



Ideas for Reclaiming Advent and Christmas

During Advent we anticipate and celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In our modern-day culture Christmas has also become a season of giving. This year we have compiled some resources to help Presbyterians engage in giving that sustains life and celebrates the birth of Christ in more meaningful ways than mainstream culture provides. Our Alternative Giving Ideas have been designed to accommodate a range of budgets and family needs. We'd love to hear your feedback and incorporate your creative ideas.

Regardless of how you choose to celebrate Christmas this year, we hope that you will have a life-giving, simple, and Christ-centered holiday season. Please contact us to share your stories about your Christmas celebrations. We welcome and look forward to your feedback and ideas. Advent and Christmas blessings to you.

Downloadable at www.pcusa.org/enough/christmas.



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Be Intentional

Society places many expectations on us (and we place expectations on ourselves) to create “the perfect Christmas” or “the best Christmas” by outdoing each other or what we did last year. Often we run ourselves ragged all season, only to collapse with exhaustion after the holidays and find that we did little that was actually enjoyable. Decide early in the season what will be meaningful for you this year and make choices all through the season based on that intention.

Let your witness live itself out this season. If you decide to do things differently this year, take time to explain to others why you have made this switch. Whether its organic foods, alternative gifts, sweat free products, fairly traded goods, and every aspect of life that honors God, be gentle and kind in your explanations, keeping in mind that faithful living is a process and we need each other and God to assist us on our journeys.

Pray and Renew

What are your traditions surrounding prayers and blessings during Advent and the Christmas season? Is there one person who prays each year, or do multiple people offer prayers? It may be helpful to talk together about the prayers that are said:

- Often Christmas and the holiday season create times where people of different denominations and faith traditions share table together. If this is the case you may wish to have people offer prayers from their tradition.
- Incorporate prayers for farmers and the Earth into your family's celebrations: www.nfwm.org/nfwmresources/hojprayers.html
- You may also have people at your table for whom English is not their first language, so consider offering prayers and thanks in multiple languages.
- Talk about ways to share God's gifts with others. Discuss ways of renewing the Earth and supporting sustainable farming practices. You can share the joy of gardening by planting potted winter bulbs like Amaryllis or Paper Whites.
- Consider your family's everyday prayer life, too. If one person traditionally offers the prayer, perhaps others can join in for communal prayer, or you can rotate the tradition around from person to person year to year.

Study and Learn

Spend time with loved ones during Advent around your Advent wreath, Christmas tree, hearth or in an

outdoor location, and engage in prayer, study and activities that broaden the heart and mind:

- *Whose Birthday is it Anyway? An Advent and Christmas Resource for Families, Individuals and Churches*, a publication of Alternatives for Simple Living. To order call Presbyterian Distribution Service (800-524-2612) and request PDS #74360-07-302.
- *Let Heaven and Nature Sing: An Advent Devotional Resource*, by Presbyterians for Restoring Creation: www.prcweb.org/DOCS/PRCAdventResource.pdf
- *Thoughtful Christian* (www.thoughtfulchristian.com) has several Bible studies related to Advent and Christmas:
 - *Reclaiming Christmas: Seeking an Alternative*
 - *Repentance, Faith, Holiness, and Love: An Advent Study*
 - *Pausing on the Road to Bethlehem: A Spiritual Journey through Advent*
 - *Accounts of Jesus' Birth*
- Use Advent Resources in your Church's Services. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a number of Advent and Christmas resources for use in congregations: www.pcusa.org/advent.

Create

Develop your own rituals for Christmas:

- Develop a yearly cookbook to share traditions and meals. The recipe's author can write about the creation, history and heritage of the recipe.
- Create your family's ornaments, table centerpiece, or tree topper. Find inspiration all around you from a nature walk, a craft store visit, or other outing. Visit a nearby farm or farmer's market to find gourds, decorative winter squash, dried corn and natural arrangements.

Share the Work

Sometimes serving means providing for others through hospitality and doing the work yourself. However, the holidays are times of sharing.

Encourage everyone to help with preparation and service. In helping, people can share Christmas stories, learn traditions, and develop new skills. Here are some ideas to lessen your stress during preparation by sharing the work among all:

- Simplify. Decide together as a family how you want to celebrate this holiday season: What aspects are essential to you and your family in order for the holiday season to feel like Christmas? Let go of things that are not essential and make room for more time with loved ones!

