

# Motivation, Calling and Environmental Mission

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What motivates people to spend time and energy on 'care for creation' projects? Answering this question requires some understanding of what motivation is and how it is understood. The classical answer is that people are motivated to avoid pain and to maximise pleasure.<sup>1</sup> From every-day parenting to international relations this assumption forms the ways people try to influence the behaviour of other people through threat and promise, punishment and reward, 'carrot and stick'. But this does not explain why someone would plant a tree knowing they will not be around when it is grown, or why a church group would sort through the church rubbish bins in order to promote recycling. E. Tory Higgins argues that "pleasure and pain refer to only one kind of outcome of goal pursuit—hedonic experience. There are outcomes other than hedonic experience that people care about; in particular, they want to be successful at what they do even if they have to suffer to make it happen."<sup>2</sup>

Why people chose to do things they are not forced to do, or that are not immediately pleasurable is the subject of Motivational Theory. This emerged in behavioural and educational psychology from the observation that people are more productive and creative when they are personally motivated than when they are doing as they are told. Research has explored the difference between 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' motivation. Extrinsic factors are external to a person, in behavioural terms the reward that I get from a particular behaviour, the 'pay-out' which could be financial or praise, or protection from a threat (i.e. avoiding punishment). Intrinsic factors are internal, my personal goals, desires and fears. From the 1970s an emphasis on intrinsic motivation has had a major influence in Western countries, especially in the fields of education and management.

Teaching practices have been profoundly influenced by the desire to foster intrinsic motivation, as this is seen to encourage sustained and self-directed learning and higher levels of thinking. "This form of motivation is much more sustainable because it does not require constant threats or prizes from teachers or parents."<sup>3</sup> Intrinsically motivated students who are "thinking longer and harder and enjoying the challenge of being confused will ask deeper, more thought-provoking questions."<sup>4</sup> This has been described as 'deep learning' which fosters a personal interest in the topic assisted by a sense of empowerment and autonomy.<sup>5</sup> Eco-mission is sustained and enriched by this kind of 'deep learning' and personal investment by both leaders and members.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bailey, *The SAGE handbook of philosophy of education* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> E. Tory Higgins, *Beyond Pleasure and Pain: How Motivation Works* (Oxford Scholarship Online, January 2012) DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199765829.001.0001

<sup>3</sup> Claire Chuter, "The role of motivation in learning." *The Education Hub*, <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/motivation>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Schiefele, "Interest, learning, and motivation." *Educational psychologist*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1991): 299-323.

In business management Douglas McGregor described business management based on extrinsic motivation as 'Theory X', which he saw as the dominant style in Western countries. He advocated a 'Theory Y' of managing people based on stimulating personal motivation.<sup>6</sup> Managers who use this approach trust their people to take ownership of their work. James MacGregor Burns developed these ideas to advocate 'transformational' instead of 'transactional' leadership. "Transactional leadership appeals to followers' self-interest and is built on and motivated by the mutual exchange of benefits (e.g., compensation)," while transformational leadership is more about inspiring others, "linking followers' goals and efforts to their self-concept, thereby "harnessing the motivational forces of self-expression, self-consistency, self-esteem and self-worth."<sup>7</sup>

The eco-mission movement wishes to inspire others to care about Creation and to act in ecology and sustainability. The challenge of 'transformational' theory is to nurture motivation without resorting to 'the carrot and the stick'. Formal statements and decisions of church bodies do not necessarily have much motivational effect. For example, the General Assembly of the PCANZ in 2018 passed a motion committing the church "to reducing our impact on the environment, acknowledging the important role Christians play in being stewards of God's creation."<sup>8</sup> However I have not yet been able to find evidence of this decision having an influence at a local level.

Our understanding of motivation has been shaped by the work of Abraham Maslow who is famous for his 'hierarchy of needs' (originally proposed in 1943).<sup>9</sup> According to this model it is difficult for people to be motivated by broad or intangible goals when their basic needs are not being met. Christchurch people certainly experienced this after the 2010-2012 earthquakes. With houses, churches and businesses damaged or destroyed, basic security needs came to the fore and everything else was put on hold. The world is currently in a similar crisis caused by Covid-19, which is having vast effects on every aspect of mission, including ecology projects. Crisis sends us 'down the hierarchy' to attend to our own survival and immediate relationships.

