What Motivates Eco-Mission?

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There is a growing body of literature on the role of the Christian church in responding to environmental crisis. It is written by people who are themselves passionate about ecological faith and mission, with the intention of pursuading others to become informed, motivated and involved. The language is often urgent about what this "requires" of the church.[1] Mark Keown urges his readers to "stop vacillating, procrastinating and hesitating."[2] Religion is seen as an untapped resource which could be applied to motivating people to care about the environment.[3] But what actually motivates Christian people?

The following twelve 'motivations' for ecological mission are aspects of a broad mission movement. Individuals and groups will connect with some facets more than others. This is by no means an exhaustive list; other motivations that I do not explore in depth include the economic benefits of a 'green' or 'circular' economy, and the spiritual motivations of people who do not stand within the Christian tradition.

Many writers in this field call for a revolution in consciousness and spirituality, some claiming that religion no longer serves the human family well in this time of ecological crisis. Thomas Berry increasingly challenged orthodox Christianity; a Catholic priest, Berry moved away from the Christian faith, in his 90s claiming that "holy scriptures limit the human search for the divine," and advocating faith in "a natural world that we will esteem, by immediate experience, as the manifestation of the ultimate mysteries of existence itself."[4] This 'post-theistic' 'creation spirituality' is a fascinating topic for study, but it is not the focus of this dissertation. I stand in a place which highly values the Bible as foundation of faith and 'standard' of truth, and looks to the Holy Spirit to lead and guide the mission of the church.[5] My interest lies in exploring how the Christian church in its breadth and diversity is responding to the call of God to care for the earth. I describe this in terms of twelve motivating beliefs or attitudes:

1. Faith in God as Creator
2. A vocation to be stewards of Creation
3. Confession that human greed has damaged Creation

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[1] e.g. "It requires not only ecological action but also self-assessment and self-correction by communities." Neil Darragh, "What have faith communities to do with ecology?" in Neil Darragh, ed., *Living In the Planet Earth: Faith Communities and Ecology* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2016): 7-14, 13.
[2] Mark Keown, "The Apostolic Green Imperative." in Neil Darragh, ed., *Living In the Planet Earth: Faith Communities and Ecology* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2016): 33-39, 39.
[3] Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 37, iss. 2 (June 2009): 283-309.
[4] Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 20.
[5] "The supreme rule of faith and life and the supreme standard of the Church is the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments." *The Book of Order* 1.1.2, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

4. Fear of impending disaster
5. Hope for the restoration of Creation
6. The ethical imperative to live sustainably
7. Caring for local ecosystems
8. Justice for "the least of these"
9. Respect for the special place of indigenous people
10. Desire for the church to be a community of Creation care
11. Wellbeing, physical and mental health
12. Delight in the beauty of Creation

1. Faith in God as Creator

Christians care for the natural world because God does.[6] A faith perspective begins from affirmation of God; whatever our view of God the shared foundation is that the universe is powered by a force that is not human. We recognise a divine hand at work in the natural world, from the origins of the universe as 'creation' to the vast intricacies of interconnected ecosystems. At its core this is expressed in the most simple of Jesus' parables (so simple that Matthew and Luke left it out of their gospels!), the parable of the growing seed in Mark 4:26-29. While the gardener sleeps the plant grows, "he does not know how" (Mk 4:27, NRSV). No matter how much people understand the mechanisms involved, no matter how much we control or damage the systems of life, ultimately "The earth produces of itself" (Mk 4:28). This, says Jesus, is a picture of the Kingdom of God, how God works and who God is. Christian motivation for ecology is not about improving human control through greener technology or financial incentives for long-term sustainability. The starting point is that the world is gift from God to be held with that 'not knowing' which Christians call 'faith'.

The Bible begins with "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Nicene Creed begins with "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." The identity of God as Creator and the universe as Creation is the undisputed starting point of Christian theology. The foundational claim of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that God is the source, initiator and sustainer of the physical universe. The Lausanne Commitment affirms that "We cannot claim to love God while abusing what belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance."[7]

Before the act of creation time and space did not exist. There is an emerging concensus among scientists around the origins of the universe, that it began in a single moment in an explosion known commonly as the 'big bang', dated at 13.8 billion years ago. There is no evidence of anything existing prior to this. Theologically the significance of creation being 'ex-nihilo' (out of nothing) refutes the dualism (common in other religions and in some strands of Christianity) which sees God as eternally opposed to matter, and the spiritual and the physical as fundamentally different and irreconcilable. In Christian theology, spiritual realities as well as tangible realities are created by God, dependent upon God for

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[6] "The Sierra Club's publication *Faith in Action* reveals that 67 percent of Americans say that they care about the environment around them because it is God's creation." Mallory McDuff, *Natural Saints: How People of Faith are Working to Save God's Earth* ebook, Oxford Scholarship Online: September 2010 DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195379570.003.0000

[7] "A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action," 7-A, The Lausanne Movement, 2011. https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctcommitment

their continued existence. The created universe is not inimical to the divine but is as able to be an expression of God as the human, the spiritual or the intellectual.[8] Ernst Conradie states that "The message is not primarily the imperative that we as humans should embrace God's creation (for we are part of that), but the gospel that the world only exists in God's embrace."[9]

The inherent value of the universe is further emphasised in the Genesis 1 creation liturgy as God repeatedly declares "It is good". "Despite everything, the created world we live in is a *good* world, and it is *good* to be alive in it … Christians do not affirm the world because they are optimistic about the world as such, or unrealistic about all the suffering and injustice in the world. They affirm it because *God* says Yes to it … An other-worldly religion may seem very pious but it is not Christian."[10] Reformation theologians such as Calvin taught a world-affirming faith, in response to the medieval monastic emphasis on "contempt of the world."[11] Conradie suggests that "knowledge of God's character is what enables us to look at the world in a different light, in the light of the Light of the world. Then we recognize that the soil on which we are standing is holy ground."[12]

The Old Testament emphasis on God as Creator is radically monotheistic. Nature is affirmed but not worshiped. Other ancient religions saw things such as the sun or moon, or local features such as mountains, as divine beings. The Old Testament celebrates natural things as created, as in themselves expressing in their own way worship of God.[13]

2. A Vocation to be Stewards of Creation

Christians care for the natural world because they feel called by God.