- Have others bring side dishes or desserts. This can add variety to the table. Creating a table for goodies from all your friends and family honors everyone's contributions to the feast.
- Share space and make room for community! If your kitchen is large enough invite others in to help with the preparation of the meal, or if your kitchen is smaller find other spaces where food can be prepared and others can help.
- Establish a family kitchen. If your family is one where one person tends to do most of the cooking, cleaning or other planning and preparation, then give that person a break this year. Share preparation tasks among all involved. This helps everyone take part in the planning and preparation so everyone can take part in the fun and relaxation!

Slow Down, Make it Memorable

When we get too caught up in shopping and preparation, it is easy to forget about Christ. Relax and savor not only the season but also Christmas Day. Christmas is a holiday and our focus should be on God, not on the material nature of Christmas. Adopting a Christmas mantra like, "I can't serve both God and mammon," can be a helpful, prayerful reminder of the meaning of Christmas during stressful times. It is easy to get caught up in the hustle of everything, but planning ahead can help to prevent some of the holiday stresses:

- Turkey, ham, goose, and prime rib all takes a long time to cook, so use this to your advantage. While the meal cooks, spend time out of the kitchen with your friends and family.
- Share Traditional Stories. Before engaging in a family or holiday tradition, ask someone to explain the reason for the tradition. For example, retell the story of the birth of Christ as you set a nativity scene. Share your heritage in the telling of stories. Encourage questions and dialogue about holiday traditions.
- Share stories with each other, either during a meal or at another time. What is each person's favorite Christmas memory? Make the conversation intergenerational by sharing memories of past holidays and gatherings as well as the history of the holiday.
- Take time to remember members of your family or other loved ones who have died. Tell stories and share memories to honor the person and keep them present. If you are grieving a recent loss, take time to honor your grief and care for yourself. Even if you are not grieving yourself, others around you may be, so keep in mind that the holidays are particularly difficult for those who are mourning losses of any kind – be it the loss of a

loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, or the loss of a possibility or dream. Reach out and honor the realities of life that are present amidst the busy bustle of the season.

Serve Someone and Share the Wealth

Christmas is a season of birth and renewal. We give gifts and honor God. This holiday should be a celebration of life and we hope that it will be for all people. However, there will be those who are not able to partake in Christmas celebrations. Perhaps they do not have the money or resources; perhaps they do not have a family or friends to visit; perhaps they do not have a home. Whatever the reason, we can work together to eliminate the causes of hunger and poverty.

- Taking the time to visit a local shelter or food bank can help develop a strong sense of service. If it is possible, take the time to serve a Christmas meal to others outside of your home. Find a shelter near you: www.seconddharvest.org/zip_code.jsp
- Food donations, meal preparation and delivery, or inviting new guests to your home are all forms of service and outreach you can embrace this Christmas.
- Take action against hunger! You can take up a collection at your meal to support local efforts to eliminate hunger, or have your guests bring nonperishable items to donate to a local food pantry or shelter. If you are feeling politically active, consider a letter writing campaign or initiative for your guests to support. For example you could send postcards to the executives at Burger King to support the work of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers: www.ciw-online.org/news.html and the Campaign for Fair Food: www.pcusa.org/fairfood.
- Interfaith Activity. Christmas is a time of great celebration for Christians and the holiday season is also a time of celebration for many of the other world's religions. There are a number of ways to learn about other cultures and religions this season. Honor God by sharing what it means to be a Christian this season, while also honoring and respecting those of other faith traditions.

Stay Home

Avoid returning gifts on the day after Christmas. Take time with family to rest, relax and enjoy the season. Call or visit people you haven't seen in a while. Perhaps plan an outing or family activity. This will help you avoid the hubbub of the frenzied "return day" immediately following Christmas and make space for meaningful activities.



