

## Expanding Vision: Silvia Purdie



Ka mihi atu ahau ki a koutou: tēnā koutou katoa. Greetings!

He honore ki te Atua kaha rawa, te Tama me te Wairua tapu.  
Ko koe te Kaihanga, te Timatanga, te Otinga,  
te Kaikaranga, te Kaiwhakaora o te Ao katoa.

Glory to God in the highest, to the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
You are Creator, Beginning and End of all things,  
the one who calls, the one who sustains the world and all that is in it.

Ko Silvia Purdie taku ingoa. Nō Ingarani ōku tūpuna – my ancestors came mostly from England in the 1860s as settlers in North Canterbury. Ngāti Tūmatauenga te iwi – my husband is an Army chaplain. Kaitiakitanga te mahi – I work in environmental sustainability. Manaakitanga te kaupapa – I also work as a counsellor, supervisor, author, trainer, and am an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

*What experiences shaped how you feel about the natural world?*

I had an extraordinary childhood. I grew up the white girl in Pacific and Māori communities: Suva in Fiji, Kaikohe in Northland, Ruatoria on East Cape, and Nuku'alofa in Tonga. My parent's marriage wasn't great, and they split up when I was 12, but they shared a love of the outdoors. Every Saturday we'd pack a picnic and go somewhere for a walk. Every holidays we'd be off on a road trip. By the time I finished school I had travelled the length and breadth of both Aotearoa and Tonga, exploring mountains, lakes, forests, beaches and islands.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Find out about Silvia's work as a counsellor and supervisor, and find a host of faith and creation resources: [www.conversations.net.nz](http://www.conversations.net.nz)

<sup>2</sup> Getting to Tonga's islands involved overnight journeys on high seas in boats with no beds and assorted livestock!

My father was a Methodist missionary teacher, with a strong pacifist background. He taught geography, plus pretty much everything in those Pacific and small rural schools. He loved to inspire others to understand more about the natural world around them. As we drove across the country he would rave on about river terraces and the ages of rocks until my eyes rolled. My mother loved birds and we carried a bird book everywhere we went, as every bird call had to be identified! Together they wrote a school textbook about the environment of Tonga, laying out photos on our dining table in our little concrete block house in Nuku'alofa.

Every house we lived in they set about making a garden. Growing food to eat was just what we did. I remember their disgust when some young American VSA volunteers next door in Tonga bought packet dry powder mashed potato. Food should be fresh!

Our favourite place in Tonga involved biking to the south coast (about 40 mins, with my sister getting dubbed on Dad's rickety bike, dodging pot-holes!). Pull off at a dirt track, leave the bikes under a coconut tree, clamber down a narrow gap in the cliff to a small perfect beach. Between the brilliant sand and the reef edge was a wonderland. At low tide we walked across the coral outcrops. At high tide we swam the channels. What life there, in every crevice of the pools, crazy coloured fish darting, creatures in shells. Utterly pristine, back before we invented throw-away bottles or microplastics or industrial fishing.

Through my teen and university years I lived with Mum and my sister Natalie in Lower Hutt, then flatted in inner city Wellington, enjoying the beautiful hills, river and harbour, while I worked as a University Lay Chaplain and then National Youth Co-ordinator for the Methodist Church. Two years in Taupo, newly wed, where Chris and I fell in love with the lake in its many moods. Wainuiomata was a gentle place, surrounded by regenerating bush, a place of babies – home for five years. We loved our four Dunedin years, not least for the myriad of fabulous beaches, with three lively young boys who flung themselves down sand dunes. I discovered the intense joy of seeing the natural world through the eyes of a child. I trained as a counsellor, and then I followed my husband into ministry in the Presbyterian church.

The longest time in one home was Linton, out of Palmerston North, on an army base when Chris became a military chaplain. I'll never forget arriving at that house, opening the back gate to see laid out before me wild open space with a river flowing by. In all those nine years I never lost the astonishment and gratitude to God that I felt in that moment. Gosh I loved that place. Trees grew, the river flooded and changed, and we explored it all, with kids and friends and three cats. I studied, was ordained, and began in parish ministry; at home I would be out splashing through the steam or tucked under a tree.