This is shaped by our creation stories. In Genesis 1:28 God blesses the first human beings and says to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (NRSV). How people have understood the word 'dominion' has had vast implications for human impact on the natural world. In 1967 Lynn White argued that the idea of human dominion over creation led to the assumption that nature exists only to serve human needs. He accused Christianity of legitimating

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[8] Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine: Teachings of the Christian Church* (Richmond, VI: CLC Press, 1968).

[9] Ernst Conradie, "Creation and Mission." *International Review of Mission*, WCC, vol. 101, issue 2 (Nov 2012): 339-344, 344. DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2012.00107.x.

[10] Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine,* 159 (emphasis in original).

[11] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction (3rd ed)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Quote from Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ.* "There is a dialectic in Calvin's thought between the world as the creation of God himself, and the world as the fallen creation. In that it is God's creation, it is to be honored, respected and affirmed; in that it is a fallen creation, it is to be criticized with the object of redeeming it", 299.

[12] Ernst Conradie, "Creation and Mission." *International Review of Mission*, WCC, vol. 101, issue 2 (Nov 2012): 339-344, 344. DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2012.00107.x.

[13] "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1:20, NRSV).

exploitation of the enviroment, and being partly to blame for the modern ecological crisis.[14] Responses to White's argument have sharpened Christian thinking about humanity's role in relation to the planet.

Theologians such as Douglas John Hall re-defined 'dominion' in terms of 'stewardship; creation "is entrusted to humanity, who are responsible for its safekeeping and tending."[15] Hall describes stewardship as "the vocation that God intended and intends for the human creature in the midst of God's good creation."[16] Stewardship is a biblical concept, rooted in Genesis 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (NRSV). The word 'till' is more about 'serving' than digging, according to Calvin DeWitt, in a mutual way a 'con-serving'. The word 'keep' "conveys the idea of keeping the dynamic qualities of the thing being kept … a rich, full, and fulfilling 'keeping'."[17]

Stewardship is looking after something that does not belong to you, taking care of something on behalf of someone else. My husband and I own a property in the Manawatu, which is rented out while we are living in Christchurch. We employ a property manager to sort out the tenancy. She acts as my agent to take care of the place. The Bible is very clear that the Earth belongs to God; he is literally the 'landlord', "Lord of all the land" (e.g. Psalm 24:1).[18] The word 'steward' is equivalent to Jesus speaking about 'tenants' or 'servants' in his parables which emphasise human responsibility to God for caring for the land and the gifts they have been entrusted with (e.g. Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 20:9-19). John Stott argues that scripture subordinates property rights to the principle of caring for all the community, and that we continue to be accountable to God for our stewardship. "We have no liberty to do what we like with our natural environment; it is not ours to treat as we please. 'Dominion' is not a synonym for 'domination', let alone 'destruction."[19]

Many Christians are motivated to keep the Ten Commandments. The fourth of these is to keep sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11), which applies to the natural world as well as in human community. Rest and re-creation is an essential biblical principle, integrated into the act of creation and the ethics of human responsibility. As a stewardship principle this means that the environment must be allowed to recover from human use of its resources.[20]

For New Zealanders an understanding of the Maori ethic of 'kaitiakitangi' is essential, especially as it is now written into law as a unique role for iwi in managing natural resources including reserves, rivers and food sources.[21] Maori see themselves as 'tangata

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[14] McGrath, *Christian Theology.*
[15] McGrath, *Christian Theology,* 304.
[16] D.J. Hall, quoted in Clint Le Bruyns, "Re-placing Stewardship? Towards an Ethics of Responsible Care." *Religion and Theology*, vol. 16 (2009): 67–76, 72.
[17] Calvin B. DeWitt, "Biodiversity and the Bible." *Global Biodiversity*, vol. 6, iss. 4 (Spring 1997): 13-16, 13.
[18] John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today,* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 146.
[19] John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today,* 151.
[20] McGrath, *Christian Theology,* 304.
[21] Phil Lyver, Jacinta Ruru, Nigel Scott, Jason Tylianakis, et.al., "Building biocultural approaches into Aotearoa–New Zealand's conservation future." *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, vol. 11 (2018). doi:10.1080/03036758.2018.1539405

whenua' as 'kaitiaki', guardians or caretakers. This springs from their sense of direct connection with all aspects of the environment through 'whakapapa' (ancestry). The purpose of kaitiakitanga is to uphold the life force, 'mauri', of all elements of the natural world. It means "guardianship, preservation, conservation, fostering, protecting [and] sheltering."[22]

A central aspect of stewardship is a commitment to future generations. As the saying goes, 'we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children'. Pope Francis affirms an ethical obligation to those who will come after us and warns that "We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth."[23] Even Christians who expect an imminent end to this world still want their grandchildren to be able to swim in a lake without fear of toxins.