Greenery as Life, Creation, and Renewal

We celebrate the birth of our Savior during Christmas. If you are celebrating the holiday season in the Northern Hemisphere, with the onset of winter you probably notice fewer signs of life, which can make it difficult to celebrate birth and renewal. There are a number of ways the church has traditionally remembered Christ's birth through the introduction of signs of life during the season of Advent:

Advent wreaths

- Make your own wreath. Rather than purchasing a fresh advent wreath, you can make one from the boughs of a Christmas tree. Reusing the lower branches of the tree that were cut to fit the tree into its stand can make excellent wreath material.
- An advent wreath can be completely organic. To find local and organic options for wreaths and other greenery visit a local farmers market by searching Local Harvest (www.localharvest.com) or Organic Bouquet (www.organicbouquet.com).
- For candles, think beeswax. Beeswax candles are completely organic and biodegradable. Beeswax also burns cleaner than paraffin.
- If you have made your wreath from natural greens, it can be composted or recycled like a Christmas tree.

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree...

While there may not be a Biblical basis for having a Christmas tree, the practice of bringing greens and signs of life into our homes during the winter has become a standard part of Christmas tradition.

- If you already have an artificial tree, it is best to make use of it as long as you can.
- If you are in need of a tree, whether you should buy a real tree or an artificial tree can be a tough decision. The National Christmas Tree Association provides a list of benefits to

purchasing real trees:

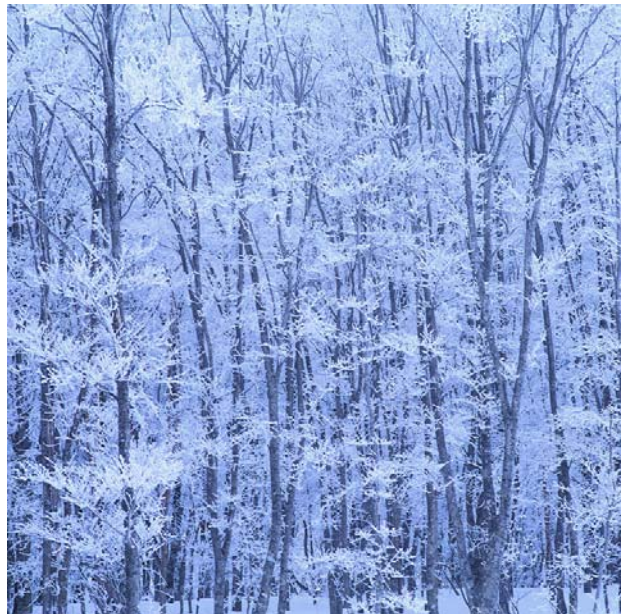
www.christmastree.org/debate.cfm.

- Go Local. Consider visiting a nearby tree farm to get your tree, and make it a memorable outing with family or friends. Find local farms at Local Harvest: www.localharvest.org.
- Treecycle! Real trees are 100% biodegradable. They can be converted into mulch or compost for organic farming. If you live on a farm yourself, your tree can be reused as fish shelter/habitat in your farm's pond or lake. To find out where your tree can be recycled visit Earth 911: <http://earth911.org/>
- Instead of setting up a traditional tree, consider decorating a large houseplant already inside your home.
- Plant indoor winter bulbs like amaryllis and paperwhites for dramatic, fragrant blooms. These are plants for kids to watch because they grow incredibly quickly.

Think outside the box

Decorate outside your home with edible decorations to attract wildlife:

- Pinecones coated with organic nut butter and rolled in seeds, and dried ears of corn create natural bird feeding ornaments.
- Apples may be hung from branches to feed deer or other larger animals.
- Garland can be made out of air popped corn or chunks of stale bread.
- Millet and other seeds can be woven into a wreath that will attract a variety of wild birds.
- If the tree is close to a window in your home, keep watch for visiting animals. Make it educational and try to identify as many species as you can.



Holiday Gifts

The Magi traveled a long distance to bring gifts to Jesus. Their gifts were items of value that honored the child and provided for the family. Today we are bombarded with messages of extravagance during the holiday season, and gift giving can be a tricky topic for many. Like the Magi, we, too, can try to find gifts that honor our loved ones, while also honoring Christ and remembering why we celebrate Christmas in the first place. Jesus and his family were poor. Christ was born in a manger surrounded by hay and animals.

