

## THE CHURCH AND THE ENVIRONMENT: SEVEN STATIONS TOWARDS THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE WHOLE EARTH<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This contribution offers a broad orientation regarding theological discourse on the church and the environment. The question is what the church as church can do in addressing environmental threats. The eschatological uniqueness of the church is taken into account, as well as the different dimensions of Christian witness (marturia), namely kerygma, diakonia, koinonia and leitourgia. The argument is structured in the form of seven spiritual 'stations' towards the sanctification of the whole earth. The thesis is that the 'and' in the phrase 'church and environment' requires theological reflection. If we also reflect on the situatedness of the church in the environment, this opens up possibilities to see the distinctive place of the church within the larger household of God – which would then also offer a theological re-description of the term 'environment'.*

**Keywords:** Church, Environment, Sanctification, Witness

### Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to offer a broad orientation regarding theological discourse on the church and the environment. The typical way of addressing this would be to follow four logical steps: 1) environmental problems are very serious; 2) the Bible and the Christian faith demonstrate God's concern for the environment; 3) the church is therefore called to address environmental threats (but fails to respond adequately); 4) the question is how this should be done practically. This logic often leads to repetitive calls to Christian leaders to address the problem, to complaints that the church is doing so little in this regard and to empirical studies to find out why this is the case.<sup>2</sup> The assumption is that we know what should be done and why it should be done but not quite how it should be done.<sup>3</sup> In following this logic considerable space would be given to discuss the seriousness of the problem, leaving little time for theological discernment.

Instead, the emphasis here is not so much on what the church can do about the *environment*, but on what the *church* as church can do about environment threats. Moreover, the emphasis is also on what the environment can do for the church. I would maintain that, especially for Protestant churches, the environmental crisis provides an opportunity for reformation, renewal, and conversion. This requires theological reflection on the unique

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is based on a paper prepared for a conference on "Church and environment", hosted by the Ghana Baptist University College in Kumasi, Ghana, 25-29 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Chapter 5 of Ben-Willie Golo's study on churches in Ghana. See Golo 2006:153-200.

<sup>3</sup> This assumption is debatable. See my recent overview of different ways in which a theological rationale for Christian earthkeeping is understood (Conradie 2011).

eschatological nature of the church. That would help us to see what the church can contribute to this common task that no other sector of society, social group or institution can muster. As far as I can see it, churches typically and sadly fail to address this question – as a result of trying to do what others are doing as well. They therefore fail to offer the world what it so desperately needs. What the world needs is in my opinion nothing but the gospel itself. To reflect on this challenge may therefore help churches to rediscover their own most precious message.

There are ample theological resources to address this task. One would need to take into account the differences between theological discourse on the nature, formation, upbuilding, governance, ministries and missions of the church. Where does the priority lie? With governance (the role of Peter)? With church-planting (the kerygmatic task of evangelism)? With the up-building of the church (the priestly task of ministry)? With mission (the church is only one instrument in God's mission<sup>4</sup>)? In what follows below I will draw on the distinctions between the sociological and the theological dimensions of the church,<sup>5</sup> the church as institute and as organism and the eschatological tension between creation and re-creation in which the church is situated.<sup>6</sup> I will focus on the church as local congregation as one of six manifestations of the church.<sup>7</sup> The classic reformed distinction between the prophetic, priestly and royal offices of Christ and of Christian existence will lurk in the background. I will also employ missiological reflections on different dimensions of the Christian witness (*marturia*), namely proclamation (*kerygma*), service (*diakonia*), fellowship (*koinonia*) and worship (*leitourgia*).<sup>8</sup>

My argument is that the 'and' in the phrase 'church and environment' requires theological reflection. If we also reflect on the situatedness of the church *in* the environment, this opens up possibilities to see the distinctive place of the church within the larger household of God<sup>9</sup> – which would then also offer a theological re-description of the term 'environment'. This argument is structured in the form of seven spiritual 'stations' towards the sanctification of the whole earth.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See my recent essay on "Creation at the heart of mission?" in which the place of the church in God's mission is emphasised. See Conradie 2010.

<sup>5</sup> For one South African example of a discussion of this tension, see De Gruchy 1994.

<sup>6</sup> This is at the heart of a study (in Afrikaans) by Flip Theron (my doctoral supervisor) which played a significant role in the theological critique of apartheid theology within the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa itself. See Theron 1978.

