

CONSTRUCTING AN *OIKOTHEOLOGY*: THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF UMZIMVUBU¹

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to the discussion on the shape and role of the church in South Africa. It seeks to contribute to ecological theology by extending its traditional focus. Using the oikos metaphor an attempt is made to develop a theology that integrates ecological with economic dimensions of life. An oikothology is proposed. The work done in the Anglican Diocese of Umzimvubu is used as a case study to illustrate the efforts of a church to live out an oikothology and to challenge the church as a whole.

Keywords: Ecological Theology, Oikothology

Introduction

While South Africa is a land of extraordinary beauty and diversity it has experienced widespread environmental degradation and resulting poverty. South Africa is a country still struggling to engage in the process of reconstruction and nation building; our past has divided us. We have been separated not only from each other but also from our natural environment. We are beset with a crippling high rate of HIV/AIDS which has exacerbated these problems. The construction of an *oikothology* is proposed as a way of helping in both the preservation and enhancement of the environment as well as in maintaining the well-being of its people and the eradication of poverty.

We consider why an *oikothology* is needed by looking at the problems of traditional ecological theology. The term *oikothology* is based on the Greek word *oikos*, which means "home" or "household". From it we derive the English words "ecology" and "economy". Seeing the earth as a global household, constructing an *oikothology*, is proposed as an effective way of helping us to integrate environmental concerns with poverty eradication. Some of the experiences of the Anglican Diocese of Umzimvubu are then described to provide an example of how one church group has made an effort to embody an *oikothology*.

The Need for an *Oikothology*

Colonialism and apartheid destroyed a sense of community, of belonging to one household. In fact, it promoted the ideology that people could not live together, that they needed to have their own homes, or "homelands" as they became known. Through this system the natural environment was further destroyed and people's unequal access to these natural resources became entrenched (Durning 1990; Khan 2002:15-48). Racism and sexism became institutionalised in South African life.

¹ This article is based largely on my unpublished PhD thesis entitled "Constructing an *Oikothology*: The Environment, poverty and the church in South Africa," University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2006, which reflects work done in the Diocese of Umzimvubu in 2002 and 2003.

The church in South Africa has steadily been developing and expressing an ecological theology in response to the growth in environmental awareness. Theological writings indicate this trend (Conradie and Warmback 2002:121-134; Conradie 2006). The doctrine of creation, the inclusive covenantal traditions of God's concern for all of life, the life and teaching of Jesus and other New Testament, theological and ecclesiastical traditions that value the natural environment have increasingly been emphasised, and there are church resolutions to prove this (Conradie and Field 2000; cf Cock 1992:174-185).

The church in South Africa has also responded to the increasingly evident poverty in the country. Again, resolutions and theological writing, emanating from our context bear testimony to this (cf De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2004). However, these two concerns of the environment and poverty have tended to be seen in some quarters as mutually exclusive. The state of the natural environment is seen as separate from the well-being of people and not related to economic arrangements which impact on their levels of poverty. This approach has been labelled the "green divide": On the one side there are those that have a strong interest in environment matters, and particularly "green" issues, those of conservation and biodiversity preservation and tend to be less interested in poverty issues. On the other side there are those who tend to show greater interest in people and the effect a degraded environment has on them and less interest in preserving the biodiversity that sustains life. While this "divide" has been evident in South African society it has also been reflected in theological writing emanating from our context. Ecological theology therefore needs to be extended to incorporate the relationship of human beings to the environment, particularly their access to the life-sustaining resources of the earth. An *oikothology* therefore needs to reflect the close connection between concern for the environment and the eradication of poverty and that the church, by valuing the environment, in fact, contributes to the reduction of poverty.

For some this connection between the environment and poverty is not always obvious. It may be most clearly seen in instances where those who are poor are directly dependent upon the natural resources of the environment for their food and shelter. The preservation and enhancement of these resources therefore enhances the livelihoods of these people. And so the environment needs to be preserved not only for its own sake but for the value that it has for human beings.

While it is argued that the resources of the environment are sufficient for the sustenance of all life, the accessing and distribution of these resources to those who need them is a problem. In an *oikothology* the use of the *oikos* metaphor helps illuminate the connection between a concern for the environment (natural resources) and the eradicating of poverty (the equitable distribution of these resources). The metaphor points us towards both the ecological and the economic aspects of the earth community.

Constructing an Oikothology

As indicated earlier, the word "ecology" is literally a word about the "home", or the "logic of the home" (*oikos-logos*), and refers to the interrelated dynamics that make up the total life of the household. It refers to the resources of the earth and respecting these systems that sustain life. "Economics" is literally the rules of the household (*oikos-nomos*), the way of administering this household. In constructing an *oikothology*, the earth as the "household of God" is used as a metaphor to describe how the world should be viewed and as a means of helping us understand the relationship between the earth's resources and people's access to them.

