

Environmental Responsibility: Why the Church Must Share Big

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses why the church should charge herself more for today's environmental challenges. At different levels of the social structures, voices of concern about the deterioration of the ecosystem are audible, primarily due to the widely felt impacts of the environmental crisis. Many people wonder who is responsible. Some think of environmental responsibility as individual, while others as collective. Does the balance favour one, and if so, why? Where do we need more effort? By situating the church's position in both contexts, this paper argues that the church should assume a leading role in the efforts towards environmental restoration. This paper offers a comprehensive understanding of theological foundations and practical reasons that position the church to promote the sustainability of the natural ecosystem effectively. In the process, the paper acknowledges that interference with nature's ecosystem disproportionately affects the poor and proposes strategies for the church to enhance its role in promoting environmental justice.

Key Words: Ecosystem, restoration, Church, sustainability, environmental, justice, and theological foundations

INTRODUCTION

The church's involvement in the so-called "secular" world, presumably a divinely instituted entity, has drawn different perspectives. Some scholars, like Hildreth 2018:55–63, say that the church should only concentrate on winning souls and preparing them for the 'afterlife,' for it is her primary role, while others are of the view that forgetting the church's role in social transformation would be a major 'omission' and not the biblical major 'commission' (Sterns, 2009:181–189). This divergence indicates that some perceive the church as a divine institution that is indifferent to events beyond its purview, specifically the spiritual realm. Therefore, discussing environmental protection and issues related to climate change as part of the church's responsibilities may seem inappropriate. However, according to Gelder (2000:128), the church serves four main functions: evangelism, which involves introducing people to Christ (John 3:3); edification, nurturing, and maturing (Eph 4:11-16); and worship and social concern, which involves expressing love to God and fellow men (Math 22:37-39). This paper builds on this understanding to argue that social concern, as an outright function of the church, involves God and man, as expressed in the great commandment (Math 22:37–39). Loving God entails loving him in his divine nature and all that He has created, including man and the sustainability of the ecological system. As the primary steward of the natural environment, this is just one of the reasons the church should assume a larger role in ecological responsibility (ER). This paper delves into additional theological justifications, practical explanations for the church's superior position in fostering sustainability of the ecosystem, and strategies for the church to advance environmental responsibility (ER). However, in this paper, we first elaborate on what I mean by the term environment and why ER is worth our attention.

The Environment/Ecological System

The term environment basically refers to one's surroundings. It is sometimes used synonymously with terms like ecology, land, world, earth, nature or creation. However, understanding the environment as one's surroundings seems too simplistic in that it is often mistakenly taken to exclude the further natural environment that includes the natural resources; the "naturally occurring living and non-living elements of the

earth system, including rocks, plants, fish and fungi, soil, water and minerals” (Barnsard & Schroder, 2021). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we shall adopt a contextualized meaning, treating the term environment and ecology; relationships among living organisms and their environment interchangeably. (Keong, 2016) defines the term ‘Ecosystem’ as a generic term that describes one or more communities of interacting organisms with their environment as a distinct unit. Ecosystems can be hierarchically organized ranging from small units to larger ones. This implies that the natural world consists of many ecosystems in a web-like connection. This ecological interpretation thus views the ecosystem not as a distinct or random grouping of communities but rather in an intrinsically connected and mutually dependent manner. So herein, the term “ecosystem” is used in its holistic meaning in reference to “the sum total of surrounding things, conditions, and influences” to mean environment. This includes both the biotic (living things) and abiotic (non-living things) components such as the physical environment and its conditions.

Also, environmental studies usually involve usage of different terms which might need some clarity. These include; preservation, conservation, and sustainability among others. The term ‘Preservation’ is sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘conservation.’ However, there is a remarkable difference between the two. Conservation basically involves safeguarding the environment and natural resources against harmful effects of human activity. It involves regulating extraction, processing and use and disposal of products from these resources in order to ensure their sustainability and that of the environment. Preservation on the other hand calls for a less human centered approach in the use of natural resources despite their usefulness to humans. Emphasis is put on keeping nature intact on the basis that both living and non-living things have a right to continued existence (Smith, 2018). ‘Sustainability’ of the three seems to be the more complex given the burden associated with shift thinking paradigms. Nevertheless, it is viewed to involve three main issues: ecological health, social equity and economic welfare. All these must be met within a framework that ensures “...meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” The present owes the future (Warners, Ryskamp & Van Dragt, 2014). These are some of the ways of expressing ER.