Recent years have been in Christchurch, and now Burnham, which has brought more places to explore and appreciate. My friend Ira bought a large rugged chunk of growing forest on Banks Peninsula. It has been amazing to see God at work in that process, and to share kaitiakitanga for that place. Regeneration and conservation is tough work. I took on the task of cutting and removing old fence wire and wild roses, and have scars to prove it.

As I reflect on my rich and diverse experience of the natural world I feel overwhelmingly grateful for the many opportunities I have had, and that I knew a time before the digital revolution and plastic pollution.

*How has God called you into caring about the natural world?*

I experienced a clear call to ordained ministry in Taizé in France at Easter 30 years ago. In a vision in worship (surrounded by candles and soft singing) I could see the Earth and it

became the Communion loaf in God's hands, broken and made whole. I felt such a longing to break bread and pour the cup and share the Gospel. A decade later God renewed my call to ordination, with an even stronger sense that caring for God's creation was part of this. But you know how it is, study and work and life gets busy, and I successfully ignored this aspect of my calling for another decade. For the church, and in our ministry training, creation care was the aspect of mission which falls off the end. Yes, obviously we care about the environment, but other things are more important (?!).

It was in my time at Cashmere Presbyterian Church that I started working with A Rocha. I hosted a seminar with input from A Rocha, together with others around Christchurch who were passionate about creation care. I was so inspired by them. I figured that if I wanted to make a contribution, the most important area was sustainability. I used my study leave to write about waste and this became an A Rocha 'Rich Living' study booklet.<sup>3</sup> This got me into practical systems for churches to reduce their rubbish, including writing 'The Rubbish Challenge' series in 2021,<sup>4</sup> and co-ordinating a zero waste project for Christchurch churches.<sup>5</sup>

For the last few years I have convened the Christchurch group of A Rocha. We've run seminars and workshops, built up interest and connections across a real range of churches. What I love most about this is that caring for creation cuts right across denominational or theological divides. All sorts of Christians are being stirred to speak out and make a difference.

To me it is so obvious that this is a work of God in our time. The Holy Spirit is calling the church to care for God's creation. Sustainability is a trendy thing and there is a lot of media attention to environmental and climate change issues. If anything, this makes Christians suspicious of it and wary of secular agendas. My approach is to base everything I teach on the Bible. What does Bible have to say about rubbish? about climate crisis? about eco anxiety?

A year of post graduate study last year created more space for this, including a dissertation on 'Motivations for Eco Mission'.<sup>6</sup> I'm interested in what actually motivates people of faith to care for creation; it's not the same for everyone. Some are practical people who want to get stuck in and do something. Others see the big picture and want to fight injustice or shift government policy. Others are relational, all about being whānau. Others seek spiritual connection, theology and prayer. It has been great to be part of establishing Eco Church in NZ as this has a breadth of ways that local churches can enhance the natural world in their life, worship and mission. There's something for everyone!

And now God is calling me well outside my comfort zone, into the wider community sector in NZ as I look for ways to resource social service agencies and other community groups to incorporate environmental sustainability and respond to climate change.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Waste' Rich Living study booklet can be found at: [www.arocha.org.nz/resources/rich-living-series](http://www.arocha.org.nz/resources/rich-living-series)

<sup>4</sup> The Rubbish Challenge can be found at: [www.conversations.net.nz/rubbish-challenge](http://www.conversations.net.nz/rubbish-challenge)

<sup>5</sup> Zero Waste for Churches: [www.ecochurch.org.nz/zero-waste-programme](http://www.ecochurch.org.nz/zero-waste-programme)

<sup>6</sup> 'Motivations for Eco Mission', Conversations: [www.conversations.net.nz/12-motivations-for-ecomission](http://www.conversations.net.nz/12-motivations-for-ecomission)

<sup>7</sup> Place Consultancy: [www.place.net.nz](http://www.place.net.nz)

I love the way God calls us. It is always deeply personal, connecting from the heart. And it is always global – we are part of a world-wide movement worked out in this place and time. God calls us because we matter, each and every one of us. I am privileged to have lived more than five decades and to know a growing maturing faith. These days I describe my relationship with God as a strong working partnership. I know what Jesus meant when he said that his food is to do the will of the Father (John 4:34). I know the inspiring and sustaining power of the Holy Spirit every day, as I live in full confidence of my ‘mahi taki’ (working as one) with God.