Attending to personal needs in mission motivation means creating spaces for rest and relating: "support and play strategies are crucial; not planning and task forces, but potluck dinners, festivals, and dances."<sup>10</sup> People's ability to work for social change and environmental sustainability is underpinned by our needs for acceptance and love. For eco-mission projects this means valuing the relational aspects of our work as much as the tasks being done.

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960)

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Brubaker, "Spirit-led followers: rethinking transformational leadership theory." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 2 (April 2013): 138-145, 139, quoting Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> PCANZ, "Summary of Decisions, General Assembly 2018." Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/index.php/about-us/general-assembly/general-assembly-2018>

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–96. CiteSeerX 10.1.1.334.7586. doi:10.1037/h0054346. Maslow's 1954 book *Motivation and Personality* was also very influential in the field of understanding human motivation.

<sup>10</sup> Jon W. Magnuson, "An Inside Look at an Outside Mission: Social Action and the Church." *Theology Today*, vol. 37 no. 2 (July 1980): 236-240, 239.

Peter Coutts advocates for the importance of meeting the needs of church members during a change process. He sees as people's sense of identity as particularly important, and suggests that any new initiatives be well incorporated into the story of a church, its core sense of 'this is who we are'. This has important implications for churches wishing to engage more in ecological mission; leaders need to articulate 'eco' goals into the "narrative thread" of the church "so that people can see that the way forward is strongly connected to their past, to their identity."<sup>11</sup>

A key idea in motivational theory is that motivation emerges from the creative tension between challenge and ability (i.e. a person's perception of their capacity to meet the challenge, also known as 'self-efficacy'). This is a 'goldilocks zone'; too large a gap and the task seems too difficult, too little challenge and it seems boring or not worthwhile. In education this is described as Expectancy Value Theory; learning happens when the task is seen as being of value and when the student expects that they are able to complete it.<sup>12</sup> Robert Fritz pictured this creative tension as holding an elastic band between two fingers. One finger represents current reality and the other finger represents a vision or potential reality. As you move the fingers apart the tension on the elastic band increases. "If the elastic band is not stretched, no energy exists and nothing happens. If the present reality and vision or potential reality are far apart then there is great tension and potential energy ready for action."<sup>13</sup> Fritz argued that this tension is vital in sparking energy and creativity, motivating people to work to "bring reality in line with vision" with "challenge and passion".<sup>14</sup> However if the gap is too wide then people may give up their vision and lower their expectations.

This simple metaphor is a helpful tool in understanding personal motivation in the face of huge challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change. Murray Hunter draws attention to the emotions involved in the tension between a difficult challenge and individual perception of ability and resources to meet the challenge. Facing up to a difficult reality can spark vision, curiosity and energy. However the gap between reality and vision also generates emotions such as anxiety, grief, worry or hopelessness, which can discourage people from taking action.<sup>15</sup> From a Christian perspective this is about hope; "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, NRSV). The question of what sustains hope in the face of overwhelming bad news is a profoundly spiritual one which is deeply connected with the Biblical story, with the cross and resurrection of Christ at the heart.

Panu Pihkala explores the issue of motivation for action on climate change from a Christian point of view, highlighting the role of anxiety in suppressing social discussion or practical change; humanity is hampered in our "meeting of this environmental crisis by a

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Coutts, *Choosing Change: How to motivate churches to face the future* (2013: The Alban Institute, Herndon, VA).

<sup>12</sup> Chuter, "The role of motivation in learning."

