

THE EKKLESIA PROJECT:

A School for Subversive Friendships

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Friendship. If the Ekklesia Project is about anything it is about friendship. In particular it is about discovering friends we did not know we had. Such a discovery is possible because most of us in the Ekklesia Project have discovered that we do not just “happen” to be Christian, but being Christian makes our lives possible.

Most of us on the whole think we are “sorry excuses” for being Christians, but like it or not, it turns out that is who we are. We are unsure what it means for us to be Christian, but we are very sure we cannot do it on our own. So the Ekklesia Project is the name we have given our discovery that we are not alone. God, to our amazement, has raised up brothers and sisters in Christ from near and far that make it possible for us to claim one another as friends.

That we can claim one another as friends even before we know one another well needs to be explained. Part of the explanation involves rethinking what is normally meant by friendship in our society. Thomas Aquinas claimed that our ultimate destiny is to be made friends with God--a view that obviously challenges the superficial understanding of friendship that assumes friends “like” one another. For example, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, may not have ever “liked” one another, but their friendship was undeniable. Moreover, their friendship unleashed a power that made possible their and our friendship with the poor. Charity, according to Aquinas, is the agent that makes such friendship possible. To be formed by charity is to be made more than we could be through the Holy Spirit’s presence in Word and Sacrament. To be so formed does not mean that we all share a common “experience”, but--more important- that we share common judgments. Charity, after all, is the deepest form of knowledge. That we discover we are friends of one another across time and space even before we have come to “know” one another we believe is the work of the Spirit.

One of the judgments we discovered we share as members of The Ekklesia Project is not to be embarrassed by the claims we have just made about the Holy Spirit. Christians, and particularly Christians who like to think of themselves as “thinking Christians,” have become reticent to describe our lives using scriptural and/or liturgical language. Only fundamentalist and former criminals talk about having their lives changed by Jesus. We are not fundamentalist and on the whole (and this may be good or bad) most of us would be regarded as “law abiding” folk. Rather we are generally people who have had the disadvantage of educations shaped by the modern university and have, therefore, learned that whatever we may think about how God has or has not had an effect in our lives we had better keep it to ourselves. The Ekklesia Project is constituted by people resolved to the overcoming of our culture’s limited vision in the hope we might witness to the God we believe moves the sun and the stars and is to be found in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In short the Ekklesia Project is founded on the proposition that God matters for any matters that matter. Accordingly we hope we are more “materialistic” than any Marxist ever imagined. We want to reclaim the everyday practices of the church--practices as common as friendships that make it possible to speak the truth to one another--that we believe offer us salvation from the powers that are more than willing to govern our lives. In short we should hope to help the church to recover the aggressive habits which make Christians hated, and hopefully feared, by the powers that would rule the world as if our God does not exist. We believe such a recovery requires the renewal of our imaginations to see what God is making possible in our time.

Accordingly, we are unapologetically political--understanding politics as not merely what states, empires and governments do. We hope to be a challenge to the church that has accommodated itself to America and to the society that has tempted the church to be less than it is called to be. We despair that the church has become trivialized, relegated to the “private”, but we also seek to confront the liberal political and economic arrangements that have pushed the church to the sidelines. We have no use for happy and/or “friendly” churches. We do not desire to see the church grow using the manipulative strategies of the church growth movement. We do not want our churches to

“entertain” us by trying to be an alternative to the American entertainment industry. If the church tries to compete with TV then the church is already lost.

Instead we seek to help the church to be feistier and more self-aware. We do so because we think until the church recovers itself as an alternative to the politics associated with the regimes that claim the honorific titles of “democratic” and “capitalist”, the church will not be able to resist becoming another “consumer choice”. Christians produced by “consumer choice” churches, moreover, will lack the resources to resist being consumed by what they consume. This is particularly the case for our children who see little reason to take Christianity seriously since adult Christians obviously do not take themselves seriously.

We believe the failure of the church to demand and require overriding loyalty and devotion from those that would claim to be Christian is nowhere better revealed than in the Christian capitulation to war. That Christians slaughter Christians in the name of national loyalties reveals that Christians have embraced the nationalistic loyalties of our day. If Christians are friends with all with whom they share the body and blood of the Lord, then it is rightly wondered by non-Christians how Christians can so willingly come to kill other Christians. Were Christians to live more fully as friends in the Lord, the powerful would once again come to see Christianity as a subversive force—one capable of seeing through all attempts to have Christians kill one another (and everyone else) in service to the former loyalties of nation, clan or group. We believe what it means for the church to be one, to be united, renders problematic in the extreme all justifications that attempt to turn Christians into people capable of waging and supporting war.

