

PRACTICING HOPE: CONGREGATIONAL  
ENVIRONMENTALISM AS INTERSYSTEMIC CARE

by

Genny C. Rowley

Bachelor of Arts, 2003  
Baylor University  
Waco, TX

Master of Divinity, 2007  
Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology  
Atlanta, GA

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APPROVED BY

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE:

DR. NANCY RAMSAY,  
Dissertation Director

DR. JORETTA MARSHALL,  
Reader

DR. TIM HESSEL-ROBINSON,  
Reader

DR. JEFF WILLIAMS,  
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

DR. JORETTA MARSHALL,  
Dean

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## Dedications

To the congregational cohorts who shared their courage and wisdom with me,  
without whom this project would not be;

And to Cameron, my partner in hope when it is clear,  
and in courage when hope is difficult to find.

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As I write these acknowledgements on Earth Day 2013, I am reminded of the slow, incremental processes of the ecological world and they ways they illuminate the writing and research process. The unfolding mysteries of life in creation offer its human participants moments of startling discovery and connection – experiences that help us question our individual and commonly held paths, providing rich wonder and meaning to our humanity. Ecological discourses also highlight the seeming wastefulness of the evolutionary process, and the curiously self-destructive behavior of its dynamic human participants. Such insights leave me with unanswerable questions, and occasionally the disconcerting need to stop, change direction, and start something afresh. Engaging these lenses in the light of my own formation in the Christian tradition offers me an interesting interpretation of the cycles of the natural world and our participation in them, which bears a curious allusion to the dissertation process: wonder and transformation can be found in the most surprising of places, if I can somehow consider a different way of seeing the world. I would call this openness to experience grace, for its presence seems unmerited and sacred in origin. I am changed by this process, and I am glad for it.

I have learned through this project that one's vocation will take as much time as we allow, and yet this time that we give to it unfolds together with the rest of life's experiences. Our intricately connected lives are embodied so richly, and I have been grateful for a project that resonates deeply with so many of my curiosities, concerns and joys. I have been both challenged and enriched by relationships developed during this process, and I hope that those who have participated, either by sharing their stories or by reading and shaping this work with their feedback, have also found some small gift through this project.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION: CONNECTING SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

**Introduction**

One of my clearest realizations regarding the inseparability of human health from ecological health came on the banks of the Passaic River in New Jersey's Ironbound community. Surrounded on four sides by an airport, rail lines used by heavy industry, highways, and the highly contaminated Passaic, this community is one of the country's most polluted areas. Home to a former Agent Orange factory and the country's largest garbage incinerator, this community of racial minorities and the working poor has organized itself for over four decades to fight for safer air, cleaner water, uncontaminated land, and safe green spaces for those who call this community home. I stood observing the site of the former Agent Orange factory, listening as the community organizer shared the tangled web of environmental issues facing community residents. The poor air quality contributes high rates of asthma and other serious respiratory problems for community members, and high levels of dioxin, mercury and lead in the soil and water increase the risk for cancer. Additionally, the lack of safe outdoor space and poor access to healthy food contributes to high levels of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Organizations like the Ironbound Community Corporation, who led this tour, help empower citizens and organizations within this community to demand responsible action from those directly involved in the serious pollution problems diminishing the health and wellbeing of

Ironbound residents. Yet, at some level, each of us participating in consumer societies is implicated in the kinds of ecological devastation faced by the Ironbound. Our cultural patterns of living, in spite of some good intentions for providing comfortable living standards, are causing serious harm to not only the Ironbound, but to the entire global system of life. People, creatures, and places residing at the ecological margins face the most immediate risks to their wellbeing. Those of us privileged by our cultural systems face significant responsibility for recognizing and transforming the wounded relationships between human beings and the world we call home. To sustain meaningful life that respects the right to flourishing for all people, creatures, and places, an ecological paradigm shift must take place.

The connections between Western-identified cultural systems and the flourishing of all members of the web of life are being made on many fronts. This unfolding paradigm shift is visible in the phenomenon of religious environmentalism, a practice by which people of faith involve themselves in environmental issues using the lenses of their particular faith traditions. This dissertation explores the inseparable relationship of social justice and ecological justice concerns through engaging the experiences of religious environmentalists, and reflects on the theological frameworks contributing to this kind of praxis. These experiences contribute to a constructive *planetary pastoral theology*. This kind of theological frame highlights the interconnection between all of Earth's systems, reflecting how human flourishing on micro, mezzo, and macro levels is always embedded within the wellness of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the communities we call home. I will argue that theology and pastoral praxis from this vantage point enable us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with greater precision and poignancy in a context of global ecological struggle. I will also argue

that *theology* is at the heart of transforming our relationships with the natural world, through engaging the theological *hoping paradigms* of the cohorts participating in this study.

What fosters this kind of generative faith praxis? Placing the ecological concerns of particular ecosystems in dialogue with local faith communities creates unique frameworks for praxis that I call *hoping paradigms*, theological worldviews at the nexus of theological anthropology, eschatology, and spiritual practices. I use this phrase for two reasons. First, it highlights how theological categories are comingled in the lives of faithful people. Second, it helps describe how an ongoing theological meaning-making process furthers the work of the cohorts in this study. This project describes the religious environmental narratives of three congregationally based Protestant Christian groups, elucidating the relationship between their hoping paradigms and their transformative efforts in their local communities. Engaging the unique religious environmental praxis of each group makes the dynamic character of their present theological hopes clearer. The remainder of this chapter provides the ecological and cultural impetus for the project, situates it in the field of pastoral theology, and outlines the chapters that follow.

### **Ecological and Cultural Contexts**

For much of human history, our species posed minimal threat to the global ecosystem. The taken-for-granted strength and wellbeing of the larger global ecosystem must now be questioned, as our large human population and the spread of consumerism begin to cause significant social and ecological hazards. We can no longer view trouble social issues such as poverty from a purely anthropocentric lens, for the consequences reach further. The separation of social from ecological justice concerns results from a long-standing split in the discursive connections between human and ecological flourishing. Dominant discourses of Western-identified culture



treat the Earth primarily as an object for human use, creating a hierarchy among human beings and the rest of creation through the influence of Platonic dualism in theology and philosophy. The goal of separating ideas from their infinitely detailed contexts is to find “pure” knowledge, the “essence” of a universal truth. In the Platonic worldview, truth is a rational, disembodied, intellectual way for humans to reconnect to the soul’s true home with the gods. Dualistic ways of thinking grew more powerful under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism, which used scientific observation as a vehicle to name truth. These discourses prized a detached rationalism, promoting the sense that the observer is in control of the observed. Since the rational observer is the revealer of scientific truth, that observer is the *subject* that has power over the *object* under scrutiny. The ecologically detrimental shift in this Cartesian paradigm is the mechanization of nature for control and exploitation; the hidden end of knowledge in this paradigm is *control so that the objectified may be used by the powerful*.

Since the rise of this type of thinking, forms of violence and oppression resulting from this objectification have been visible for those willing to see them.<sup>1</sup> Ecological suffering at this time in human history is difficult to ignore, as material resources become increasingly scarce through hyper-consumerism, a large human population demands more of those resources, and the frightening epiphenomenon of climate change shows its increasing effects on day-to-day life.<sup>2</sup> Cultural values like individualism and unlimited economic progress obscure the ecological stage on which our lives are played. The emphasis on individualized and rapid material gratification occludes the richness of time and space acting upon our lives in the form of those products, the

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<sup>1</sup> Post-colonial and liberation theologies are especially powerful resources for this critique. See, for

<sup>2</sup> See the recent report from The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation. A Special Report of Working Groups I and II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. Christopher Field et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

materials of which are part of a complex ecological cycle with a longer time scale than many human lives.

Given the instant connectivity and rapid pace of information flow in Western-identified cultures, we who inhabit them are faced with near-constant awareness of the environmental troubles facing our planetary home.<sup>3</sup> Through growing public awareness of the ecological crisis, discourse on the imperiled environment has become commonplace. Scholars such as Frederick Buell describe this phenomenon, citing the normalcy of ecological crisis as the backdrop for living:

Environmental crisis is no longer an apocalypse rushing towards a herd of sheep that a few prophets are trying to rouse. It is not a matter of the imminent future but a feature of the present. Environmental crisis is, in short, a process within which individuals and society today dwell; it has become part of the repertoire of normalities, a reference to which people construct their daily lives.<sup>4</sup>

These troubles are both as wide as the world and as intimate as our bodies, so that “normal” is now constructed within a severely bruised environmental context. The cultural values of economic progress and individualism obscure the need for change by providing justification for our harmful environmental habits. There is widespread difficulty connecting this commonplace knowledge of environmental peril into the practices of daily living because our daily practices appear so fixed and normal. In my own cultural context, many Americans live as though personal choices and the cultural milieu surrounding us are not implicated in commonly discussed ecological problems.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Various studies have been conducted on the influence of mass media on public perception of environmental crisis. See, for example, Jun Yin’s “Elite Opinion and Media Diffusion: Exploring Environmental Attitudes” *The Harvard International Journal of Press Politics* 4 (1999), 62-86, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/harvard\\_international\\_journal\\_of\\_press\\_politics/v004/4.3yin.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/harvard_international_journal_of_press_politics/v004/4.3yin.html)

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Consider the recent shift in the rhetoric of climate change denial. Many climate change “deniers” have stopped saying that climate change is not happening, in favor of the “climate change cycle” argument, which states

There is strong evidence in favor of two apparently contradictory truths. First, most people want a clean and safe environment, with abundant habitat for nonhuman species and wild places in addition to livable human settlements. Second, this valuation of the natural world is not always and maybe not usually reflected in people's personal consumption practices or political choices. There seems to be, in other words, little if any causal relationship between environmental value orientations, awareness and concern on one hand, and behavior on the other.<sup>6</sup>

Dominant cultural patterns invite a passive consumerist stance rather than one of thoughtful participation, further contributing to alienation from the more-than-human world. The “dual long-term motives of an *economic ideology* that exploits and discards the nonhumans as well as the majority of humans, and the *spiritual ideologies* that legitimate it by collusion or default,” create challenges for understanding the large-scale implications of human power relations, beyond the lenses of individual blame and pathology.<sup>7</sup> While economic and spiritual discourses are more connected than the preceding quote supposes, the larger point of participation in discourses that “other” those with whom we relate is an important one, with real effects in our human social world and in the wider planetary ecosystem. The need for a more complex and holistic approach to ecological relationships is clear.

In spite of this lack of attention, there is evidence of hope in our world. Though the global expansion of unrestrained free-market economics and its supporting ideologies continues, myriad persons resist, contributing to a shift in what Charles Taylor calls “the social imaginary.”<sup>8</sup>

Social imaginaries will be more thoroughly discussed in the following chapter, but in brief, they

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that the Earth goes through normal periods of warming and that human industries releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere play no part in the current trend.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Peterson, “Talking the Walk: A Practice-Based Environmental Ethic as Grounds for Hope,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 47.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Keller and Laurel Kearns, “Introduction: Grounding Theory – Earth in Religion and Philosophy,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2003).

refer to the collective thought-practices of a society, and the interplay of relations between lived cultural experiences and cultural ideologies. The journeys of engaged ecological advocates have the transformative potential to generate dialogue about how people might come to change their relationships with the wider Earth community, creating relationships of intersystemic cooperation. In a time of ecological foment, these groups are those believing through active spiritual practices that they can “open a crack in history.”<sup>9</sup>

### Varieties of Religious Responses

People of faith make a variety of choices when deciding how to respond to environmental crises, ranging from various forms of denial to thoughtful action. This dissertation explores a type of response known as *religious environmentalism*, in which environmental concerns are engaged through positions of faith, either by social location or through explicit faith claims connecting ecological concerns and theological traditions.<sup>10</sup> Observing the practices of religious environmental groups, dialoging with members of these communities, and engaging the theological significance of these practices to the cohort members provides windows into the dynamic hoping paradigms that foster their ongoing work. Investigating how some persons of faith see environmental issues as part of their faith practice while most do not is of great importance in a period of ecological crisis.