<sup>7</sup> I am drawing here on South African discourse on six sociological manifestations of the church, namely as worshipping community, as local congregation, as denomination, as ecumenical fellowship, in the form of Christian organisations and in the form of Christian families and individuals. What may be expected of the church to address environmental threats is very different in each case. See chapter 2 of my study on climate change (Conradie 2008) for a discussion in this regard.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between these aspects, see especially the work of David Bosch (1980), the doyen of Missiology in South Africa.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this theme, see Conradie 2007. In this article there is an extensive discussion of contributions to an African ecclesiology, especially on the distinction in African women's theology between as house, a home and a hearth. See especially Kanyoro & Njoroge 1996; Mugambi & Magesa 1998; Phiri & Nadar 2005.

<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on sanctification is typical of the reformed tradition in which I stand. In the work of Dutch theologians such as Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Arnold van Ruler (1908-1970) sanctification is not limited to its personal or ecclesiological dimensions; the sanctification of communities, societies, the state and indeed the whole cosmos is emphasised through the term "re-creation". The significance of this emphasis will become evident in subsequent sections.

### From Spiritualising Denial to Prophetic Critique

The well-known analysis of five stages of coming to terms with loss may well be applicable to an emerging Christian awareness of environmental threats. In her work on being confronted with imminent death, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified these stages as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.<sup>11</sup> She also noted that these are not to be understood as consecutive phases even though there is some logic in the sequence employed.

Anyone first confronted with the scope and seriousness of environmental threats cannot but express shock, dismay and anger. The gravity of the problem has clearly increased since the 1970s with its debates on limited resources ('limits to economic growth'), the 1980s with its concerns over sustainable development ('our common future'), the 1990s with its concerns over environmental injustices and the new concerns over human survival amidst tipping points, the possible collapse of larger ecosystems. What may be even more shocking is that warnings in this regard do not come from churches or religious people but from scientists who, quite remarkably, have become prophets against their own methodological inclinations.

Such shock is typically associated with anger. Prophetic environmental critiques allocate blame in no uncertain terms. The affluent industrialised nations put the blame on over-population and its associated environmental consequences. The impoverished nations of Africa put the blame on over-consumption and its associated environmental consequences. They blame it on colonialism, late-industrial, neo-liberal capitalism and consumerism. The Accra Declaration (2004) of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is an excellent example. The injustices associated with climate change are by now obvious to all: Those who contributed least to the problem will suffer most under the consequences. Consider the plight of island nations, peasants in Bangladesh and subsistence farmers in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Such anger is also expressed *regarding* and not only *by* churches. In many contexts Christians are not environmental activists and environmental activists are not Christian. The frustration is that churches are slow to respond and are actually contributing to the problem – as the famous critique by the American historian Lyn White already suggested.<sup>13</sup> When Christians do address environmental threats in the form of prophetic critique, that is typically done in anger too. The same apply to the many resolutions adopted by ecclesial bodies, albeit that those at whom the resolutions are aimed seldom receive the resolutions, let alone reading them or responding appropriately.

Prophetic anger is also prompted by the widespread denial of environmental problems. The voice given to climate change sceptics in the public media is interesting if one considers the analysis of Kübler-Ross. What is more intriguing is the form of denial found amongst right-wing evangelical Christians. This is expressed in the forms of spiritualising

<sup>11</sup> See Kübler-Ross 1973.

<sup>12</sup> This is especially typical of the many statements from the All Africa Conference of Churches on climate change. For a discussion of various ecclesial documents on climate change released in 2009 with a view to COP 15 held in Copenhagen, see Conradie 2010. See also Desmond Tutu's foreword in the publication *Africa up in smoke* (2005): "The world's wealthiest countries have emitted more than their fair share of greenhouse gases. Resultant floods, droughts and other climate change impacts continue to fall disproportionately on the world's poorest people and countries, many of which are in Africa ... [There is also a need to recognize] the strength and creativity of African people in times of stress. What is needed most now is that Africans are supported in their efforts to build on those strengths."

<sup>13</sup> See White 1967, also Mante 2004.

dualisms where heaven is regarded as more important than earth, the soul as more important than the body, spirit as more important than matter and God's salvation in Jesus Christ as more important than God's creation.<sup>14</sup> The tension between the first and the second articles of the Christian creed then becomes undeniable. At worst, such dualisms lead to an escapist denial of the need for Christian earthkeeping. If Jesus is coming again soon, and if the world is going to be destroyed in any case, why would there be any need to care for the earth now?