Why Environmental Responsibility?

Environmental responsibility ought to be on the front page of our agendas because of two broad reasons. First, the God-made relationship between man and the environment. Secondly, the conviction that much of the witnessed environmental challenges are man-initiated which obliges us to care. With the former, it has already been highlighted above that we exist in a web-like connection with the natural environment and so we need it. It is believed to be multifunctional in a way and to an extent that no other form of capital can provide (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 1992); it is a basis for both human and non-human life (Hori, Kamiyama & Saito, 2019). The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) thus defined the Ecosystem as “the planet’s life support system – for the human species and all other forms of life” (MEA, 2015). Therefore, its misuse for example through over-exploitation of natural resources which risks their depletion does not only harm the health of the ecosystem but also our socio-economic well-being. Man can possibly live without some manmade forms of capital but requires a minimum amount of natural capital for survival.

ER is thus paramount in order to cater for the increasing population that recently hit 8 billion. The fact that the world population is growing yet the natural resources are dwindling should be of a collective concern. An example is water, one of the basics for human life. Fresh water reserves are low as compared to the salty (70%) yet it is unevenly distributed. Furthermore, its consumption has increased six folds in six years (Valery, 2014). Therefore, such a scenario combined with increased urbanization and capital-intensive industrialization makes the need for ER inevitable. ER may thus be a way of ensuring food security for the increasing population among other benefits such as reducing encroachment by safeguarding against potential habitat loss. Therefore, depending human life on a well sustained ecosystem through ER improves human resilience amidst worsening threats of global climate change. It greatly contributes to human well-being in different aspects. Kirkby (1989) for example observed that it is “essential in motivating imagination, creativity, cognitive and intellectual growth and social relationship.” A study on the impact of nature around design schools in Malaysia found out that it does not only provide a supplement of fresh air and food to dwellers but also stimulates social interaction and distressing (Hashim & Denan, 2015). Hence a well sustained environment enhances human life because people have made different types of unbreakable cultural, spiritual and subsistence relationships with

the natural environment, adopting value systems that surpass economic framings that without resources like water among others, they would cease to exist (CRS & MEAS, 2015).

About the latter, natural causes of environmental issues such as variations in the sun's intensity, volcanic eruptions and shifts in concentrations of naturally occurring greenhouse gases (GHG) such as carbon dioxide nitrous oxide and methane among others according to NASA occur naturally slowly to justify the witnessed climatic conditions. On the other hand, human activity leading to climate change include increased industrialization that emits greenhouses gases (GHG); our transportation systems burns fuel and so emits GHGs whose effect Timothy Wirth, a former US senator describes as the most significant economic, political, environmental and human problem facing the 21st century" (Denchak & Turrentine, 2021); burning fossil fuels for electricity such as coal; deforestation also increases carbon dioxide concentrations leading to global warming; uncontrolled or increased use of fertilizers and poor mining methods are also reasons for climate change because it emits nitrous oxide emissions and so on.

As a result, today, environmental conditions that calls for serious ER manifest in issues such as climate change, water scarcity, global warming, food insecurity and environmental degradation, deforestation, soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, plastic pollution, acid precipitation and air pollution, ocean pollution, desertification and poor waste management among others. These environmental issues, as alluded to above influence people's daily lives; living and working conditions, the food they eat, the water they drink, the air they breathe and further shape their relationships with the land, with one another, with animals and with what is visible and invisible (Agang, 2020). The invisible includes God himself. The need to address environmental threats is thus one without debate. Pope Francis referred to the environment as our common home and described actions contributing to its destruction as "sin". He lamented that human action and greed had turned the planet into a "polluted wasteland full of debris, desolation and filth" (Pope Francis, 2015). Therefore, we ought to watch our relationship with it for our own good and those to come after us. Father Thomas Berry (God's Earth, ABC TV) was quoted reflecting on a properly functioning environment saying that "we have no inner spiritual life if we do not have the outer experience of the beautiful world. The more we destroy the world the less a sense of God is possible..." (Preston, 2017). Who doesn't need God? Much as some may think of independence from him, it is arguable that we all need him.