The religious environmental movement in the United States has grown noticeably in the past two decades. More houses of worship engage the connections between the earth and faith practices than ever before, an increasing number of ecumenical and interfaith groups address these issues with dedication, and ecotheological courses now claim a regular place in theological

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<sup>9</sup> Marcos, Ponce de Leon. *Our Word is Our Weapon* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 213.

<sup>10</sup> See Roger Gottlieb's *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) for a broad introduction to the concept of religious environmentalism.

education.<sup>11</sup> Types of religious environmental responses vary, from issue-based responses such as climate change activism to geographically based responses such as grassroots involvement with local environmental issues councils. Additionally, there are a variety of denominationally based response groups that arise from particular theological value systems. These groups offer structure for theological and social programming, as often work in tandem with the previous categories. Involvement in environmental issues through the conviction that matters of faith and matters of ecology are intimately connected threads this variegated collection of responses together.

### **Genesis of Project and Thesis Statement**

This project emerged from my interest in ecological discourses as a dialogue partner for pastoral theologians, from my pastoral theological interest in how local congregations construct particular faith identities through faith practices, and through my own desire to further an ecotheological consciousness with the life of the church. To study this synergy of interests, *this project explores how the communal hoping paradigms of certain congregationally based religious environmental groups inform their praxis. These hoping paradigms emerge from an ecological commitment to the interconnected nature of life, fostering forms of public theology through promoting engagement with and transformation of the public sphere. These experiences generate constructive theological possibilities for pastoral theology, pointing to a planetary pastoral theological paradigm of intersystemic engagement as a lens for care.* Exploring these interests from a pastoral theological perspective allows for rich interdisciplinary conversation highlighting the particularity of lived human experience as key to constructive theological proposals.

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<sup>11</sup> Fletcher Harper, "Religion and the Earth on the Ground: The Experience of GreenFaith in New Jersey," in *EcoSpirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 504.

Bringing the ecological crisis under the wing of public theology requires the forging of ties between two disciplines, a correlative dialogue in which the concerns of each are allowed to shape the other. Pastoral theological method, including the significance of the revised correlational method for pastoral theologians, will be the exclusive focus of the following chapter. Here, it is important to note that a fully correlative dialogue would involve a collaborative project between an ecologist or environmental scientist, an ethnographer, a social psychologist, and a pastoral theologian. To use this kind of methodological inquiry in this dissertation, a more unilateral flow is necessary: I ask how pastoral theologians might respond in light of certain cultural and scientific developments, but the partner disciplines with which I engage cannot invite reciprocal dialogue from pastoral theologians due to the nature of the project.

Why do people become religious environmentalists? Though a variety of reasons based on the unique identities of individual persons and communities exist, two clear influences in the worldview shift towards religious environmental work are evident. People's exposure to various scientific discourses (ecology, climate science, physics, biology, geology, etc.), and their awareness of ecological hermeneutics within their faith traditions combine in unique and context-dependent ways to create the impetus for reconfigured theological worldviews. Both ecological and theological influences shape this turn towards interconnectedness. This new embodiment of theological praxis emerges from the deconstruction of anthropocentric worldviews and the reconstruction of anthropologies of caring interrelationship. The following briefly explores the role of anthropocentrism and the implicit shift away from these entrenched norms in the anthropologies of religious environmental worldviews.

### **Anthropocentrism and Theological Anthropologies: Towards Interrelationship**

Anthropocentrism is a worldview placing the interests of human beings at the center of life, at the expense of other forms of life. Theological anthropology addresses how we understand our identities, dilemmas and possibilities as human beings through the lens of our faith traditions. Much of traditional Christian anthropology is anthropocentric; important to this dissertation is whether the resources of the Christian tradition can also be ecologically sound and foster practices of ecological flourishing. The majority of contemporary theological frameworks do consider anthropological implications in their theological proposals; yet, the relationship of human beings to the remainder of life and the theological import of life for its own sake often remains a hidden object of unconcern, a mere tool for human flourishing. Thus, anthropocentric assumptions remain an unstated epistemological key for the bulk of our theological and philosophical praxis.<sup>12</sup> This taken-for-granted notion places human beings atop a hierarchy of life forms and is difficult to counter due to layers of cultural and even biological preferences.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this hold, a conversion to kinship and care with the natural world is taking place in the theological praxis of religious environmentalists. Two important counters to layers of anthropocentric tradition present themselves in religious environmentalism. First, the necessity of reconstructing theological anthropologies in dialogue with ecological sciences emerges through reflection about interrelationship on cosmic and evolutionary levels; second, various ecological hermeneutics developed in biblical and theological studies ground ethical relationship

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<sup>12</sup> For a helpful critique, see Gary Steiner's *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> For example, the use of both plants and other animals as food reflects our evolutionary history as omnivores, able to adapt to various sources of food for survival.

towards the environment within the biblical witness itself. The movement from atomistic understandings of the human-divine relationship towards holism, or describing worldviews from a standpoint of dynamic interrelationship, is a crucial one for religious environmentalists.

### Scientific Impetus for Theologies of Interrelationship

The scientific paradigm shifts surrounding knowledge of the earth and cosmos has been a flashpoint for change in humanity's self-understanding, provoking significant theological shifts for many world religions. The biological sciences, in particular, illuminate the imminent relatedness of life on earth. Understanding that we live in a physical, chemical and biological web of life that shares an evolutionary past (illuminated by a shared genetic code), as well as a material and relational present, cracks the edifice of many traditional theologies claiming human beings are essentially different in their physical nature from the rest of life on the planet. When scientists began the Human Genome Project, our close biological relationship to other forms of life was largely unknown, and it was hypothesized that a large number of our genes would be different from species. Researchers were initially surprised to learn how close our evolutionary ancestors are; we share, for example, 85% of our genes in common with the zebra fish (*danio rerio*), and more than 98% of genes with the chimpanzee (*pan troglodytes*).<sup>14</sup>

Movement towards a planetary pastoral theology involves an expanded theological anthropology. This requires holding the tension between honoring the uniqueness of all life forms, while acknowledging that we are physically more kin than not. Constructive anthropologies of *interrelationship* emphasize humanity's membership within the whole

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas L. Theobald, "A Formal Test of the Theory of Universal Common Ancestry," in *Nature* 465 (2010): 219-222.



“community of life.”<sup>15</sup> This theological account does not imply that human welfare is insignificant, or that social justice is unimportant, any more than acknowledging that the “living human web” eclipses the importance of individual wellbeing. Instead, justice discourses are deepened and enriched through understanding their intersystemic embeddedness in a larger ecological web. Operationalizing this practice requires the development of scholarly links between dominant cultural and theological ideas on *both* people *and* the ecosystems on which they depend. For contextual theology that is ecologically versed, for example, ecotheologian Daniel Spencer advocates the use of the term “ecological location,” which “expands ‘social location’ to include both where human beings are located within human society and within the broader biotic community.”<sup>16</sup>

#### Anthropologies of Interrelationship: Re-visioning the *Imago Dei*

The turn towards valuing life’s interconnected and interdependent process, whether from a theological or ecological standpoint, invites a re-visioning of theological anthropologies. A planetary pastoral theology evokes reflection on the interdependence of life that Western-identified cultures often continue to ignore, while re-visioning the *imago Dei* away from specifically human *traits* towards a quality of *relationship*. Ulrich Beck describes our interdependence thus:

People have the experience that they breathe like plants, and live *from* water

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<sup>15</sup> This is the phrase coined by the Earth Charter, a people’s charter crafted over the period of a decade by an international commission that began as a U.N. initiative and was completed as a global civil society initiative. It is described by the commission as “the most inclusive and participatory process ever associated with the creation of an international declaration” and is recognized by a growing number of international lawyers as gaining “soft law” status, comparable to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For the full text of the Earth Charter, see “The Earth Charter,” last modified 29 June 2000, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Spencer, “Restoring Earth, Restored to Earth: Toward an Ethic for Reinhabiting Place,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 417.

as fish live *in* water. The toxic threat makes them sense that they participate with their bodies in things – a “metabolic process with consciousness and morality” – and consequently, that they can be eroded like the stones and the trees in the acid rain. A community among Earth, plant, animal and human beings becomes visible, a *solidarity of living things*, that effects everyone and everything equally in the threat.<sup>17</sup>

Participation in a greater, resilient-but-wounded planetary whole necessitates theologies that enhance our self-understanding as creatures in constant relationship, not merely with our own “kind,” but with embodied difference that both encompasses and extends to everykind. The point of this shift is not to prescribe a particular vision for all persons and contexts; a new “grand narrative” of ecological harmony would seem to repeat many mistakes of identity erasure so common to traditions of Enlightenment thinking. Rather, anthropologies of interrelationship promote certain ethical norms that are enacted in local and particular ways.

The epistemological norms of particular persons and communities engaging in religious environmental work shape the character of their belief and praxis; in this study, some communities are shaped more by their familiarity with climate science, for example, where others may find biblical stories of creation stewardship to be their primary ethical mandate. The various theological and ecological contexts in which persons find themselves inevitably shape their praxis in idiosyncratic ways. While the character of these shifts is quite diverse, the effect is a moral imperative for relationships of ecological care. Expanding the notion of human nature towards an embedded and interrelational holism widens the net of how to understand and embody justice, creating ethical obligations to the more-than-human “other.”

Finding communities embodying this holistic vision of justice-in-relationship invites a variety of ecological hopes. The ways religious environmental groups enact their ecological hoping paradigms are diverse, nuanced by the local landscape, the particular persons involved,

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<sup>17</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 74.

the varied faith traditions being practiced, and the unique challenges they have chosen to face as a community. The praxis of religious environmental care is then multi-leveled, diversely enacted, and richly expansive in the enactment of hoping paradigms reflecting an ecologically relational justice.

Much of religious environmental work is made possible through a widened vision of theological anthropology. Pastoral theologians, who in the past two decades have consistently engaged broadened theological anthropologies grounded in norms of relational justice, are particularly attuned to the ways in which shifting our theological norms invites opportunities for our theological traditions to meet the challenges of changing contexts with integrity and hope.

### **Pastoral Theological Context**

Describing the context and character of pastoral theology has been a historically challenging task.<sup>18</sup> The following description is multi-layered, portrayed through historical, phenomenological, methodological, and, to an extent, provisionally normative lenses. Pastoral theology in its current form emerged from historical pastoral reflection on caregiving activities and the caring engagement of the divine in human history. Its commitment to prioritizing lived human experience as a source of theological wisdom means that pastoral theology is highly phenomenological. It begins with the experiential unity of belief, tradition, and practices, holding embodied and particular experiences to be performing meaning and authoritative. Recognizing the contextuality of human experience, pastoral theologians reflect through methods of interdisciplinary dialogue, seeking conversation partners aiding the understanding and practical

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<sup>18</sup> See Elaine Graham, "Pastoral Theology in Historical Perspective," in *Transforming Practice*, 56-82; James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, "An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 1-19; and Emmanuel Lartey's "The Nature of Pastoral Theology" in *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 14-41 for descriptions of the complex character of the discipline.

response for the experiences engaged. In this way, the process of reflective dialogue among particular experience, theological traditions, contextual discourses, and interdisciplinary wisdom creates constructive theological responses that are transformative in their intent.

The above definition highlights the process of theological reflection inherent to the pastoral theological task. Pastoral theology approaches the complex interpretive journey of reflecting upon the “practical wisdom” birthed in the local, contextual, and embodied knowledge of communities. This reflective process has several key components: 1) How do particular experiences, theological discourses, and related disciplines inform the process of reflection? Taking particular experience seriously while bringing adjunct disciplines and outsider perspectives into the dialogue opens questions about faithful response in particular situations. 2) How is power accounted for in this process? The reflected-upon experiences illuminate what voices will be part of the dialogue process, based on who is already participating in the conversation and the kinds of questions raised by the particular experiences. 3) How are these voices weighted? A process of critical dialogue provides space for clarifying theological hopes and articulating contextual responses in the service of those norms. By more clearly articulating constructive theologies, the community may determine how they facilitate faithful responses. 4) How is this process relevant and empowering for local communities? The outcomes of this critical dialogue, which elucidates theological norms in light of contextual particularity, are pastoral and spiritual practices born in the localized reflective process for contextual needs.