The stages of negotiation and depression (hopefully not acceptance) point to the difficulties around political discourse on climate change. If the vagueness of the Bali road map (COP 13), the disastrous failures at Copenhagen (COP 15) and the tentative steps at Cancun (COP 16) on adaptation but not on mitigation are considered, there is little evidence that COP 17 to be held in Durban in 2011 will demonstrate the political will, courage and leadership required to address climate change. Indeed, the limits to social transformation may be harder to address than the limits to non-renewable resources or the limited capability of biotic systems to absorb the waste products of industrial societies.<sup>15</sup> Theologically speaking, the stages of negotiation and acceptance represent the whole current debate in the field of Christian ecotheology, in all its complexity and distinct discourses.<sup>16</sup> Here the theological differences between various strands of Christianity become obvious. At the local level it is manifested in tensions between various denominations each proclaiming the attractions of their brand of Christianity in the hope of securing a larger share of the religious market.<sup>17</sup> Whether this can be done with theological integrity is another matter.

### **From Royal Prophecy to Moral Imperatives for Royal Dominion**

Prophetic calls are typically addressed at those in positions of power in the political and economic spheres. That is certainly appropriate and often courageous. However, there is a difference between a prophet and a critic. Both apportion blame, but while the critic criticises, the prophet weeps.<sup>18</sup> Prophets position themselves in solidarity with the victims but also accept the implications of their own judgements. They realise that victims (and especially their spokespersons) sometimes become perpetrators and are caught up in a deadly spiral of violence. This is well-illustrated in prophetic critiques of economic production processes (blaming industrialisation and neo-liberal capitalism) given the demand for consumer goods. It is somewhat facile to criticise oil companies if one makes use of motorised transport. Some (myself included) fly all over the world to attend conferences on climate change and to conscientise others to reduce their green-house emissions.

The critique of prophetic critique is found across post-colonial Africa. One cannot merely continue to blame the woes of Africa on outside forces. Somewhere we also need to

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<sup>14</sup> Here Mercy Amba Oduyoye's question needs to be considered: "Is the God of our redemption the same God of our creation?" (2000:75). This question is born from the African quest for identity. What is the continuity between a pre-Christian African notion of the creator God and the Christian message of redemption that took root in Africa following the work of Western missionaries? Since the earliest Bible translators have used the same word and name for the God of our ancestors and for the God of Christian proclamation, there appears to be some continuity, but given the legacy of colonialism certainly also deep tensions in this regard.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this distinction, see Chapter 3 of my book *The church and climate change* (Conradie 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See my survey of such literature (Conradie 2006). See also my survey of discourse on ecological theology in Africa (Conradie 2007) and the typology offered by Golo (2006:69-102, 153-200).

<sup>17</sup> See the critique of ecclesial consumerism in the SACC's document on climate change (2009:42-44).

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion in Nolan 1986.

emphasise a responsibility for addressing the problems ourselves. After a theology of liberation there is a need for a theology of reconstruction.<sup>19</sup> Such a theology is still addressed at those in positions of power. It emphasises the need to exercise such limited power with responsibility within a particular sphere of jurisdiction. For the prophetic church this is often awkward. If prophets are co-opted by kings, they lose their independent voice. In South Africa this remains a bone of contention given the positions of power that many former church leaders and theologians have come to occupy. Does public theology require prophetic theology or a royal theology of reconstruction or both?

At the local church level this sense of responsibility prompts calls for stewardship. The metaphor of stewardship can be interpreted in different ways. It can refer to the servant or even the slave in the household. It can also refer to the shop steward. However, more often than not the steward is the second-in-charge, taking care of the owner's property. In companies the modern-day steward is the financial manager with considerable power. In local church councils the financial manager and the building committee would be called to exercise stewardship. Calls for stewardship are therefore aimed at those in positions of relative power. One would not call on small children or beggars to exercise responsibility over the use of possessions and resources. They ought to be used wisely and frugally. Calls for environmental stewardship are widespread, especially amongst evangelical Christians, also in the African context.<sup>20</sup>

As I have noted elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> such calls for environmental stewardship are also heavily criticised in ecumenical circles. At the heart of this critique are questions about the hierarchical position assigned to human beings within the earth community. Moreover, if humans are to be stewards, God is either portrayed as being at the top of the hierarchy or as an absentee landlord. As many others have observed, this is hardly the model required amidst critiques of anthropocentrism. One may conclude that such calls for environmental stewardship are appropriate but limited. Those who are indeed 'stewards' should exercise stewardship, but the metaphor should not be too readily universalised.