Moreover, decades ago the Ecologists Barry Commoner examined the environmental crisis together with human-nature interaction on many different aspects such as population growth, capitalism, politics, consumer demand, greed among others and summed up everything saying: "we have met the enemy, he is us" (Harris, 2021). The same was mentioned by the first world conference on the changing atmospheric conditions held in Toronto USA in 1988. Its observation concluded that "humanity is conducting unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be only second to a global nuclear war" (Adedeji et al, 2014). If this is so, it implies that responsibility rests on us to think of how we maneuver the present ecological challenges and ensure its restoration and sustainability. Patricia Tull also echoed the same mentioning that "We may search for technological answers to the multiple ecological problems we face but the questions are really human ones" (Tull, 2013, p. 200). Cal DeWitt also sees the task of caring for the environment as a special human duty that should be done in a shepherd manner since humans reflect God's image in a unique way (Terman, 2000). Therefore, there is a need for increased ER but the question is, under what umbrella especially as far as the church is concerned? The church is headed by Jesus Christ and derives authority and inspiration from him and the written word of God. Therefore, at this point I discuss the biblical reasons for church's 'must' concern for environmental health.

Theological Foundations

Christians globally consider the Bible as a book of authority. It is believed to be inspired by God and good for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness". It equips God's people for every good work (2Tim 3:16-17) (NIV). Accordingly, references are made to it on almost all aspects of human life including the environment. There are several scriptures that back the church to step up action for environmental sustainability. Notably, any talk about the environment and Christianity will most likely make a reference to the 1967 famous article by Lynn White. She argued that the dominion motif created the viewing of the environment as 'the other.' This to her contributed immensely to the misuse of the environment (Balcomb,

2019) culminating into present environmental challenges like climate change. She only, however, just added a voice to earlier opinions. Ludwig Feuerbach for example as early as (1843) alluded to the same in saying that “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest, for Christians. The Christian thinks only for himself and the salvation of his soul” (Moo, 2006, p. 467). Perhaps there are others who may subscribe to this view but is it right to judge so using a single scripture? We argue that there is enough biblical evidence asserting otherwise, encouraging the church to take responsibility for the environment.

The New Testament (NT) according to Earnest Lucas (1999) has very little to offer at least explicitly when it comes to the care of the environment. Three reasons are given: One is that it is not systematic theology per se but mostly occasional letters meant to address specific issues. Second is that unlike the Old Testament (OT) which had a nationalized kind of people and societal structures with a strong agricultural base to its economy, the NT was a multinational community without central power and identification with particular land. In fact, most of the audiences for the letters were urban groups and as such, most ethical issues by large dealt with personal and interpersonal issues. Thirdly, throughout the formative period of the NT, the OT was the scripture of early Christians. This may imply that it could sometimes be taken for granted and only alluded to during disagreements between Christians and Jews or among Christians themselves. Therefore, one can easily conclude that the NT teaches what the OT does when it comes to environmental issues (Lucas E. , 1999). Togarasei (2008) argues for the same for Paul. Here, three NT texts will be discussed at length. They are: John 3:16 (Salvation); Colossians 1:19-20 (Fullness of Christ); and Romans 8:13-23 (Environmental response).

John 3:16-17 (Soteriology)

Salvation in this text is not limited to humans. Rather, it is inclusive of everything because Jesus came to save the ‘world’. His redemptive work against sin extends to all creation because sin also affects our relationship with other creation. Jesus’ reconciliation is holistic. (Burma-Prediger, 2001, p. 124) says that “Christ’s work is as wide as creation itself; it is nothing short of restoration and consummation in all creation. ... Thus, our work is to be patterned after Christ’s reconciliatory reign as cosmic Lord.” The wholistic work of salvation accomplished on the cross, is vindicated in the resurrection, which resurrection embraces all creation. According to McDonagh (1990), Christian’s attitude towards nature is influenced by Jesus’ respect towards the natural world; he was not driven by the urge of dominion despite his unique nature and abilities. Rather, he showed intimacy with God’s creation. The gospels indicate that he spent his formative ‘time’ in the desert (Math. 4:1-11), regularly climbed the hills for prayer and often interspersed his teaching with references to the lilies of the field, the birds of the air and alike (Horell, Hunt & Southgate, 2018).