In a home all are equally valued. A home embraces the material as well as the non material. In a home there is the structure as well as mutuality of care, assurance of belonging, sustenance and support. A home implies domestic relations of interrelatedness and interdependence, without rivalry and oppression. It is about community and reconciliation, wholeness, connectedness, love, sacrifice, generosity, and welcoming the stranger. All life shares the same home. We all need each other. *Oikos* as metaphor incorporates the central dimensions of what constitutes the environment, and it gets to the root of environmental problems, by dealing with both the ecology and the economics.

The *oikos* metaphor has been used within the World Council of Churches for some time (e.g. Raiser 1991, Cobb 1992, Rasmussen 1994, Muller-Fahrenholz 1995, Rasmussen 1996). The most recent example is in the AGAPE document (WCC 2006). Within the South African context it has not had much use, other than in the work of Ernst Conradie who has used it in his writing on a number of occasions (e.g. 2000, 2005; cf Botman 2005). The *oikos* metaphor has been used by a South African ecumenical organisation to provide useful insights into the post-Apartheid context.²

It is widely recognised that the problems of hunger and poverty are not primarily related to a lack of sufficient resources in the world, but rather to the lack of adequate distribution of and access to them. Within South Africa many people have been excluded from the resources that they need to nourish and sustain themselves. They have been excluded from the household goods, the "pantry" of the household. Through a number of apartheid laws people were excluded from a variety of resources that could have enriched their lives. Primary among them was access to land. Land is the basis of the home: It supports and nurtures life, particularly in producing the food we need to survive. Land ownership and occupation patterns have been very unjust and have contributed greatly towards poverty.

This situation has been compounded by our economic system. Because of the nature of our capitalistic society with its competitiveness and consumptiveness there are those who gain an unfair share of the household resources.

It is worth noting that there are problems with the use of the term *oikos*. In South Africa the house does not have a positive image for many. Apartheid policies destroyed home life for many both literally and figuratively, with the establishment of homelands and the migrant labour policy. Widespread domestic violence makes the home a place of fear for many women. Despite these shortcomings, it remains a useful metaphor to use. It holds up before us a sign and symbol of what life should be like, and this provides us with a vision of a hopeful future. It has a strong prophetic aspect to it in a context of injustice, poverty and ecological degradation.

Contemporary Theologies

As we proceed with this articulation of an *oikothology* we do so mindful of the problems with the term in our context, but also appreciative of the power of the metaphor to guide our theological reflection and engagement. An *oikothology* draws on contemporary theologies such as ecofeminist, African and liberation theologies.

The discrimination of women and the oppression of the environment and increased poverty go hand in hand. The insights offered by ecofeminist writings, which look at the posi-

² This document, called *The Oikos Journey: A Theological Reflection on the Economic Crisis in South Africa*, was published in March 2006 by the Diakonia Council of Churches. It is a document modelled on the Kairos Document, which seeks to highlight economic justice issues.

tion of women in relation to the environment, offer us useful resources to help us to see the interconnectedness of life and promote the empowerment of women (cf the writings of Ruether, e.g. 2000; Ackermann and Joyner 1996:121-134; Rakoczy 2004:315-322).

African theology, developed mostly from a context of poverty and the struggle for life, portrays African worldviews that have a strong focus on the community of life, including a sense of unity, and an affirmation of people's full humanity (Asante 1985:289-293; Setiloane 1995:53-66; Sindima 1990:137-147). Liberation theology focuses on the liberation of human beings from all that oppresses them, particularly unjust structures, and affirms their full humanity. The integration of ecological concerns into liberation theology offers particularly helpful resources for constructing an *oikothology* (Boff 1995 and 1997).

Understanding the position of human beings in relation to the rest of creation can help provide important insights into how the resources of the earth should be accessed and distributed. In a lecture on "Racism and ecology", Albert Nolan likened human beings' relationship to the environment with racism:

Not only do some human beings believe that they are superior to other human beings, but human beings as a whole have come to believe that they are superior to all other creatures, and that they can dominate, exploit, use, abuse and destroy any of the other things God has created (Nolan 2002:12-13).

There is a dominant attitude that human beings own everything and can do with the earth what they like. It is a very arrogant attitude. The tendency in Christian theology has been to overemphasise the unique position of human beings in the realm of nature, and this domination has largely been legitimised on the basis of differences. For example, the notion of stewardship assumes human supremacy among the species, assuming human beings know what's best, is built on a strong distinction between humanity and nature and assumes humans have considerable social and economic power that they can assert. However, seeing human beings as part of the earth community, with a special responsibility, is what reflects an *oikothology*.

