

Greening Christian institutions and practices: An emerging ecclesial reform movement

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Introduction

Ecotheology and environmental justice activism have been latecomers to the field of contemporary ecclesial movements. With shared values of simplicity and concern for the poor and oppressed, and for justice and equity, it is curious that it has taken religious institutions so long to respond to the global environmental crisis. The sustainable development discourse of the secular world helped the church make the link between social and ecological justice but an anthropocentric worldview hindered the emergence of a transforming eco-theological agenda in most Christian communities. Very late in the day, Christian leadership is now beginning to recognise that planetary sustainability and caring for creation must become an integral part of the ministry of the church.

This contribution records a brief history of the environmental movement and church involvement in ecojustice activism. It makes suggestions as to why Christian churches in South Africa, with a historic involvement in social justice, have not responded sooner to the crisis. A new voice of concern from faith communities is beginning to emerge alongside the confident “green economy” discourse of global institutions and corporations. With the realisation that human behaviour is seriously threatening the delicate balance of life on the planet, the need for a unifying and transforming tipping point to mainstream this emerging ecclesial reform movement is discussed.

Scriptural guidelines

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. (Psalm 104:10-13, NRSV version from the Green Bible 2008)

The Bible is filled with ecological wisdom but with scales over our eyes we have neglected to read it through a green lens. Scripture has guided and directed human behaviour for over two millennia. At the same time, the church has responded to people’s lived experiences and social conditions by interpreting and applying scriptural guidance to the social and political mores of the time. Thus ecclesial reform has influenced social movements and vice versa.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Church of England’s *Book of Common Prayer* readings emphasised humility and obedience to the authorities at a time when it was important to uphold the monarchy and avoid religious conflict. Growing awareness of human rights was expressed in the church-led campaign against slavery. Twentieth century campaigns for racial, gender, health and other human rights have seen the church draw on scriptural values of justice and equity along with a greater emphasis on love, compassion, and mercy. As needs arose and conditions changed, scriptural passages were “discovered”,

re-interpreted and used to lead and support reform initiatives. “New” liberation theologies emerging first in Latin America in the 1970s reflected the lived experiences of the social and economic conditions of the time. Until recently, there has been a notable voice missing from these emerging theologies in the church struggle for justice. It is the voice of the “other than human” or what Berry (1999) terms the “earth community”.

For two thousand years, church doctrine and practice has been unapologetically anthropocentric. By being given dominion over the earth, “man” had a scriptural mandate to subdue it (Gen. 1:28). More recent interpretations call on humans to be “stewards” or “custodians” and for God’s people to be “earth-keepers” (Gen. 2:15) but these passages still emphasise the superiority and authority of humans over the rest of creation, even though it is nuanced with more caring language.

Modernity: Religion alienated from science and economics

Enlightenment thinking in the modern era constructed an epistemology of separation. The rift between science and religion further contributed to the alienation of people from the earth. Using the rational language of science to describe God’s creative handiwork as “the environment” has depersonalised the spiritual relationship that indigenous communities have had with the land over eons of human history. Globalisation, the modern religion of consumerism and a belief in the myth that there can be perpetual economic growth on a finite planet, has further eroded these values. Global governance systems now encourage people to view every aspect of nature as “an ecosystem service”. Government institutions and corporations espouse the notion that the world can be “saved” from the environmental crisis by “greening” the economy. Many even advocate putting a price on essential life support systems like carbon and water (Kaggwa et al 2013 and UNEP 2013).

What is the reality? The human population is now in excess of seven billion. Global food systems and energy and water supplies are insecure. Many of the earth’s natural habitats are severely degraded. Climate change is a lived reality, especially amongst vulnerable communities in the so-called developing world and oceanic islands. Thousands of species of indigenous plants and animals are becoming extinct. In the midst of this, many people are trapped in a cycle of degrading and often hopeless poverty.

Why has the church been deaf to the cry of the earth when the Scriptures are filled with references of God’s love for the whole world, the cosmos (John 3:16)? Why has the church not responded and joined forces with environmental movements when evidence of environmental destruction is all around us? It is puzzling when Christians and environmentalists share many common core values: Values of living more simply and sustainably, sharing and caring for the oppressed and disadvantaged neighbour (in this case, the earth community as neighbour); common principles that reject excessive accumulation of wealth that lead to gross inequality. Both sectors have traditions of activism and advocacy for justice.