Other Pauline texts concurring with this include Romans 8:18-25, Colossians 1:15-20, and Ephesians 1:10 classified among what they termed as “recovery” readings (Horrell et al., 2018). All these attests to the cosmic nature of Christology and soteriology. Jerkins (2008:14-15) argued that most responses to White’s (1967) claim drive along the cosmological axes and so suggests the use of soteriological narratives in dislodging the claim which to Conradie (2010) is the deepest rationale for Christian earth keeping. Hence the church’s work of earth keeping is firmly grounded in Christ’s work.

Colossians 1:16-20 (Fullness of Christ)

In this passage, we find the idea of fullness of Christ in whom everything finds fullness. In the article, “*Christian Discipleship in the Environmental Crisis*”, Margot Hodson is of the view that the biblical concept of fullness dares to provide us not only with the vision of what was once but also a possible way towards a restorative response. Moo (2010) also viewed it as vital for any attempt to understand the intrinsic value of nature and so, the influence on how we should respond especially amidst this period of increasing environmental degradation.

In the New Testament, Fullness (*pleroma*) focuses on Jesus, that is, “his infilling as part of the Godhead, the infilling of the church and individual Christians in Christ, and the restoration of the fullness of creation through Christ”. In Colossians 1:15-20, however, the concept of fullness lies at the intersection between Christology, ecclesiology and creation. In line with creation or the environment, the relationship between Christ and creation rhymes side by side with his fullness. Creation in this context finds fullness in Christ who holds everything together (Verse 17) and who reconciles everything to God the creator (Verse 20). To Moo (2006), if Roman 8:19-22 is the most cited text in biblical environmentalism in the NT especially in the “not yet” of

the eschatology of nature, (Colossians 1:20) deserves a nod on the “already here” side of the tension about the eschatology of natural world. Commenting on (Verses 19 and 20), Ray Van Leeuwen was quoted saying: “All of reality is Christ’s good creation, he redeems all of reality; therefore, all of reality is the responsibility of God’s people” (Leeuwen, 1981:64). This puts environmental responsibility upon man through Christ.

Following Margot Hodson, Ian Baur also views Paul in Col 1:20 as not talking about “cosmic salvation” or even “cosmic redemption” as such but “cosmic restoration” or renewal (2002:126). Thus, Henderson (2007:172) compared the idea of fullness with the *missio dei*, the renewal of the created order. This renewal leads to the full reconciliation of all things including the natural environment. Thus, in the NT, it can be seen how creation, redemption, Christology and ecclesiology are highly interconnected through pleroma. At creation, the earth was filled by God’s glory which now it groans for again (Romans 8) due to increasing environmental crisis. This redemption was brought about by Christ Jesus in whose work we should gladly partake if at all our mission is to be wholistic. This calls for a rethink of Christian discipleship, there is need to consider a self-giving lifestyle towards the environment, living with a restorative spirit of the earth (Hodson, 2020).

Romans 8:13-23 (Environmental Response)

In this Letter to the Romans, Paul writes personifying the whole creation as it awaits with eagerly and groans inwardly in labor pains. It calls for the redemption of the creation from its bondage. This passage is an indication of the connection that has existed between the righteousness of human beings and the state of creation but unfortunately, this righteous connection has been damaged to the extent that the creation is groaning in pain. From this passage, we can see Paul’s concern for the whole creation and to us today we must realize that our life outside the creation is meaningless. We must treat the creation rightfully. Paul’s address about creation may also reflect his eschatological, soteriological, and Christological views. The creation is suffering and eager to receive its imminent salvation, achieved through Christ and those who hope in God, the church.

This is partly because the environmental problems we face today result from our curiosity of exploring our expanded scientific knowledge to the extent that the creation has become subjected to futility in the name of science. We ought to remember that when the creation suffers, we suffer too. This means that the fate of the creation is in the hands of human activity. Therefore, drawing what Genesis 3: 17-19 where Adam and Eve sinned and the land was difficult to labor, the environmental crisis today is attributed to our irresponsible ways of dealing with the rest of the creation. Though Paul did not quote the Old Testament in this passage, this teaching must have influenced him. In Paul’s mind, since the salvation of humanity lies on Christ, the salvation of the creation also depends on Christ and Humans become co-creators with God in the redemptive work for the environment (creation). Children of God must regain their righteous attitude towards the creation.