3. Confession that Human Greed has Damaged Creation

Christian theology of sin and forgiveness motivates concern for Creation because we recognise human pride and rebellion as part of our story. The Lausanne Commitment confesses "with sorrow" that we "often disfigure our Christian presence and deny our gospel witness" by fitting too comfortably into the "world of sinful desire, greed, and human pride."[24] Confession arises from an awareness of 'transgressing' against God's laws and best intentions for us (Psalm 51). It is fascinating that this biblical idea of 'transgression' has been used in the 'planetary boundaries' model of understanding current human effects on the earth's ecosystems.[25] Human sin is deeply personal but also far wider than any individual action.

Many liturgical churches now keep a 'Season of Creation' during September each year (culminating with the Feast of St Francis). This was initiated by the Greek Orthodox church in 1989, and now includes the Catholic and Anglican communions internationally (among others), with resources in six languages.[26] In this season, prayers of confession focus on sin against the environment. Australian Normal Habel has been a leader in this movement:

> In the past we have tended to confess only our personal sins against God and one another. In *The Season of Creation* we also acknowledge the sins we have committed against creation, both individually and collectively as human beings. Our sins have hurt both creation and our kin in creation. The very first sin our

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[22] Chanel Phillips, "Mahinga kai - He tāngata. Mahinga kaitiaki - He mauri." Thesis, Master of Physical Education, University of Otago (2015), 73. http://hdl.handle.net/10523/5852

[23] Francis, "Laudato Si", 161.

[24] "A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action," 7-E, The Lausanne Movement, 2011. https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctcommitment

[25] "Transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems." Johan Rockstrom, *et.al*. "Planetary boundaries: exploring the safe operating space for humanity." *Ecology and Society*, vol. 14, issue 2 (2009): 32.

[26] "About the Season of Creation", https://seasonofcreation.org/about/

> human parents committed affected the ground (Gen. 3.17). Our greed and selfishness still bring hurt and harm to many parts of creation.[27]

Prayers of confession draw on Biblical metaphor and story and express repentance, for example:

> You delight in creation, its colour and diversity;
> yet we have misused the earth
> and plundered its resources for our own selfish ends.
> Lord, have mercy.
> **Lord, have mercy.**[28]

"Through myriad forms of ecological degradation we are disrupting a fundamental quality of God's garden—its life-generating capacity. We are *uncreating*."[29] Cynthia Moe-Lobeda highlights the ways in which we in the affluent West are embedded in 'structural evil': "This is not the evil of intentional or willful cruelty. Rather, it is evil that inhabits our lives by virtue of the economic policies, practices, institutions, and assumptions that shape how we live." She calls on the church to recognise this and repent in order to receive God's love and be "bearers of that divine and indomitable love."[30] This is echoed by Pope Francis' warning that "We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration."[31]

In prayer we confess that "we have sinned … in the wrong we have done."[32] The problem for Western Christians is that at a day-to-day personal level, the things that contribute to the global evils of deforestation and pollution do not seem 'wrong'. It is wrong for me to fly to Wellington to see my mother? It is wrong to buy a packet of brazil nuts (even if I suspect they are unsustainably sourced) and throw the plastic bag in the rubbish bin? Moe-Lobeda challenges us to look beyond our prayers of gratitude for the things we have, to confront the points at which our 'blessings' may be 'stolen' from others or the earth.

> Is it possible that our prayers and attitudes of gratitude for our many blessings subtly rationalize and normalize the ways of life that produced my material blessings while also generating global warming and toxic dumping? Do those prayers conceal the enormous extent to which those blessings are stolen goods, stolen primarily from the world's peoples of color? To conceal that theft is to perpetuate it.[33]

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[27] Norman Habel, "Seasons of Creation Liturgy, First Sunday." http://normanhabel.com/?page_id=271, accessed 24 May 2020.
[28] "'Let all things their Creator bless': Liturgy for use during the Season of Creationtide." Diocese of Guildford, Church of England, 13. https://seasonofcreation.org/clergy-resources
[29] Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Augsburg Fortress: 2013), xvii.
[30] Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Augsburg Fortress: 2013), xvii.
[31] Francis, Laudato Si, 36.
[32] *A New Zealand Prayer Book: He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* (London: William Collins, 1989), 407.
[33] Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 94.

Christian worship affirms forgiveness for those who repent, achieved for us by the cross of resurrection of Christ. Psalm 103 promises that "as far as the east is from the west" God throws away our sin (Ps 103:12, NRSV). Broken relationships can be healed by repentance and forgiveness. But our sins against the planet are more enduring. A plastic bottle thrown into the sea might well float from 'the east to the west' and still be killing sea life for hundreds of years as it disintegrates.

4. Fear of Impending Disaster

Christians share with many others in the world today the conviction that we are currently in a critical moment in history. We are motivated by fear perhaps even more keenly than by hope. Scientists tell us that we are now living in the Anthropocene as "a period where the human impact on earth is equal to the great forces of nature of previous periods."[34] This human impact brings with it the very real possibility of mass extinctions, and has been described as a "suicide machine."[35] Larry Rasmussen poses the questions:

> How, on a hot, changing, and crowded planet do we move from industrial-technological civilization to ecological civilization? How do we accomplish a durable future for the children, all the children, human and other-than-human? And how do we do so when the global human economy of corporate capitalism collides with the very economy it is wholly dependent upon; namely, the economy of nature?[36]

There are no shortage of commentators warning of dire consequences if humanity continues on its current course, and calling the world to change with a sense of urgency. Bronwyn Hayward writes about the impact of carbon emissions on climate change: "We are now gambling with the futures of everyone born since the millennium. For the sake of young people alive today and future generations, we have to believe it is not too late and work as hard as we can to change the ending of this carbon story."[37] L.E. Sponsel argues for a new 'spiritual ecology': "If not pursued voluntarily in an informed and enlightened manner, then the spiritual ecology revolution and consequent transformations will be forced on humankind by circumstances of ecocatastrophe, and that at far greater expense, including human suffering as well as economic and social costs. Ultimately, the choice is either ecocide or ecosanity."[38] Hope for the planet involves "the transition from a doomed economy of industrial growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the recovery of our

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[34] Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, "Doing Public Theology in the Anthropocene Towards Life-Creating Theology." *Verbum et Ecclesia,* vol. 36, no.3 (Oct 2015), art. 1443. DOI:10.4102/ve.v36i3.1443.