Where is the ecclesial reform that challenges the salvation myth of the green economy and perpetual economic growth? Why is the prophetic voice of the church, so bold during the anti-apartheid era, not advocating for transformation towards ecojustice when the earth is in crisis? Why the silence when the evidence of environmental collapse is all around us? Why do we not recognise the impact of ecological collapse on human wellbeing?

We are dealing with the legacy of mistrust and separation between science and religion left by so-called “Enlightenment” thinking. Some Christians suspect environmental organisations of “new” age or pagan leanings while the church has been criticised for discounting rational science. There is however a growing call for mainstream religion and science to be in dialogue (Nürnberg 2011). Einstein is reputed to have said: “Science

without religion is lame and religion without science is blind". Science has "taken the world apart" but if there is to be behavioural change, the world needs a moral compass that touches people's hearts. Religions may now hold the key for a different vision of the future. This is the transforming ecclesial movement we are concerned with.

Environmental justice movements: Where is the church?

For millennia, human communities lived close to the earth with an intimate knowledge and understanding of their dependence on nature and her cycles. Permanent settlements and expanding populations gradually grew the human ecological footprint. With the expansion of towns and cities, people began to lose their spiritual connection with the natural world. Emerging Abrahamic faiths set "man" apart from and over nature. "Wilderness" became a place to be feared. In spite of this, Christian ecological wisdom and sensitivity surfaced in various forms over the centuries. The early desert fathers, the Celtic Church, the Benedictines and latterly, the Puritans in North America, all recognised forms of human-nature connectivity and responsibility. Inspirational individuals like Hildegard of Bingen, St Francis of Assisi and Meister Eckhart have left us with a wellspring of thoughts and writings about human-nature relationships. Here are the foundations of collective wisdom and a moral compass to link faith with nature (Conradie & Field 2000).

The lack of a Christian response to the current environmental crisis may in part be blamed on the legacy of dualism left us by 16th, 17th and 18th century European philosophers and scientists. The "age of enlightenment" as it came to be known, deconstructed the world and promoted the separation of body and soul and people and nature. Science and religion spoke different languages and didn't listen to or understand each other.

The industrial revolution opened up wide-ranging "development" opportunities to the human family but it wrought enormous and irreversible damage to the environment. The struggle for liberation and human rights so dominated the social agenda of the church during the twentieth century that it was blind to portents of the earth in distress unless it was related to a human story. An early omen about deteriorating planetary wellbeing came from the landmark publication of *Silent Spring* by biologist, Rachel Carson in 1962. Around the world, scientists were beginning to pick up signs of a looming environmental crisis. *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al 1972) and Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* (1974) and the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment helped the global community begin to make the connection between human development and the environment. At that time, the church in South Africa was dealing with the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, the escalating crackdown on civil liberties by the National Party Government and the lived reality of apartheid.

The sustainable development discourse, first defined in *Our Common Future* in 1987 and which brought together the "environment" agenda of the developed world and "development" needs of countries in the south, set the stage for global discussions which have unfolded over the past 25 years. The UN has taken the lead by hosting an Environment Conference every decade since 1972 and regular intergovernmental meetings on climate change, biodiversity and desertification to name a few. The seventh Millennium Development Goal deals with environmental sustainability. Specialists from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) meet regularly to reflect on the health of the planet. We are learning more and more about the state of the environment at global, continental, regional and local levels and secular consciousness is growing but we are swimming against the tide. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), 60% of the earth's ecosystems are seriously degraded. Several billion people are directly dependent for their survival on the environment where they live. At the same time, the

disparity between rich and poor widens.

Towards the end of the 20th century new communities of concern for the earth and the human family and new narratives were emerging. These were calling for more ethical and responsible relationships between humans and the planet. The Earth Charter initiative was launched in 1992 at the time of the Rio Earth Summit (see www.earthcharter.org). This long-term participatory process was drafted by groups of people, including many faith leaders from around the world. Respectful of religious values, it articulated a set of common principles about our shared responsibility for the earth including environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development and peace. This was a message that the late African Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai, also shared with the world. Another voice was that of the proponents of Gaia, who saw the earth functioning as a single self-regulating living organism.