We are persuaded by John Paul II’s description of our times as a “culture of death”. No longer believing in God, most of us finally become bored of the infinite variety the “amusement culture” offers (sex, power fantasies, sham risk-taking, etc.) and turn to that which is even more interesting than sex—death. We believe Catherine Pickstock has rightly diagnosed the time we call modernity as “necrophilic”, that is, a time when all that is left is the denial as well as the certainty that we will have to die. We entrap and are entrapped in a struggle with ourselves and one another that tries to insure that our lives can be prolonged and

“enjoyed” as long as possible. As a result we must live lives of deadly lies, of grim determination to grab whatever we think we might need no matter the consequence, thus making it impossible for us to befriend one another. Yet no lasting friendship can be built on the lie.

That our lives too often belie the Gospel, in spite of our best “intentions” to live as well as speak truthfully, is but an indication that Christians have forgotten that to be truthful and speak truthfully is a skill. The competing allegiances that constitute our lives have made us morally inarticulate. We are, therefore, committed to recovering the skills of Christian speech so that we might be witnesses to the God we believe has made us capable of truthful friendship.

The Ekklesia Project is our attempt to help Christians discover friends they did not know they had. We believe, moreover, that such discoveries have the potential to empower the church to be an alternative politics to the world’s violence. One of the tenets of the Industrial Areas Foundation, an organization committed to organizing those who lack power, is “relationships are power”. As an abstract slogan “relationships are power” may be false or, even worse, dangerous. Yet we believe “relationships are power” if the relationships are governed by the common baptism we share in Christ that makes possible our many stories becoming for the world one mighty prayer.

These are extraordinary claims for the group of people who make up The Ekklesia Project. We are little more than a loose network of academics, pastors, and lay persons who first met in 1999. What brought us together was a common love of God and the church--a church we believe is in deep trouble in the United States and elsewhere. Yet we did not and do not believe that the church, troubled and as unfaithful as it is, is the enemy. Rather we believe that the church, which after all is God’s church, is the basis for any hope we should and can have for confronting the powers. That we were able to meet at all is the result of sheer contingency. We had become known to one another through writing, correspondence, and meeting this person who knew that person, and so on. We thought we shared enough in common we might risk getting together.

At our first meeting, in which our numbers were intentionally kept small to concentrate on deepening our existing work and

vocations, we had discovered we at least shared a common penchant for leaving no thought unsaid. This is not a group of shrinking violets. For example we were not sure we would ever be able to name ourselves because we are not just Catholic and Protestant--we also have Southern Baptist members who reminded us that Baptists are not used to thinking of the church as the body of Christ. We tried to accommodate even the Baptists, but we need to be clear that we do not pretend to the civility usually thought necessary for ecumenical endeavors. We do not plan to resolve the great disputes between Protestant and Catholics. We do, however, suspect that the disputes of the past have become ends in themselves in ways that fail to confront the challenges before all churches. We believe if we focus our endeavors on those common challenges, we may find through that work how Christians can pray together.

We are united in our common commitment to the significance of the gathered church as the place that Christians must regain what it means for them to be the disciplined people of God. That is why we have no interest in being just another academic association. Indeed, we believe that one of the indicators of the troubles in which the church finds herself is the alienation between Christian thinkers, which just means people who are associated with universities, and the laity and clergy of the church. Confronting that divide means gathering under The Ekklesia Project tent clergy, laity and scholars in ways that remind us that Christianity is not, and never has been just an "idea".

Of course, to be reminded that Christianity is not an "idea", even an idea to give our lives "meaning", makes clear our conviction that the church in our society must be an alternative culture. The challenge is to distinguish forms of being counter-cultural that are faithful to the gospel from the endless variations a capitalist order produces to give us the impression we are "our own person". To discern the difference between faithfulness and just being different for the hell of it means we are going to need all the help we can get. Which is why we are convinced as those who believe that Christ has made us his friends, we must seek to extend that friendship through the Ekklesia Project.

We do not believe the church's accommodation to the world is inevitable or permanent. In all parts of the world, God has kept

alive and keeps alive people for whom the church is their “first family”. Such a people are freed from the American preoccupation, if not idolatry, with and of the family-i.e., the presumption that the church is a good thing primarily because it makes the family “stronger”. In contrast people who do not just “know” but are embedded in practices that make the church their “family” can happily have children because they know their lives as well as their children's lives are not “theirs”. Such churches are able to resist the accommodation to the political, economic, and cultural powers of the day because they have become the peace of Christ, that is, the peace that refuses to kill in the name of protecting my family, my land, my nation.