It may be noted that positive aspects of an *oikothology* have been captured in some recent theological statements. See for example, *This is God's earth* (SACC 2002) and *The Land is crying for justice* (Conradie, Mtetwa and Warmback 2002). However, the case of the Diocese of Umzimvubu illustrates well the systematic application of an *oikothology*.

The Diocese of Umzimvubu

The Umzimvubu Diocese is one of the dioceses of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, which is one of the major church denominations in Southern Africa with a large membership. According to the 1996 census it had at that time almost one and a half million members (Hendriks and Erasmus 2001:46). This diocese is an example of an Anglican diocese that has engaged with an *oikothology*. It is a good example for two reasons. Firstly, the diocese is one with widespread poverty. It is situated mostly in the Eastern Cape Province, which is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. Secondly, it is a diocese where there has been a concerted effort to focus both on the environment and the eradication of poverty. To illustrate the actions of the diocese we concentrate on three particular areas: Land and the promotion of sustainable agriculture, opposition to the granting of forestry permits and the proposed N2 Wild Coast Toll Road. We consider a brief history of the diocese, and then describe the geography, language, parishes, and clergy together with a note about the extent of poverty in the diocese.

The Diocese of Umzimvubu grew out of the "multiplication" of the Diocese of St John's, being formed from the northern region of this diocese. Realising that the Diocese of St John's was rather large and that there was a need for "development", a committee for the northern areas, called the Regional and Community Development Committee (RCDC), was formed in 1989. It was this committee that proposed the formation of a new diocese, and on 28 July 1991, at a Family Day Service held at the East Griqualand Show Grounds in Kokstad, the Diocese of Umzimvubu was inaugurated. Its name had been decided upon on 22 April 1991 at a meeting of the clergy and lay representatives at Kokstad to name the new diocese. On 1 December 1991, at a service in Mt Frere, Bishop Geoff Davies was enthroned as the first bishop of the Diocese of Umzimvubu. Previous to this, since 1988, Bishop Davies had served as Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of St John's. He served until the end of December 2003, when he was succeeded by Bishop Mlibo Ngewu.

The name of the diocese is taken from the Umzimvubu River which rises in the Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg mountain range and with its tributaries runs through most of the diocese, connecting many of the parishes. The diocese covers a wide area. It includes the area from the Ngwagwane, Umzimkulu and Mtamvuna rivers in the North to the Tsitsana, Tsitsa and Umzimvubu rivers in the South. On the North West are the Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg mountains and on the East the Indian Ocean. The area incorporates a number of areas rich in biodiversity and natural beauty. There are areas with endemic flora as well as the ecologically sensitive Pondoland Wild Coast and the beautiful Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg, a proclaimed World Heritage Site. While English is spoken throughout the diocese, the most common language spoken is isiXhosa. Sesotho is spoken in some parts of the diocese, particularly in those parts near Lesotho. Afrikaans is also spoken, particularly around Kokstad. The diocese is divided into 32 parishes, comprising about 600 congregations.³ The diocese is served by about 52 clergy, 23 of whom were stipendiary. Of these, four were women (one from Canada).⁴

A major part of the area of the diocese covers the former Transkei "homeland", with a high density of people for a rural area and, as a consequence of overcrowding, the land became significantly degraded. The area the diocese covers is regarded as one of the poorest areas of South Africa, with relatively little infrastructure and unemployment estimated to be as high as 75%. To a large extent the people live off the land. Relying on traditional subsistence farming methods, the people are dependent on access to arable land to eke out a living.

Important to the work of the diocese is its vision. The vision is expressed as follows: "Our vision is that all God's people should reach the full stature of their humanity, so as to live in harmony with the rest of God's creation" (*Umzimvubu News*, November 1997:6). One of its objectives was clearly stated as being "[t]o assist people in finding strategies to break the poverty dependency cycle" (*Umzimvubu News*, November 1997:5). Their work to maintain healthy ecosystems, preserve the fertility of the soil and ensure there is water available, has played a significant role in helping eradicate poverty. Important components of the work of the diocese in achieving the vision include theological training, the establishment of a training centre, and environmental education. We now turn to look at particular focus areas.

³ These are grouped into six archdeaconries: Clydesdale, Holy Cross, Kokstad, Matatiele, Mount Frere and Qumbu.

⁴ As at 31 December 2003.