I love the way God’s call gathers up all of our story. I grew up a white kid in brown communities but once we moved to Lower Hutt I was part of the dominant culture. Mono-white never feels normal to me. I love to connect with people from other cultures and honour diverse perspectives. In creation care I have a heart for Pasifika communities and how they are impacted by global warming. And I’m passionate about the central place of Māori in our nation. I uphold the vital role of Māori as Kaitiaki of this land. We need to hear each others’ voices.

I love the way God inspires and sustains us as he calls. One thing’s for sure with creation care: the work is ‘2-steps-forward, 1-step-back’. It is hard, and disappointments come almost as much as the joys. But I know God constantly at work, renewing his Creation, and renewing me, and renewing the church. It is the greatest privilege to be part of this.

Another thing is for sure: we can’t do this alone. God doesn’t just call individuals but he raises up a people, forms teams and community and whānau. I am a networker and I love bringing people together, making connections. Stuff happens because people like each other and respect each other – and ‘cut each other some slack’ when we drop the ball. Calling, theology and mission are ‘body’ things. We are the body of Christ, warts and all.

*What are the challenges of creation care?*

The main challenge, of course, is that the problems we face seem so daunting. Even with a wonderful joy-filled project like the regenerating forest on the Banks Peninsula, with increasing temperatures and risk of droughts there is every chance that the forest could go up in flames; the most common tree is kanuka, which burns really well! Fear is real and overwhelm is always a risk to be managed.

Mine is a ‘big-picture’ brain, so I am drawn to large-scale issues and solutions. And God meets me there and pushes me further out! The Spirit of Christ drops these ‘what-ifs’ into my mind and I can see it, I can picture it. ‘What if churches of every stream started caring for creation in their local area?’ What would that take? ‘What if every community agency had an environmental sustainability strategy, and was resourcing their staff to integrate care for people with care for the environment?!’

These ‘what-ifs’ are energising and scary at the same time, because having seen it I cannot turn it off. I can no longer not engage with that vision. It is God’s call for me personally, and God’s vision for me expands me. It’s no good saying to God, “I’m too little for that vision.” He just doesn’t buy that!

When you step out in that vision, God has already cleared the way. Not every time, by any means, but a lot of times there are amazing ‘coincidences’. In my Place Consultancy work I have found someone’s name and phone number and just called them. They have no idea who I am, and I start raving on about environmental sustainability in social services. And heaps of times the person has said, “Gosh, funny you should ring, I was just thinking about that!” One person was sitting at his computer struggling with an assignment on the

topic. Other people recently had someone ask them about it and they didn't know how to respond. God prepares the way.

Then what happens next is often frustration and disappointment. Occasionally one conversation leads to another one and it grows and leads on into partnership. Mostly, though, people are too busy, other demands are too pressing. Especially with Covid, people in the community sector and in the church simply don't have the spare mental capacity or sheer energy to tackle something new. Environmental sustainability feels big and hard and all too much right now.

God's mission to renew the face of the earth through renewed people<sup>8</sup> is as wonderful as it is fraught. Moving with the Holy Spirit in partnership with the Creator requires that we significantly enlarge our capacity for frustration and failure. God does not seem to mind setbacks.

In church ministry I expected that everything we did would succeed and everyone would be happy. It sounds completely bizarre to me now, but I really did! The church is allergic to failure. I remember the chairman of a church funding trust telling me there was a "black mark" against me because the youth ministry project they had helped fund had not gone as well as we had hoped. When I applied for a creation care project the following year our application was dismissed. God does not work like that. God does not measure success or failure the way we do. He gives us a D for Determination, an E for effort, and a F for Fearless Faith!

Perseverance to me looks like being kind to myself and others. Especially in Covid pandemic, in and out of lockdowns, we have all had to learn to sit more lightly with our plans. Adjust, let it go, find something else to do, another way around. And it's OK to do less. My relationship with God is a rock solid foundation soaked through with grace. There is always more love, more mercy, more possibilities. I am learning to trust completely in God's timing.