This dissertation provides needed interdisciplinary dialogue between pastoral theological approaches and ecologically oriented disciplines, with the aim of constructing theological responses that assist faith communities in theological and civic engagement around environmental issues. Our context of deepening environmental crisis due to past and present

utilitarian behavior towards the more-than-human world requires situating human experience within the whole web of life. This then broadens discursive possibility around how to ethically embody care within the church, academy and biotic community as a process of *creatively engaging intersystemic tensions*. This is a process buoyed by the theological hopes of particular communities with embodied theological norms. Contemporary norms in pastoral theology include relational justice, interrelationship, and love. Critical correlative dialogue between the experiences of religious environmental groups, ecological disciplines, and pastoral theology may widen our understandings of these concepts.

Contemporary forms of pastoral theology emerged from the philosophical and theological traditions of Post-Enlightenment liberal humanism. Reflecting on the tradition and trajectory of pastoral theological responses provides insight into the type of critical exchange and paradigm shifts possible in a dialogue between pastoral theological approaches and ecologically engaged disciplines.

#### History and Trajectory of Key Metaphors in Pastoral Theology

To construct a *planetary pastoral theology*, the connections between ecological suffering and human suffering must be made explicit. One of the challenges implicit in reflecting theologically on a particular kind of care is that the complex ways that care is lived and embodied are difficult to parse out. The dialogical nature of the field offers opportunity for continual reform, however; as contextual concerns shift, different theological imperatives are highlighted. By engaging the cultural politics of social justice within the field of contemporary pastoral theology, areas of epistemological obfuscation within the current perspective are brought to light, in hope of opening space for constructive responses that do not negate the important strides towards justice-making that have already been made.

The current model of Protestant liberal pastoral theology strives for social justice ideals that are embedded within larger social and philosophical discourses about modern society. These social justice ideals are often separated from ecological concerns or placed in competition with each other because of their epistemological history. Many of the hermeneutical frameworks shaping pastoral theological interpretations of social justice within the Christian tradition emerged from the social and philosophical mores of the period from the Enlightenment through the Industrial Revolution.<sup>19</sup> The epistemological stance known as *critical humanism* can be traced through significant streams of the pastoral theological emphasis on social justice. While critical humanism and pastoral theology should not be conflated, the influence of this theory on discourses of justice has shaped many of the ways justice is framed and enacted in the current pastoral theological context. *Critical humanism* is characterized by:

- Belief that social institutions are socially constructed and that they are value-laden rather than value neutral;
- Criticism of the unequal power relationships in current social institutions and the resultant inequities;
- Advocacy for social and institutional change to overcome these injustices.<sup>20</sup>

The greatest challenge of a critical humanist stance in contemporary society is its implicit anthropocentrism. Its ideals developed in a time when global planetary crisis had not yet emerged as a threat to the flourishing of life; hence, it is limited in its ability to address these concerns unless critically reflected upon. Respect for these social values and the many goods they bring about also means that ability to criticize humanist institutions and beliefs becomes a challenge. Their hegemonic power may continue to restrict and oppress counter-cultural politics

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<sup>19</sup> See Christie Neuger's "Power and Difference" in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 65-85; and Gail Furman and David Gruenewald, "Expanding the Landscape of Social Justice: A Critical Ecological Analysis," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 40 (2004): 47-76 for connections between justice ideals developed in modernity and how they inform theological and educational practices, respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Furman and Gruenewald "Expanding the Landscape of Social Justice," 50.

and individual creative expression even when marginalized groups and discourses ostensibly have equal access.

From an ecological perspective, social justice rhetoric is incomplete in that it fails to recognize the interdependence and interrelationship of life due to its exclusively human focus. Such anthropocentrism further legitimates existing cultural patterns (e.g., consumerism and belief in unlimited economic growth potential), while failing to grasp the wider embodied and emplaced context in which social justice is enacted. The effects of ecologically destructive patterns of living on all life systems certainly influences the potential for social justice to occur, and the effects of ecological devastation are felt most keenly by persons experiencing social marginalization. The thorny problem of anthropocentrism exists as a largely hidden specter in a network of hierarchical power enforcement. By advocating only for social justice in a time of increasing ecological devastation, we may further entrench vulnerable persons and ecosystems into suffering.

Pastoral theologians must forthrightly engage the ecological context of our social world or risk, at best, inadequate responses to issues of justice, and, at worst, continued collusion with the ecological destruction causing present and future suffering for everykind. Examining pastoral theologians historical understandings of care in the past century highlights the contextual shifts inviting wider paradigms for care.

The field of pastoral care and early pastoral theology was guided for a significant part of the twentieth century by Anton Boisen's metaphor of the "living human document."<sup>21</sup> As the

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<sup>21</sup> Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (Chicago, New York: Willet, Clark, and Company, 1936). Boisen popularized the use of the term "living human document," though it appears he may have appropriated without citation William James' use of the descriptor *documents humains* in his illustrations of the experiences of psychiatric patients in his well-known *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

context of the field began to shift, so too did its guiding ideals and metaphors. Archie Smith introduced the concept of “web” as a metaphor signaling the importance of relational interconnectedness in his 1982 text, *The Relational Self*. He connects social transformation, spiritual freedom, and psychic wholeness through his experiences working for these types of flourishing within African American faith communities.<sup>22</sup> Smith’s relational paradigm sought to link the transformation of selves and societies through the healing vehicle of communities; this relational approach offered an important methodological shift for pastoral theologians, though it took approximately ten years for this perspective to be a key framework. In the mid-nineties, Bonnie Miller-McLemore further shifted the discourse of the field by adapting and expanding the metaphor of “web” towards the metaphor of “living human web.”<sup>23</sup> This shift acknowledged the relationship of social discourses and public policy as they relate to persons’ well being, and helped foster the emerging plethora of relational, justice-oriented pastoral theologies with liberative and transformative intentions. Miller-McLemore’s work exemplified a burgeoning trajectory of the field, as the extension of “relational humanness” towards “relational justice” became increasingly significant in pastoral theological discourse.<sup>24</sup>

To retain the connection between ecological and social justice, a broader frame is needed. Attending to the *web of life* in our work and play helps usher in new kinds of relationship, fostering kinship with the more-than-human world. Decentering humanity’s position from the

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<sup>22</sup> Archie Smith, Jr. *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982.

<sup>23</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The Human Web: Reflections on the State of Pastoral Theology,” in *Christian Century*, 110 (7 April 1993): 366-369.

<sup>24</sup> See Larry K. Graham’s “From Relational Humanness to Relational Justice: Reconceiving Pastoral Care and Counseling,” in *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict*, ed. Pam Couture and Rodney Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 220-234; and Nancy Ramsay’s “A Time of Ferment and Redefinition,” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 1-43.



center of the web offers a metaphorical first step toward practices of just love inclusive of all creation. Nearly twenty years have passed since the advent of the “living human web” as a guiding image for pastoral theologians, and much has been gained in terms of working to shift theologies discursively and practically towards just relationships in a world so oriented towards hierarchical patterns of domination. Yet, the taken-for-granted notion that humanity is the pinnacle of creation remains a largely unquestioned nexus of hierarchical power-in-relationship. This requires a thorough exploration of how we might dismantle this kind of relating and invite relationships of ecological kinship with the whole web of life.

### Ecological Engagement in Pastoral Theology

Pastoral theologians and pastoral counselors have already begun the work of shifting towards interpreting human theological experience within the context of the embodied, physical natural world. Most explicitly, Howard Clinebell’s work developing a model of ecotherapy and ecoeducation in the early 1990’s left a prescient mark on the field. His primary work in this area, *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* prophetically called for an ecological shift in human engagement with the natural world, citing the power of childhood connections to the natural world and the need for reconnection to such sacred experiences throughout life, both for human wholeness and to foster the wholeness of the Earth through involvement in preventing and mending ecological suffering. He also calls for the scholarly engagement of pastoral theologians in a 1996 essay for the International Pastoral Care Network for Social Responsibility Conference, saying, “If our field is to make special contributions to saving the earth for all the human family’s children, we must enlarge the evolving paradigms which guide us. We must add a strong eco-justice dimension to both pastoral theology and care.”<sup>25</sup> Prior to the publication of

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Clinebell, “Healing Violence Against Persons by Healing Violence Against the Earth: Pastoral Theologians and Caregivers Respond to the Global Ego-Justice Crisis,” in *Pastoral Theology & Pastoral*

Clinebell's method, Larry Graham's 1992 text *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds* outlines a method for pastoral theological engagement inclusive of the natural order as a layer for understanding human experience. Graham places partnership with the natural world within the purview of Christian ministry, claiming that "the general purposes of the ministry of care are to increase the love of self, God and neighbor, and to enable care-seekers to develop the capacity to work for a just social order and to engage in partnership with the natural order."<sup>26</sup> Graham's work makes methodological and theological space for pastoral theological engagement with the more-than-human world, yet stops short of offering theological analysis or ministry implications for transformatively engaging this layer in method and ministry. Most recently, Barbara McClure acknowledges in *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling* that ecological concerns belong within the "purview and responsibility" of pastoral theological engagement, and that Clinebell's work brings significant insight to the field.<sup>27</sup> Her mention acknowledges the significance of an ecological worldview, but does not explicitly connect the widespread consequences of extreme individualism to the web of life beyond human threads.

These scholars have created significant space for theological dialogue with ecologically oriented disciplines, but to date there have been no substantive pastoral theological proposals at the confluence of environmental crisis and human spirituality/religious practice. Research and theological reflection around the effects of ecological crisis on lived religion is still needed, and language that draws social and ecological justice concerns together theologically is limited.

Much work remains to create rich theological anthropologies of human embeddedness in the web

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*Psychology's Contributions to Helping Heal a Violent World* (Surakarta, Indonesia: DABARA Publishers, 1996), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Larry Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 48.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Reflections on Theory, Theology, and Practice* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 217.

of life, dependent in every moment on our physical environment, and around the implications this has for models of care. The influence of particular eschatologies and anthropologies, or hoping paradigms, on faith praxis in the present is also uncertain; the connection of hope to religious environmental activism is of particular interest in this study.

### **Significance of Study**

The importance of this study falls into three broad categories: fostering critical theological dialogue in light of contextual responses to ecological crisis; providing generative possibilities for congregational and community leaders working wishing to foster ecological engagement within congregational contexts; and fostering pastoral theological engagement of the ecological dimension of human experience. Disclosing theological meanings embedded in faithful responses to ecological crises validates and normalizes such acts of faith, and increases the likelihood that others may join in this kind of work. While responses such as those being studied here are comparatively rare at this point, they are growing in importance and offer fresh insights into theological engagement, pointing to novel and significant ways of being faithful in changing times. The constructive theological possibilities offered in later chapters demonstrate the complexity of embodied hoping paradigms at the nexus of theological anthropology, eschatology, and spiritual praxis, and offer a theological framework for planetary pastoral theologies grounded in commitments to the interconnected web of life. These theological perspectives invite us to view care as *intersystemic engagement*. Widening the scope for care through an intersystemic method of engaging the tensions between different systems of flourishing clarifies possibilities for naming the various theological values and ethical norms implied through specific acts of religious environmental praxis.

For faith leaders fostering ecological engagement in their communities, these responses of theological praxis may fuel constructive dialogue and participation around ecological injustice. The church has always been called to stand with those who suffer in solidarity and hope, and the shift towards understanding Earth as a suffering member of creation, a subject among subjects, is an important paradigm shift for the wider faith community. Communities engaged in religious environmentalism display a novel embodiment of the connection between the Christian missional call and understandings of justice and transformation within the tradition, which bear further exploration and reflection.