[35] Meylahn, "Doing Public Theology in the Anthropocene," quoting Brian McLaren.

[36] Larry Rasmussen, Foreword, in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Augsburg Fortress: 2013), xi.

[37] Bronwyn Hayward, *Sea Change: Climate Politics and New Zealand* (Bridget Williams Books, Kindle Edition, 2017), 62.

[38] L.E. Sponsel, "Spiritual Ecology." *Encyclopedia of the Anthropocene*, vol. 4 (2018): 181-184. DOI:10.1016/B978-0-12-809665-9.10486-0.

world."[39] This has been called the 'Ecocene', an ecologically focused global era emerging from "creative transformations in all domains and on all levels."[40]

5. Hope for the restoration of Creation

Christians care for Creation because it has an ultimate future. God is not finished with the earth, and will one day make all things new.

It is on the question of the future of the earth that Christians find themselves most divided. Many genuinely believe that we are living in the 'end times' prophesied by Jesus. Those living in Christchurch over the last decade have seen plenty of "violent earthquakes, and famines and plagues" (Luke 12:11, HCSB). We have seen the mosque massacres and the skyline lit red with fire; it is not hard to relate to the apocalyptic. Christians look towards a miraculous transformation of the earth by God, which some imagine as the destruction of the earth as we now know it by divine judgement, and people of faith sharing eternity in a different heavenly dimension. Compared to this cosmic drama "catastrophic climate change and environmental deterioration do not effectively compete for concern."[41] From this perspective, trying to address carbon emmissions or climate change is pointless, a distraction from the truly important issues of personal salvation and eternal life.

The problem, for me, is that the temptation to escape from the world's problems is all too easy. John Stott puts it bluntly:

> In the end there are only two possible attitutudes which Christians can adopt towards the world. One is escape and the other engagement. 'Escape' means turning our backs on the world in rejection, washing our hands of it (though finding with Pontius Pilate that the responsibility does not come off in the wash), and steeling our hearts against its agonized cries for help.[42]

However each Christian engages with end-times prophecy, Jesus is adamant that future judgement does not absolve us of present responsibility; how will each of us "stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 12:36)? Have we lived our calling in our time?

There are a range of theological positions on ultimate Christian hope and the destiny of Creation. At the opposite end from the 'fire and brimstone' people are theologians who advocate a vision of eschatology which is fully incorporated into life on earth. C.J.H. Wright claims that "heaven is not a place in the sky, but rather God's dimension of what we think of as ordinary reality. God's people must be 'new-creation' people here and now – God's agents participating in God's mission in the renewal of the present."[43] Nicola

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[39] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), 26.

[40] Joanna Boehnert, *Design, Ecology, Politics: Towards the Ecocene*, https://ecocene.wordpress.com/home/the-ecocene.

[41] Bernard Daley Zaleha and Andrew Szasz, "Why conservative Christians don't believe in climate change." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 71, no.5 (2015): 19–30. DOI: 10.1177/0096340215599789

[42] Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 24.

[43] Cornelius Niemandt, "Ecodomy in Mission: The Ecological Crisis in the Light of Recent Ecumenical Statements." *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Pretoria, vol. 36, iss. 3 (2015): 1-8, . quoting C.J.H. Wright, 2014.

Hoggard Creegan emphasises the embeddedness of humanity in the natural world: “To find hope for and in and with nature we need more than stories that have an ending, more than a messiah who comes from afar. The stories we tell must resonate with life and matter.”[44]

Barbara Rossing’s work on eschatalogy explores diverse biblical pictures of the future of Creation and argues that these do not need to be harmonised. She advocates for the importance of imagination for Christian hope for “a new creation that is both transcendently new and yet in continuity with this creation, since it is the renewal of this world.”[45] Some reclaim the socio-political richness of Christ returning to ‘turn the tables’ on the injustice of this world. Ernst Kasemann calls for a “radical and urgent hope” of “the apocalyptic gospel of revolutionary judgment and the call to solidarity and service in the world.” This is “nothing short of the liberation of the cosmos from the powers of Sin and Death.”[46] Mark Keown claims that “The Bible is emphatic – there will be an end to this age,”[47] initiated by the return of Jesus. “The Bible speaks of a new heaven and a new earth which merge into one and in which God will dwell with his people.” His vision is of “this world restored after it has been purified.”[48]

What we hope for shapes what we work for. “If our vision of the future is a rather vague disembodied state that has no place for trees, flowers, mountains, lakes, and fascinating animals and insects, then it is likely that we will not attach much value to them in the present.”[49] Despite differences, Christian theology points beyond the destruction and suffering of present experience to a future of hope in which God’s good creation is restored, redeemed and renewed. Eco-theology calls for a robust hope in the rich diversity of God’s purposes for Creation and for the inclusion of all living things in God’s intentions for the Age to come.

6. The Ethical Imperative to Live Sustainably

Christians who value living out faith in daily life see the ethical imperative to live in sustainable ways. Mary Betz, writing for *Tui Motu,* encourages: “Acting to restore God’s *oikos* invites us to look at our own behaviours and choices. One step at a time — whether a few more plant-based meals per week, discernment between need and want in purchases, or starting/improving a garden — will position us firmly on this journey of restoration, both of Earth and of ourselves.”[50]

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[44] Nicola Hoggard Creegan, “The Phenomenology of Hope”, in Hoggard Creegan and Shepherd, *Creation and Hope : Reflections on Ecological Anticipation and Action From Aotearoa New Zealand* (Pickwick Publications, 2018).