*What do you encourage churches to do?*

Three specific things I would like to highlight here. The first is around mental health and wellbeing. I have been applying my counselling, pastoral and theological training to the question of how climate crisis is affecting people. I encourage everyone in pastoral care roles, especially those working with young people, to learn more about climate change and to face the building storm of emotions. How do you feel about global warming? How do those emotions impact how you live and work and sleep and relate to others? We have to notice and honour our own responses.

Then we have to create space for other people to be open about how they feel. Many children and young people feel overwhelming waves of hopelessness and pointlessness. Why bother going to school when the world is being destroyed? Eco anxiety is defined by Glenn Albrecht as "the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse."<sup>9</sup> If this is becoming a defining feature of our time, what does this mean for how we create community, do children's programmes and provide pastoral care? Panu Pikhala calls the church in our pastoral care to "the encounter of different emotions and anxieties related to the environmental situation, with the purpose of finding

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<sup>8</sup> As Ani so beautifully describes it in her chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Panu Pikhala, "Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety." *Sustainability*, September 2020, p.4.

meaning and even joy in the midst of a tragedy.”<sup>10</sup> I believe that taking environmental action together as faith communities is the only way we can offer substantive hope.<sup>11</sup>

The second specific action I would encourage churches to do is to host seminars. People in our communities are hungry for good information and space to discuss what we can do about environmental crisis. Churches can speak into this: advertise a sermon series, invite a panel for a public forum, hear from scientists and politicians and climate activists and theologians and psychologists.

Third, we definitely need to shift our ‘norm’ around the end of life. My grandparents’ generation chose to break with tradition and not be buried in cemeteries. They were motivated by a concern for the environment: they did not want to see more and more land being covered in concrete in memorials to the dead. Unfortunately we now know that cremation is just as bad for the environment. The intense heat required for cremation uses a huge amount of power. When a body is cremated all the carbon is released into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, adding to global warming. The ash left behind is toxic, mostly salt and residual chemicals.

All credit to the Natural Burials team who have worked with councils around the country to create eco cemeteries, where bodies are enabled to gently return to the earth without adding toxins. Trees are planted instead of tombstones, so that the burial site becomes forest.<sup>12</sup>

My family is in the process of making this shift in thinking and practice around death. We recently visited Makara Cemetery out of Wellington, where several of our whānau now lie, and it was amazingly beautiful and peaceful. The grandkids explored the bush and lay around on the grass, feeling connected with those they remember. It is a real God place.

*So what is God’s heart for creation?*

My theology comes out in liturgy. I hear God’s heart in Proverbs 8. The early church recognised Jesus in the voice of Wisdom, and this shaped their conviction that Christ was with God from before time and in all of Creation. This is how I hear God’s cry for us today:

[Here I am, crying out](#)

*Litany by Silvia Purdie*

Here I am, crying out – can you hear me?

I am Wisdom, I am Christ, I am Creator and Saviour and Sustainer

I stand at this crossroad, I stand at your door – do you welcome me?

I cry out and my voice is True and my word is Life.

My determination is Justice and my gift is Love.

For all time **I was**, for all Creation **I am**, for all that’s to come **I will be**.

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<sup>10</sup> Panu Pihkala, “The Pastoral Challenge of the Environmental Crisis: Environmental Anxiety and Lutheran Eco-Reformation.” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, volume 55, number 2, June 2016, p.138.

<sup>11</sup> View Silvia’s talk on Climate Change and Mental Health on her website:

<https://www.conversations.net.nz/mental-health.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.naturalburials.co.nz>

I saw the foundations of Earth. I saw the birth of Life.  
I am God's rejoicing!  
Every fragment, every atom, every corner of the universe  
I see, I hold, I adore.  
In every creature, every wave, every moment  
I breathe.  
And here I am, crying out – can you hear me?

I call to you, arms wide open – step toward me,  
fling yourself headlong!  
I catch you as you trip and fall, for you are entangled,  
wrapped around and around by  
power cables and strips of plastic and cords of debt,  
labels and fears and data,  
dragged down by effort on effort on effort.

Love, you try so hard  
but only I can release you.  
Stand still, let it all fall away  
here in the favour of God, who sees you  
with equal measure of Judgement and Affection.  
Stand still, and look! Here is another way.  
Share my delight, for you and for all things, all things, all things,  
till you too are the voice of Wisdom.