Finally, pastoral theologians can broaden their reflection and engagement with human experience through engaging its ecological dimensions. Shifting to an ecological paradigm has theological implications that begin with understanding human selves as inextricably embedded in a web of life that stretches across species and across time. Pastoral theology's historical focus on social justice can become more inclusive through expanding our theological anthropologies. This study displays the interwoven nature of social and ecological justice concerns, highlighting the interconnectedness of our embodied, creaturely human experience. Moving towards a planetary pastoral theology of intersystemic flourishing acknowledges both that competing needs exist, and that creativity is needed to justly engage these tensions.

While I have named these implications as significant focal points for this study, the interdisciplinary nature of the project and the richness of the material found in the research process implies that readers of its results will undoubtedly find additional areas of dialogue and reflection to be engaged from the narratives explored for reflection.

## Dissertation Map

This introductory chapter was designed to provide the cultural, theological, and pastoral theological context that gave rise to the dissertation. Chapter 2 provides a thorough engagement of method, describing how my own epistemological norms shape the project, the use of ethnography to collect and study the experiences of religious environmental groups, and my use of pastoral theological method for collating the multiple perspectives and experiences into a process of constructive theological reflection. Chapter 3 provides a literature review of three significant areas for theological reflection emerging from this study. By engaging the complex notion of practices, ecological frameworks for justice, and the future stories implied by eschatologies, we are able to further enter the theological worldviews supporting religious environmental activism. This chapter supplies the basis for working understandings within the concept of hoping paradigms and ecological transformation engaged throughout the dissertation. Reflection on the narratives of religious environmental groups occurs primarily through three conceptual lenses related to the hoping paradigms described earlier: religious and spiritual practices, ecological justice, and anthropological-eschatological belief systems. Hoping paradigms, which occur at the nexus of theological anthropology, spiritual praxis, and eschatology, describe who we are, who we hope to be, and how we might get there. The concepts in Chapter 3 resonate with the theological praxis of the congregational groups in the study, providing language through which these stories signal ecological and theological identity shifts in the broader church. The complex interrelationship of theological worldviews and spiritual praxis leads me to define these concepts together as “hoping paradigms.”

Chapters four through six are brief ethnographies of the religious environmental groups participating in the study. They explore the unique contexts and religious environmental praxis

of the three congregational groups, presenting a rich and detailed portrait of each group's work together. Each parish context reflects a different Protestant denominational heritage, a different geographic context and a different focus for their religious environmental work, thereby enhancing the potential for a diverse range of theological embodiments of ecological commitments.<sup>28</sup> These chapters are both richly descriptive and disclosive; portraying the groups' understandings of how their various theological worldviews and religious environmental praxis are inseparable in experience and how they dynamically impact the ways these groups engage difficult issues. They are also constructive at the level of each particular narrative, considering theological and pastoral responses that might further the work of the groups. Chapter 4 explores the praxis of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church as they form their new Creation Care Team and host a conference on environmental justice issues for area Lutherans. Their hoping paradigm of making a difference through ecological discipleship and partnership with God supports their work and their process of constructing a shared purpose. Their experiences invite constructive theological reflection genesis and process of shared hoping paradigms, and how these contribute to praxis in faith communities. Chapter 5 examines a progressive Baptist commitment to sustainability and climate change awareness, including their role in co-hosting a regional interfaith conference for those interested in religious environmentalism focused on the area of climate change. Their hoping paradigm of "organic" community action is grounded in relationships of support and empowerment and fostered by their commitment to love and respect the whole web of life. Their narratives foster a critical dialogue about the role of climate change discourses and apocalypticism in Christian praxis. Chapter 6 describes the vibrant dedication of Central Texas Episcopal Church's Environmental Guild to sustainability efforts and biodiversity,

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<sup>28</sup> While the theological embodiments were somewhat diverse within the range of the Protestant tradition, one of the limitations of this study was the similar racial and class demographics of the participating cohorts. The cohorts in the study are almost completely Euro-American professional class older adults.

illustrated by their Earth Day service of dedication for their newly developed urban wildlife habitat. Their hoping paradigm of sacramental living and advocating for all creation's right to flourish is supported by their commitment to loving hospitality for the whole web of life. This fosters a constructive theology of relational justice in an ecological key.

The final chapter draws the narratives together for consideration of these invite a reshaping of the social imaginary and planetary pastoral theologies. It describes interplay between religious environmental work and the theological *hoping paradigms* through engaging their complex, particular, and relational character. This kind of emerging praxis carries the possibility of transformation through the narratives of local communities, causing small cracks throughout the anthropocentric social imaginary of Western-identified cultures. The experiences of the three cohorts in this study point to the significance of tying ecological discourses of interconnectedness towards theological anthropologies, creating "sustainable" understandings of humanity's interrelationship for our context of planetary suffering. Such anthropologies fund pastoral theology in a planetary key, promoting care through intersystemic engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Hoping paradigms provide a way for people to live out their hopes for the future in the present moment. As we attend more fully to our ecological context, our hopes for the future must lean in to these planetary concerns. The praxis of these religious environmental cohorts and the hoping paradigms supporting this work represent a range of Christian responses to the myriad ecological concerns of our current context. Considering what invites and sustains these vibrant expressions of faith opens a host of questions, ranging from the practical (how might this look in my community?) to the speculative-eschatological (do these actions matter? What will become of

humanity?), to the methodological (How does this invite us to think differently?). No definitive answers, even in the realm of the “practical,” can be claimed in such a complex system of stories, communities, geographies, and theologies. Yet, I hope that willingness to engage the conversation with curiosity and courage will take us further into contextually just expressions of our relationality. The very fact that I was able to find groups for whom this subject matters points to an always-contextualized ground for hope as the caring action of intersystemic engagement. Such involvement makes space for the flourishing of all participants in creation’s local ecosystems. These may also invite wiser enactments of justice for our whole planetary community of neighbors, and a transformation of the web of life through our embodied acts of planetary love.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A CORRELATIVE METHOD: DIALOGUE BETWEEN ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSES AND PASTORAL THEOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

Method, broadly stated, is the way in which one goes about something. Thorough description of method indicates the process by which conclusions are made, and clarifies the implicit hermeneutical perspective from which a particular project is engaged.<sup>29</sup> Pastoral theological method takes human experience seriously, viewing it as constitutive of theological worldviews. This pastoral theological dissertation participates in the methodological conversations unfolding in the field regarding how to relate particular human experiences, adjunct disciplines, theological traditions, the context in which the experience takes place, and intentional consideration for identifying and weighing the various norms at work in the construction of theory and practices. It is also intentionally framed as “public theology,” examining the ways broad cultural discourses are implicated in the suffering of those people, places and creatures at the ecological margins.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This is particularly important in fields such as theology, where “Truth” has historically been used as a weapon to control, violate, and erase identities. Clear disclosure of the subjective, constructed nature of truth claims may invite dialogue and participate in the construction and application of such claims within particular communities. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas’ notion of “ideal speech communities,” and Seyla Benhabib’s notion of the tension between the concrete and generalized Other.

<sup>30</sup> See Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the ‘Fourth Area,’” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 45-64 for a detailed description of the emergence of public theology as the critical examination of how the public and private sectors intertwine to promote or diminish human flourishing.

This project uses ethnographic methods to garner rich descriptions of the experiences of religious environmental groups, and places them in the midst of a mutually critical conversation between theological discourses and contextually relevant ecological discourses. Conversations of this sort bring forth potential spiritual praxis that embodies life-giving relationships between people of faith and the ecosystems in which they are embedded. From these experiences, constructive pastoral theologies shaped by the turn to interconnectedness in the ecological paradigm emerge.

A clear method accounts for the aim of a project within a particular context, the vital components of method congruent with that context, the authoritative weight given to those components within a specific project, and the reflective process unfolding during the research process. The following outlines how these items develop within this dissertation, beginning with a description of the project's aim within a pastoral theological context.

### **Project Aims in Pastoral Theological Context**

This dissertation addresses the following research questions:

- What are the hoping paradigms of particular religious environmental groups?
- How do these paradigms support and inform the praxis of the groups?
- How do commitments to ecological interconnectedness foster transformative theological engagement?
- What are the constructive possibilities for pastoral theologians engaging in theological reflection and care that is planetary in scope?

These questions emerge in part due to my own identity as a religious environmentalist, and in part due to my formation and training as a pastoral theologian. My ecosocial location as a highly educated Euro-American woman of the middle class living in urban North Texas certainly informs these questions as well. Pastoral theology is “contextual theology funded by critical

engagement in acts of care or response to needs posed for such care,”<sup>31</sup> focusing on the “care-giving activities of God and human communities.”<sup>32</sup> Pastoral theology has historically explored human experience as a source of theological wisdom, placing this experience in critical dialogue with theological traditions and with relevant interdisciplinary partners. In this way, pastoral theologians construct contextually relevant responses to questions of faithful praxis in particular contexts. Emphasis on particular and concrete experiences within a given context, on how faith communities define caregiving for themselves, and on creating constructive theological responses creates space for this dissertation, though recent paradigm shifts within the field make it especially germane.

#### Interdisciplinary Dialogue: The Influence of Tracy’s Revisionist Model

The historical focus of pastoral theologians on the dialogue between human experience and theological meaning took a decisive turn with David Tracy’s articulation of a revisionist model of correlation in his 1975 text *Blessed Rage for Order*. He argues that for Christian theologians to authentically attend to the demands of pluralism and secularity, mutual dialogue must take place between human experiences and the Christian tradition. These shifts, he notes, are not new ideals for the theological task (liberation, in his articulation), but rather methodological resources for the revision of Christian praxis that enable its legitimacy in a post-secular context.<sup>33</sup> This is a particularly potent method for this project, with its frank engagement of the dialogue between ecological discourses and theological meaning making. A critical

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy Ramsay, “A Time of Ferment and Redefinition,” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>33</sup> David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 33-34.

dialogue between theology and several of the ecological discourses fostering the environmental movement prepares the way for the construction of proposed theological hoping paradigms present in religious environmental engagement.

In addition to its focus on mutually critical dialogue between disciplines, the revisionist method produced a renewed focus on theological claims within pastoral theology, particularly those emerging from the context of communities of faith. Don Browning's focus and development of this method in the 1980's and 1990's was one of the primary catalysts for shifting pastoral and practical theology away from its enmeshment with individualized, psychological paradigms of human flourishing. Through theological reflection, he believed communities could determine if their faith practices sync with their theological norms, and move intentionally from "theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices."<sup>34</sup> His emphasis on the intentional construction of normative communal morality is limited in its view of theology as a universalizing system of ethics and in its failure to attend to contextuality in the construction of moral norms. In spite of this, it invites communities towards a definitive and agential stance as theological actors.

Elaine Graham's continued engagement with this methodological trajectory highlighted the discursive power of particular communities at work in the construction and enactment of theological commitments. Her form of critical correlation falls into Rebecca Chopp's description of "emancipatory praxis," in which the hermeneutical process in theological reflection is in the service of liberation, focused on the praxis of present and future communities

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<sup>34</sup> Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 7.

as the primary locus of theological authority.<sup>35</sup> By locating the power for theological meaning making at the level of local and particular communities, she brings the agents and subjects of pastoral theology and care into question. If who authors and receives care is questioned, the aims of pastoral care, influentially articulated as healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling, are also questioned.<sup>36</sup> This shift away from a singular focus on individual care transactions towards a wider understanding of care as 1) embedded within the whole of Christian praxis, and 2) enacted by the community of faith makes this project possible.<sup>37</sup>

Recognizing the value of religious environmental praxis as acts of care towards the wider human and more-than-human community would not have been possible in mid-twentieth century pastoral care. Opening up a comparatively new area for pastoral theological reflection by engaging ecology as a partner discipline has its own complications. Relatively few dialogue partners in the immediate context of pastoral theology means I risk missing significant areas for reflection due to the limitations of my own perspective. While the dialogue between ecological discourses and pastoral theology is new, the ways that study participants have transformatively engaged them suggests they hold much promise for expanding our notions of theological anthropology, relational justice, and hope. The workings of the correlational dialogue unfolding in this project are forthcoming in the section on pastoral theological analysis.