[45] Barbara R. Rossing, “Reimagining Eschatology: Toward Healing and Hope for a World at the Eschatos”, in Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (eds.) *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Augsburg Fortress, 2017): 325-348.

[46] Ry O. Siggelkow, “Ernst Kasemann and the Specter of Apocalyptic.” *Theology Today*, vol. 75, issue 1 (2018): 37–50.

[47] Mark Keown, *What’s God Up To on Planet Earth?* (Castle Publishing, 2010), 74.

[48] Keown, *What’s God Up To on Planet Earth?*, 85.

[49] Dick Tripp, *The Biblical Mandate for Caring for Creation* (Wellington: Avery Bartlett, 2011), 127.

[50] Mary Betz, “Repair Our Home.” *Tui Motu* Magazine, issue 241 (September 2019): 10-11.

The church used to represent moral and ethical 'good' in our society. Now the word 'good' increasingly refers to what is good for our planet.[51] In Western societies there is an emerging ethic of sustainability & moral imperative, which is not primarily driven by Christian morality. There is a whole genre of literature, social media and marketing of 'how-to' life-style changes for sustainability, including some from a Christian perspective such as Ruth Valero's 'A-Z' of practical steps for "Christian living that doesn't cost the earth."[52] A Rocha Aotearoa NZ has published the 'Rich Living' study series, designed particularly for small groups, to promote reflection on lifestyle and theology, covering topics such as water and climate change.[53]

Some churches are seeking to reduce their waste and use of plastics. The General Assembly of the PCANZ in 2018 agreed to ask all parishes to "a) Eliminate the use of disposable single use items such as styrofoam cups, plastic straws and cutlery, b) Adopt the use of environmentally friendly cleaning products, c) Make recycling bins readily available."[54] Practical lifestyle steps such as this in churches and homes have an impact in the shifting the moral norms of a society, writes Celia Deane-Drummond; "Building a collective conscience that is self-consciously more environmentally aware is essential if complex problems such as climate change are going to be addressed."[55]

An important question is whether Christians in affluent societies are willing to confront the consumerism on which many would lay the blame for environmental degradation. Francisco Benzoni argues:

> The challenge of consumerist culture, with its idolatrous destruction of people and the earth, is among the vital challenges faced by the church today. Too often, the church markets itself as another commodity (the one in which "spiritual fulfillment" can be attained), so that any thoroughgoing critique of consumerist values becomes impossible. But without such a powerful, penetrating critique (as well as the offer of an alternative vision that actually affects the way Christians think about and live in the world), I believe that all the attempts to reform the church ecologically can finally have only minimal impact.[56]

7. Caring for Local Ecosystems

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[51] Companies claiming to be environmentally friendly include 'All Good' soap products and 'For The Better Good' renewable plastic bottles. "For The Better Good: A refreshing alternative to the water bottling industry." *Idealog,* 3 May 2018. <https://idealog.co.nz/design/2018/05/better-good-refreshing-alternative-water-bottling-industry>

[52] Ruth Valero, *L is for Lifestyle: Christian living that doesn't cost the earth* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).

[53] "Rich Living Series." A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand. <https://www.arocha.org.nz/resources/rich-living-series>

[54] "Responsible Stewardship of God's Creation", PCANZ GA reports, Oct 2018. <https://www.presbyterian.org.nz/sites/default/files/speaking_out/Responsible%20stewardship%20of%20God.pdf>

[55] Deane-Drummond, "What are the Resources for Building a Christian Ethos in a Time of Ecological Devastation?", 176.

[56] Francisco Benzoni, "Earth Habitat." *Journal of Religion* vol. 82, iss. 4 (Oct 2002): 665. DOI: 10.1086/491208.

Christians are not afraid to 'get their hands dirty' in practical action. 'Hands-on' church involvement with the environment includes two common types of projects: wild-space restoration and community gardens. A feature of both is the importance of partnerships with other community groups and stakeholders.

The work of A Rocha supports 14 natural ecosystems in NZ. The largest project is at Mt Karioi in Raglan, which protects nesting sites of the Grey Faced Petrel (known as 'Oi' in Maori) from predators. This has led to partnerships with local iwi, Department of Conservation, private land owners and the Raglan community, with a large volunteer base. A Rocha groups around the country work alongside organisations such as the Banks Peninsular Conservation Trust, local Councils, and Forest and Bird to assist with planting, weeding and trapping. The A Rocha Dunedin ecology project is the Tirohanga campsite (owned by the Presbyterian Church) where reforestation has enhanced the camp environment and provided opportunities for all groups using the camp to connect both physically and spiritually with Creation. Co-ordinator Selwyn Yeoman suggests that "such initiatives could transform every church campsite and new building project and many plots of vacant land and the lives of dislocated people."[57]

Personally, I am new to ecology work, but a recent purchase by a friend of a block of land on the Banks Peninsular has thrown me into the challenges of regenerating native forest. It is a rich joy and privilege, and a profoundly spiritual experience together with the physicality of cutting rusty fence wire and installing possum traps. The presence of birds in the NZ forest is for me a profound reminder of God, in their flitting joy and piercing song. Andrew Shepherd asks where God is present in conservation activity, and argues for an understanding of the Holy Spirit as being deeply involved in the 'redeeming' of creation. He describes the Spirit in avian terms as "life-giving" and "wounded", both burrowing into the earth and taking flight in resurrection power.[58]

Community gardens are smaller-scale urban ecosystems, often on church land. Bridget Crisp is part of a Sisters of Mercy project in Ellerslie, Auckland. She understands community as more than human: "Awareness of other animal, insect and plant species that now begin to flourish creates an understanding of neighbourhood that is bigger than the people living in it. Life is now observed in the fullest sense."[59] Enriching the soil and growing food enables people to "become deeply entwined in the integral and intangible processes" of a dynamic living community.[60] Her description of small children being "completely absorbed" by earthworms is evocative of Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God requiring us to become like little children (Mark 10:15). The intergenerational benefits of community gardens are an important motivation.