<sup>13</sup> Murray Hunter, "How motivation really works: Towards an emoto-motivation paradigm." *Economics, Management and Financial Markets*, Woodside, vol. 7, iss. 4 (Dec 2012): 133-196, 136.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Hunter, "How motivation really works."

severe and pervasive apathy.”<sup>16</sup> This apathy is a result of internal conflict, Pihkala argues, from an unconscious sense of being both guilty and victim of climate change, both bombarded by troubling information about the state of the world and feeling unable to do anything about it. The result is anxiety and loss of hope: “people tend to be pessimistic and anxious about the future of the world.” This is a state of trauma; “The shock of the scale of environmental destruction is so strong that people do not want to think about it. The trauma threatens their whole belief about the goodness of the world.” Pihkala advocates a theological and pastoral response centred on the cross:

*The cross of Christ was not a success story. Regarding the environmental crisis, it clearly is not evident that humanity will find enough solutions, motivation, and action. Defeatism must be avoided, but the realistic option that the world is heading into a deepening crisis also must seriously be considered. What is needed is the encounter of different emotions and anxieties related to the environmental situation, with the purpose of finding meaning and even joy in the midst of a tragedy.*<sup>17</sup>

A Christian understanding of human motivation begins with the theological claim that God has intentions for the world which give purpose to human living. Faith raises the possibility that individuals and communities can become aware of God’s purpose for them in a direct personal and live-able way that goes beyond the application of general principles or values. We name this experience as ‘calling’. Os Guinness describes sensing God’s call as “the most comprehensive reorientation and the most profound motivation in human experience.”<sup>18</sup> This reorientation can be a small nudge into a specific action or a ‘comprehensive’ re-alignment of life. It can move people into a new career or ministry (i.e. ‘vocation’) or it can draw people into changes in life-style or involvement in projects. Calling is an experience of meaning in which personal motivation and identity is aligned to a greater purpose. Feenstra described calling as the place where “the world’s deep hunger” meets an individual’s “deep gladness”.<sup>19</sup> Alistair Mackenzie et.al. claim that God “made all of us for a purpose. That’s why there is a yearning in our hearts to live significantly. This is our destiny – to discover how we can turn God’s purpose for us into a reality, in the way we live and work.”<sup>20</sup>

Calling is a process of discovery, which integrates our individual life story and personality together with others into choices that lead us in particular directions. Hughie Barnes

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<sup>16</sup> Panu Pihkala, “The Pastoral Challenge of the Environmental Crisis: Environmental Anxiety and Lutheran Eco-Reformation.” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, vol. 55, iss. 2 (June 2016): 131-140, 132. DOI: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/10.1111/dial.12239>, quoting Harold Searles

<sup>17</sup> Panu Pihkala, “The Pastoral Challenge of the Environmental Crisis: Environmental Anxiety and Lutheran Eco-Reformation.” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, vol. 55, iss. 2 (June 2016): 131-140, 140. DOI: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/10.1111/dial.12239>.

<sup>18</sup> Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 7.

<sup>19</sup> quoted in Hughie Jackson Barnes, “Called to lead—an examination into the phenomenon of calling.” Ph.D. diss., Pepperdine University (2013), <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/docview/1427353427?accountid=14700> (accessed May 13, 2020), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Alistair Mackenzie, Wayne Kirkland & Annette Dunham, *Soul Purpose: Making a Difference in Life and Work* (Christchurch, NZ: NavPress, 2004), 12.

describes stages in this process from the initial stirrings of increasing awareness, to an experience of being prepared for a new direction, through to being 'launched' to operate in a new calling.<sup>21</sup> I am particularly intrigued by this definition which calls attention to the revolutionary aspect of this process: calling is "the act of stepping into awkward, ambiguous or risky space, breaking an implied or explicit social assumption or rule."<sup>22</sup> Do Christians experience ecological mission as 'risky space'? What unwritten church rules might they risk breaking?