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<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 79-84.

<sup>36</sup> William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964). In this text, they argue that healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling are the primary markers of Christian pastoral care over the centuries, and that particular epochs had particular foci. While their definition can be critiqued on a number of levels, (problem focused, individualized, existential in orientation), it has had a formative effect on the self-understanding of the fields of pastoral theology, care, and counseling.

<sup>37</sup> Elaine Graham's description of cultural shifts and their impact on pastoral care significantly shapes my understanding of communities as agent of care. In this frame, the role of the pastor shifts away from guide and authority for personal moral obligation and/or individual fulfillment towards the empowerment of communities and the interpretation of traditions in a given context. See *Transforming Practice* for a more thorough engagement with these ideas.

### **The Components of Pastoral Theological Method**

A second indicator for a clear articulation of pastoral theological method is naming the components engaged in the process of research and reflection. Joretta Marshall's description of the components of pastoral theological method resonates throughout the data analysis portion of this study. She contends that pastoral theologians must account for five components in their use of method: 1) the implicit role of theology; 2) the relationship between fields and disciplines outside of religion or theology; 3) the role of communities and contexts; 4) the integration of theory and practice (praxis); and 5) the role of experience of individuals and communities.<sup>38</sup> The interplay of these five areas is consistently visible throughout the chapters describing the research and the emergent theological constructs. There is not a linear connection between these areas; instead, the weighting of these components in this project varies not only in the character and identity of the communities studied, but in their own continually transforming community identities. Additionally, my own social and ecological location as a researcher invariably effects how I interpret the confluence of these components in the course of this project. The role of my own authoritative sources for interpretation is an important one; these sources are explicitly described in the following section.

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<sup>38</sup> Joretta Marshall, "Methods in Pastoral Theology, Care and Counseling," in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 133-154.

### **Methodological Assumptions: Weighing the Roles of Liberative Eschatologies, Postmodern Epistemologies, Narrative Particularity**

The insights of liberation theologies, postmodern epistemologies, and narrative particularity significantly influence the lens through which my scholarly constructions emerge. The following details the primary discourses shaping my constructive theological analysis in this dissertation. Letty Russell and other feminist and womanist understandings of eschatological liberation are present in my focus on hoping paradigms. The embrace of alterity and provisionality in postmodern schools of thought, and the enactment of local, particular identities valued by narrative theorists and ethnographers provide a necessary caution regarding the discursive and normative power of any ideology. I hope that the following exploration of my own hermeneutical keys provides insight into the forces shaping the theological constructions emerging from this project.

#### Eschatological and Liberation Discourses: Letty Russell, Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theologies

This project directly engages frightening global problems. The liberationist eschatologies shaping this work lend me the determination of courageous persons invoking possible futures, even when their various hopes are slim and fragile.<sup>39</sup> Ideas of liberation and eschatology are connected through their visioning of possible futures, and their wrestling with human agency in the invocation of such futures. The discourses I review in this section shape my work in their display of a praxis-oriented synergy of lived theologies seeking a future of unexpected reversals, in spite of the despair invited by dominant cultural discourses. Letty Russell's eschatologically

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<sup>39</sup> Among those involved in various liberationist pursuits, hope is not optimism that all will be well, so much as the moral and ethical commitment to discern and attempt to invite futures in which flourishing of various kinds may be possible.

driven method and the critical work of a host of feminist and womanist pastoral theologians strengthen my own aims of ecological partnership and social justice.

Feminist theologian Letty Russell is a foremother of feminist liberationist theologies. Russell takes hold of Kant's third question, "[For] what may I hope?," and turns it inside-out.<sup>40</sup> Moving from an individualized model of rational morality, Russell instead espouses a transformative communal hope. Her commitment to temporal, eschatological transformation is equally rooted in her ministry experiences partnering with the urban poor of East Harlem, and in the message of love and justice she reads at the heart of the Christian gospel. Russell's key commitments can be summed up into two of her methodological practices: "thinking from the other end," and "thinking socially from the bottom."

"Thinking from the other end" is Russell's conviction that working from the perspective of God's redemption is imperative to the liberating work of the Christian tradition. Deeply influenced by Jürgen Moltmann, Russell names the transformed New Creation as "a revolution in which everyone wins."<sup>41</sup> She refuses to leave behind the oppressors, though her praxis is one of thoroughgoing solidarity with those oppressed by racist and classist social structures. Russell's liberationist perspective is provocative in her determination to hold on to the prophetic-messianic strands of the Christian tradition as a vehicle of transformation, in spite of the many ways the tradition has colluded with oppressive social structures. She reads the Bible as God's

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<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans./eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Near the end of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he poses three questions as a heuristic for the scope of his philosophical project, claiming that his interests in pure and practical reason come together in the queries "What can I know?," "What ought I to do?," and "[For] what may I hope?" Kant's hopes are for eschatological happiness in God and for life beyond death, and are necessary components for the possibility of an individual's moral life, ensuring the worthwhileness of morality even if happiness in one's finite lifetime is elusive.

<sup>41</sup> Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 20.



intention for the mending of Creation, embodying a critical liberationist hermeneutic that filters out the multiple textual voices that are contrary to the transformation she highlights as God's intention for humanity.

Russell's theological horizon of eschatological transformation is met and matched by her commitment to marginalized persons and communities in "thinking from the bottom." By inquiring who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged in particular systems and contexts, she demonstrates the theological significance of experience from the margins. Russell recognizes her positions as one of ambiguity: as a white woman, she is privileged by class and race, yet marginalized by her gender. She frames her work with those oppressed by race and class as that of conversion out of privilege and into partnership, work that can only take place through genuine listening and learning from women and men of oppressed races and classes.<sup>42</sup>

Russell's commitment to an active human partnership in God's liberating activity and her thoroughgoing commitment to a transformed New Creation provide theological perspective for this project in my analysis of the transformative actions of the communities in this study. This frame influences and strengthens my own commitment to ask about the nature of ecological hope, and to think from the ecological and social margins of the world. The limits of her commitments for this project lie in her exclusive focus on human liberation, and in her tendency to universalize the concept of justice for all people. This is in tension with the ecological scope of this project, and with my own commitment to the contextuality and provisionality of human interpretations of justice.

Feminist and womanist pastoral theologians have worked vigilantly since the mid-1960's to broaden the paradigms of pastoral theology towards contextual, experiential, and justice-

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<sup>42</sup> Letty Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 49-51.

oriented methods.<sup>43</sup> Pastoral theologians have historically embraced interdisciplinary methods as an identifying characteristic of the field; these same methods and openness to women's experience allowed for questions of epistemology to shake the hold of the clerical and clinical paradigms dominating mid-twentieth century approaches to pastoral theology.<sup>44</sup>

Three significant concepts from feminist and womanist pastoral theology inform this dissertation: critical relationality, contextuality, and intersubjective power/agency. First, The ability to form and maintain interpersonal relationships, Christie Neuger reminds, is a particular strength assigned to women in dominant cultural discourses.<sup>45</sup> Understanding and valuing this ability is important, though criticality regarding the potential to essentialize all women as "intrinsically relational" is key. Also significant is the potential for women to feel burdened by the caregiving task of nurturing and maintaining relationships. Critical relationality is an important lens for engaging religious environmental work, inviting reflection upon the ways in which human connections to the more-than-human world can both nurture and burden the work of religious environmentalists.

Second, Carroll Watkins Ali makes the case for contextuality based on her experience as a womanist pastoral theologian whose experience is not adequately represented apart from

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<sup>43</sup> Kathleen Greider, Gloria Johnson, and Kristen Leslie, "Three Decades of Women Writing for Our Lives" in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 21-50, offers a historical analysis of women's writings in pastoral theology, care and counseling and the role of these writings in shaping a communal contextual paradigm for pastoral theologians.

<sup>44</sup> See Miller-McLemore, "Pastoral Theology as Public Theology," in which she argues that the influence of the Chicago school through various forms of Tillich's correlative method, and especially the influence of liberation theologies through their focus on power relationships and marginalized persons, indelibly shifted the character of the field towards public theology. I agree with McLemore that openness to these discourses helped shift the identity of the field, and further argue that emphasizing these discourses created a professional and theological home for many feminist and womanist scholars.

<sup>45</sup> Christie Neuger, "Women and Relationality," in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 130-31.

valuing her experience as a woman of color.<sup>46</sup> Contextual perspectives remind scholars, particularly scholars such as myself who are privileged in some way, of the harm done by reducing and essentializing human experience. Contextuality makes space for unique configuration of individual and communal experiences, and should privilege those voices and contexts that are submerged by dominant cultural discourses. Religious environmentalism cannot be understood apart from ecological contextuality; the work of groups and individuals begins in their own local experiences, which offer valuable theological insight if careful listening is done.

A third claim from feminist and womanist pastoral theologians is that deconstructing hierarchical abuses of power is a primary obligation for liberative theological constructions. Feminist and womanist pastoral theologians have specifically attended to the ways patriarchy and white privilege shape women's lives in complex (and often harmful) ways, particularly through projects focusing on women's experiences, critiques of classic texts and theories in pastoral theology, and reconstructing particular topics in a feminist pastoral theological way.<sup>47</sup> The focus on liberating relationships from oppressive hierarchies towards relationships of respect and kinship has significant resonance in this project, though the scope is broader. Feminist and womanist pastoral theologies, like those of Letty Russell, are explicitly transformative and justice-oriented in their intentions. Kwok Pui-lan offers an important caveat to this approach, reminding us that "the construction of women's hope for themselves and for nature is largely dependent on their social location and historical background. The questions 'Who are the

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<sup>46</sup> Carroll Watkins Ali, "A Womanist Search for Sources," in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Miller-McLemore and Gill Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 63-64.

<sup>47</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology," in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 88-89.

women?’ ‘Whose nature?’ and ‘Whose hope?’ must be constantly kept in mind.”<sup>48</sup> The influence of transformative liberation theologies as a source for this project are both augmented and critiqued by aspects of postmodern discourse.

### Postmodern Provisionality, Communities, and Alterity

A second theoretical lens forming this project is the attention to discursive power and invitation to disclose alterity found in postmodern theology and philosophy. In examining the tension between liberation hermeneutics and socio-pragmatic hermeneutics, Anthony Thiselton notes that the key weakness of emancipatory critiques is their tendency to universalize justice claims.<sup>49</sup> Often, liberation discourses reach beyond the horizon of particular communities and contexts, admirably seeking a universal transformation of all life (e.g., Letty Russell’s embrace of the New Creation threading through Christian theologies). This becomes problematic, as criteria for what counts as “good” and “just” is relative to the ideals of given communities. From the perspective of postmodern scholars, particular communities are transformed in dynamic relationship across uniquely unfolding experiences of difference. The following briefly describes the postmodern condition and relevant areas of influence for pastoral theologians and for this particular project.

The phenomena described under the postmodern umbrella are a critical corrective to the totalizing narratives emerging from Enlightenment era philosophies. Postmodernism disputes universalizing epistemologies of truth, human nature, power, identity, and language through deconstructive and reconstructive dialogues emphasizing the provisionality of knowledge as an avenue towards valuing alterity. The argument for postmodern worldviews can be described

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<sup>48</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, “Mending of Creation,” in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty Russell*, eds. Margaret Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 145.