Where was the moral voice of the global religious community during this time? In 1983 The World Council of Churches initiated an extended JPIC (Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation) process. Its starting point was recognition of the ecological wisdom that is housed in local communities and how this should inform Christian praxis. The first global statements about religious teachings and nature, the Assisi Declarations, from five of the world's major religions, were launched at a celebration at Assisi in Italy by the WWF in 1986. In 1992, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church declared September 1st a pan-Orthodox day of prayer for the environment.

By the 1990s, religious scholars, theologians and academic writers were beginning to explore the faith-environment nexus more extensively. Ecofeminism or ecological feminism challenged classical patriarchal theology, by linking the domination of women and of nature (see Ruether 1994, 1996 & 2000). Ruether outlines the theological and ethical need to balance justice for the oppressed and sustainability for the earth in order to create flourishing communities (Ruether 2000:10).

Religious concern for nature was opened up to a much wider, lay readership in particular by two accessible books *To care for the Earth* (1986) and *The Greening of the Church* (1990) by Sean McDonagh, a Catholic priest and long-time missionary in the Philippines. McDonagh followed these with other books on the church and extinction, patenting life, water and climate change. Thomas Berry, another Catholic eco-theologian, or "geologian" as he called himself, was also writing books about a "new" earth spirituality that appealed to a wider audience (Berry 1988, 1999 and Swimme & Berry 1992). The literature was growing and soon spread to South Africa.

Christians and eco-justice in a democratic South Africa

South Africa had a new Constitution in 1994 with environmental rights enshrined in Section 24 of the Bill of Rights. Civil society movements concerned about the state of the environment and eco-justice and not just wildlife and wilderness conservation were emerging in organisations such as Earthlife Africa (1988), the Environmental Justice Network Forum (1992), Timberwatch (1995) and Biowatch (1997). A few academics began to focus their research on people, poverty and the environment (see Wilson & Ramphela 1989, Cock & Koch, 1991, Ramphela & McDowell, 1991, Nürnberger 1999 and McDonald 2002).

With a long history of social justice activism, what were the churches saying about the environment in the new democratic South Africa? Christian communities had the potential to play a valuable role in advocating for eco-justice because religious leaders were often better trusted by grassroots constituencies than their political counterparts and were in a position to

offer unique moral guidance. In spite of this, Conradie et al acknowledge that the church was resistant to the environmental agenda and in 2001, was not (yet) an important eco-justice role player in South Africa (2001:669).

An attempt by Davies to highlight Christian earth-care responsibility in *A Call to Mission* in the Anglican Church in 1985, a time when the country was “on fire”, was misunderstood and criticised by social justice activists. One of the earliest conferences on ecotheology in South Africa was hosted at Unisa in 1987 under the title *Are we killing God's earth?* (Vorster 1987), while the South African Missiological Society hosted a conference on “Mission and ecology” in 1991. The annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa in 1991 focused on the theme of “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” (Pietermaritzburg, August 1991). Despite such initiatives it is fair to say that such theological reflections addressed an emerging environmental awareness in scholarly circles but not yet an emerging ecclesial reform movement. Even after the 1994 elections and the achievement of democracy, further attempts to galvanise action by the church in publications like *Save our Future* (Davies, G 1995) and *A year of special days: Readings prayers and resource materials for celebrating eco-justice days*, (Davies, K 1996) were not widely recognised. In 1997 the Department of Religious Studies at UCT hosted a summer school on “Theology, the churches and the environmental crisis” – which was apparently not as well attended as similar events on other topics (see Conradie & Field 2000).

The country was exploring its new democracy, struggling to restore human rights and dignity and starting to deal with the escalating social problems associated with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The challenge of greening the church in South Africa at this time was discussed by Cock (1992 and 1994). Conradie et al (2001) describe a handful of emerging environment projects initiated by a variety of Christian denominations. Amongst these were the environment and development projects in the Anglican Diocese of Umzimvubu (see Warmback 2005), the Faith and Earthkeeping project based at Unisa (see Olivier 2002, also various contributions by Daneel, e.g. 2000), the Methodist Khanya Programme, and Abalimi Bezekhaya, affiliated with Catholic Welfare and Development. However, barring small pockets of local actions, like food gardening, rural skills training, recycling and tree planting, the church was not ready for a “new” liberating and overarching theology that might drive an ecclesial eco-justice movement.

