The Christ story is a story that resides within the story of the universe. Key Questions are:

- How is the Christ story told so as to recover our affinity with creation?
- After centuries of amnesia about ecological concerns and connectedness with the earth, how might the Christ story be an awakening call for humankind?

The word ‘ecology’ comes from the Greek work ‘oikos’ meaning ‘a home’ or ‘where one lives’. The word and concept of ecology evokes a vision of ‘being at home’ as a member of the earth community, and living harmoniously within the intricate network of life in the ecosystem.

Ecological matters are big news today. There are daily media reports and comments about planetary issues such as global warming, drought, fire storms, carbon footprints, sustainability, energy-saving devices and dire predictions about the future of human kind’s existence on a vandalised earth. Scientists tell us that every twenty hours 90 million tons of global warming pollution is pumped in the atmosphere. After prolonged centuries of ecological neglect, only as recently as the last fifty years has human consciousness been jolted into an awareness of the growing ecological crisis. Faced with the prospect of an ecological catastrophe, a rising global consciousness is impelling the creation of international measures to combat threats to the health of the earth.

Humankind is not just another species on the planet. Through intelligence and consciousness people have a special responsibility for what happens to creation. According to Adrian Smith ‘we humans are not separate beings on earth but rather we are expressions of earth’ (2001, p.72). Thomas Berry reminds us that we need to compose a new story to enable us to live creatively within the great story of the universe:

>Before we say anything about the natural world, we stand in awe at the stars in the heavens, at the earth with its seas and continents, its mountains, rivers, forests and its animals... We humans are the ones in whom the diversity of the universe celebrates itself, in conscious self-awareness. From our vantage point we can sketch out the great story of the universe until now. We recognize the earth as a privileged planet but we have lost our ability to understand or appreciate it. (O’Connell, p.48).

Berry’s point that we have lost or forgotten how to appreciate creation is endorsed by Richard Louv. Louv names the lack of appreciation of creation as NDD (‘Nature Deficit Disorder’).

**Christ and Creation**

What does the Christ story have to say about the well-being of the earth community and the role of humankind as stewards of the earth? How does community and the redemptive mission of Jesus the Christ involve the whole universe?

In his life, Jesus like us and every living creature, moved and breathed the oxygen of a universe throbbing with life. The earth forms a living system in which human are in integral part of this web of life. Living things, such as humans, would rapidly die of asphyxiation if the oceans, grasses, trees and plants were not pumping out the oxygen that enables us to breathe and live. In the big picture of the evolution of creation, humans are latecomers. We cannot do without creation. For billions of years, however creation has done very well without humans.

For much of the story of Christianity, the Christ story has been told without reference to the context of creation. To tell the Christ story apart from the story of the universe exposes Christianity to the danger of isolating humanity from its Creator. In the Christ story, the material of the earth and all matter merge with the revealing Divine Spirit of God.
During the last few hundred years, humanity has acquired the science and technology to uncover some of the secrets of the universe and trace the unfolding evolution of the universe back to its origins almost 14 billion years ago.

The time is opportune for Christians to now retell the Christ story within the framework of creation. Paul in Colossians reminds us of the centrality of Christ in creation: ‘He is... the first born of all creation... all things have been created through him’ (1:5-16). The first statement of belief in the Nicene Creed is ‘We believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth’. God’s revelation in Jesus the Christ happened two thousand years ago. So, belief in God as Creator preceded belief in Jesus as Christ.

Until recently much theological thinking tended to regard the story of creation as mere backdrop to the centre stage of the drama of redemption. Now Christians are beginning to appreciate how the redemption and creation stories are two perspectives of the one saving mission of Jesus the Christ. Modern science in quantum physics explains how everything in creation is linked within a web of ceaseless energy and relationships.

**Religion and creation**

Every tribe and civilisation has some version of a creation or origin story. Creation or origin stories offer answers to such profound questions as where did we come from, what is our relationship to the earth and Divine Spirits, and what is our destiny? Creation stories are sacred myths to explain our place in the world and our destiny. Mythical language is not scientific language. Sacred creation myths tell imaginative stories to illustrate how humans are to live within the network of creation. Ancient people interpreted the world structure as having three layers: the heavens above, the earth and the underworld. Religious traditions imagined the gods or God in the heavens; humans and all creatures on earth; and the forces of darkness, evil powers and death in the underworld.