Having surveyed the whole New Testament, Lucas (1999) made a synthesis and established that; The NT is against any idea separating God’s purpose in creation and redemption; it is not true that the natural environment, in fact, non-human creation will just be phased out in a throw away manner when Christ finally consummates the salvation of humans; and also, Christians should not adopt a spirit-matter dualism that downplays the place of the material world because the incarnation of the word, which was with God and was God, the son who bears the outflow of his glory showed concern, love and respect for the environment. It is inclusive of the soteriological work of Christ.

It can be acknowledged that the Bible and the NT in particular does not explicitly show us how to evaluate scientific reports or how to respond to our negatively changing environmental conditions. Thankfully, it offers several principles such as care for creation, loving our neighbors and witness to the world (Jenkins, 2022). We ought to remember that God in the Christian world view is a self-revealing infinite spirit. He does this through creation, his Son Jesus Christ and his written word (Scripture). He demonstrated commitment to the material world by becoming incarnate in it (John 1:14; Col 1:16-17). Accordingly, we are called upon to express this love to all creation. St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) was quoted saying that; “If you have men who will exclude any of God’s creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who deal likewise with their fellow men” (Bredin, 2010, p. 156). Therefore, as we partake in the soteriological work of Christ, in

its entirety the natural environment should be accorded consideration to ensure its sustainability by safeguarding it against our predatory lifestyle. There must be various reasons why the church as an institution is better placed to promote ER, but before we dive into them, let us see how she comes in despite its mandate of the Great Commission.

The role of the human person in the ecosystem is not as obvious as it sounds for some. Man has often been described as a rational animal and so in some way above other creations. He was commanded to multiply and fill the earth and was also put in charge of all of God's creation Genesis (1:26-31). This means that caring for the environment is good for man's well-being and survival and a duty assigned by God. Is this to be done as an outsider or insider? The view that humans are part of the bio-physical ecosystem has not settled for some ecological researchers. Are we part of the ecosystem or we are not, should we as rational beings control the ecosystem or rather, we should control the way we use it? These are complex questions but how we respond largely depends on how we see ourselves and our environment. What is man's role in the ecosystem?

(Houck, 1998) argues that denying that we are not sounds ridiculous and accepting that we are renders the concept meaningless. He came up with three views regarding the role of human beings in the ecosystem: one is that we are God's co-engineers, in that we are not only part of the ecosystem but we improve them daily. The second is that human beings are instead the earth's virus because of our activities and so the earth's immune system is kicking in, trying to rid itself of an infection of the "human parasite" Preston (1994). The third view is that the human person is a steward of the ecosystem, that is, humans are to take care of the ecosystem diligently. Considering these three, it is the second that sounds outside of the biblical mandate (Genesis 1:26-31) and I think this is because man needs the environment more than it needs man for it is "the planet's life support system – for the human species and all other forms of life" as defined by the MEA. This may explain why we end up behaving predator-like within the ecosystem. We tend to forget that our continued existence hinges much on ensuring the optimum health conditions of the ecosystem, which I believe is our role.

Consequently, the structure and functioning of the ecosystems have undergone rapid changes due to increasing human ecological footprint more so in the second half of the 20th Century like no other time in history (Corvalan, Hales & McMichael, 2005). The health of the ecosystem is highly linked on the long-term existence of the human person whose activity has brought about damage to the ecosystem and its bio-capacity to provide necessary life-supporting services vital for human long-term existence (Keong, 2016). Therefore, the human remains at the center of it all, man has a major role in the ecosystem to ensure its sustainability using policies that are both human and environmentally friendly. Ecologically, "a policy cannot be good for the environment if it is not good for the people" Clancy (1997:8). The question now is, is this role more personal or collective and how does the church come in?

Individual or Collective/Global Environmental Responsibility?

We live in a world of rights and opinions even with seemingly general matters. This also applies to how best today's environmental challenges can be addressed through ER; should it be individual or collective. A research on whom ER should rest established that "all" people in their respective capacities are and should be responsible for environmental sustainability (Rasmussen & Lauver, 2018). ER can be either individual or collective and can be viewed through various perspectives which include: conscious, pro-environment behavior Kollmuss & Agyeman (2002), awareness and sense of duty Eden (1993), acknowledgement of the rights of other species Kopnina (2014), or responsibility towards future generations Weiss (1990). Environmentally significant behavior is that which directly or indirectly affects it. Stern (2000) tabled 4 kinds of such behavior: environmental activism, non-activist behavior in public sphere, private sphere environmentalism and other significant behaviors (professionals). He adds that ER can also be understood in a moral perspective; a question of what is right and wrong. There is also environmental action; this can also be individual or collective, however, individual action normally has low but direct impact as compared to collective one. Also, for Middlemiss (2010), ER is can be a duty that one feels to blame if not fulfilled (Linnanvuori, 2019). It is thus a concept that can be viewed in diverse ways.