It can be difficult to find the balance between honoring your loved ones with the latest thing and honoring the Christ to whom we strive to be faithful. Giving alternative gifts can be fun and uplifting if it is done in the spirit of love; however, if you are too aggressive or overbearing, your gift may not be well received. Take it slow and meet people where they are. Embody Christ in your giving and receiving this season. Gifts that honor Jesus are those that reflect God's presence with us. Christ's ministry reminds us that we are not to seek treasures on earth, but to build up our treasures in heaven. When you give, let the scriptures be your inspiration and give thoughtfully, with justice, kindness, and humility:

Gifts of time and service

Gifts of time and service can be quite memorable. These gifts require thoughtful preparation and help build relational bonds. Sharing the gifts God has given you through service and teaching honors God and blesses others.

- **Teach Skills.** If you are gifted with crafts, music, dance, or other talents, give the gift of knowledge. Gifting a series of lessons empowers the people you love with new skills and abilities, while passing on some tradition and heritage.
- **Games.** You can give board games or a deck of cards with a promise to play. Teaching a new card game to a child or adult is a lasting gift.
- **Meals.** Give the promise of food and meals to people on your list. Promising to eat lunch with your children at their school once a month is a great way to spend more time with family.
- **Homemade Gifts:** Knitted items, framed photos, handcrafted toys, works of art, and other personally made gifts show care and concern for the recipient. These gifts require time and thought to create.
- **Commitment.** Make a commitment to someone this season. Find ways to serve the people on your list by committing to care for them. You can shovel snow, prepare meals, plan events, or schedule a vacation.

Gifts of giving

Give gifts that honor God by supporting church ministries through alternative giving. You can provide a donation to honor someone on your list.

- The Presbyterian Small Farmer Fund supports fair trade and organic farming throughout the world. Producer groups apply to the Presbyterian Hunger Program. Equal Exchange supports the fund with donations each year based on volume of sales from the Presbyterian Coffee Project. Individuals and congregations can also give to the fund.
- Give to Enough for Everyone. Support the church's ministry of lifestyle integrity (and the creation of materials such as this one) by donating online at www.pcusa.org/enough/giving.htm.
- Give to the Presbyterian Hunger Program, make an additional gift to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering, or support the Christmas Joy Offering:
 - www.pcusa.org/hunger/give
 - www.pcusa.org/oghs
 - www.pcusa.org/cjoffering
- Microcredit loans provide people with opportunities to develop their communities. For more information on microcredit and investing in Oikocredit, visit: www.pcusa.org/oikocredit.

Gifts of membership

Providing a gift that gives throughout the year shows your commitment to the recipient. Memberships are great gifts for people who have seemingly everything.

- **Give or Renew a Membership.** Discover the clubs and organizations to which the people on your Christmas list belong and sponsor their membership for the year.
- **The Gift of Health.** Instead of waiting for New Year's Resolutions, give the gift of a gym membership along with a shared commitment to health. You and your loved one can enjoy time together in the gym.
- **Magazines, Journals, and Electronic Subscriptions.** Many publications have subscription fees, which make great gift ideas. Each month the recipient will be reminded of your generosity.



Fair trade gifts

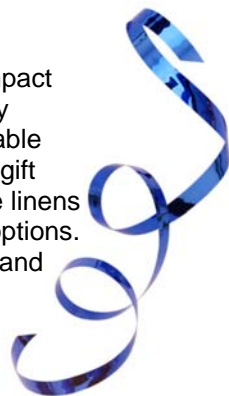
God's call to live our lives justly can take many forms. By being intentional with our spending we can share the blessings of prosperity while sharing our Christian call. Selecting fair trade products and avoiding sweatshop labor in your gifting celebrates God's call to liberate the oppressed and to set captives free. Fair Trade options are not limited to coffee. Many items that you might give as gifts for Christmas can be found fair trade, which means that you will not be giving gifts made with slave or child labor and you will know that the people who worked hard making the products are being paid a wage they can live on.

- Coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate, and snacks. The Presbyterian Coffee Project (www.pcusa.org/coffee) offers a variety of items to fill a holiday gift basket with fair trade goodies. You could whip up a batch of homemade marshmallows and create a memorable hot chocolate gift basket!
- Buy American. Products made in the United States are less likely to be made under poor conditions or forced labor. Local toyshops can be great finds for wooden toys like blocks and trains. U.S. Made Toys (www.usmadetoys.com) can provide you with information on toys that are still made in the United States.
- Sports equipment. Fair Trade Sports (www.fairtradesports.com/gearshop/) offers a wide variety of sports equipment for the sports enthusiast on your list. Their products are produced by adult workers who are fairly paid and many products are made from sustainably harvested organic rubber.
- Go Global. Purchase fairly traded gifts from one of the PC(USA) Global Marketplace partners: www.pcusa.org/globalmarketplace. Your gift will support the self-development of people throughout the world.
- Try to avoid sweatshops. While it may not be possible to satisfy everyone on your list with the above recommendations, you can find ways to be more responsible in giving by avoiding sweatshop labor. The 2008 sweat free shopping guide (www.sweatfree.org/shoppingguide) is a great resource for sweat shop free products. Avoiding the producers in the Hall of Shame (www.sweatfree.org/hallofshame) will also help to prevent some of the worst offenders from making it under your tree this season.
- Season tickets to the theater or other arts, sporting events, or memberships to museums or science centers can be fun for all.

Eco-Friendly gifts

Throughout the scriptures we are reminded of God's deep connection with us and our world. Sustaining life on the planet requires us to sustain the earth. In caring for the earth we are caring for all of God's children and sustaining the diversity of created life. Many gifts can be environmentally responsible and support your concerns for the earth. These gifts can also serve as a way of teaching people to care for creation and one another. Eco-friendly gifts may help others to see God in new ways as one who cares about the world and all its people.

- Trees, plants, and landscaping. If you have a green thumb or a gift for gardening, you can give out gifts of future promise. Providing seeds or cuttings from your own garden, teaching someone to garden, helping someone plan a garden, or planting a tree together are all great gifts.
- CFLs or LEDs. It can be a little expensive to fit a whole house with Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs) or Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs) but the electricity savings will quickly offset these initial costs. Each month your loved ones will thank you as they pay lower electric bills and accumulate savings.
- Water Bottles. The consumption of bottled water has huge environmental and humanitarian impacts. Providing someone you love with a reusable water bottle and possibly a water filter can prevent hundreds of flimsy plastic bottles from ending up in landfills. Drinking tap water helps prevent the privatization of water, which helps ensure enough water for everyone. Reusable bottles save oil and energy from being consumed in the production of new bottles. For more information on bottled water and its impact look into the Think Outside the Bottle Campaign: www.stopcorporateabuse.org/cms/page1353.cfm. Sign the pledge yourself and include a copy for your loved one with your gift.
- Carbon offsets. Offsets provide a great way to give back through the planting of trees and development of new "green" technologies. TerraPass offers a number of ways to calculate and customize a carbon offset for each person on your list: www.terrapass.com/. For other options on carbon offsets and green tags visit: www.newdream.org/holiday/energy.php
- Reusable Gift Packaging. Minimize the impact that your gifts will have on local landfills by packaging them in reusable or biodegradable packaging. Consider using a gift bag or a gift basket. Wrapping gifts in blankets or table linens create practical and reusable packaging options. The possibilities are endless. Be creative and minimize your impact.



Holiday Foods

Food plays a huge role in the holidays and our gatherings. Many biblical stories tell of God providing food for the weary, whether this was the Hebrew people fleeing Egypt or the more than 5,000 Jesus fed. As Christians, we can be conscientious of where our food comes from and how it is produced, so that our food choices sustain life rather than injustice. Here are some ways to embody the life of Christ through your eating and food preparation this season.

Keep it local

Local foods, like those from farmer's markets, require less energy to transport to your table and help minimize your environmental impact. Local foods are fresh and often reflect seasonal flavors.

- Purchase your turkey, ham, goose, or prime rib locally from a free range, organic producer — the Sustainable Table provides educational information to help pick out the main course option to suit your needs: www.sustainabletable.org/.
- Purchase no meat at all and create a vegetarian or vegan feast from local farm goods.
- Visit the Local Harvest Web site and search by zip code to find markets and farms in your area: www.localharvest.org/.
- Check out 100-mile Diet for local and organic recommendations: <http://100milediet.org/>
- The Rural Coalition operates the SuperMarket Coop, a cooperative of low-income farmers and artisans in the US and abroad. Visit www.supermarketcoop.com for wreaths, gifts, food, beverages and more.

Buy organic

Use as much organic food as possible. Organic foods are produced without pesticides, hormones, or other potentially harmful chemicals, which prevents chemicals from polluting water systems, soil, air and our bodies. Organic farming means farm workers and consumers are saved from exposure to potentially harmful chemicals. Many local and fair trade options are also organic.