Land Use in the Diocese

Land is an important factor in any consideration of poverty eradication in South Africa and from an environmental point of view the correct use of land is significant. The past injustices in land distribution and ownership patterns in South Africa still influence present day realities. Land issues are even more significant in rural areas where the close connection between land and poverty is most evident. Access to, and ownership of land, is an important aspect of poverty eradication. Land issues were no less significant in the Diocese of Umzimvubu. There developed a growing appreciation for the significance of the land. Land was to be valued as an important component of the sustainable agriculture work and was foundational in the diocesan strategies to enhance the livelihoods of its communities.

Sustainable agriculture includes the conservation of energy, the production of diverse forms of high quality foods, fibres and medicines, and the use of locally available renewable resources, appropriate and affordable technologies and the minimisation of the use of external and purchased inputs. The project that developed was called the Umzimvubu Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Education Programme (USAEEP). This programme is aimed at making the best possible use of the land and was a key component of the poverty eradication strategy. At the outset the diocese undertook a comprehensive survey of all land to establish ownership and to assess its appropriate use. This information was then used as a basis for its work. It is worth noting that donga repair and water security measures were some of the other strategies undertaken to help with food security.

The diocese responded to particular issues that it considered both a threat to the environment and to the welfare of the people. We consider the example of two of these issues: The granting of forestry permits and the proposed N2 Wild Coast Toll Road through Pondoland. The diocese campaigned against both these developments. The diocese's strong commitment to the preservation of the natural resources, while also being concerned with the economic arrangements that benefit or disadvantage people, is clearly illustrated, and an *oikotheology* is given practical expression.

Opposition to the Granting of Forestry Permits

The issuing of forestry permits in part of the East Griqualand area of the diocese created much controversy. The controversy began when a number of farmers applied to the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) to have forestry permits for their farms.⁵ The reasons for the requests for the permits can be largely explained in the following words by the bishop's wife, Kate Davies:

In this region, stock farming is becoming less profitable because of severe stock theft and increased labour costs. Some farmers are also feeling threatened by new labour laws. As a result, afforestation, which represents an opportunity to sell farms at a profit to forestry companies, is an easy and financially very rewarding option. (Davies 1996:1)

While it was recognised that forestry could lead to economic development and the creation of more jobs, it was felt that on the whole this move would lead to the overall long-term impoverishment of the area, both environmentally as well as in compromising communities' livelihoods.

⁵ By February 1996 nearly 30 farmers had applied for permits for more than 41 farms covering a total area of nearly 40 000 hectares.

Opposition from within the diocese was based on the following grounds (Davies 1996; Davies 1996):

- Conservation and biodiversity loss: Being monocultures, the trees would reduce biodiversity and cause permanent loss of natural grasslands in the area.
- The water supply would be severely affected: The planting of the trees would lead to the drying up of the rivers. The rural communities which depended on the rivers for human use and stock watering would be severely affected. The ecologically important wetlands would also be threatened by the timber plantations.
- Agriculturally, the alien plantations would have negative impacts on the land making it difficult to rehabilitate it for agricultural use at a later stage. The large plantations would affect the traditional farming infrastructure and make dairy and stock farming unviable. They would also prevent the cultivation of other vegetation which can enhance people's livelihoods, particularly in providing crops for food.
- In terms of the impact on the local economy, as most forestry operations are undertaken by contractors, many farm workers and their families would lose their jobs and homes. The granting of permits was regarded as primarily driven by a profit motive.
- There was no meaningful consultation and participation in the process by those who would be most directly affected.

Through his participation in correspondence with the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, the holding of public meetings as well as through the press, Bishop Geoff Davies engaged in the issue and encouraged his clergy and parishes to do likewise. In expressing their opposition there was co-operation with local farmers and other interested people, the use of environmental lawyers as well as lobbying of government officials and mobilising of those directly affected.

The intervention took time, but in the end achieved its results. Not only were the permits not issued but the permit system itself was changed and some of the problems at the root were addressed, namely the legislative processes. It was felt that not only was the environment preserved but the area was saved from the substantial impoverishment that most people would have experienced.

Opposing the N2 Wild Coast Toll Road

The proposed building of a national toll road through the Wild Coast (a large part of which falls within the Diocese of Umzimvubu) was another issue that galvanised the diocese into action. As with the action around the forestry permits, opposition was expressed in a variety of ways and included the active involvement of the church.

Over a number of years there had been plans to build a new toll road, which would stretch from Durban to Port Elizabeth. It intended to run nearer the coast than the existing road. A further aspect of this development was the proposed mining at Xolobeni, an ecologically sensitive area, which some felt was the real reason for the proposed road.