An environmentally responsible person may imply "feeling a sense of responsibility towards the environment and future generations or acting in a responsible manner, either as an individual or as a member of a group"

Linnanvuori (2019). The idea of blaming individuals for environmental problems is not that old; individuals were not seen to be responsible but today, it is either implicitly or explicitly embraced that individuals are to blame in case they act irresponsibly towards the environment (Fahlquist, 2008). He agrees with Michelletti (2003:2) that “every person is part of the global responsibility” but asks of the extent to which we can blame individuals and not the institutions for the present environmental crisis. This is because consumers and/or citizens are by far influenced by cultural, social and institutional settings in their actions and so have different attitudes and beliefs dependent on their social and institutional settings and/or location. To him, this implies that the extent to which individuals should be blamed for environmental problems should be contextualized in regard to socio-economic, political and cultural context.

Environmental responsibility becomes significant only when an individual values her pro-environmental behavior and perceives him or herself to be a responsible agent as compared with others. However, sustainability of such environmental responsibility is quite complex and dependent upon not only the individual's social context but also organized environmentalism (Eden, 1993). According to Chawla & Cushing (2007), an environmentally responsible person is that who “appreciates the environment, knows about environmental issues, feels that environmental issues are personally important, and believes it is possible to make an impact on them” (Linnanvuori, 2019). To have such a community of people, everyone needs to have a moral and ethical engagement with the environment but this can be achieved through strengthening our institutions' capacity for environmental responsibility since it may not be easy to change people's behaviors. This is because these institutions have the power and resources to do more to protect the environment. They are also capable of making it easier and less costly for individuals to act in more environmentally friendly ways for example industries can reward collectors and recyclers of non-decomposing products/garbage among others.

Therefore, global or collective ER is also very vital in the journey towards environmental restoration. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that took effect in 21st March 1992 observed that “the global nature of climate change calls for the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and their social and economic conditions” (Miller, 2021). Perhaps this is because “the effects of climate change are not homogenous” (Zhang, 2009); the developing world suffers the greater consequences more quickly and deeply especially women and children yet actually they contribute less to its causes. Accordingly, frameworks such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) sometimes referred to as the “triple bottom line” calls upon business enterprises to be obliged not only to their stakeholders but also the society. It has 3 Ps: Profit, People and the Planet where environmental impacts are taken seriously (Spanne, 2021). Proper communication in the corporate society will enable creation and proper dissemination of CSR sustainability initiatives to all stakeholders such as the Governments, Non-Governmental organization, Communities, Supply chain, Citizens, Competitors among others (Allen & Craig, 2016). Therefore, individual responsibility seems more comprehensive but requires an input from relevant authorities and the corporate world. The point is that we are all equally responsible for environmental health in all our societal structures and levels of influence. Having seen individual and corporate roles in ER and the biblical and theological reasons for the church's involvement in ER, why must it take the lion's share in the struggle for environmental restoration?

Reasons Why the Church Must Share Big

Jesus' example: the head of the church is Christ himself (Ephesians 1:22-23), and there is evidence that Jesus showed concern for societal challenges, especially in relation to the disadvantaged and oppressed of the society (Matthew 4:23-24). James saw social concern as the mark of true religion (James 1:27) which Ericksen (1998:167) observed that to be carried into the epistles too (Emedi, 2010). Moreover, Jesus prayed that the church should not be taken from the world despite its divine belonging but just as the Father had sent him, so he was sending them into the world (John 17:14-18). The church is the only entity that exists not for its own but for others. So, just like Jesus the perfect example emptied himself, handed his divine privileges and gave in to human humiliation (Phil. 2:5-11), the church too ought to relieve itself of its institutional advantages and all its self-satisfying and self-glorification to get involved in ER for betterment of livelihoods of God's people.

Since environmental challenges affects more the poor, the church ought to take a lead role for environmental justice.