Three classical creation stories have shaped the Judeo-Christian story of our origins. Behind the Genesis story lies the ancient Babylonian creation story of Enuma Elish (written on tablets no later than circa 1100 BCE) and the Greek creation story Timaeus (fourth century BCE). Both stories influenced the writers of the Genesis story of creation. The biblical account of creation was never intended as a scientific or historical explanation of how the universe came into being. Biblical creation stories tell us that God is the origin of life and God is involved in the world, especially with women and men. The sacred myths of creation insist that God did not create the world and then ignore it. The act of creation may be understood as a self-expression of the Divine Energy of love, relationships and ‘generativity’.

Chapters one to eleven in Genesis recount a sacred origin story which has shaped the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The story of our origins in the eleven chapters explains in mythical language our purpose and relationships with God and the world. These chapters of Genesis have a number of themes:

- Creation is good: ‘and God saw that it was good’ (Genesis 1:25)
- Humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27)
- Humans are stewards in creation with a special responsibility for the care of the earth (Genesis 1:28-30)
- People are born into a flawed condition which was a consequence of disobedience to God’s wishes (Genesis 3)
- Sin is not only an individual act but is communal in its destructiveness (Genesis 7-8)
- God forms a covenant with people and the earth symbolised by a rainbow (Genesis 9).

For thousands of years humans lived within the network of creation, placating the gods and goddess of nature through religious rituals. Early images of deities were female, especially images of Mother Earth.

The earliest human appreciation of the sacred emanated from beliefs about the earth as the source of all life and the ground of all being. The earth was like a great woman’s body out of which emanated all life.

The Great Goddess was worshipped for thousands of years and is still a living tradition in India. In the Upanishads (Hindu writings), Brahman is a mysterious power in nature which comes into consciousness in our world and is the unifying force of all things in creation. According to the Upanishads, beyond the diversity of everything in the world is the principal of unity which is manifested in Brahman. The principal of unity holds that, although we live in a world of diversity, we need to keep together the forces of separation by honouring the deep unifying energy of the oneness of the universe.
About five thousand years ago with the rise of the farming and military castes in some cultures such as Egypt, we begin to notice the separation of humans from the earth. During this era we observe the emergence of the great religions, and gradually male deities replaced female deities. In the words of Joan Chittister, ‘Males become the centre of the universe, the crown of creation, the norm of the human race’ (2007, p.57). There was a slow almost imperceptible shift from understanding humans living within the life of creation to humans seeing the earth as either hostile with its vagaries of nature or as a source of boundless resources to be utilised for the benefits of humankind.

Christians and the earth

Ambivalence would best describe how Christians historically have related to the earth. Jesus’ boyhood was spent in the bountiful land of Galilee in the northern region of Palestine. During one of my pilgrimages to Israel I was enthralled by the beauty of the countryside around Galilee.

In Israel I grew in appreciation of how Jesus used nature symbols to describe his dream, the reign of God. Woven into his teachings, nature symbols abound. The reign of God is compared to a mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32). The mysterious growth of the kingdom is likened to a growing see (Mark 4:26-29). Using nature images, Jesus called on his disciples to trust in God: ‘consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap… Consider the lilies, how they grow ’(Luke 12:24-29). As a pious Jew, Jesus would often recite psalms with nature symbols (for example, Psalm 8, 104). He would also have been conscious of the Jewish belief that creation and the Torah were twin sources of God’s revelation to his people. The reign of God, the core message of Jesus, is the first experienced by celebrating God’s presence in the whole of creation.

Negative Christian attitudes to the earth

Although Jesus was steeped in affinity with the earth, early Christianity struggled to retain this heritage. There were a number of influences which impacted on Christians in their relations with the earth. As explained earlier in the text, dualistic philosophies, separating material things from spiritual matters, denigrated the material earthly dimensions of our being an exalted the spiritual. Gnosticism presented a serious threat to the Early Church by teaching that the body and material things were of no ultimate consequence. Plato’s philosophy and neoplatonic thinking described how the ascent to the eternal forms implied letting go of inhibiting material things.

The dualism between body and spirit has been the most persistent heresy for Christianity. Dualism appeared and reappeared in many guises, such as Manichaeism (third to fourth century), Albigensianism (thirteenth century) and Jansenism (seventeenth century). Dualism permeated Church life and devotions, especially in France. In a dualistic perspective, the earth was regarded as merely a passing phenomenon for Christians on their pilgrim path to eternity. Although we need to be prudent in reading history backwards from a twenty-first-century lens, the dualistic philosophical heritage left its mark on the development of a healthy Christian appreciation of the body and holistic sexuality.

The division between body and spirit directly contradicted the core Christian belief of the Incarnation: ‘And the Word was made flesh and lived among us’ (John 1:14). As a consequence of dualistic influences, the teaching Church has struggles in formulating a positive anthropology and wholesome approach to sexuality. One of the theological giants in Christian theology, Augustine, taught that sex in marriage was always sinful unless both partners resolved that their sexual union was for purposes of procreation only.

