and chapter one?

2. As an envisioned alternative to the neo-classical economic worldview, how does the economic ecological model portray who we are, where and how we live, and how we ought to live?

3. How would you characterize the ecological economic worldview's understanding of the individual? Compare the notion and place of the individual in this perspective with that of the contemporary neo-classical economic model.

4. In the ecological economic paradigm, what are the two critical issues that by necessity precede and qualify all decisions about the allocation of scarce resources (p. 106ff)?

5. On page 108 we read that "one of the purposes of this book is to persuade readers that the ecological image of the good life is both "good" and "good for you" (p. 108).

What convincing arguments or images does the author use to convince readers that this suggestive model is good for all, including the earth?

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. This chapter emphasizes the importance of an alternative vision of what constitutes the good life for middle-class North Americans. Unlike the neo-classical economic worldview, this model prioritizes sustainability and distributive justice as the founding values guiding the allocation of scarce resources in an economy shaped by ecological economics. The basis for this understanding is a notion of human beings as individuals-in-community, as interdependent and interrelated members of the same planetary household: the earth. This paradigm begins with who we are from the perspective of

postmodern science: we are part of an earth community of vulnerable and dependent others-together-in-need.

How is this use of postmodern science an example of the third norming criteria or guiding resource discussed in chapter three (p. 63ff)?

What other insights coming from contemporary disciplines might change or modify our understanding of who we are in the scheme of things?

2. In the ecological economic model, the basic image for understanding who we are is that of members of a household who must follow three main house rules as housemates in the global village: (1) "take only your share," (2) "clean up after yourselves," and (3) "keep the house in good repair for future occupants" (p.122).

What do you think would happen if these simple house rules were followed by every citizen in your community?

What convincing reasons can you give for following these house rules?

3. Note the discussion of frugality on page 116.

How is the practice of frugality a conservative yet subversive virtue?

Why is the refusal to practice it by middle-class North American Christians described as a sin?

4. You have been given the job of advising believers in your local community of faith concerning ways to assess "bad" consumption in their life — that is, "excessive consumption of luxuries by some while others (and the planet) deteriorate for want of basics."

What kind of painful self-limitation and restraint might be called for?

List specific things that middle-class North Americans might need to do without to ensure a healthy life for all.

## Guide to Chapter 6

### God and the World

"If . . . God is the love that creates, sustains, and transforms everything that is — if God is the declaration that reality is good — then all is changed. It is not so important that "I believe in God" as it is that I align my life with and toward this reality. I must try to discover what it means to live in reality that is defined by love." (*Life Abundant*, pp. 134-35)

**READING:** Part III, Introduction, and Chapter Six

### CONNECT

1. Read the following quotation out loud: ". . . Prayer precedes theology; being in relationship with God (acknowledging this as one's actual state) comes before the conceptual, systematic task of talking about God."

Share a story from your own life showing how this has been true for you or someone you know.

2. What phrase or portrait of God from this chapter do you think would be helpful in increasing our present society's sense (or lack thereof) that "God is with us"?

3. Recall any feelings of confusion or "mystification" you have experienced in trying to understand the Christian doctrine of the trinity. Have participants take four or five minutes to scan over and review the material in the section, God as Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer (p. 143ff).

How helpful was this discussion of the model of the trinity in clearing up or at least demystifying some of the confusion about this doctrine?

What aspects of this discussion stood out as particularly illuminating to you?

4. If you can, think of a powerful encounter with what you have come to believe is the reality of God. Describe this experience.

Which, if either, of the following resembles the kind of God you experienced: a supreme being/super individual ruling from afar, frequently uninvolved and utterly transcendent; or

a close, sustaining, supporting, nourishing, immanent presence (or something else)?

### CONTENT

1. In groups of three or four, work together to come up with a brief statement defending the notion that the author's assertions about God and the world are

really an extended elaboration of the image of *Emmanuel*, God with us (p. 142, 146). Use the text to argue your position.

2. Divide into two groups: a group of "deists" and group of "panentheists." Take ten or fifteen minutes to look over the pages below and prepare your argument. Groups then should argue their assigned group's view of the God-world relationship through the interpretive lens/model of the appropriate economic worldview (deists through the neo-classical economic model, panentheists through the ecological economic paradigm). Have two "neutral" parties record their main assertions on newsprint or chalk or dry-erase board. (See pp. 137, 141, 145-49).

3. Discuss the various ways of saying "God is love" found on pages 138-43. Remember the limits of these portraits: "*no models are adequate; they are not descriptions, merely an attempt to express something of God's being and nature*" (141).

List the various models (deistic, monarchical, dialogic, agential, etc.) and how they depict the God-world relationship.

Which model or combination of models does the author believe to be most faithful to the ecological economic worldview?

4. What does the author mean when she says a kind of "double vision" is required for seeing how God is present in the world (p.149-50)? In what direction does this "double vision" see God moving reality?

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. On page 135 we are reminded of the definition of theology or "discernment for discipleship" at work in this chapter: "Theology is reflection on experiences of God's liberating love from various contexts and within the Christian community. The subject of theology is God; the medium is our own experience as interpreted in various contexts and guided by the Christian community."