In spite of a general apathy, many of the mainline churches were beginning to understand the link between human well-being and a healthy environment and issued statements and adopted resolutions reflecting this. Conradie and Field (2000) list a number of these statements published in the 1990s. Conradie notes that while they may be symbolic in “shaping moral vision”, statements and resolutions often have little practical impact (2006:182-183). They were significant, however, because, even if not spoken about, caring for the earth and the earth community particularly as it related to human wellbeing, was now on the agenda of most of the mainline Christian churches in the country.

21st century developments

A growing level of consciousness about the human impact on the earth's bio-systems emerged in the 21st Century. Improving communication technologies that made information more accessible to ordinary people and the screening of *The Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's 2006 award winning documentary on the climate crisis, emphasized what scientists had been predicting for decades. Around the world, the Christian church was responding with academic courses, workshops, global conferences and publications on ecotheology (Hessel & Reuther 2000, Conradie 2006, www.yale.edu/religionandecology and many others). In South Africa, Conradie (e.g. 2006) was making a significant contribution to the local and

global ecotheology conversation and literature. Almost every denomination has now developed, adapted or has access to environmental liturgies, bible studies and programmes providing guiding frameworks for local eco-congregation activities. In 2008, a green-letter edition of the Bible appeared on bookshop shelves. This *Green Bible* highlights “the rich and varied ways the books of the Bible speak directly to how we should think and act as we confront the environmental crisis facing our planet” (2008:15).

From theory to praxis: Slow change in South Africa

Where is this 21st Century ecclesial eco-justice movement being expressed and how is it playing out in South Africa? In 2000, Conradie and Field published *A Rainbow over the land*, an accessible and much needed contextual book intended to help local South African Christian communities find ways of responding to the environmental crisis. Although few people know of the book which is now out of print, it provided a wonderful framework, filled with simple explanations and practical examples and guidelines on how theory has and can be transformed into practical actions. Fourteen years on, it is likely to have quite a different reception. There would now be considerable demand for an updated and expanded version of this useful resource.

In 2002, South Africa hosted the WSSD (World Summit on Sustainable Development) in Sandton, an upmarket suburb of Johannesburg. Members of faith communities participated in the civil society workshops and “side-shows”, explored “green” exhibitions and listened to new narratives. They were present but hardly visible in the crowds. The “Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development”, a political commitment, emerged from the global meeting but the conference had little obvious impact on Christian communities in South Africa except perhaps to promote small local recycling and other greening initiatives.

However change was in the air. In the build-up to the WSSD, a group of theologians and Christian leaders worked on and published a powerful discussion document, entitled *The land is crying for justice* (2002). It called for Christians to make the connection between social and ecological injustice and to become advocates for change. NECCSA, the Network of Earthkeeping Christian Communities of South Africa, was launched at this time. Committed to stimulating concern for environmental justice amongst Christians in South Africa, the network encouraged “earthkeeping” practices. This was an expression of care for the whole earth community, not just human well-being. It also hoped to challenge structures of power and greed that both marginalise the poor and damage environments (see www.neccsa.org.za). While NECCSA is no longer active, it prepared the soil and helped connect individuals and small groups of Christians concerned about the environment. In 2003, the Durban based Diakonia Council of Churches picked up on the eco-justice theme for their “Social Justice Season” and published a series of Bible studies and liturgies linking faith with the environment (Brittton 2003).

Other national action-based Christian-environment initiatives taking root in South Africa at this time were A Rocha, an international evangelical Christian conservation organisation (see www.arocha.org) and the Church Land Project (CLP). In those days the CLP researched and promoted sustainable and ethical use of church owned land but it now has a stronger political and justice agenda calling for poverty alleviation and equitable land rights (see www.churchland.org.za).

The Global Anglican Environment Congress (Gollither 2004) hosted in South Africa prior to the WSSD in 2002 led to the formalisation of the CPSA Environment Network in 2003. Their aim was to entrench eco-justice in Anglican Church policy and practice but in reality only lip service was paid to resolutions and church policy statements. Greening projects,

though multiplying, only took off where they were inspired by local eco-champions. In 2001, the SA Catholic Bishop's Conference Justice and Peace Department established an eco-justice desk. Over the years they have organised campaigns on GMOs and nuclear energy (Warmback 2005) and more recently on just energy and fracking in collaboration with SAFCEI (see www.safcei.org). Their current focus is on poverty, land reform, climate, energy and extractive justice (see www.sabcjusticeandpeace.org). Clusters of local churches undertaking contextual eco-justice actions, many linked to food gardening in support of HIV/AIDS programmes, were beginning to appear in many mainline church congregations but in no way could this be described as a mainstream movement.