One group of early Christians believed that the ‘parousia’ or ‘the end time’, was about to befall humanity. St Paul in his First Letter to the Thessalonians warns Christians to keep working and living because we don’t know when the Second Coming of Christ will happen. According to those waiting for the end time or time of rapture, the earth will be destroyed following this period on the final judgment day. Who wants to get involved with the earth if it is soon to be engulfed in a fiery end?

Other events such as the Black Death (1348-1356) devastated Western Europe. Millions died as a result of a massive plague. The Black Death seemed to confirm a view that the earth was a hostile and dangerous place. ‘Other-world’ spiritualities tended to denigrate earthly things and focused on what happens after death. Given the utter poverty in the lives of most people at this time, one can readily appreciate why ‘other world’ spiritualities held such an appeal. The popular hymn ‘Hail Holy Queen’ (Salve Regina) attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) echoed this sense of alienation from the earth: ‘mourning and weeping in the valley of tears’. Even today, the
expression ‘to find dirt on someone’ (meaning ‘to find something unclean or unsavoury or unworthy about someone’s past or present conduct’) is a telling reflection on people’s attitudes to the earth – ‘dirt’ being seen as something unwholesome, unpleasant and repugnant.

Until recently much of science has demonstrated scant respect for nature. Roger Bacon, regarded as the ‘father’ of modern science, said nature is to be ‘tortured’ until it yields up its secrets. While modern science has brought many benefits to humankind, the underside of science has cast a long shadow across the earth with its pillaging of the earth’s resources, its misuse of animals in the name of science to harvest organs for humankind or to determine toxicity levels for yet another hair shampoo or domestic detergent, its development of nuclear weapons, and its carbon pollution possibly leading to global warming. The injunction in Genesis 1:28 to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over…every living thing that moves upon the earth’ has been interpreted by big business as giving endorsement to vandalising the earth.

A critical issue for Christianity in its relationships to creation was the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The new cosmology demonstrated that the earth was not the centre of the universe but a small planet moving in a vast expanding universe of stars and planets. Traditional Christian cosmology posited a view of a series of hierarchical levels with the heavens above, hell below and God dwelling in the sky. Modern science contradicted such a view of reality (Ruether, p.28). The painful reformulation of Christian cosmology after the seventeenth century was an indicator of the general reluctance of the Church to come to terms with a world increasingly shaped by science. Christian cosmology gradually accepted a scientific vision of the universe.

**Christians affirming creation**

Another strand of Christianity is very positive towards creation by celebrating our affinity with nature. Thomas Aquinas exalted creation as a manifestation of God’s abundant goodness. He affirmed the gift of creation when he wrote, ‘the whole universe participates in the divine goodness and represents it better than any single being whatsoever’ (*Summa Theologiae*, q. 47, a. 1.). Throughout the centuries, movements such as Celtic Christianity, Benedictines, Franciscans and the Rhineland mystics fostered spiritualities woven into intimacy with God’s creation. The writings of Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen in the Middle Ages and more recently writers such as Thomas Berry, Matthew Fox, Denis Edwards, Paul Collins and feminist theologians are examples of people teaching spiritual paths infused with God’s presence in creation (Kohn, p. 67).

For the most part, Orthodox Churches have been more attuned to creation theology and spirituality than the more cognitive spiritualities of Western Christianity. As explained earlier in the test, the basic principle of sacramentality, whereby God’s presence is experienced in all creation, firmly grounds Christians in affirming creation. According to St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) called all things, however small, by the name of brother and sister because he knew they had the same source as himself. In his ‘Canticle of the sun’, Francis celebrated creation:

Praise be my Lord God  
for all his creatures,  
especially for our branch the sun.

Another great medieval mystic, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) wrote:

As the Creator loves his creation,  
So creation loves the Creator...  
The entire world has been  
embraced by this kiss.

An eminent modern prophet of the affirmation of creation was a Jesuit priest and palaeontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Pierre sought to close the gap between science and religion by proposing that in telling the whole story of the universe, one must include the psychic and spiritual dimensions of the emerging universe. According to Chardin, as the universe evolved in complexity, human consciousness developed as an energy within the material of the universe. The spiritual inner energy is moving towards an Omega point, the Cosmic Christ. Although Teilhard de Chardin’s thesis fell under official Church suspicion, there has been a recent revival of interest in his basic thesis that science and religion must find common ground in being partners in the narrative of the universe.