### **From Stewardship to Priestly Environmental Projects**

Generalised calls for stewardship may not be commensurate with the gravity and scope of environmental threats. Many local Christian communities and Christian organisations have therefore recognised the need to do more than that. They have started particular environmental programmes, projects or ministries. This should be understood as being alongside ministries to (AIDS) orphans, the poor, the sick, the elderly, the deaf and the blind, the mentally handicapped. Indeed, the social agenda of local churches in Africa is overburdened with such needs. Such environmental projects would therefore tend to compete for funds, energy and time with other programmes. Some have therefore opted to regard environmental concerns as a dimension of any other concern without necessarily turning the environment into a separate agenda item. Others have questioned environmental concerns as elitist and hardly relevant in Africa given so many other urgent priorities.

Nevertheless, all over the world Christians have initiated a wide variety of local projects. What is interesting here is to see the full spectrum of such projects and the way

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<sup>19</sup> See especially the many publication of Jesse Mugambi on a theology of reconstruction, e.g. Mugambi 1995 and 2003.

<sup>20</sup> See my survey of the literature on stewardship from within the African context, as one model of ecological theology in Africa alongside others (Conradie 2007).

<sup>21</sup> See especially Conradie 2007.

they respond to local needs. There are projects for recycling, permaculture, tree planting, urban greening, urban farming, herbal medicines, water harvesting, education on fauna and flora, sustainable agriculture, skills training towards appropriate technology, nature conservation and community development, indigenous church gardens, living graveyard campaigns and so forth. One may simply observe that Christians have begun to exercise priestly care of land entrusted to them. These projects are still few and far between but they do serve as an inspiration to others to use such projects as models to be copied in ways that would be appropriate to the needs of a particular context. This is why it is helpful to recognise the full spectrum of such projects.

In engaging in such projects local congregations and Christian organisations are doing what many other organisations and groups are also doing. They are not necessarily doing anything distinctly Christian or doing it in a Christian way. The motivation and inspiration behind such a project may come from the Bible or the Christian faith, but it may well be purely pragmatic, responding to a particular need. This would follow the pattern of a former generation of missionaries who established schools, hospitals, orphanages, old age homes and training centres in response to existing needs and whenever no one else was doing it properly. Often these institutions were later funded or taken over by the government. More recently, in cases where the local government is struggling to manage such institutions efficiently, churches are again taking over some responsibilities.

There is, of course, little need for Christian churches to duplicate the work of other environmental organisations. Churches should, instead, support the work of these organisations as far as possible, establish the necessary channels and networks of communication and encourage its members to participate in the work of these organisations. While Christians may *ultimately* have a distinct ecological vision, they could share the 'penultimate' goals of many other environmental organisations and activists. Perhaps churches should take the initiative only if no other organisation is addressing a particular problem.

This emphasis on penultimate goals also allows Christians in Africa, especially where traditional customs and forms of indigenous knowledge still thrive – despite the impact of mining, industrialisation, urbanisation and consumerism (and the prosperity gospel) – to draw on traditional African ecological wisdom within the framework of a traditional cosmology. Such a retrieval is widely celebrated in *Christian* discourse on the environment in Africa.<sup>22</sup> This is in my view entirely appropriate: African Christians need to look for common goals and a common ethos and may on that basis offer the rest of the world something of traditional African wisdom.

In many African contexts, especially in rural areas, churches are nevertheless the only suitable institution to address a variety of social needs. Since churches have recognised leadership, some infrastructure, networks, regular meetings and ample volunteers, they are often entrusted to dispense aid, help with monitoring elections, raise awareness around HIV and AIDS, address poverty and so forth. The church can make a difference because local Christian communities enjoy trust from people at grassroots level – more than any political party, labour union or community organisation. Indeed, together local churches form the largest, most influential and most active organisation in many African countries. It is important to recognise that this assessment does not require any theological position. It is made in the light of sociological variables.<sup>23</sup> Often outsiders and politicians envy the ability

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the contributions by Asante 1985, Gitau 2000, Setiloane 1995, Sindima 1989. Here I am merely acknowledging such discourse, given the primary focus on the *church* and the environment.

<sup>23</sup> Jacklyn Cock (1992) argues that Christian churches should take the lead in addressing environmental problems in South Africa. She mentions the following reasons in this regard: 1) The church in South Africa

of churches to address such needs – whereas church leaders ironically feel rather impotent to mobilise their followers around a particular cause.

The recognition that Christian communities, alongside other faith communities, non-governmental organisations (NGO's), community based organisations (CBO's), faith based organisations (FBO's), environmental activists and other groups may make a contribution to address environmental concerns in Africa still prompts an important theological question: How does Christian earthkeeping relate to earthkeeping in other religious traditions? This question may be left open for the moment.