SAFCEI, the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute, was born out of a mandate from participants attending a multi-faith environment conference in 2005. Working alongside the South African Council of Churches and with values based on the Earth Charter principles, SAFCEI was launched by Wangari Maathai at a colourful tree planting ceremony at Delta Park in Johannesburg, in July that year. Because Christianity is the dominant religion in the region, much of SAFCEI's work involves Christian churches.

SAFCEI encourages faith leaders to read sacred texts with "green spectacles" and mainstream caring for the earth community by developing environmental policies and providing ethical leadership. Church leaders are called to set an example and advocate for better environmental and social governance and practices by all sectors of society. Politicians are challenged to "do the right thing" and make ethical decisions that consider the long term well-being of people and the planet over shorter term financial and political rewards. The SAFCEI eco-congregation programme promotes action and agency in local faith communities so that they become centres of excellence and transformation that promote life-long informal learning about living more sustainably (see www.safcei.org).

Upping the stakes: Economy and climate change

The reality of economic injustice and climate change, two related global challenges, grew in prominence at the start of the new Millennium. Both concerns reinforced the urgency for a unifying ecclesial ecological movement.

Economy and ecology: Oikos-theology and the olive agenda

Ten years after achieving constitutional democracy in South Africa, the legacy of Apartheid continued to manifest itself with an ever widening gap between rich and poor. Around this time, a number of theologians were exploring an "eco"- or "oikos"-theology, using as its cornerstone, a concept from the Greek word for "household". (Warmback 2005, Conradie 2006:11-18, De Gruchy 2007a:333-345 and others). The Greek word *oikos* forms the etymological root from which words such as "economy", the rules of the household, and "ecology", the study of how everything in the home is interrelated, are derived. This model provides theological underpinning that integrates the challenges of social, economic and environmental injustice in the world, our "home". Conradie even suggests that *ecological theology* "offers an avenue to overcome the widespread fragmentation of theological sub-disciplines" (2006:18). These theological ideas might be likened to the secular "sustainable development" discourse that emerged from the UN global conferences in the 1980s.

Recognition that unjust economic systems were at the root of social deprivation and environmental destruction began to be reflected in powerful Christian statements. *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth* (2004), called on member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to integrate into their witness and mission, a response to the economic and environmental injustices of the global economy. In recognition that economic injustice was creating another *kairos* moment for the church, the

Durban based Diakonia Council of Churches, issued a thoughtful challenge to church, state and society in *The Oikos Journey, a reflection on the economic crisis in South Africa* (2006).

De Gruchy wove the *oikos* threads together in his paper on the “Olive Agenda”, creating a “metaphorical theology of development” (2007a). Speaking at the SACC Triennial conference in 2007, he stated that “We cannot consider a new future without resolving the tensions between economics and the environment” (De Gruchy 2007b). Using the symbol of the olive branch as a biblical metaphor for peace, he merges into one integrated story, the historically conflicting interests of the “brown” poverty agenda and the “green”, environmental sustainability agenda, the latter so often interpreted as a privileged or exclusive minority conservation position.

The *Oikos* study group stated that “God’s economy is a matter of discipleship” (*The Oikos Journey* 2006:29). The churches in South Africa were now receiving an unambiguous message about how economic injustice and the growing commodification of the earth had become drivers of human poverty and environmental degradation.

Climate change

The world experienced more intense and unpredictable weather events, droughts, floods and storms in the first decade of the 21st Century than at any other time in recorded human history (Coumou & Rahmstorf 2012). International climate talks focused on securing and implementing the Kyoto Protocol. While getting more media coverage, the talks were still going nowhere. Communities on the ground, particularly in rural areas, were already experiencing the impacts of climate change. Faith communities have been slow to engage with its practical realities and struggle to know how to help people build resilience to these risks and vulnerabilities.