Urban gardening connects with other aspects of church mission, such as sharing food together and caring for the hungry. Fellowship often revolves around food, and when that

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[57] Selwyn Yeoman, "Witnessing Christ in the Care of Creation." *Candour: Ecological Christianity*, iss. 8 (July 2013): 5-8, 8.
[58] Andrew Shepherd, "Spirit, Seabirds, & Sacramentality: Ponderings on Petrels and Pneumatology." in Nicola Hoggard Creegan and Andrew Shepherd, *Creation and Hope : Reflections on Ecological Anticipation and Action From Aotearoa New Zealand* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).
[59] Bridget Crisp, "Growing community around a garden." in Darragh, 158.
[60] ibid.

food is grown together locally this forms a powerful synergy of mission and spirituality. Mallory McDuff's research into church gardens promotes "the spiritual act of feeding, the importance of equal access to healthful food, the use of gardening to gain life skills, the centrality of food to relationships in faith, and the power of teaching about simple living through food" as central learnings.[61]

8. Justice Concern for "the least of these"

Christian mission is motivated by Jesus' command to care for those in need (Matthew 25:40). In the 21st century this is inextricably linked to environmental protection. The world's poor are bearing the brunt of climate disaster and ecological collapse.[62]

Environmental justice is "the nexus of ecological wellbeing and social justice … not only sustainable Earth-human relations, but also justice along various axes of privilege and power within and between human societies."[63] Willis Jenkins argues for "the ethics of sustainability" to be integrated with "the practices of reconciliation, and thus to the mission of God to restore unity to creation" in order to be both "good news for the poor and the land."[64]

Deane-Drummond highlights the ways in which ecological degradation impacts unfairly on women; "environmental justice is globally gendered."[65] She highlights the role of women around the world working together to protect their local environment, often in the face of severe opposition and violence, yet tapping into shared joy and faith. She describes a group of women in Kenya who had achieved access to water for their community, who impressed her with "their belief in the direct results of God's actions in their midst and through their witness to the very real presence of the risen Jesus."[66] For them there was complete continuity between environmental justice and Christian faith.

When churches get involved with justice issues this grows partnerships with other organisations and networks. This is vividly described by Mallory McDuff as she documents the collective efforts of churches in Immokalee, Florida, to support immigrant tomato pickers towards fair pay, which she described as churches being "partners in justice rather than givers of charity."[67] For McDuff this project was a living example of the commitment

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[61] Mallory McDuff, *Natural Saints: How People of Faith are Working to Save God's Earth* ebook, Oxford Scholarship Online: September 2010 DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195379570.003.0000

[62] Peter Harris narrates various situations from his own international experience of the inteconnection of poverty and environmental degradation, *Kingfisher's Fire: A story of hope for God's earth* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2008).

[63] Robert Saler, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and Whitney Bauman. "Time for an Eco-Justice Reformation?" Editorial, *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology*, vol. 55, issue 2 (June 2016): 106-108, 108.

[64] Willis Jenkins, "Missiology in Environmental Context: Tasks for an Ecology of Mission." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 32, no. 4 (Oct 2008), 176-184, 180.

[65] Celia Deane-Drummond, "Foreword." in Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (eds.) *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Augsburg Fortress, 2017): xxi-xxvi, xxiii. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt1pwt42b.5.

[66] ibid, xxii.

[67] Mallory McDuff, *Natural Saints: How People of Faith are Working to Save God's Earth* ebook, Oxford Scholarship Online: September 2010.

of the Presbyterian Church of USA: “Recognizing that the well-being of the earth, its resources, and humanity are interdependent, the PC (U.S.A.) believes we are called to ways of living that foster the wholeness God intends for our world.”[68]

9. Respect for the Special Place of Indigenous People

Christian care for Creation in NZ exists in partnership with Maori.[69] Mark Holloway articulates through his ‘conversations with God’ a conviction that God is calling Christians to “listen to the cry of the land” which is inviting Maori and Pakeha to “sit down at the table and work out where to from here.”[70]

> Listen to the cry of the land … Those whose feet walk naturally on the land, the sound comes crying up through the earth, through the soil, the grass, into the souls of their feet and up into their very beings.[71]

Holloway sees that the land of Aotearoa has been wounded by injustice, and accuses the church of blessing the theft of land from Maori. This has “bewildered” and disempowered Maori, “and because they feel powerless their soul begins to seep out of them. One generation follows another onto the wounded land.”[72] Ruth Panelli and Gail Tipa describe as “cultural trauma” the loss to Maori of their ancestral lands: “To divorce Iwi Maori from their lands and waterways was to damage not only the culture-environment bonds that were interwoven between different *iwi* and their *atua, tupuna, mahinga kai*, cultural sites, and resources, but also to affect their social order and, more importantly, their *mana* and obligations as *kaitiaki*.”[73]

Care for the land of Aotearoa needs to respect the place of Maori and their unique relationship with the local environment. Sue Burns explains that for Maori, “*Whenua*/Land cannot be divided from *Atua*/God and *Tangata*/People,” and suggests that this attitude can “bring us much closer to the biblical framework of land and divinity.”[74] Internationally, indigenous cultures are seen as role models for the ecology movement, with much to teach Western culture about sustainability: “The fact that many such societies endured for

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DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195379570.003.0000

[68] Statement of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, quoted by McDuff, *Natural Saints.*

[69] Other colonial nations are facing this in their own context. In Australia the Adelaide Declaration on Religion and the Environment in 1997 called on the church to respect the spiritual and physical interconnectedness of Aboriginal people with the land and to work for reconciliation. Norman Habel, “Ecology and Bible – Principles for Interpretation.” http://normanhabel.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Ecology-and-Bible-Principles.pdf

[70] Mark Holloway, *Cry the Wounded Land: Conversations with God about Maori and Pakeha and the Land* (The Freedom Assignment Ltd, 2017),126.