The golden rule; Sider (1981:19) is of the view that the church's big sharing in ER also flows from the golden rule of loving our neighbor, a way in which man links to God's own work. According to Myer (2017:175) stated that there is enough historical evidence that points to the church's involvement in the social life and so "Christians as citizens cannot avoid involvement in the political, economic and moral challenges facing their communities" (Mugambi, 1996). The church cannot exist for its people if it rejects speaking their language and relate to its existential situation (Solomons, 2012). All these greatly involve the environment. Therefore, the church as the custodian of the gospel has no way to shun away from ER. Instead, she must act exemplarily by spearheading the struggle towards environmental restoration.

Furthermore, the church is one of the most inter-societal institution that provide society with "blue prints". For (Modise, 2018), any diversion from this truth implies that the church should forget about political, social, economic and judicial issues. This is because it would put the gospel at risk and create a crisis of faith in the process because avenues where the gospel would get implemented would be sealed off. As the conscience of the world as Martin Luther called it, the church should be in place to oversee change processes especially those that pose risks to the environment. Promotion of positive social change, nurturing and accompanying is core to the church's mission. The church must identify, analyze, prevent, and militate against destructive social and environmental change due to human activity. Tsele (2001:204) as cited in (Magezi & Nanthambwe, 2022) thus called upon the church to counter the idea that it should limit its task to evangelism. He affirmed that human, social, and economic development is not alien to the Church's mission because it is part of God's own mission to the world. This is why Moltmann (1994:47) urges the church to move from Christology per se to Christo praxis. Praxis according to Paulo Freire is a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1982:36). To Moltmann, "...there is no Christology without Christo-praxis, no knowledge of Christ without the practice of Christ". The Christian praxis supports the motif of the church's involvement in nation's events and activities which involves a great deal of the environment (Olorunnisola, 2015).

Additionally, the church in her inter-societal nature comprises of a diverse community of people that both function as individuals and in collective ways. Hence it is indeed better placed to influence masses to act environmentally responsible, even on the pulpit. It has the capacity to organize people into clusters to act on specific environmental challenges such waste disposal. It is also better placed to influence government to increase budgets for environmental protection and improves laws and policies for the environment. It can also well partner CSRs and do PPP for promotion of environmentally friendly behaviors. In short, it has a bigger voice; it can easily talk truth to power for a better environment. Therefore, there are reasons indeed why the church must take it upon her herself to promote efforts towards environmental restoration.

The Way Forward for the Church

As alluded to above, most environmental problems we face today arise from unjust practices by the minority rich thereby affecting the majority poor hence the need for environmental justice. According to Shajahan & Sharma (2018), masses in the low- and middle-income countries are the most affected by pollution-related illnesses; since they are coupled with poor health care services and food insecurity. Women and children, the elderly and the disabled are most affected yet they contribute less to its causes (Zhang, 2009). As such, environmental justice is concerned with the unfair distribution of environmental impacts on the vulnerable, marginalized and minority groups of the society (Bullard, 2008; Walker, 2009). This is perhaps why (Jones, 2018, p. 132) views environmental justice to be premised in the abuse of power by the greedy, materialistic and self-centered individuals and systems whose acts and decisions upon the environment results into suffering of the vulnerable poor. Conradie (2007: 241) thus referred to environmental justice as an activist approach to environmental protection and equity. The environmental injustices prompt activism to benefit the most hit vulnerable poor to which Jesus showed significant preference (Luke 4:18) and so the church.

In a presentation at the Common Dreams Conference, Noel Preston called for "Eco-centrism" which challenges a human-centered approach to ethics, economics, religion and culture as a way to a lasting solution to environmental problems. He calls for an 'eco-centric theology' which to him together with the practice of

eco-spirituality would be ideal resources for a future envisioned by eco-justice, (Preston, 2017). So, the church's response to him should be a theology that is eco-centric. Eco theology is a religious concept that originated from the belief that the natural environment is God's good creation that addresses environmental issues in a religious perspective (Ezichi, 2012). Christian eco-theology uses theology to evaluate the impacts of human action on ecology and explore how the Christian theology moral principles could be used to ensure environmental sustainability. Central to this position is the idea that nature was created by God and human beings are obliged to take care of all the creation (Gareiou & Zervas, 2018). Some ways the church can maximize its position in promoting ER include the following:

1. **Whistleblower;** Some people may fear the law and act as whistleblowers in communities upon seeing practices of environmental degradation. The church can surely do that on behalf of the local population. As the conscience of society, she observes critically humanity's use of God-given dominion to guard against exploitative predatory tendencies instead of acting as God's co-creators. The church can be the chief whistleblower, spearheading environmental sustainability and justice dialogue. This is because her voice is normally respected in society, even by those in authority.
2. **Massive teaching;** in the Papal Encyclical letter, the Pope recognized limited consciousness in the public about global environmental concerns and decried ineffectiveness in ecological movements not only because of opposition but also because of a general lack of interest (Francis, 2021). The church ought to carry the cross to teach people on environmental risks we face, for example through public sensitization on better farming methods such as agroforestry, crop rotation, reduction in use of fertilizers, among others. Through this, the church can intensify knowledge on the stewardship motif as spelt out in (Genesis 1:26-28). This however, according to Okopido (2010) needs to be enhanced by adding the concept of the 'value of the community' as it embedded within the African culture, in the Christian faith and other religions as well as the Earth Charter. This to him can tame the arrogance and otherness of human beings that prompts reckless utilization of other creation (Agbiji, 2017). It can collaborate with government agencies to teach people such ways of farming; encouraging subsistence farming which according to Hawks & Scott, (2013) enhances knowledge of natural processes, reduces food mileage, organize campaigns on Afforestation and Reforestation which allows one to experience and appreciate nature and further contributes to emotional attachment to the place which results into personalized care thereby leading to social and scientific sustainability.
3. **Advocacy;** this is another tool the church can use to show ER. Such work, however, may not be done by the church alone, otherwise it may risk being viewed as deviating from its divine mandate. She can take on partnership with like-minded environmental bodies and political leaders to ensure environmental justice and sustainability (Kiarie, 2020). A good example is the United Church of Christ in America in the early 1980s whose work resulted into other movements fighting for Environmental/ecological justice (Blanchon et al., 2009).
4. **Population control;** to a large extent, the environmental crisis we experience today results from increased population growth which increase demand for natural resources. Methods like family planning can be further advanced even to the youth to control population growth. The church especially in Africa has generally been hesitant in promoting birth control through modern family planning methods. This could help in reducing the pressure we put on the environment for survival. This is one area the church can do significant advocacy.

The church can also invest in projects of Re-introduction and Relocation of both plants and animal species. This can be achieved through breeding of required species. When dealing with these two; site history, landscape and aquascape perspectives, species coexistence and community assembly theories and the stages of the chosen species should be considered (Rohr, Bernhardt, et al, 2018). Projects as this can be a source of money through selling varieties, tourism activities and also a source of employment to the youth. Job creation is indeed crucial because due to the rapid population increase, unemployment is on a continuous rise and as a result, the masses turn to the environment for survival for example through deforestation for charcoal burning in rural settings.

CONCLUSION

After creation, the Bible says that God saw that all He had created was good (Gen 1:31). To recover an environment as intended by God, the stewardship paradigm deserves an applause but it looks limited in highlighting our dependent relationship with the environment. There is need to think of a paradigm based on reconciliation theology that further emphasizes the notion of interconnectedness of all creation; one that reasserts the fact that humanity is part and parcel of the natural ecosystem. The caring for the environment for the everyday life (ER) is one way to move towards environmental restoration despite slow environmental response especially from large scale damages (Jones, Jones, et al, 2018). It seems to be a highly interdisciplinary task involving environmental sensitivity, tracking the changes that take place both naturally and due to human activity. These are necessary for crafting better conservation and preservation measures. This will involve adoption of cultural attitudes based on ecological and environmental ethics; acting not only as stewards but also as part of the natural environment.

Suggestively, given today's environmental conditions, ER should not only be a moral choice but a duty as well. Preservation of life should remain golden instead of the economic greed that only satisfies a few. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1984) was convinced that "the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not every man's greed" (Kattumuri, 2018). ER is something that cannot just be brought about in its entirety by an individual or even a few of them. However, it can be initiated by either. It must involve all of us, both individually and collectively working in collaboration for environmental protection. The church as an inter-societal and diverse institution is obviously as discussed above one of these actors whose input can easily explode for a better environment. Both history and scripture attest to the fact that social transformation is integral to the mission of the church, and so it ought to take the lead in environmental responsibility.

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