<sup>49</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 7.

thus: All knowledge production is expression of situated human power, leading to a suspicion of universal truth claims and the idea of detached, rational observers. This invites a re-visioning of knowledge and meaning as an intersubjective process of persons and communities embodying and continually reinterpreting normative values through specific, concrete praxis. This plurality of knowledges invites a valuing of diverse expression and alternative identities, making space for the identity of others with the aim of inviting relational interchange and transparent dialogue. Two key values emerge from this philosophical frame that bear significantly upon this dissertation: the concept of knowledge as provisional and particular, and that encountering difference potentiates transformation.

Suspicion cast upon epistemological foundationalism ushered in esteem for contextualized knowledges, emphasizing the ways language constitutes human realities and how accessing participation in various discourses shapes the character of knowledge and its real effects on the experiences of our planetary system. Kevin Vanhoozer identifies one of the key contributions of postmodernism as the demystification of reason, noting that “postmodern iconoclasts do not abandon reason; they merely remove it from its pedestal and situate it. To locate an ideology or conceptual system in the rough and tumble of human history, culture and politics is, of course, to demystify it.”<sup>50</sup> Rather than metaphysical claims of universal knowledge to be found “out there,” the truths of communities are embodied and enacted from within, located in the “provisional – yet binding – strategies of normative action and community within which shared commitments might be negotiated and put to work.”<sup>51</sup> This value syncs with

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<sup>50</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>51</sup> Elaine Graham, “Pastoral Theology as Transforming Practice” in *Words Made Flesh: Writings in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 158.

this project in two ways: with the long-standing pastoral theological commitment to particular human experience, and with the research focusing on expressions of religious environmental praxis in local faith communities. It also acknowledges the limits of my work: this project is clearly constituted from my particular vantage point, and can offer no universalizing claims to application.

A second postmodern touchstone is the notion of encountering alterity. The notion that dialogue promotes liberative transformation is balanced in postmodern thought through the recognition that there is a radical encounter with otherness at the heart of every communication.<sup>52</sup> Openness to such radical alterity requires a disclosive ethics and politics, so that knowledge is continually recognized as situated and not normative. There can be no pretense of intellectual neutrality, or positioning of persons as detached observers of experience. Only then may an invitation for the disclosure of alterity be truly possible. The potential for violence in the recognition that the other cannot be forced into dominant norms or made into our own images exposes power at work in discursive encounters. Two claims are particularly important from my perspective. The first claim is ethical in nature: openness to alterity means that I am willing to be transformed in unexpected and surprising ways through the encounters I have as a scholar-researcher; I cannot hope to control the outcomes of the project, though I most assuredly influence them. The second claim is explicitly theological: in valuing alterity, I affirm that the mystery called God is something uncontained by any particular perspective, though it is surely glimpsed and sometimes described in our transformational encounters with difference. These perspectives are guiding ideals in my role as a researcher, and I have strived to embody

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<sup>52</sup> Both Derrida and Benhabib address this concept; Derrida through the notion of identity erasure that happens through linguistic assumptions, and Benhabib through her encounter of the concrete other, whose particularity cannot be contained.

them in my conversations with people and in my experiences with the more-than-human world, with its revelation of profound alterities to human experience.

#### Narrative Construction of Particular Identities

The constitution of identities through the embodied praxis of communities is the final set of guiding claims for this project. Ethnography and narrative theory have been my primary influences in exercising this claim, through the emphasis on description and participation as research norms, as well as the narrative conviction that language discursively creates the social realities in which persons and communities enact their identities.

The philosophical stances of ethnographers, though varied, cluster around commitments to the thorough description of lived experience through participation in the lives of the persons and communities engaged as research subjects. Implicit within these commitments are two key convictions: First, methods of description rather than those of prescription acknowledge that religious experiences are complex and diverse, not easily captured by quantitative methods or the study of doctrine alone. Methods of description offer windows into the tension between personal agency in the interpretation and embodiment of religious traditions and the transmission of institutional mores. Thorough description illuminates how religious praxis is translated from its institutional and traditional contexts into “lived religion.”<sup>53</sup> Second, the unique religious expressions developed in this tension call forth the need for pluralistic tolerance and the honoring of a multiplicity of experiences. The beneficence of religious praxis is weighed not through “correctness” of belief itself, but rather through how it functions in the lives of religious

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<sup>53</sup> The term “lived religion” is derived from French sociologists of religion (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu, Catherine Bell, Talal Assad), who emphasize how religion is replicated through practices in which social ties are built and preserved. This approach emphasizes power analysis in institutional transmission. A second approach found in the tradition of spiritual formation focuses on cultural adaptations of tradition to fit contextual shifts (e.g., Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, Stephanie Paulsell).

communities.<sup>54</sup> Key in my own embodiment of ethnographic values is the commitment to ask communities to make judgments about the helpfulness of their praxis for themselves, rather than interpreting their experiences for them. As a constructive pastoral theologian, I seek hermeneutical possibility for faithful and full Christian praxis, but through illustration of potentiality rather than claims to metaphysical reality. Such illustrations may have creative resonance, prompting more experiments in how faithful and full praxis gets embodied amidst constantly shifting contextual grounds.

Connected to the commitment to description is the notion of *storied identities*. Narrative counseling theory holds that human lives are made up of a multitude of events, many of which do not become part of our “stories.” Through a selective meaning-making process shaped by our social locations and personal histories, certain stories are collected to weave identity narratives. Communicating these narratives can invite evaluation of how these stories function, and potentially a search for other, submerged storylines more in keeping with the preferred identities named by persons and communities.<sup>55</sup> In seeking out narratives of hope related to religious environmental work, I am inviting and possibly reinforcing those aspects of community identity. This is a power-laden endeavor, and the very questions I ask shape the form the narratives take. The sense of storied identities is particularly congruent in a pastoral theological context, which comes together in the space between contextual human experience and the living, storied tradition of Christianity.

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<sup>54</sup> This pragmatic approach can be traced back to the philosophical pragmatism of Charles Peirce, as well as the psychology of religion perspective developed by William James (most clearly seen in *Varieties of Religious Experience*). This pragmatism has had a formative influence on the field of pastoral theology, with its historical curiosity around the effects of religious practices on human flourishing.

<sup>55</sup> For more on narrative counseling theory, see Alice Morgan, *What is Narrative Therapy? An Easy-to-Read Introduction* (Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000) for a primer, and Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) for a thorough explanation of the clinical and philosophical commitments of narrative therapy.



## Conclusions

The hermeneutical keys guiding this project are multiple and converge around transformational hopes enacted in particular community contexts. Scholars emphasizing eschatological dimensions of liberation, postmodern provisionality and agency, and narrative descriptions of particularity are those that resonate most clearly with my aims for this project. These concepts continue to surface in the schema for pastoral theological analysis and in the constructive proposals of this dissertation, and will resonate during the literature review in the next chapter. The following sections detail the ways in which these particular influences took shape in the form of the research process.

### **Method: Gathering the Narratives**

Method must account for the process of research as well as the assumptions behind it. This section summarizes qualitative pastoral ethnographic methods and their use in this dissertation. The method for collecting the narratives of ecological hope in this dissertation was shaped primarily by Sarah McFarland Taylor's research project shared in her work *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*, and by Mary Clark Moschella's text, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Because this study is primarily constructive pastoral theology inspired by accounts of particular phenomena, ethnographic methods provided an avenue whereby it was possible for me to gain vivid narratives and images through my participation with the research groups. Additionally, this type of research matches my own preferences for studying human experience. Ethnography considers participants in the research process to be partners in a dialogical process

of co-constructed meaning occurring in ongoing relationship, as opposed to objectifying research participants as subjects whose complex lives can be reduced to mere data.<sup>56</sup>

Ethnography is the telling of lives through the perspective gained from close encounters with those lives. Moschella describes it thus:

Ethnography is a form of social research used by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars to study living human beings in their social and cultural contexts. Participant observation is the hallmark of this kind of research. Ethnographers go to the places where people live, work, or pray in order to take in firsthand the experience of group life and social interactions...Ethnographers notice the material dimensions of life, the financial workings of an organization, the power-relations between people, as well as their poetic or artistic artifacts and expressions.<sup>57</sup>

Attention to the ways that the “telling of lives always changes those lives” helps the researcher stay mindful of the power implicit in the relationship between research and research participant.<sup>58</sup> Gathering stories through close encounters such as interviews and participant observation, with attention to the power involved in being an “outsider” eliciting a story, has some effect on the group.

Additionally, qualitative research is very much painted through the eyes of the researcher. Even the most thorough “thick descriptions” of community life come to be through the contextual lenses of the researcher, and the process of analyzing and interpreting the data adds more layers of interpretation to the process of ethnographic reporting.<sup>59</sup> Reflexive ethnographic

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<sup>56</sup> The research protocols described in this chapter were approved by Texas Christian University’s Internal Review Board, which seeks to ensure the safety and integrity of research participants.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>58</sup> Lynn Davidman, “Truth, Subjectivity, and Ethnographic Research,” in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James. Spickard, J.Shawn. Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>59</sup> The phrase “thick description” comes from the work of Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

research is always mindful that “there is no getting away from the reality that ethnography is a theory-laden endeavor that reflects the categories and presuppositions of the researcher.”<sup>60</sup>

Moschella likens the process to an impressionistic painting, saying, “an ethnographic narrative may be a beautiful and telling representation of the social life of a group, yet it always remains a construction, a story about the author’s experience of the group, and not the group’s shared social life itself.”<sup>61</sup> As a participant-observer in the research process, I elicit particular responses based on my identity as a pastoral theologian and ethnographer. While I sought to make space for the hoping paradigms and ecological praxis of the groups as much as possible, the ways I presented the research project, my relationship with the group, and the framing of questions for discussion all influenced how the story was told during the interview process. It is ethically imperative when engaging in this type of research to intentionally negotiate the space between the agency of the researcher and the group’s own telling of its story. While I have strived to honor the voices of group members at all times, these ethnographies remain my perspective of dynamic events, rather than the only truth of a particular set of circumstances.

Ethnography is limited by its choice to look deeply rather than broadly, as well as its preferences for methods of description rather than statistical weight. It is also limited in its temporal scope; while some ethnographies follow groups for a number of years, this one, by necessity, follows the cohorts for a particular season of their work. For the purposes of this study, three intimate portraits of activity and beliefs of religious environmental groups provide an overview of both the uniqueness of particular groups, and the diversity within these kinds of faith practices. By choosing groups from different Protestant Christian denominational

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<sup>60</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and geographic areas, the multiplicity of ways persons make theological sense of these practices is highlighted. Because the purpose of the dissertation is to create a rich description of how hoping paradigms influence practices of ecological justice-making, a small sample size is appropriate.<sup>62</sup>

This study was designed around qualitative interviews and observation processes influenced by the ethnographic models described above, in order to foster generative and collaborative input from religious environmental groups. After contacting and speaking to many groups, I selected groups from three Protestant congregations who are publicly engaging environmental issues, identifiable through public events held by the groups and accessible geographically to me as a researcher. By seeking diversely embodied practices of congregationally based religious environmentalism, I found groups willing to share their narratives of how the group practices arose and how different theological frameworks influenced their work together as groups.

After connecting with group leaders through public religious environmental networks, I arranged permission to engage the group through focus group interviews. During each group interview, we spent approximately two hours talking together about the history and identity of the group, and how participating in a congregationally based religious environmental group influences their theological framework, with a focus on questions of hope in the face of environmental challenges. Additionally, we discussed specific contextual information that shaped each group, such as demographic characteristics, and local environmental context.

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<sup>62</sup> See Jennifer Mason's *Qualitative Researching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Sage Publishing, 2002); and John Swinton and Harriet Mowat's *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2006), 120.

A second tool for creating rich and detailed portraits of the work of these religious environmental groups was participant observation. After connecting with group leaders, I attended particular functions of each group to develop a fuller picture of how the group embodies religious environmental practices. This combination of focus group interviews and participant observation invited thorough reflection and immersion in the spiritual meaning-making processes of these groups. It was an experience of close, time limited involvement, during which the groups honored my research by sharing their lives and faithful work with a relative outsider.