### **From Local Church to Sustainable Community**

To engage in such environmental projects would remain superficial and hollow if local congregations do not get their own house in order. The congregation itself should become a sustainable community.<sup>24</sup> Especially in more affluent urban areas there is a need to investigate the environmental footprint of the church, its buildings, its use of electricity its needs for transport, its use of paper, its investments. Often churches are significant land owners, in urban and rural areas. In rural and impoverished areas the focus of 'sustainability' may shift to issues around nourishment, sustenance, food security and sustainable livelihoods. What is required either way is the responsible stewardship of all material resources and possessions so that the local congregation can become a model of a sustainable community.

In South Africa and England there is major campaign around what is termed eco-congregations where this vision is being embodied and practised. The South African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) is leading the way in developing models and resources for the establishment of such eco-congregations. The idea is that the local church council should come to the decision that it wishes to portray itself as an eco-congregation, recognising what would be demanded to get to such a decision and to remain true to this claim.

The eco-congregation movement focuses on the sociological dimensions of the church as institution and as legal entity. What is of interest here is therefore the membership, the leadership structures, forms of governance, management of property and possessions, bank accounts and so forth. One could also investigate the programmes, activities, social patterns and assumptions about lifestyle in a particular local community. In this sense there is no difference between Christian communities, other religious communities and various faith based organisations. SAFCEI is therefore able to extend the notion of eco-congregation to other faith traditions.

Nevertheless, the theological resources of the church would play a crucial role in fostering and nourishing such a vision of sustainable community. The very term sustainability may well have been coined by the church around 1974 and since then became widely used in secular circles.<sup>25</sup> It does not merely refer to God's providence that sustains us in our daily lives. It begs theological questions on what endures through time amidst all other variables and evolutionary changes. The answer of Psalm 100 resounds: It is

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has an organised space at the grassroots level to promote mass environmental awareness; 2) It has the necessary leadership for moral transformation; and 3) A holistic, ecological vision has deep roots in the Christian tradition.

<sup>24</sup> For this notion of sustainable community, see especially Larry Rasmussen's *Earth community Earth ethics* (1996), as well as Wellman (2001).

<sup>25</sup> See my discussion of the background of the term in Conradie 2006, section 11.1.

ultimately only God's loyalty (*hesed*) that endures forever and that sustains us. God's loyalty to God's own beloved creation was such that in God's eyes creation is indeed worth dying for (John 3:16).

### **From Community to Holy Communion**

The content and significance of the Christian faith and of theological reflection is understood in the previous sections as valuable on pragmatic grounds. It serves to motivate people to do what it is right. If one can obtain consensus through secular processes on sound environmental principles, values and virtues, then religion may still play an important role in employing symbols, visions, metaphors and archetypes that would unleash the spiritual energy to foster an environmental ethos and praxis. This is the role assigned since Kant to religion in pluralist societies. Religion is defined in terms of morality. The actual content of religious beliefs is trivial as long as religion can strengthen the moral fabric of society. There may be different explanations of the need to do what is right at the ultimate level as long as religion can help to build the moral foundations of society. Religious differences may then be tolerated. The only shift is that environmental concerns are now added to an understanding of such moral foundations.

I guess Christian communities may tolerate such views on the role of religion. However, to trivialise the content of the Christian faith in this way would hardly be satisfactory for the church on its own terms. This suggests the need for a radicalisation of the vision of sustainable community to one of 'holy communion'. This requires a theological understanding of the very nature of the church as a fellowship of believers (*koinonia*), as an alternative community (David Bosch), as a Eucharistic community, a liturgical communion, as the 'communion of the saints', as a community ultimately participating as the body of Christ and the *Shekinah* of the Holy Spirit in the very life of the triune God, which is itself a community of persons. One can elaborate endlessly on the content and significance of this liturgical vision. There are riches here that cannot be fathomed by outsiders. Let me merely say that this Holy Communion functions as an eschatological symbol. It is now already an embodiment of heaven on earth, under the sign of the cross, in anticipation of what is to come, preparing the way of the Lord, preparing God's household (*oikos*) for the home-coming banquet of the Lamb that was slain. The Holy Communion includes a communion of persons (the ancestral saints and the sanctified sinners), a communion of holy things (the sacraments), of holy gifts (1 Cor 12) and of sanctified possessions (Acts 2:44) within the one household of God.

This liturgical vision has implications for the way in which the communion of the saints, the liturgical community is structured. This is open to sociological investigation. All over the world Christians are beginning to recognise the ecological dimensions of this vision. One example is the introduction of various feast days with an environmental significance. One may mention Environment Sunday (closest to World Environment Day on 5 June), Arbour Day and many more. Far more significant is the introduction of a Season of Creation in the liturgical calendar following a suggestion of Patriarch Dimitri I of the Orthodox Church in 1989. Churches in Europe, America, Australia and South Africa are developing liturgical resources to celebrate such a Season of Creation alongside other periods in the liturgical calendar. In my view this initiative may have far reaching consequences in the long run. It is slow work since one sermon seldom changes a person's outlook, but 20 years of participation in Christian worship may shape a person's beliefs, values and character decisively, albeit not necessarily for the better.