Yet too many of these believers and churches are or at least perceive themselves, as being isolated or disconnected. We, however, believe they are part of a movement of the Holy Spirit creating a unity across our divisions. The Ekklesia Project is committed to serving this movement within, across, and beneath existing churches and structures. Through the friendships developed in our various activities, mutual assistance, and fellowship we hope to increase our own and other’s appetite for a more fulsome and attractive understanding of the Christian life; one consequence of this may be to help one another discover why being a Christian makes us so happy. Of course we are so happy because, led by the Spirit, we discover we are not alone. We have friends and friendships strong built to resist the power of sin and death.

We need to emphasize that we do not seek to be a new church. We are not trying to move people from one tradition or denomination to another. The Ekklesia Project invites all Christians and churches to reclaim their vocation to be a church shaped by the priorities and practices of Jesus. Indeed we hope one of the greatest aids The Ekklesia Project provides is to gather congregations and people across the boundaries of denominations and traditions in an effort to encourage one another to seek first the “kingdom of God”.

We are well aware these kind of organizations have often appeared in church history, and especially in U.S. church history, only to disappear quickly. Unlike many earlier movements, we do not seek to make the church a means to transform the United States into the kingdom of God. We are not concerned about the

character of the society called America, but our first loyalty is to the church. That is why we are not concerned whether The Ekklesia Project is or is not long lasting. The only society that not only must last but has lasted is the church of Jesus Christ. That is the politics we seek to serve through the work of the Ekklesia Project.

A “Declaration and Invitation to all Christians”

At the founding meeting of The Ekklesia Project in 1999, the assembled clergy, scholars and lay people drafted a “Declaration and Invitation to all Christians”(called the “Invitation”).

A review of the Invitation provides a glimpse into our assessment of church and world in our day, and of the Spirit’s work in revitalizing the body of Christ- work to which we hope to join our efforts and prayers.

At the outset, the Invitation observes that instead of living as the body of Christ, Christians too often conform their lives to partisan ideologies and identities, or to the routines of a consumer culture.

Even though the churches frequently “seem willing to subordinate the Gospel to the imperatives of economic power holders and institutions,” the Invitation declares that “our allegiance to the God of Jesus Christ always takes priority over the other structures that compete for our attention during every hour of every day of our lives.”

The mission of the church is captured in the name ekklesia, which in Greek indicates being “called out” from the world. This calling is “the work of the Holy Spirit, who redeems the lives of believers not as isolated individuals, but as members of an alternative community-a resource of resistance” to the idolatrous claims of the modern state, market and other power structures.

Being more consistent in our discipleship and faithfulness to the Gospel requires dynamic and passionate local churches. The Ekklesia Project serves as a network of support and inspiration and congregations committed to such a vision; as noted in the Invitation, “We believe that we can help one another to narrow the gaps between what we Christians profess and how we live.” The Invitation is clear about the priority of the church, as it is and could be:

The Ekklesia Project is not a church, nor is it an alternative to existing local churches. It intends to celebrate and make known the work of those congregations and groups whose allegiances to God and the body of Christ make discipleship a lived reality in the world. The Project also intends, in the spirit of “fraternal correction” (cf. Mt. 18:15-16; 1 Thess. 5:14), to challenge communities and practices that have minimized or diluted the church’s obligation to be a “light to the nations” (cf. Isa. 49:6) and a foretaste of the promised Kingdom of God. Those of us who have created The Ekklesia Project hope and expect to be held to the same level of accountability by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Invitation summarizes its principles in four basic tenets:

1. “(T)he triune God is the origin and the ultimate goal of all things; and that...the claims of Christ have priority over those of the state, the market, race, class, gender, and other functional idolatries.”
2. “(C)ommunal worship is the heart of the Christian life. We seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring our everyday practices into greater conformity with our worship...(W)e pledge to give and receive counsel about how we might better embody the gospel in its individual and communal expressions.”
3. “We believe that the church undercuts its own vocation when it compromises with the institutions, allegiances and assumptions that undergird the “culture of death” in our world. We remind all Christians that,

in rejecting the sword and other lethal means to advance His goals, Jesus set an example for all of us who seek to follow Him. While accepting rather than imposing death may still be foolish and scandalous in the eyes of non-Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23), it remains central to what it means to follow a crucified and risen Messiah. We believe that the process of renewing the church in our day requires Christians to rethink all those values and practices that presume a smooth fit between killing and discipleship—no matter how disturbing or divisive this reappraisal may be (cf. Mt. 10:34-8).

4. “We seek to restore the bonds of ecclesial unity and solidarity that are always under threat from the powers and principalities of the present age.”