[71] ibid, 125.

[72] ibid, 98.

[73] Ruth Panelli and Gail Tipa, “Placing Well-Being: A Maori Case Study of Cultural and Environmental Specificity.” *EcoHealth*, New York, vol. 4, iss. 4 (Dec 2007): 445-460, 452. DOI:10.1007/s10393-007-0133-1. (Note: ‘atua’ refers to local guardian spirits, ‘tupuna’ are ancestors, ‘mahinga kai’ are food gathering areas, ‘mana’ is authority and respect, and ‘tiaki’ is caretaker.)

[74] Sue Burns, “Listening in the Landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand.” in Nicola Hoggard Creegan and Andrew Shepherd, eds., *Creation and Hope : Reflections on Ecological Anticipation and Action From Aotearoa New Zealand* (Pickwick Publications, 2018).

centuries and even millennia proves that they were sustainable ecologically, economically, and socially."[75] Mary Hale, Anne Marie Dalton and Nancie Erhard emphasise the importance of building relationships of trust with indigenous people based on "genuine, respectful engagement". They warn that the church runs the risk of repeating colonial habits if we try to set the environmental agenda; "Ecological issues do not stand alone but are woven into the complex of challenges facing first peoples, which include self-governance, housing, education, language preservation, incarceration issues, and mental and physical health."[76]

10. Desire for church to be a community of Creation care

Christianity is a collective faith that values community. Ecology in a Christian perspective will always include the ecology of faith community, ie. the church. Both traditional church institutions and emerging informal eco communities are vital and motivational. Local churches can make a difference on global problems through innovative mission practices; "Christian engagement with climate change that starts from individual encounters with the redeeming Christ and leads to community-based resource management and a global network of carbon sequestration."[77]

My research project aims to describe the sense of purpose of local church 'Creation Care' groups. I have not been able to find any other research on such groups and their role within the life of local churches.

Liturgy is an important aspect to the 'greening' of local churches. Celia Deane-Drummond claims that "a Christian approach to environmental ethics can shine forth even stronger" by incorporating in worship both new and ancient liturgies that express "creaturely participation in the praise and joy in God", as well as confession both individual and for "the failure of human societies."[78]

The importance of connecting with young people is stressed by Mallory McDuff who researched how churches in the US are using camping and other 'immersive experiences' in both natural and church-based environments to teach ecology and faith. "Our churches can create venues for youth to have a collective experience with the environment that pulls them outside their everyday existence and empowers them in a positive way."[79] The A Rocha campsite project out of Dunedin hopes to "bear witness to every school, church and community group which passes through, inviting them to share in conservation planting, riparian repair, lessons in sustainable gardening and encounter with the contemplative life."[80]

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[75] L.E. Sponsel, "Spiritual Ecology." *Encyclopedia of the Anthropocene*, vol. 4 (2018): 181-184, 181. DOI:10.1016/B978-0-12-809665-9.10486-0

[76] ibid, 369.

[77] Willis Jenkins, "Missiology in Environmental Context: Tasks for an Ecology of Mission." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 32, no.4 (Oct 2008): 176-184, 181.

[78] Celia Deane-Drummond, "What are the Resources for Building a Christian Ethos in a Time of Ecological Devastation.", in Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond, Denis Edwards, Ernst M. Conradie, eds, *Christian Faith and the Earth : Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014): 160-181, 175.

[79] McDuff, *Natural Saints.*

[80] Selwyn Yeoman, "Witnessing Christ in the Care of Creation." *Candour: Ecological Christianity*, issue 8 (July 2013): 5-8, 8.

Churches around the world are valuing the unique ecology of church land and cemetaries. David Manning describes how “the churchyard boundary protected the species within, creating small oases for wildlife across the country,”[81] and calls for valuing and active conservation of these spaces. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church are sites of small forest remnants, “nestled in patches of vibrant, shady forest. Forests, the church’s religious belief goes, were like the clothes surrounding the church at the center—as much a part of the religious space as the church building itself.”[82]

Re-designing church buildings is another avenue for churches committed to reducing energy consumption and promoting sustainability. A short article about a new Catholic building in Toronto quoted the priest, Paul Cusack: "While reducing energy costs was one of the reasons for building a 'green'church, our primary motivation was to establish a link between the sacredness of the gathered community of faith and the sacredness of Earth."[83]

11. Wellbeing, Physical and Mental Health

Christians care for Creation because it is vital for human wellbeing. As Pope Francis puts it, “We were not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature.”[84] Panu Pihkala’s fascinating article on environmental anxiety and pastoral care highlights the devestating mental health effects of climate change and other forms of ecological damage. He details the problems now being diagnosed as “climate anxiety”, especially among young people for whom this has become a major cause of anxiety.[85] My own conversations with young people in NZ confirm his observations. I was recently out walking with a 12-year old boy and his family. He looked across a stunningly beautiful valley and said “Humans will just muck everything up.” Piklaha describes the cognitive effect of how “a vast amount of very troubling information about environmental conditions and changes in the world, while at the same time offering very few options (in people's minds, at least) for significantly changing the state of affairs, causes a strange and troubling atmosphere.”[86] Without faith and hope a profound pessimism about the future paralyses people. Motivation to act for change requires a belief that something can be done and that individuals and local communities can make a positive difference. As Jesus healed the paralysed man, perhaps in our time we can be freed to ‘get up and walk’ in hope (Mark 2:1-12).