Opposition to this road came from a number of quarters, and for a variety of reasons. Bishop Davies expressed his own opposition in a number of ways and on a number of grounds and became a vociferous advocate against its construction. Essentially the road's construction was an issue that was seen to impact negatively on the development of communities, with strong implications for poverty and the environment.

The following are some of the reasons for its opposition:

- The area is a global botanical hotspot with 180 endemic plant species.

- The route was not considered the best one – particularly the “greenfields section”. It was felt that existing roads should be upgraded, which would benefit local communities.
- The development of the road was seen to be motivated by greed and not the development of the local communities. Its construction and the proposed mining would destroy the eco-tourist potential for the region.
- There was a lack of transparency and democratic consultation in the whole process of its consideration.

Use was made of the press in expressing opposition. For example, Bishop Davies wrote the following for the *Mail and Guardian*, in which he expressed concern that the people of Pondoland will benefit very little: “We need to stop pandering to the tourist industry, the big engineering companies and the merchant banks in the hope that a few crumbs will fall from the tables of the rich to the local people” (Davies 2003). He also questioned the real motive for the planned road:

Why is the government so concerned about the trucking industry? Is the Department of Minerals and Energy hell-bent on mining along the Wild Coast? Is there a hidden agenda to mine titanium on the Wild Coast and truck it to Coega, another economic and development disaster in the making? (Davies 2003).

Resolutions on the issues passed at public meetings were sent to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. In December 2004 this Minister set aside the Record of Decision to go ahead with building of the road on the basis that the environmental impact assessment process was flawed. The debate was reintroduced in 2005 and a new environmental impact assessment undertaken.

Reflections on this Case Study

By the very nature of the Anglican Church, the role of the bishop is a significant one. In this diocese the bishop gave a strong lead in the process of implementing the vision and in encouraging all to take it seriously. Effective use was made of the press, value placed on education and training and collaboration with other similar organisations was encouraged.

Bishop Davies, popularly referred to as the “green bishop” within the Anglican Church, played a major role in the developments described above. In his work he has attempted to incorporate the human and economic dimensions into a concern for the environment (Davies 2002:30-34; 2003:2004:118-124). While he was the bishop of Umzimvubu he proposed a number of resolutions to Provincial Synod on issues of the environment and economic justice. In recent years his involvement has extended beyond the Anglican Church to other denominations, other faith groups and internationally through his involvement in the world-wide Anglican Communion Environment Network and as co-ordinator of the Southern African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute (SAFCEI).

While episcopal leadership is valuable, what is needed is the participation of the church at large in the construction and implementation of an *oikothology* that can sustain the work of the church on an on-going basis. It is the task of the whole church.

The Challenge of the Church

The church, by its very nature, and through its experience of struggle has particular resources that it can offer society to help sustain the resources of the environment and eradicate poverty. It has gifts of community, reconciliation, healing and justice. And in working

towards dismantling racism and sexism it can contribute towards the restoration of damaged lives as well as disfigured environments.

In order to live out an *oikothology* the church needs to engage in grassroots action, education and training, and lobbying and advocacy, always aware of the need to collaborate with other appropriate organisations. As well as preserving and enhancing the ecological resources, it is important that the church works towards a new and just economy that ensures that the earth's resources are not exploited beyond their capacity to regenerate, and that they are fairly distributed (cf Legum 2002). Within its own life, in the management of its buildings and property, the use of liturgy, the sacraments, spirituality and pastoral care it needs to be ecologically sensitive (Field 2001:67-79). Furthermore it needs to actively engage in issues that both preserve the integrity of creation as well as sustain people's livelihoods, such as those of just trade, ethical investment, the just transition to renewable energy, and food sovereignty. These actions of the church lead towards the further development of an *oikothology*.

An *oikothology* has implications for traditional Christian doctrines such as creation, the fall, redemption and the mission of the church. In terms of creation, it affirms that there is only one home. It accommodates all and all life is to be respected. The "fall" has resulted in both poverty as well as environmental degradation; redemption is therefore for all life. It cannot be considered only in respect of human beings; God's concern embraces all. The church's mission, therefore, is to bring life to both human beings as well as to the rest of creation.

Conclusion

An *oikothology* presents an integrated theology, one that addresses both the delicate ecological issues that are increasingly impacting on human habitation as well as the policies that regulate life. The church needs to affirm that indeed the earth is a home for all and celebrate the diversity of life that provides that nourishment for all to flourish. The Umzimvubu Diocese undertook particular activities that benefited both that environment as well as human beings within the environment. Their example provides a challenge to the church. While particular actions are valuable, the on-going development and implementation of an *oikothology* is what is most needed.

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