In addition to calling for a variety of educational, congregational and outreach activities, the Invitation establishes a covenant among its supporters: to maintain vital prayer lives, to participate in the worship life of their local churches, perform the traditional works of mercy (for example, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the stranger), and “to observe a daytime fast every Friday as a form of prayerful resistance to the idolatrous practices of our culture”. The complete text of the Invitation, and a list of its endorsers to date, can be found in the Appendix.

Ekklesia Project Activities

The Ekklesia Project combines attributes of a scholarly association, a congregational support organization, and a public education initiative.

In its scholarly work, The Ekklesia Project sponsors a book publishing series on radical discipleship, social analysis and theology. The series draws upon theologians, social scientists, philosophers and other scholars; its aim is to encourage the production and distribution of high quality scholarship related to matters of discipleship, social theory and the church. In addition to being important contributions in their respective academic

disciples, these books are intended for classroom use in colleges, universities and seminaries.

Future scholarly endeavors include an Ekklesia Project Conference Series, and new approaches to theological education for seminaries and congregations alike. The Ekklesia Project hopes to offer fellowships to encourage scholars and pastors to produce high quality books, articles and other materials that advance the intellectual work of the church in our day.

Our congregational support efforts include “Discipleship and Divided Loyalties,” an October, 2000 exploration of problems and opportunities affecting Christian formation. This program gathers more than two dozen pastors, church leaders and activists for three days of intensive study, worship, analysis and idea sharing.

In seeking to identify obstacles and possibilities related to “making Christians” in our world, this gathering promises to become the first of many efforts to assist local congregations to discover and deepen their work as places where lives of deep Christian passion and commitment are fashioned.

Future efforts at congregational support include a Speakers Bureau that brings Ekklesia Project scholars, pastors and teachers to congregations and communities across the country. We also hope to establish an affiliate network for local congregations sharing The Project’s vision, enabling them to support and encourage one another’s efforts.

As part of its public education work, The Ekklesia Project has launched a book series aimed at general, non-specialist readers. It has also initiated a series of topical essays on Christianity and culture, to be published in inexpensive booklet form and disseminated to church and secular audiences alike. Future public education programs may include a syndication service offering op-ed pieces, columns and regular features to secular and religious media, and an Ekklesia Project magazine or journal.

Contacting The Ekklesia Project

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The Ekklesia Project maintains a web page that includes resources, announcements and news regarding our activities and work. You may find it at <http://www.ekkleksiaproject.org>

See www.ekkleksiaproject.org/pamphlets/pamphlets.htm for a listing of online pamphlets in the *Studies in Radical Discipleship* series.

Appendix: Ekklesia Project Invitation and List of Endorsers

THE EKKLESIA PROJECT: A DECLARATION AND AN INVITATION TO ALL CHRISTIANS

Through the church, the wisdom of God is being made known to the world(cf. Eph, 3:10). This may come as a surprise to many, both inside and outside the church. The economic, political and social structures of the contemporary era are so powerful that they frequently seem to eclipse God’s wisdom, substituting for it the “wisdom” of the world. Instead of living as the body of Christ, Christians too often conform their lives to partisan ideologies and identities, or to the routines of a consumer culture. We are often asked to put other allegiances before what we owe to God and the community of faith; and all too often, our churches seem willing to subordinate the Gospel to the imperatives of economic and political power holders and institutions.

And yet, we are called not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed, by the renewing of our minds, so that we might discern the will of God--what is good, and acceptable, and perfect(cf. Rom. 12:2). We speak of the Church as “the body of Christ” because we believe that Christians are called to make present the reality of Jesus Christ in the world. Hence, to “be the Church” is to declare that our allegiances to the God of Jesus Christ always takes priority over the other structures that compete for our attention during every hour of every day of our lives.

Christians from many walks of life feel the tensions among these competing allegiances, and recognize that accommodation and compromise are woefully inadequate responses. Some find themselves frustrated by the modern university and its various guilds, within which the Christian intellectual life is no longer recognized as a viable subject of conversation. Others are concerned that many people who describe themselves as Christians do not know the central stories of the Christian faith, let alone allow their lives to be shaped by these stories. Still others are anxious about the challenges of raising children in the Christian life, in the midst of a culture increasingly driven by consumerism and violence. What holds all these concerns together is the common conviction that the Christian faith should play the decisive formative role in our day to day lives. And it is also clear that many Christian universities, local churches and believers are unwilling or unable to play this role if it means resisting certain powerful aspects of the existing order.