### **Reflection and Construction: Pastoral Theological Analysis**

This dissertation makes its constructive theological proposals through studying congregational acts of religious environmental care in relationship with ecologically marginalized persons and communities.<sup>63</sup> These narratives provide opportunity to reflect on the role of theologies in this transformative work, and what kind of reflective praxis is called forth as a result. This type of caring activity practices “public theology”: how these acts of care influence the theological, ecological, political, and social discourses of their particular communities is crucial to this dissertation and evident in the reflective process and theological proposals.<sup>64</sup>

Pastoral theologians offer a distinctively praxis-oriented methodology, beginning with experience and moving intentionally towards constructive theological proposals.<sup>65</sup> The metaphor of a “spiral” is frequently used, alluding to a process beginning and ending in concrete human

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<sup>63</sup> I define ecological marginalization the objectification and commodification of persons, places, animals, and other entities such that they are reduced to resources instead of subjects with unique social, biological, and geologic identities.

<sup>64</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the ‘Fourth Area,’” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996).

experiences shifting in temporal context. Emmanuel Lartey's description of the methodological spiral of pastoral theology offers a clear conceptual framework for understanding the reflective process of constructive pastoral theology. This cycle views theological reflection as a process, integrating the information from the data-gathering phase in critical dialogue with situational and theological discourses towards renewed praxis, and provides some of the shape for my method of presentation.<sup>66</sup>

#### Emmanuel Lartey's Cycle

Put into the schema of Lartey's spiral, pastoral theological reflection on the research data moves through several stages. This project takes the experience of faith communities seriously: by seeking *particular human experiences* in the form of collected narratives, observations, and emergent theological themes from each group, it is possible to describe how theologies are lived in the week-to-week identities of the groups. *Contextual analysis* is critical to the formation of constructive responses; consideration of cultural and ecological discourses influencing the hoping paradigms of the communities creates the opportunity for a critical correlational dialogue. Such inquiry sheds light on powerful discourses at work in the immediate social imaginaries of religious environmental groups. Careful *theological analysis* of how group members understand the involvement of God in the midst of their work, how congregants from these groups embody stated theological values through these practices, and the tensions and limits of their theological worldviews illustrates the narrative of their particular hoping paradigms. A notable piece of this schema for reflection is the *dialectic between situational discourses and pastoral theological discourses*, in which previous parts of the reflective cycle "question" each other. This could

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<sup>66</sup> These terms are drawn from Emmanuel Lartey's *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 75-76. See the entire chapter entitled "Methods of Pastoral Theology" for further exploration of the breadth of what informs pastoral theological method and the multiplicity of ways it can be engaged.

happen through asking about the effects of specific beliefs on the kinds of praxis that emerge, or about how discourses like climate science shape how theological interpretations are made. This inquiry focuses on the synergies and tensions between contexts and theological praxis, acknowledging the constant evolutions of this relationship. Finally, the *reflective practice* component articulates constructive theological responses in light of the encounter with contextual and theological analysis of the experiences. These responses are presented in the final chapter of the dissertation.

While the reflective spiral is a helpful schema in outlining key movements in the reflective process, theological reflection is not linear or step-wise in life. As with the components for method, the process moves in unique and particular ways based on the experiences of each group studied. For example, parts of the dialectic between context and theology emerge already with the praxis narratives. In spite of the artifice of organizational schemas, this spiral is a useful tool for engaging a process of deliberate dialogue and theological construction.

#### Types of Correlational Dialogue within the Spiral

Carrie Doehring offers a helpful counterbalance to Lartey's reflective spiral. Noting Rebecca Chopp's typology of different subtypes within liberal Protestant theology, she reminds us that the ways in which cultural discourses and adjunct disciplines are reflected upon in dialogues of critical correlation are not neutral, but have specific aims.<sup>67</sup> Pastoral theologians tend to cluster around hermeneutical aims, emancipatory praxis, or a hybrid of the two.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Carrie Doehring, "A Method of Feminist Pastoral Theology," in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 104-105.

<sup>68</sup> Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*, 79-85.

Don Browning's method exemplifies the hermeneutical strategy, which privileges historical sources that locate theological authority primarily in past tradition. Relying strongly on philosophical discourses to augment social scientific and theological arguments, Browning creates thick descriptions of religious practices that are brought into dialogue with his key norms. These dialogues are then used to construct theologies to guide more theory-laden religious praxis. Elaine Graham's critique of Browning's method exemplifies the emancipatory praxis model of critical correlation. Here, hermeneutics are carefully located in their cultural tradition so that the power assumptions present in their arguments are exposed. She and others using this model tend to place the authority for constructive theological proposals in the practices of present religious communities and the preferred religious experiences of individuals.

A combination of emancipatory praxis and hermeneutical frames for pastoral theological reflection is increasingly visible.<sup>69</sup> This model holds both the authoritative traditions of the past and the embodied communities of the present in critical tension as constructive theological proposals are crafted. My own use of critical correlation falls into this category.

### **A Pastoral Theological Method for Ecological Anthropologies and Transformative Praxis**

I am engaging in a method of critical correlation between religious practices and the various ecological discourses cultivating congregationally based religious environmentalism. My use of the correlative method leans towards emancipatory praxis because of my theological commitment to shifting humanity's relationship with the wider web of life towards respectful interrelationship. I have located authoritative sources for this shift in the transformative praxis of

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<sup>69</sup> See Larry Kent Graham's *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds* and Bonnie Miller-McLemore's various works on gender discourse and public theology for examples of this method.



congregationally based religious environmental cohorts. This method is also linked to hermeneutical approaches; highlighting the green strands of biblical and theological traditions provides meaningful orientation and grounding worldviews for the work of these communities. Finally, this pastoral theological method is constructive. In highlighting the ecological context of all human experience, understanding who we are and where we are going must necessarily shift. Ecologically situated theological anthropologies provide a means of reflecting on how a planetary pastoral theology envisions futures of justice and mutuality for the whole of creation.

This project requires a method that can withstand the demands of *pastoral theological norms* such as particular human experience, transformative intent, critical dialogue, and constructive theologies for praxis. It must also hold the weight of *ecological discourses*, such as biological interrelationship and human responsibility. It must *account for the particularity* of the parties involved in this project: my own power as interpreter, researcher, and writer; and the complex narratives of the religious environmental activists who shared their experiences as a vehicle for reflection. It must also be accountable to the wider communities involved in this project by offering a *means of transformative engagement* with these stories and theological constructions.

As a pastoral theological project, this dissertation is nested in ongoing conversations about methodological priorities in the field. Thorough attention to the shaping power of contextual discourses on human identity and behavior, rich descriptions of lived experience, and explicit attention to the theological intent behind connecting different discursive interests brings forth theological constructions that are both critical and creative, pushing new questions and boundaries for pastoral theological exploration. This project does this through pastoral ethnography, with its focus on richly described contexts for religious practice through participant

observation and narratives generated in co-authored conversation. My approach also emphasizes careful research of the wider contextual forces shaping the religious environmental communities; based upon initial research, conversations, and observations, contextual norms were identified and described. Finally, this project is theological in its attention to the complex tensions between the stated theologies of participants and the ways they foster or limit their participation in religious environmental praxis. Theological reflection for praxis that is both transformative and faithful is the aim of the correlative dialogue among these thick descriptions.

To be ecologically conversant, this method assumes ecology's key principle of the physical interrelationship of all living systems. To accept this principle is to acknowledge humanity's participation as part of the natural world itself, an expression of creation within it and inextricably tied to it. This perspective is evolutionary, contextual, political and pragmatic. Scientific understandings of the interrelationship of Earth's web of life nuance theologies of interconnection and interrelationship. Acknowledging that potential for individual human flourishing is tied to social, political, and economic discourses influencing large-scale patterns of human behavior implies that we must also acknowledge the devastating ecological impact these behaviors invite on local communities and particular lives. This tension unfolds in the project within each individual account, with rich descriptions of the ecological contexts and the ways in which the participants are tied to them, physically and symbolically.

This method must also account for the particularities of those shaping this dissertation. Named above are the particular commitments that shape how I understand the hoping paradigms of religious environmental groups as transformative visions of possibility, funded by moral and ethical commitments of theological worldviews enacted in community dialogue. Reflexive awareness of how my identity and commitments are shaping how I write the narratives and

interpretation must be present throughout both the descriptive and constructive process. Pastoral ethnography's respect for narrative particularity and the authority of the local knowledge of those participating in the study helps me maintain an awareness of the situated nature of all narratives. I am careful in the project to claim constructive theological proposals as my own; while the descriptive narratives were intentionally co-authored through the interview and observation process, the process of reflection and construction happened at a distance from the participants. The conclusions and possibilities named in the following chapters would have likely been different if we had been full co-researchers in the process.

Finally, the intent of this project as a whole is the transformative engagement of people of faith with this issue. Understanding our shared human life as part of vibrantly interconnected creation moves the faithful praxis of particular communities towards ecological inclusivity. From a pastoral theological perspective, I hope that we begin to situate humanity in both ecological and social locations, critiquing anthropocentric perspectives that hide our interrelationship with the web of all life in the present moment and across time. Constructive theological anthropologies that emphasize interrelationship and interconnection help shift the wider social imaginary towards possibilities of ecological justice and holistic flourishing. Constructive eschatologies of *enduring relationality* move us to consider the ongoing nature of our interconnectedness, that our future hopes are also ecological. From a pastoral perspective, I hope more congregations begin to take up the ecological strands of their traditions while listening closely to ecological suffering within their local communities. As a person of faith, I am inspired to attend to the sacramental nature of ordinary living, and to seek justice for those on the ecological margins of my own community. As a participant in the web of life, it is my fervent

hope that we can begin to transform our ways of relating to one another towards respectful awareness, mutual flourishing, and standing against life-limiting cultural practices.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THE ROLES OF ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE, RELIGIOUS PRAXIS, AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN THEOLOGICAL HOPING PARADIGMS

#### **Introduction**

The hoping paradigms of religious environmental cohorts highlight the need for constructive pastoral theology that is planetary in scope. Commitments to the interconnected web of life foster diverse theological anchors for the work of the groups in this study, and their engaged practices offer a praxis model for understanding care as *intersystemic engagement* in the midst of ecological crises. This chapter outlines relevant literature developing the content for religious environmental hoping paradigms as theologies-in-action fostering the praxis of engaged ecological care. Previously, I described religious environmental hoping paradigms as emerging from various conversions to ecological kinship, shifts occurring at the nexus of expanded theological anthropologies and revised eschatologies. Chapters 1 and 2 provided an introduction to the scope and method of this dissertation by highlighting the context for dialogue between theology and ecologically oriented sciences, and clarifying the means and hermeneutical influences shaping the study. This review explores how notions of planetary interconnectedness contribute to eschatologies emerging from a broadened theological anthropology, concepts of justice in religious environmental praxis, and the complex notion of practices. These three

elements create a framework for understanding the praxis of these cohorts as intersystemic care in the service of planetary hope, providing a springboard for a constructive pastoral theology of care as intersystemic engagement.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project becomes increasingly apparent when reviewing literature relevant to this topic. Cellular biologist Barry Commoner coined the oft-quoted sentence “The first law of ecology is that everything is related to everything else.”<sup>70</sup> This claim is evident in this project through highlighting how religious environmentalism is a type of caregiving, funded by theological shifts towards ecological kinship and accompanied by unique ethical claims. Studying how faith groups create caring relationships with the web of life in their local context, and how theological understandings are involved in those acts of care requires engaging that fertile ground where faith claims and activism are united. But how does this kind of praxis, aimed at a holistic vision of justice making, come to be important?