Minimize waste and packaging

While recycling is far better than adding waste to landfills, buying items with no packaging or reusable packing is the best option. Find items with minimal packaging. If it is possible to reuse an item then reuse it, if it is not possible, then seek out recyclable material. Here are some ideas to get you started and to make your kitchen and holiday season a little greener:

- Rather than having meats prepackaged in Styrofoam and shrink-wrap, buy meats from a local butcher or meat counter where they can be wrapped in paper.
- Organic scraps and waste can be composted. If you have a garden it is a great, natural way to enhance your soil!
- Glass jars can be reused as cups or as containers for gifts in a jar: <http://organizedchristmas.com/index-gifts-in-a-jar>
- Gift bags are better options than wrapping paper because they can be reused. Using a reusable cloth or recycled shopping bag for a gift bag means the bag can be used all the time: www.reusablebags.com
- Before you throw it away try to recycle it. Eco 911 provides a wealth of information on what can be recycled and where it can be recycled. They also provide analysis on the benefits and costs of recycling items, including the environmental impact of different forms of recycling: <http://earth911.org/>



Buy Fair Trade

Using as many Fair Trade Certified products as possible means increased, tangible income for farmers and artisans around the world. Consider the following as you prepare your holiday treats:

Table spread and decorations

A Greater Gift (formerly SERRV), Ten Thousand Villages, and many other Global Marketplace partners offer tablecloths, placemats, serving bowls, utensils, pitchers and more:

- www.agreatergift.org
- www.tenthousandvillages.com
- www.pcusa.org/globalmarketplace
- Check with local potters for stoneware casseroles or other dishes you may need.
- Centerpieces for the table can come from organic producers who engage in sustainable flower harvesting: www.organicbouquet.com.

Beverage and snack needs

Equal Exchange and the Presbyterian Coffee Project (www.pcusa.org/coffee) provide the following goodies, and ensure a larger portion of your purchase reaches the farmers and farmer cooperatives.

- Fair trade coffee, tea and hot cocoa help to warm up chilly winter days - www.pcusa.org/coffee/order.htm.
- Fair trade cranberries for breads, muffins, cookies or other holiday treats.
- Fair Trade almonds and pecans can be snacked upon and incorporated into pies.
- Fair Trade Organic Baking Cocoa for brownies, cakes and more - www.equalexchange.com/cocoa.
- The six fair trade organic chocolate bar varieties are delightful all by themselves - www.equalexchange.com/chocolate-bars.
- Fair trade coffees, teas and hot cocoa: www.equalexchange.com/coffee
- www.equalexchange.com/organic-tea
- www.equalexchange.com/cocoa
- Order online: <http://equalexchange.stores.yahoo.net/>

Cooking and baking

- Look into options for fair trade sugar and vanilla. Children who are sold into forced labor and slavery harvest sugar and chocolate, but buying fair trade ensures you are not supporting unjust practices or child labor/slavery. Local natural foods stores should offer a variety of fair trade products.
- Fruit and produce are also available as fair trade items. These items may be found locally by locating a fair trade producer and supplier near you: http://transfairusa.org/content/certification/fresh_fruit_program.php.

Other Resources

There are a number of great resources on the web to help shape your holiday season in a way that honors God and celebrates the people in your life. Here are just a handful of other options you may wish to incorporate:

- Alternatives for Simple Living is currently holding a Moving Sale. Consider giving your loved ones gifts related to simple living. Alternatives has an extensive collection of resources, and many will be on sale (50% off) until the office moves in January: www.simpleliving.org
- Give "Gift of Time" cards to your family and friends. From the Center for a New American Dream: www.newdream.org/holiday/kit/gift_of_time_cards.pdf
- Check out the Simplify the Holidays program of the Center for a New American Dream: www.newdream.org/holiday
- Coop America's Ten Green Toys for the Holidays: www.coopamerica.org/programs/shopunshop/10GreenToys.cfm
- Co-op America and the Center for a New American Dream have categorical listings of products that are green or justly made or both: www.coopamerica.org/pubs/greengifts/index.cfm www.newdream.org/consumer/marketplace.php



www.pcusa.org/enough

Enough for Everyone is a ministry of the General Assembly Council,
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