My own sense of calling to care for Creation is part of God's call on my life. When my call to ordination was re-affirmed by God in 2004 I experienced a 'holy concern' for the earth at the same time as desire for sacramental ministry. However, the processes of training and parish ministry, as well as the challenges of motherhood, pushed aside my call to ecological mission until recent years. I can relate to Hughie Barnes' suggestion that when people deny or ignore a sense of calling this can create feelings of guilt and loss. Finding a place where I can use my gifts (e.g. writing) within the eco-mission movement has brought a renewed energy and enjoyment, which spiritually is understood as getting into alignment with my God-given calling. I also find it vital, personally, to have something that I can 'do' about the problems of the world. The news of ecological destruction, global warming and extinctions is just so bad that without a specific way to engage in creative solutions I would be overwhelmed and 'switch off', as Pikhala describes. For me, living in my calling from God is the only way to navigate the trauma and avoid despair.

Do people engage in eco-mission because of a sense of call? This immediately raises theological and spirituality questions. If we begin from the assumptions that a) God cares for Creation and b) God is calling people to care for Creation, then how do people experience this?

Attending to the different phases of the call process has helpful implications for eco-mission organisations such as A Rocha. Our strategies need to be broad enough to be proactive in different ways with people depending on where they may be in this process:

- a) increasing awareness of environmental concerns in the church and inspiring people to explore further
- b) preparing people for action through accessible training and low-commitment events
- c) launching people into roles where they genuinely are making an impact and giving expression to their calling.

The language of calling is a rich and vibrant resource for eco mission. This resources people to listen to God, take risks in following promptings, and find resilience in the face of anxiety. The language of calling makes the connection at a spiritual level between personal and collective faith and the realities of living in our world today.

If we acknowledge calling as God's prerogative and uniquely personal we have to accept that people, even deeply faithful missional Christians, will not experience a sense of call to eco mission. God may have other tasks in mind for other people. Despite our passion and sense of urgency about the state of the planet, not all Christians will feel called to this aspect of mission.

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<sup>21</sup> Barnes, "Called to lead"

<sup>22</sup> Oestreich, 2009, in Barnes, "Called to Lead".

## Implications and Questions for Reflection

Extrinsic and Intrinsic motivation: Motivation theory explores how motivation happens on different levels and across continuums:

- from things that directly benefit us (e.g. enjoying the outdoors) to things which we do to benefit others or the world as a whole,
- from 'here and now' results (e.g. recycling) to results which may come a long time in the future,
- motivation from negative events and fears (threats) both direct (personal) and indirect (global) to motivation from hope and creativity.

I think that eco-mission includes both extrinsic goals with specific observable outcomes (e.g. OI chick births) and intrinsic goals which are more personal to those involved (e.g. group belonging, physical fitness). I am curious as to which kinds of motivations the local groups in Christchurch articulate as being most important to them.

- What are the current goals of your group?
- How are you trying to motivate other people (e.g. your wider church) to care for creation? What do you think is the best way to motivate people?
- Are you more motivated by good news or bad news? Is your Creation Care work more about protecting or preventing bad things from happening or about creating new/positive things?

Challenge and Agency: The literature on motivation suggests that sustaining motivation for action requires finding a balance between the challenges we face in eco-mission and the ability (resources, or 'agency') we have with which to face them. This 'sweet spot' gives us the creative energy to propel us into action while protecting us from getting overwhelmed with the enormity of the task.

- How do you decide how much you can manage?
- Are you aware of finding a balance between challenge and your ability to meet the challenge?

Meeting Needs: The balance between challenge and agency is a fluid one, affected by personal and group factors as well as global events such as Covid-19. The task is to meet personal and group needs as well as meeting the requirements of the tasks.

- In what ways does your Creation Care group meet the personal needs of those involved (including spiritual, social, intellectual, physical)?
- How has Covid-19 affected your ability to achieve your goals?

Emotion:

- What feelings are you aware of that motivate your Creation Care work, both positive (e.g. hope) and negative (e.g. anxiety)?
- How do these emotions impact on your work?

Calling: A sense of vocation or calling is a powerful motivating factor which can sustain people through difficult or unrewarding times. I hypothesise that those involved in Creation

Care leadership can articulate a belief, based on experience, that God has called them to this.

- Do you feel that God has called you to be part of Creation Care?
- What experiences have given you this conviction?
- How does a sense of calling shape your work?
- What verses or themes in the Bible clarify a sense of calling to eco mission for you?