Climate change has been on the agenda of the WCC for several decades. Recognising the disconnect between science and political behavior, the WCC published a statement that expressed solidarity with victims of climate change in 2002. Six years later, at the instigation of the Archbishop of Sweden, Anders Wejryd, The *Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto* was drawn up by a summit of international faith leaders in preparation for the 2009 COP15 climate talks in Copenhagen. The document called for moral leadership, responsibility and hope. The voice of faith leaders around the world was strengthening but clearly had no influence on the political outcome of the talks.

In 2007 in South Africa, another *kairos* process of theological reflection was started, this time under the auspices of the Western Cape branch of the South African Council of Churches. A document entitled *Climate Change – A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*, issued in 2009, called for prophetic witness and action from Christian leaders and churches (2009). SAFCEI and her partners, along with the SADC-wide *We Have Faith, Act now for climate* justice campaign began to build momentum towards the 2011 COP 17 Climate talks in Durban. This was done through a series of major conferences for faith leaders in South Africa, Zambia and Kenya and with a petition calling on world leaders to be honest and put the wellbeing of people and planet before short term political interests and economic benefits.

Christians and people of faith flocked to Durban from many parts of the sub-continent, some on trains, bicycles and even a caravan of buses from Kenya. While faith communities cannot claim to have had any influence on the formal talks, the hosting of a media grabbing multi-faith rally in a rugby stadium at the start of the talks and the presence of people of faith, as distinct from civil society movements, throughout the two week event was unprecedented. SAFCEI was building and strengthening its network across the region and at home, Christians were called on to become more informed, to pray for a fair deal and to

lobby leadership to respond ethically to the climate crisis and eco-justice.

While difficult to measure, there is no doubt that Christians are much better informed and engaged with eco-justice issues than they were at the dawn of our democracy. We now hear about and read statements calling for eco-justice at all levels from local church congregations to influential local, regional and international religious leaders. Amongst the newer, influential voices is that of Pope Francis. Addressing a large crowd in Rome earlier this year, he implored Christians to become “Custodians of Creation” and to “Safeguard Creation, because if we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us! Never forget this!” (Jenkins 2014).

At the local level, formal and informal eco-congregations are springing up everywhere (www.earthkeeper.org). A growing number of Christians are discovering and being inspired by ecotheology and many churches are exploring new and creative ways of worship, using liturgies that embrace earth spirituality. In 2013 ACSA, the Anglican Church in Southern Africa, appointed a full time environment coordinator. With the help of a group of interns, environmental activities are being initiated in Anglican Dioceses and churches in many parts of the Province (www.greenanglicans.org). A third version of the accessible series of worship and activity guides on celebrating a *Season of Creation* (2007, 2012, 2014) has recently been added to the suite of resources available from ACSA and Sunday school earth-care materials are currently being developed (see <http://www.greenanglicans.org/resources/liturgical/>)

Actions in churches and Christian communities are driven by a raft of social and environmental concerns such as food insecurity, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, poverty, unethical economic practices, escalating water and electricity costs, alarm about the climate, fracking, acid mine drainage, GMOs, waste, nuclear energy, and biodiversity loss. Statements and resolutions about ecojustice are coming from the synods of many Christian denominations. At the General Assembly of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of SA (UPCSA) held in July 2014, ecojustice and ecotheology were mentioned in almost all of the reports presented and their *Statement of Faith* now has an entire section devoted to the biophysical environment. The Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town is to develop a global strategic plan on the environment at an “Eco-Bishops Initiative” that he will host in Cape Town early in 2015 (see Gray 2014).

SAFCEI has a dossier of correspondence from religious leaders to Government calling for investment in renewable energy as an alternative to nuclear and fossil fuelled energy (see www.safcei.org). Faith leaders were involved in the National Development Plan process and are included as significant civil society stakeholders in parliamentary debates on environmental issues. All over South Africa Christian congregations and organisations are now developing environmental policies, doing energy audits, implementing energy and water efficiency interventions, recycling waste, planting water-wise gardens, growing vegetables, promoting lower carbon emissions (also with respect to coal stoves), writing letters, challenging the wisdom of fracking and other extractive processes, exploring eco-spirituality and celebrating special environmental days and liturgies.