What major context provides the interpretive grid/model for thinking about God and the world in this chapter?

What Christian doctrines or historical continuities are interpreted through this lens?

2. In the last section of the chapter, the question of the goodness of reality is broached by discussing the "lightweight" view of evil in the neo-classical worldview (p. 151ff).

List the two things this perspective fails to take seriously by posing the

question of theodicy the way it does: How can an all-powerful, all-good God permit evil to exist?

In the face of moral evil, to whom would the ecological economic perspective pose the question, How could you let this happen?

3. The hurried and busy consumer lifestyle of middle-class North Americans creates numerous obstacles to faith's wisdom (theology) and its task of discerning God's creating, liberating, and sustaining presence in and for our world.

What kind of concrete practices of discipleship could help North American Christians resist the cultural temptation to become "human schedulings" and attend to God's presence in the world?

Create a mock schedule for the coming week with appropriate blocks of time devoted to discerning God's way, will, and presence in your world.

4. Read the following quotation out loud: "Since, for Christians, God is always incarnate and present, there is no place on earth, no joy or wish that any creature experiences, no need or despair that they suffer, that is not a possible route to God" (p.136).

How does this passage fit with the author's suggestion that "God is good news about reality"?

How easy or difficult is this trust in the goodness of things for persons in your faith tradition?

## Guide to Chapter 7

### Christ and Salvation

"A Christian (and a Christian theology) stands or falls with Christology. Being a Christian means identifying with, taking the name of Christ. There is no way for Christians to avoid Jesus. . . . An ecological economic Christology characterized by the prophetic and the sacramental, claims that "God is with us." This Christology looks Godward through Jesus: Jesus is the model for Christians of what "God with us" means. God is with us in Jesus — particular ministry of justice and care as well as in his death, which gives us a pattern for cruciform living. God is also with us through inclusive divine embodiment, valorizing physical well-being as well as divine victory over the powers of death and despair." (*Life Abundant*, pp. 158, 170)

### READING: Chapter Seven

#### CONNECT

1. Think of a story from the Bible about Jesus that you think is particularly revealing of his character and priorities.  
Discuss in pairs this story and your own emotional connection (or lack thereof) to the image of Jesus you held in your childhood.
2. Write down as many adjectives and phrases that you can to describe Jesus. Discuss these in the full group, writing them on newsprint or a board.
3. Does the portrait of Jesus that means the most to you come primarily from the Gospel stories (parables, teachings, healing miracles, etc.) or from the Christ described in the letters of Paul? Discuss this in pairs.
4. The question popularly posed today on everything from billboards to bracelets and t-shirts is W.W.J.D. ? What would Jesus do?  
How could this fad be a helpful (or dangerous) resource in the popular consciousness for presenting an alternative view of abundant living?
5. Why do you think the man Jesus remains a popular figure — even among the "cultured despisers" of religion?

#### CONTENT

1. The author identifies three central features of the conventional picture of Jesus as savior that make it bad theology from the perspective of the ecological economic paradigm, but conveniently good for the neo-classical

economic worldview: Jesusolatry, anthropocentrism and individualism, and a purely spiritual understanding of salvation (p. 159). Discuss why this picture is good for one world-picture and bad for the other.

Why is the traditional view called a "docile, non-threatening partner" for neo-classical economics?

2. Read the following quotation out loud and discuss its meaning from the perspective of the text: "Jesus is the finger pointing to the moon" (p. 166).

3. In posing the question of the possibility of an ecological economic Christology, the text provides a typology of contemporary Christologies (p. 162ff).

What particular contributions do they make to an ecological economic Christology?

What insights from "the ministry of Jesus and his death on a cross" provide the content and pattern for our concrete responses to oppressed persons and nature as "the new poor" (p. 167ff)?

4. What key ideas about the scope ("range") and hope of divine concern are supplied by a sacramental Christology (p. 168ff)?

5. Respond to the following quotation and note ways that it might deepen or modify the ecological economic model of who we are and how we should live: "Raising the cruciform shape of reality to the central principle for human living is Jesus' contribution" (p. 168).

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" Answer this question from the perspective of your faith tradition in conversation with a pertinent contemporary problem (domestic violence, mental illness, healthcare reform, homelessness, youth violence, etc.).

2. Some have written that Jesus puts a face on God.

How is this face described in the arguments of this chapter?

If the church in our time is to be one particular version of this face of God — the body of Christ — what shape should its ministry take in today's world?

3. Discuss some ways that the picture of the historical Jesus coming from contemporary Jesus scholars might give middle-class North American Christians a "message" (what), a "ministry" (how), and "marching orders" (where and when). (See p. 175).



4. The summary the author provides at the beginning of the chapter sketches the dominant picture of Jesus Christ and his saving significance in traditional, orthodox theologies. This view is precious to many in the church and has no doubt been the medium of countless experiences of God's liberating love. If you were advising someone who teaches a Sunday school class in a local small church, what strategies would you suggest for expanding their perspective on the saving significance of the man Jesus and the incarnate Christ?