In the African context there are wonderful examples of the implementation of such a liturgical vision. Two examples from southern Africa may suffice. In the Mashvingo district in Zimbabwe the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches introduced in the 1980s and 1990s tree-planting Eucharists. This motivated the AIC's involved to plant millions of trees in deforested areas and to look after them until they can sustain themselves. Various indigenous species were planted, including fruit trees, fast-growing trees for timber and slow-growing mahogany trees for coming generations.<sup>26</sup> Another example is the Khanya programme of the Methodist Church in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. They built a liturgical space with three intersecting circles with all the African symbolism involved. The one circle is the liturgical space. Another contains a vegetable garden and the third a kraal for cattle. Remarkably, the water used for baptism is the same water used for the vegetable garden and for the cattle to drink. In this way, liturgy and life are intimately connected in this ecological communion.

### **From the Church of Jesus Christ to God's World – Liturgy and the Life of the Laity**

The heart of the liturgical vision is Christian worship. Here the body of Christ rediscovers something of the identity and character of the triune God. This cannot but lead to praise and worship. Through the liturgy Christians also learn to see the world through God's eyes, namely with compassion and mercy, as something so valuable that it is worth dying for.

In the liturgy there is an important dialectic at work between the world and God and between church and society. Worshippers carry with them into the liturgy all their experiences from the past week, all the sorrows and joys, all the burdens of life, their needs, interests and desires, their moods, habits, customs and cultures. They also bring with them their own notions of what makes the world go round, their worldviews, together with their notions and images of God. We can only talk about God on the basis of our experiences of the world. All talk about what is above comes from below. We inevitably construct God in our own image; we therefore bring all our idolatries with us into the liturgy.

When we then enter the liturgy, we are confronted with and ritually reminded of God's identity and character. This takes place through worship but also through preaching and teaching. We are confronted with the accumulated wisdom of the biblical texts and the slow process in the biblical narratives of gradually coming to an understanding of who God is. There is a certain progression in the biblical texts from let us say Joshua to Isaiah, from the misunderstandings of the disciples of Jesus to the mature wisdom of the apostles.<sup>27</sup> The same progression (but at times also regression) may be found in confessional traditions and local congregation seeking to gain knowledge of God. Indeed: Who is God truly? Put differently, the liturgy is the place where we learn anew to recognise God, to challenge our images of God in the light of what is recognised to be God's revelation. When we then think back, we realise that this understanding of God's identity and character can only come from God. Through word and sacrament we become grateful recipients of God's grace.

In focusing on God alone through Christian worship we cannot leave the world completely behind because we carry the world with us in our hearts and minds. However, we also learn to look at the world in the light of the Light of the world. We recognise that the soil on which we are standing is holy ground. When we depart from the liturgy with God's blessing we therefore look at the world through new eyes, having been trained to see

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of this project, see especially Daneel 1999.

<sup>27</sup> I am drawing here from Michael Welker's argument in *God the Spirit* (1994).

it through God's eyes, again with compassion and mercy, as something so valuable that it is worth dying for (John 3:16). We return to the world and our daily lives seeing the world as God's world. We insist that "The Earth is the Lord's and everything within it" (Psalm 24:1).

To claim that this world as we know it is God's own creation is a counter-intuitive claim. How could that be, one needs to ask, given the many miseries of life? If *this* world is God's, God must either be mean, capricious or impotent. To make the claim is therefore to have to tell the whole story of God's work, the story of creation, human sin, providence, salvation and the expected consummation of all things. This implies that we have to situate the whole Earth within God's economy (in the sense of the economic trinity), God's work in God's household.<sup>28</sup> To tell the story, or better, to re-enact this story with our lives is the liturgy of life. To be sent into the world with God's blessing therefore implies a sense of vocation, responsibility, stewardship, mission, development, social transformation.