An ecclesial reform movement: Mainstreaming ecojustice in South African Christian communities

At a recent conference on Religion and the Environment in Africa hosted by the African Association for the Study of Religion at Cape Town University (July 2014), the question was raised whether ecojustice had been mainstreamed by faith communities on the sub-continent. In spite of a growing body of evidence and a collection of wonderful stories of local actions, questions like this can only be answered with hindsight. There are however significant

reasons why ecotheology has not been embraced more widely by church leaders while ecological literacy and action have not been mainstreamed in Christian communities.

Anthropocentric attitudes continue to dominate Christian thinking. As long as humans perceive themselves as separate from, and even above nature and natural laws, and believe that science and technology can be used to manipulate ecosystems without deleterious repercussions, planetary life support systems will remain under threat. Nürnberger (2011:7) calls for humanity to regain its sanity suggesting that “gratitude has changed to entitlement, needs to wants, contentment to avarice and responsibility to indifference”. Deeply entrenched human-centred perceptions will only change when there is a greater understanding of the inter-connectedness of all life and a language of gratitude and humility that does not commodify nature as a “resource” intended only for human gratification.

The Christian emphasis on future salvation over stewardship of creation has deepened the disconnection between human and other than human communities. Christians need a much stronger incentive to care for the earth than the Biblical stewardship mandate in Genesis 1:28. A creative reaffirmation of the purpose of the incarnation as expressed in the Lord’s Prayer, to establish the Kingdom of God on earth rather than to provide an “escape” to heaven, might also help refocus human responsibility to care for the earth and human wellbeing in the here and now.

There is a lapse in time between when greenhouse gases are emitted and when their unpredictable impact is felt through a change in the climate (Hansen 2009). The cause and effect of environmental challenges are often separated in space and by decades of time. As a result, subtle changes in the world around us frequently go unnoticed. The church, in its emerging ecojustice consciousness, needs play a keen role in developing an ethical framework to guide responses to issues of planetary well-being and sustainability. These guidelines should be based on the scientific precautionary principle and biblical values of sufficiency, simplicity, love and care of neighbour – the community of life. In a plea to avert an economic-ecological catastrophe, Nürnberger (2011) suggests that science needs “best faith” to be responsible while faith needs “best science” to be credible. It is time for rational science and creative and transforming hope-filled faith to have a conversation to heal the dualistic rift left us by our “enlightenment” forefathers.

Two of the key factors that precipitate social movement tipping points are the presence of a small number of key, informed and passionate people who hold “social power” (Gladwell 2000:259) with a strong belief that change is possible (Gladwell 2000:258). Eaton makes five reasonable and rational suggestions to advance ecofeminist theology agency: Teach radical liberation theologies, support critical thinking amongst religious leadership, become ecologically literate, be active in communities and get involved in inter-religious dialogue on social and ecological issues (Eaton 2000:121). Mobilisation of Christian ecojustice action needs informed leadership. There are champions in our midst but contemporary theorising in environmental ethics and ecotheology has not yet been mainstreamed into Christian theological training and praxis in South Africa. As a result, one may say that most of the pastors, priests, and preachers in churches who hold social power do not “own” the ecojustice message nor are they “empowered” to share and act on it. Teaching and learning about ecotheology and ethics needs to become the norm rather than an optional extra at theological training institutions.

With regard to a belief that change is possible, Ruether (2000:613) suggests that Christian redemptive hope should embrace ecojustice. For this to happen, the interaction between the different traditions of Christian covenantal ethics and sacramental spirituality must be reclaimed. There are urgent ecumenical conversations to be had because ecojustice is a shared and unifying concern.

Into the future

With the world facing an ecological crisis that cannot be put right by human-scale technological fixes, we need to rediscover spiritual, ecological and indigenous wisdom that helps us to re-establish respect and mutually sustaining relationships with the earth community. This will involve reviewing our theologies and revisiting the scriptural guidelines that brought us to the Anthropocene era. In a world which is being driven by greed and consumerism and which has lost its moral compass, the human community longs for a powerful, positive and unifying voice of hope. A new visionary ecological consciousness, an “earth spirituality”, is what Berry called for as we prepare to enter the relational “ecozoic” era (Swimme & Berry 1992). This inspiring spirituality must surely be based on eco-theology and engaged agency by people of faith. At this tipping point time in human history, it is becoming crucial that the church provides strong ethical leadership and helps to transform the way we view and live in the world through teaching, worship, celebration and ecojustice praxis. This is the emerging ecclesial reform movement which the world so desperately needs and for which we long.

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