5. Read the first and second full paragraphs on page 171 out loud (each willing participant reads a sentence at a time). Discuss the story of "the dry bones come to life" in Ezekiel and its implications for Christian discipleship.

## Guide to Chapter 8

### God and the World

"We belong to God: everyone and everything does. We are "hidden in God," poised to emerge as reflections of divine glory. . . . So a different kind of economy, one of surprising abundance and sacrificial generosity, is the *oikos*, the household, in which we are all called to live. Christianity is not just support for the ecological economic worldview, but a radicalization of it, especially for the well-off . . . We are called to see differently — and then to live differently, as differently as we can, with God's help." (*Life Abundant*, pp. 181, 182, 202)

**READING:** Chapter Eight and Epilogue

### CONNECT

1. Take a few minutes and read a portion of those sections in the chapter dealing with the lives of John Woolman and Dorothy Day. What impressed or troubled you about their response to their world? What role did their faith in and love for God play in their experience? Why do you think we call them saints? (Recall the vocation of sainthood for all believers discussed in chapter one, page 3.)
2. The metaphor of addiction and its accompanying experience of denial has been used in the text to describe the unhealthy attachment of middle-class North Americans to the current version of the market economy and its religion of consumerism. In what ways do you feel addicted to what some have described as cultural affluenza? Can you think of reasons why it is so easy to remain in denial about this?
3. Life abundant, life in the Spirit, cruciform generosity, Christian discipleship, life as it should be — these are all metaphors for a thought-and-life-style shaped by an interpretation of Christian faith through the lens of one model based on our best current knowledge of who we are in the scheme of things. What feelings are evoked by an understanding of salvation (deification) that requires your participation in God's life-affirming work?
4. What if you were given an assignment to write a book using your own life as an example of Christian discipleship (like John Woolman or Dorothy Day)? What visions, practices, insights, and experiences would you draw on in writing your discipleship story?

## **CONTENT**

1. The title of this chapter is Life in the Spirit. It is, like the rest of the book, an invitation to middle-class North American Christians to imagine and live a different version of the good life than that currently dominant in our society. It is about a cruciform abundant life that requires us to take less for ourselves so that others — including the natural world — have enough.

How does this alternative view of the good life flow from the Christian conviction that "the world is hidden in God"?

What story does the author re-tell to parse the Christian idea that all things come from, are in, and return to God?

2. The realities of sin and evil are powerfully reinterpreted in this chapter's exposition of life in the Spirit.

How is sin a kind of pretending refusal of who we are?

What does it mean to say that evil is this lie-living writ large?

3. Describe the deification view of salvation. How is it different than the traditional understanding?

4. According to the author, a dual purpose is served by studying the lives of passionate disciples like Dorothy Day and John Woolman (p. 187)?

How are they both cautionary tales and models for disciples today?

What key insights into the possibility of living a different version of the abundant life do they offer middle-class North American Christians?

## **CONSEQUENCES AND COMMITMENT**

1. The text describes the painful and joyous life of Christian discipleship by looking at two struggling "saints" (John Woolman and Dorothy Day). As middle-class North American Christians, these "walking parables of a new way of life" serve as cautionary tales reminding us how wrapped-up we are in the consumeristic view of the good life. They also serve as models for seeing and living differently before God in the world.

Recall John Woolman's story. How could the embrace of a lifestyle of simplicity and a greater sense of empathy toward others clear the vision of those in your church or faith community so that another pattern of abundant living might come into view?

2. Dorothy Day's delight in an alternative way of seeing and living the good life involved a choice to be part of a community of sharing where some take less so others can have enough.

What kind of practical, voluntary poverty could help the people you know and love remove some of the hindrances that prevent them from seeing and living a different, more abundant life?

Think of two or three things they could do this month to (1) simplify their lives through frugality, (2) live more empathetically toward others, and (3) joyfully participate in a community of sharing.

3. A cruciform abundant life — this is the vision and practice of Christian discipleship envisioned by this book's working theology. The author invites readers to respond to the invitation of Jesus: to see and live a different, counter-cultural vision of good living. This will involve saying "No!" to some of the deepest values of our culture, a culture whose lust for luxury deals death to the most vulnerable persons among us and the natural world that sustains us all. It also involves imagining and then living a self-limiting, cruciform lifestyle.

Think of some practical things that North American middle-class Christians can do to become counter-cultural voices for change in the arena of public discourse. How can you be heard in your culture?

Imagine some creative ways that ministers, pastors, and other leaders in religious communities can help their constituents see themselves as the oppressors that they (and we) are without overwhelming them with numbing despair.

4. In the deification view of salvation, Christians are called to see and live differently, to become like God by following Christ.

What role does spirituality — prayerful awareness of God's presence — play in empowering Christians to actually live a sacrificial abundant life?

Dream and create intentional spiritual practices that would both empower and instill hope in a local community of faith that might struggle to embrace this alternative good life (include values like simplicity, empathy, sharing, etc.).

5. Write a plan of commitment outlining things you will do in the coming year to work on your own functioning theology — one that will work in your personal, professional, and public life.