The return to the world from the liturgy, recognising the world as God's own beloved creation also brings fresh insight into what has happened in the liturgy. Drawing broadly from the insights of the Dutch theologian Arnold van Ruler, I would formulate this in the following way: The church is not there for its own sake, but for the sake of the salvation of the world. The church will pass away and will become redundant in the eschaton. Christian mission is not merely to expand the church but to transform the world, albeit that this is not possible without the church embodying and practising the message of the gospel. Society should not be incorporated under the church (made into something more churchy); the church is there for the sake of society. The work of the clergy is not an aim in itself; it is there for the sake of the work of the laity. We are not human to become Christian; we are Christians in order to become human again. We are not born to be baptised; by being baptised we are born again. God did not create the world in order to save it or to elevate it to something higher. God's work of salvation is there for the sake of God's work of creation, to allow it to flourish again, having been distorted and destroyed through the legacy of sin in all its manifestations, including environmental destruction. Van Ruler would put it strongly: the incarnation of Jesus Christ is nothing more than God's 'emergency measure' to rescue the world – which only means rescuing human beings from self-destruction so that God's whole world can flourish again.

Once one appreciates this insight one can again talk about the liturgy, including the liturgy of life, as an aim in itself. This invites a return to the biblical notion of the Sabbath as the true crown of creation. According to Genesis 1, humans have been created on the late afternoon of the sixth day, together with numerous other animals. The climax of the story comes on the seventh day, when the whole community of creation (humans included) gathers together to celebrate life in the presence of the Creator.<sup>29</sup> This is the liturgy of life which one learns to appreciate through the Sunday liturgy.

### **From the Liturgy of Life to Discerning the Unique Role of the Church in the World**

The liturgy of life involves a return to, an affirmation of and radicalisation of priestly service in the world. Above I suggested that priestly environmental projects would respond to existing needs. Individual Christians, Christian organisations and the church as local congregation may need to do what their hands find to do. Although the underlying ethos

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<sup>28</sup> See my inaugural lecture on this theme (Conradie 2008).

<sup>29</sup> This is a recurring theme in Jürgen Moltmann's book *God in creation* (1985).

and the ultimate rationale for such service may be distinct, the actual focus would be quite similar to other initiatives. In the field of Life and Work there is subsequently room to cooperate with other role players that share certain goals and objectives, including the state, business and industry and a wide variety of organisations in civil society. This is entirely appropriate and to be welcomed, hopefully also by others in the respective publics. The contributions played by local church leaders to moral regeneration, education, health and community life are indeed widely appreciated all over Africa. One may even say that without the presence of the church much else would simply collapse.

The liturgical vision and the eschatological nature of the church should, however, also invite theological reflection on the distinctive contribution that the church can make in society. Indeed, what is the place of the church within the larger household of God? What is it that the church can contribute to the well-being of the household that no other social organisation can? What does the Christian message of salvation offer that may not have a functional equivalent elsewhere? If the church would fail to provide the world what it alone can offer, that would be a sad indictment on the church. As Bishop Wolfgang Huber observes, the problem is that the church may not be taking its own message seriously. This would lead to what he describes (in the German context) as self-secularisation, i.e. a reduction of the Christian faith to its ethical significance.<sup>30</sup>

In the context of ecological degradation this question also needs to be addressed. What, for example, can the church do about climate change that no other group can? The church needs to do what other groups are also doing (on mitigation or on adaptation) but is that sufficient? One may seek to answer such questions in terms of the categories of values (or social priorities), goals, obligations, ethos or praxis. I doubt, though, whether these ethical categories would bring us very far. Instead, I will briefly suggest three very familiar aspects of the life of the church that may have far reaching ecological consequences, namely celebrating the Holy Communion, reading the Bible and prayer. Elsewhere I also explored the liberating role of a Christian confession of guilt in a context of climate change.<sup>31</sup>

a) The Holy Communion can be viewed as a sacrifice on an altar or as one course of a meal around a table. As a meal it is a form of reverent consumption of food and drink indigenous to Palestine, namely bread and wine. In a context of consumerist greed, vast economic inequalities, malnourishment and obesity this meal is culturally subversive. It does not suggest an ascetic denial of consumption or a spiritualising of the 'food of heaven' or even the 'bread of life'. The bread remains ordinary bread from the village baker. The meal is joyful (with wine to make the heart merry) and should be nourishing and sufficient, but it is characterised by simplicity and not extravagance. Like any other meal shared around a table it fosters community. There is a vast difference between growing one's own food, harvesting it, cooking it together and sharing the food around a table for long hours of joyous company – and grabbing a quick bite from the nearest McDonalds in an urban context. However, the Holy Communion is a meal with a difference. Sadly, the social significance of this meal is undermined whenever it is shared on the basis of a separation in terms of class, race, ethnicity, language group, political affiliation, gender or sexual orientation. In the South African context this is highly significant: apartheid started in the 1830s when church members did not want to share the same cup with former slaves in their own congregation. This led to separate cups, separate worship services, separate congregations, separate churches, separate

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<sup>30</sup> See Huber 1998.