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[81] David Manning, “The Living Churchyard.” *Building Conservation*, accesed 26 April 2020. <https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/living/living.htm>

[82] Alejandra Borunda, “Ethiopia's 'church forests' are incredible oases of green.” *National Geographic,* Jan 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/01/ethiopian-church-forest-conservation-biodiversity>

[83] “Eco-friendly churches [St. Gabriel's]” *The Presbyterian Record*, vol. 130, iss. 3 (Mar 2006): 15.

[84] Francis, “Laudato Si”, 44.

[85] 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. DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/10.1111/dial.12239

[86] ibid., 139.

For Maori, the wellbeing of the land has a direct impact on human health. Ruth Panelli and Gail Tipa describe as “cultural trauma” the effects on Maori of being cut off from ancestral lands, rivers and food resources. Individual and community well-being is dependent on healthy connections with the environment. They quote an interviewee who reflected: “I think their warmth, their energy, everything comes from the land. It’s part of their spirit.”[87]

Christian faith has a deep spirituality of respect for the natural world, with many people reporting that they feel ‘close to God in nature’. Contact with Creation has healing effects, which scientists can analyse. A major review of studies into the effects on human health of contact with nature found that “results consistently show that nature contact reduces stress.”[88] A key reason for this is that the mental stimulation of being in a natural environment captures attention effortlessly, which “engages a less taxing, indirect form of attention, thereby facilitating recovery of directed attention capacity”. Frumkin et.al. also draw attention to the importance of awe and mystery: “awe—the sense of wonder, amazement, and smallness that may occur in response to perceptually vast stimuli”; “mystery—the allure of seeing and knowing more by entering more deeply into a setting.”[89] Michelle Walsh researched survivors of trauma who described experiencing God as “a sustaining power in the beauty of creation.”[90] Being out in a natural environment has benefits for immunity and social interaction. It also promotes physical exercise, which is well proven to benefit both physical and mental health.[91]

The Covid-19 global response has demonstrated how important our health is to us, and the extraordinary measures that nations have been willing to suffer in order to protect human life.

12. Delight in the Beauty of Creation

A Christian sense of vocation to care for Creation is not just about ethical obligation. It is energised by spiritual motivations with strong emotional aspects, in particular delight in the beauty of nature and a sense of connectedness with God in the natural world. In our worship we use beautiful images of water flowing, mountains and sunsets as backdrops to our song powerpoints; can our love of the beauty of Creation flow into action to protect and preserve this beauty? When we sing of ‘oceans deep’ in worship can this inspire faithful voices crying out for the threatened life of the oceans? The work of artists, poets, photographers and musicians to notice and express the glory of God in the natural world is a vital part of our Creation care.

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[87] Ruth Panelli and Gail Tipa, “Placing Well-Being: A Maori Case Study of Cultural and Environmental Specificity.” *EcoHealth*; New York, vol. 4, iss. 4 (Dec 2007): 445-460, 452. DOI:10.1007/s10393-007-0133-1

[88] Howard Frumkin, Gregory N. Bratman, Sara Jo Breslow, et al., “Nature Contact and Human Health: A Research Agenda.” *Environmental Health Perspectives (Online)* 125, no. 7 (2017).

[89] ibid.

[90] Michelle Walsh, “Prophetic pastoral care in the aftermath of trauma: Forging a constructive practical theology of lived religion from organized trauma response ministries.” PhD thesis, Boston University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014, 238. 3610856.

[91] Ambra Burls explores the multiple level of benefits from green spaces. "People and Green Spaces: Promoting Public Health and Mental Well-being through Ecotherapy." *Journal of Public Mental Health,* vol. 6, no. 3 (Sept 2007): 24-39.

Six decades ago theologican Joseph Sittler invited a deeper vision of creation. He sought to express the "inner nature of things", language to evoke "a sense of the grace of creation."[92] This demands a very different stance than triumphalist or rationalist theologies; it involves "kneeling down on the earth before the lilies of the field in gentle contemplation, beholding them, withdrawing any claims driven by will-to-power, waiting and watching and wondering in abject spiritual poverty, to catch some sight of "the dearest freshness deep down things"."[93] Our NZ treasure Joy Cowley writes evocatively of 'parables' of moments of natural wonder, in the hope that "these word images might enhance awareness of the way a closer relationship with creation brings us to a closer relationship with ourselves, and our Creator."[94]

Environmental theology in the 21st century is very aware of threats to biodiversity and the increasing rate of species extinctions. Each creature, every river, has its own unique 'song to sing'. People naturally find it easier to treasure the big and the beautiful, but ecological theology also values little creatures and unregarded swamps. Work to protect species is motivated by grief for those being lost, with the theological conviction that all of creation is precious because God has made it, and so every living thing, rock and cloud proclaims in its own way the beauty and grace of God.

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[92] quoted by Paul H. Santmire, "A Reformation Theology of Nature Transfigured: Joseph Sittler's Invitation to See as Well as to Hear." *Theology Today*, vol. 61, no. 4 (January 2005): 509–527, 523.

[93] Santmire, "A Reformation Theology of Nature Transfigured", 523, quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "God's Grandeur".

[94] Joy Cowley, "Parables from nature." in Neil Darragh, ed., *Living In the Planet Earth: Faith Communities and Ecology* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2016): 95-100.