To offer but one example: at one time, universities provided at least some “free and ordered space” within which the claims of the Christian life could be imagined, criticized, and supported--even in the midst of competing, often dominant, claims of state, empire and economy. But the increasing secularization of the modern university has made it, in most cases, a hostile environment for conversations about the Christian life. And yet, such conversations desperately need to take place if we hope to work toward a greater integration of Christian convictions and Christian practices, and if scholars are to explore what Christianity might mean to their fields of study and their various intellectual vocations. Without space for Christian scholarship and reflection, and without conversations among Christians in the

universities, in the workplaces, and in local congregations, the entire church is enfeebled.

From the time of the earliest gatherings of the disciples of Jesus, Christians have recognized that God fashions the Body of Christ to be a visible presence in the world. We are “called out” from the world, as suggested by the original Greek word for church: *ekklesia*. We understand this “calling out” to be the work of Holy Spirit, who redeems the lives of believers not as isolated individuals, but as members of an alternative community--a resource of resistance to the social and political structures of the age.

Carrying out this communal work requires a common vision and a good deal of mutual support. This is part of the mission of the local church, to which all Christians must remain committed. But congregations and other Christian organizations find it difficult to live a life of discipleship in the midst of competition from the thousands of object, images, and ideals that vie for our allegiance and attention on a daily basis. Living the Christian life in the midst of such competition requires nourishment and strengthening from the Holy Spirit, carried out through *koinonia* (communion, fellowship) with other persons who find themselves similarly called.

Therefore, we have formed a network of mutual support for the life of Christian discipleship--support that, sadly, is lacking in many local congregations. We believe that we can help one another to narrow the gaps between what we Christians profess and how we live. We call this The *Ekklesia* Project, in recognition of the fact that we are “called out” of the world into a different mode of life.

The *Ekklesia* Project is not a church, nor is it an alternative to local churches. It intends to celebrate and make known the work of those congregations and groups whose allegiances to God and the Body of Christ make discipleship a lived reality in the world. The Project also intends, in the spirit of “fraternal correction” (cf. Mt 18:15-16; 1Thess. 5:14), to challenge communities and practices that have minimized or diluted the church’s obligation to be a “light to the nations” (cf. Isa, 49:6) and a foretaste of the promised Kingdom of God. Those of us who have created The *Ekklesia* Project hope and expect to be held to

the same level of accountability by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our principles are simple and straightforward:

1. We believe that the triune God is the origin and the ultimate goal of all things; and that, through Jesus Christ, we are called to give our allegiance to God and to make the Church our true dwelling place. We believe that the claims of Christ have priority over those of state, the market, race, class, gender, and other functional idolatries. “You shall have no other Gods before me” (Ex. 20:3).

2. We believe that communal worship is the heart of the Christian life. We seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring our everyday practices into greater conformity with our worship, such that our entire lives may be lived to glorify God. Similarly, we pledge to give and receive counsel about how we might better embody the Gospel in its individual and communal expressions. “Praise the Lord; praise the name of the Lord; give praise, O servants of the Lord” (Psalm 135:1).

3. We believe that the church undercuts its own vocation when it compromises with the institutions, allegiances and assumptions that undergird the “culture of death” in our world. We remind all Christians that, in rejecting the sword and other lethal means to advance His goals, Jesus set an example for all of us who seek to follow Him. While accepting rather than imposing death may still be foolish and scandalous in the eyes of non-Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23), it remains central to what it means to follow a crucified and risen Messiah. We believe that the process of renewing the church in our day requires Christians to rethink all those values and practices that presume a smooth fit between killing and discipleship - no matter how disturbing or divisive this reappraisal may be (cf. Matt. 10:34-38). Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

4. We do not accept the ultimacy of divisions imposed on the Body of Christ -- whether they be national borders, denominational divides, cultural and social stereotypes, or class divisions. We seek to restore the bonds of ecclesial unity and solidarity that are always under threat from the powers and principalities of the present age. “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38-39).

We seek to embody these principles through an ongoing critical conversation about the Christian life. We expect this to include regular gatherings and retreats at the local, regional, and national levels; a wide variety of publications, in both paper and electronic form, for a variety of audiences (academic, ecclesial, and popular); and through an ongoing network of communication (including a regular newsletter). Additionally, members of the Ekklesia pledge that they will maintain vital prayer lives, participate in the worship life of their local churches, perform the traditional works of mercy (e.g., feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the stranger, instructing the uneducated), and observe a daytime fast every Friday as a form of prayerful resistance to the idolatrous practices of our culture. We will hold one another responsible for these covenantal practices and those that the Spirit may lead us to accept at a later time.

We invite Christians from all walks of life to join us. We ask for your prayers and participation; we ask for your commitment of time and money; and we ask you to add your name to the membership list of the Ekklesia Project.

**Invitation Endorsers
May, 2002**