<sup>31</sup> See Conradie 2010.

residential areas and eventually separate 'homelands'. When shared together this meal brings reconciliation between people on the basis of receiving the food from Jesus Christ himself.

The ecological significance of the Holy Communion goes beyond challenging patterns of consumption amidst food shortages. In negotiations on climate change Christians from different parts of the world confront one another around the negotiation table without having being reconciled at the Lord's table. How different could the outcome of COP 17 in Durban be if only the Christians present could celebrate the Holy Communion together!

- b) The ecological significance of reading the Bible can again be illustrated at the macro-level although it can only be done at the micro-level wherever the Bible is actually read, for example as part of the liturgy. In political discourse on climate change it is widely recognised that the scientific information is available to understand the immense and possibly catastrophic nature of problem. The technological know-how is already available to change the energy basis of the global economy from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives. There is also significant political will to address the problem, as indicated by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 17<sup>th</sup> large (and expensive) Conference of Parties. It will be costly to do what is necessary but many economists and business leaders have indicated that the costs are small compared to the costs of not doing that. There are also attractive business opportunities around new energy sources and mitigation strategies. Why, then, have we collectively failed to draw up plans commensurate the scale of the problem? Many have observed that the problem may lie with moral will. We know that we need to do so but we cannot bring ourselves to do what we know we must. That is a familiar moral problem, now exacerbated by social resistance to change and limits to social engineering. How do you move so many people globally? As the SACC has observed in its document on climate change, the underlying problem is one of moral leadership, moral courage and moral imagination. We find it difficult to imagine that a different world is possible, that there is something more attractive and more inspiring than the consumerist heaven portrayed so vividly by the media and publicly demonstrated in the lifestyles of the affluent, also in relatively poor countries.

This raises the question whether Christians can uphold an alternative moral vision in a world threatened by climate change. As the SACC document observed, "We live in a time that lacks a compelling moral vision, even though most businesses and institutions continually talk about their vision and mission. It is deeply worrying that we as Christians, too, so often seem unable to portray through our witness and action the alternative that is required. This is strange because the Jewish-Christian tradition has such a cherished heritage in this regard"<sup>32</sup> This is where reading the Bible may play a crucial role in order to retrieve symbols of hope, a prophetic imagination. In the past, the compelling moral visions of prophets such as Amos and Jesus of Nazareth have changed the world. If Christians can dig into their own texts, this may unearth the treasures that the world truly needs – more than the search for gold, diamonds and oil that have had such a destructive impact in various parts of Africa.

- c) Finally, the prayers of ordinary Christians may change the world. This is not merely a pious affirmation. It is to recognise the transformative potential of something like an ecological spirituality fed by an ecological understanding of the liturgy as sketched

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<sup>32</sup> See *Climate Change – A challenge to the churches in South Africa* 2009:41.

above. There is no need here to sketch the details of such a spirituality as this is understood in very different ways in various confessional and theological traditions. For the moment we only need to consider the prayers for the world as part of the liturgy. Give us our daily bread. Forgive our sins. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil. Each of these prayers are highly charged with ecological significance in the midst of, respectively, economic inequalities, power blocks with vested interests, the lure of consumerism, and the reigning ideologies of our time. Each of these prayers are addressed to God as Father precisely because they fall outside the locus of control of the one who is praying. But can God do something about ecological destruction? Can God miraculously stop run-away climate change? As the SACC document recognises, this prompts questions about divine agency.<sup>33</sup> In the Western world this is a vexing problem. Here the church in Africa, with its understanding of the interplay between the material world and the spiritual world (between the visible and the invisible), with its vibrant forms of spirituality, may offer vicarious prayers also for Christian churches in other parts of the world.

### Conclusion

At least in these three ways Christian congregations may offer a distinctive contribution to address ecological destruction, something that other role players cannot muster. However, these are not aims in themselves. They do not replace priestly service or the common agenda, the common future on (actually *in*) the earth that we share in common with other religious traditions and other living organisms. They are precisely in service of such a common agenda. It is therefore better to talk about the church *in* the environment than about 'church and environment'.

Again, we are not humans in order to become Christian. We become Christians in order to live again as God's creatures. What environs the church is God's world. What environs God's world is the triune God. That is the true theological orientation required for the church in addressing environmental threats – as long as such an orientation does not lose the liturgical focus on the Orient, on Jerusalem, on Calvary, where we may learn to see something of God's very heart.

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<sup>33</sup> See *Climate Change – A challenge to the churches in South Africa* 2009:62-64.

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