I posit that the ideals and praxis of justice shift when understandings of humanity move towards models of theological anthropology valuing interrelationship and ecological kinship. These transitions in theological worldview come both from re-reading traditions in a new context, and from reading those traditions in light of other points of view – in this dissertation, particularly those of biological and ecological sciences. The dynamic ways that theologies respond and change amidst the living of life is seen in sharp relief alongside the rich concept of *practices*. The notion of practices developed in the literature review below both enlivens how practice can be understood, and raises questions of how practices of faith become *praxis*: or, the intentional enactment of particular commitments. Reflecting on notions of justice in religious environmental praxis connects to its aims: religious environmentalism can be viewed as a form

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<sup>70</sup> Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

of *relational justice-making*. Theological worldviews and environmental activism comingle in lived experience; praxis is the place where matters of faith and community activism join to address contextual realities demanding faithful response.

It should be said that other theological categories are indeed evident in the gathered narratives. The kinds of questions I posed in the interviews invariably shape the responses. For example, while some of my questions focused on the role that future stories or eschatologies played in the work of religious environmental groups, most persons are not solely focused on the future in their work as religious activists. Looking through the lens of embodiment, for example, might have led to an exploration of the soteriology of religious environmental groups because of the Christian interpretation of the incarnation. Or, a more intentional focus on the work of religious environmentalism as the work of the *church* might have prompted more questions of ecclesiology. Tight theological subcategories do not typically correspond directly to the complexity of lived practice; in this project, as I develop the notion of hoping paradigms, it is clear that how we understand ourselves as human beings-in-relationship has a temporal component that invites anthropologies and eschatologies to be in close conversation. Given the temporally evocative nature of ecological disaster, exploring the role of futurity in religious environmental work remains an important, though not exclusive, focus.

The sources in this review are mostly postmodern and liberationist in orientation, congruent with my theological and scholarly commitments and dovetailing helpfully with my methods of research and reflection. The eschatologies, explored in a frame of theological anthropology, range from mainline orthodoxy towards postmodern constructivist theology and show a range of theological possibility when considering future hopes and the aims of praxis in a religious environmental context. The pastoral theological literature explored clearly values

human experience emerging from faithful practices. The body of ecotheological literature explored here evidences a deep valuing of polyvocal expressions of mutuality, justice, and the flourishing of life, and for an understanding of humanity's embeddedness within the more-than-human world. Drawing on sources that are compatible with my research aims provides a comprehensive set of perspectives for describing the experiences of religious environmentalists. I intend for this review to provide detailed background knowledge that aids in honoring the narratives of the participants without claiming authority over those narratives, and offers a rich set of tools for constructing hoping paradigms that are holistic in scope, provisional and particular in their truth claims, and transformative in intent.

**Practicing the Future:  
Eschatological Hope as a Theological Source for Religious Environmentalists**

“But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great... Together, all together, they are the instruments of change.”

- Keri Hulme

“The future is the predominant home of hope and despair.”

- Andrew Lester

Eschatology is the traditional Christian doctrine of “last things,” the engagement of the future in light of God’s presence within that future. In a context of ecological struggle, the question of the future invites many challenging conversations addressing the agency and place of God, humanity, and the whole creation within those visions of the future. Different theologies offer windows into the diversity of ways this tension of agencies can unfold, contributing to the dialogical nature of particular beliefs and faithful practices. This section explores three very different approaches to eschatological hope, providing a glimpse into the diversity of theologies



fostering religious environmental engagement. Given the paralyzing nature of ecological devastation, it is a sacred act to behold the contingent of persons who carry their love for the whole of creation forward into the challenging work of enacting justice through religious environmental praxis. Somehow, in spite of factors leading towards immobilization, fear, and minimization of the scope of concern to personal lives, something compels religious environmentalists to engage in transformative spiritual praxis rather than withdraw. What kind of belief inspires hope for a transformed future and faithful moral courage to engage the present?

Early in this review and in prior chapters, I discuss how understanding human personhood in light of a wide relational web, explicitly inclusive of the natural world, is evident in religious environmental narratives. Anthropologies of *interrelationship* and *kinship* prompt changes in how religious environmentalists engage their lives in the present, and how they think about the future. I posit that the eschatological frameworks persons hold are directly at work in their interactions with the more-than-human world, as this is particularly evident in how participants in the study express concern for future generations. This section highlights the very different eschatological perspectives of systematic theologian Jürgen Moltmann, postmodern ecofeminist Catherine Keller, and pastoral theologian Andrew Lester. These three theologians demonstrate eschatological hope compatible with interrelationship models of anthropology, providing a means for constructive dialogue with the theological worldviews and religious environmental experiences of the participants in this study. Eschatologies are a clear component of the concept of “hoping paradigms,” in their wrestling with the tension between human and divine agency in the enactment of the future. The eschatologies presented here are variously echoed in the experiences of the three cohorts, providing way to construct eschatologies of *enduring relationality* in the final constructive chapter of this dissertation. The substantial

contributions of these three theologians allow me to add a particular nuance in light of this project. Eschatologies of enduring relationality are constitutively expressed in the praxis of these cohorts who are working for a future of justly embodied ecological relationships. While the ecotheological hoping paradigms developed in this dissertation hinge on a shift in theological anthropology, these expressions of religious environmental praxis display a committed belief that a different kind of future is possible, even when it is not probable. This shift in our common future story highlights humanity's role in inviting futures of abundant life for all of the systems of creation and is as vital a shift as anthropological interconnection. Theologically, this is helpfully understood in eschatological terms. While hope and eschatology are not the same, they are importantly related as humanity wrestles with its role in the future of life.

The significance of hope for this dissertation is drawn in part from my own experiences of research and ecological engagement. The choice to attend to the various arenas of ecological troubles in our world is challenging and frightening, and can lead easily to despair: the problems are global in scope, and it is tempting to wonder whether one's actions will matter.<sup>71</sup> This pull towards disengagement and isolation led me to a hermeneutic of hope: no mere positive feeling, hope is rather willingness to participate in creating a habitable future. My concerns resounded with Dalton and Simmon's recent text, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, which explores the emergence and development of ecotheology as hope that persistently engages "the everyday

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<sup>71</sup> I should note that while eschatology and hope are certainly related, they are not identical. Eschatology, or "last things," has often specifically referred to doctrines regarding afterlife and judgment, and is more generally used to refer to the ultimate destiny of all things. Hope is the particular and contextual positioning of human activity within the scope of unfolding history, the acting out of possible futures out of conviction about the rightness of those possibilities. So, while both hope and eschatology dialogue with discourses of unfolding future and wrestle with humanity's position in that future, eschatology can be thought of as theological reflection about possibilities for the future in light of our narratives of the sacred, and hope can be thought of as the value-laden beliefs and praxis regarding how these futures might come into being.

realities of our lives together, locally and globally.”<sup>72</sup> They describe poignantly the risk of immersing oneself in our ecological dilemmas:

[*Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*] began in a spiral of despair. After almost a year of reading and rereading ecotheological texts, we became overwhelmed by the scope and seeming intransigence of ecological degradation and the long drift into chaos...the grinding urgency of the problem and the cultural, political, and economic changes required by viable solutions stood in dark contrast to our experience of the virtual paralysis of “business as usual.” Was there no way out?<sup>73</sup>

In the midst of troubling experience, these authors found what many activists have found: a rereading of our ideas of what it means to hope. In their project, they found no easy answers, but they did find persistent activism on the part of ecotheologians, who “kept writing, lecturing, and researching, some for 30 or 40 years or more...we began to see both history and imagined futures laid out not as abstraction but as real engagement in the social imaginary.”<sup>74</sup> It is this sort of rereading I seek in this overall project: telling the stories of living hopes, working out a different way of life made possible through the mysterious partnership of God and humanity. This chapter illuminates the temporal, phenomenological nature of those hopes in the work of Andrew Lester, and offers a range of possibilities regarding the kinds of futures we can hope for by contrasting Jürgen Moltmann’s hope-centered, centrist theology with Catherine Keller’s radical ecofeminist eschatology.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Anne M. Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 125.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., ix, 125.

<sup>75</sup> I should highlight that I am not trying to reconcile the different theologies of Lester, Moltmann and Keller. They are epistemologically quite different, and their resulting theological frameworks accordingly reflect this. However, they represent a range of possibilities for conceiving eschatology, and in a world of diverse views and experiences, they will resonate differently for different persons. Also important to note is that the work I have highlighted from these scholars reflects a particular point in their ongoing theological work. Moltmann, especially, has an enormous range of eschatologically driven theological texts, and I have

### Andrew Lester

Andrew Lester's text *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* offers a pastoral theological understanding about the significance of hope in lived experience and pastoral praxis, located in his experience in ministry as a scholar and pastoral counselor. His understanding is influenced by his formation in the psychological sciences and through phenomenology as well as theology. He begins his pastoral theology of hope with the observation that human beings are time-bound creatures who remember the past, enact a present, and anticipate a future of some kind. This sense of time begins in early childhood, as when a child playing with a toy learns to expect and enjoy a particular response from that toy; these early experience of our future stories hold "the origins of our mental capacity for hope."<sup>76</sup> Lester constructs his philosophical and theological understandings from the work of Ernst Bloch (as does Moltmann), whose notion of anticipatory consciousness affected a number of philosophers and theologians. In this concept, the future is open and laden with possibilities in human experience, and people are constantly working to help bring these possibilities to fruition. Lester then moves to construct a pastoral theological framework with his notion that persons' anticipation and projection of themselves into the future is a cornerstone of theological anthropology, a way theology connects human life to the sacred.<sup>77</sup> If our sense of future offers the possibility of living as fully as possible and opportunities to help enact God's realm in the world as individuals, this extends to family and social systems as well: Lester notes that futures are not created in isolation but in the interconnected relationships

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highlighted only a few of his contributions here. For further engagement with his work, see the text *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1999).

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

stretching throughout human society.<sup>78</sup> Lester's work explicitly connects to this project through this notion of anthropologies of interrelationship. There is ample room in his theological construction for expanding the notion of interconnected relationships towards embracing those relationships that tie humanity to the more than human world.

A second way this paradigm is helpful in creating a planetary pastoral theology is the theology of care inherent in Lester's notion of the future. Pastoral care can be offered, Lester shares, when the future is under threat: "crises result from either real or perceived threats to the future dimension of our core narratives."<sup>79</sup> Concern for a physically viable future threads through the heart of various streams of the environmental movement, though discussions of the anxiety and fear raised by ecological catastrophe are not always foregrounded.

Through discerning "how the not yet has been disturbed or shut down," pastoral caregivers and counselors help persons discover hopeful future stories, with their dimensions of what Lester calls "finite" and "transfinite" hopes. The unique niche of pastoral caregivers and counselors is the obligation to attach theological meaning to the concept of hope, which Lester defines thus:

Used theologically, the word *hope* describes a person's trusting anticipation of the future based on an understanding of a God who is trustworthy and who calls us into an open-ended future. This God keeps promises of deliverance, liberation, and salvation.<sup>80</sup>

This classic understanding of hope within a faith tradition is characterized by projecting one's future towards an ontological divine, which then holds that future. Lester's definition has some limits; the emphasis on the concept of "trust" moves some of the agency back to the divine,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 37-39.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 62.

though it does not negate the agency of the persons involved. A second hesitance I hold with this definition is the temptation to think that God will “fix” our current ecological problems: that all will be well and the pain and suffering emerging from ecological devastation will simply go away. Lester did not speak directly to the ecological crisis, and I believe his intent was to foster hope and assurance that the future is beyond the control of a single individual or individuals. Still, the possible effect of passivity invites pause through the recognition that concerted human action and partnership with the divine for the flourishing of creation is an imperative for ecological hope.

An interesting aspect of Lester’s pastoral eschatology is his differentiation between “finite” and “transfinite” hopes. Lester first suggests that *finite* hopes are attached to finite objects such as jobs, children, and particular outcomes of life circumstances. He uses research from social sciences to identify this type of hoping with goal attainment. Conversely, *transfinite* hopes are hopes “that go beyond physiological sensing and the material world.”<sup>81</sup> In contrast to finite hopes, which are attached to measurable and concrete things, transfinite hopes are those that “transcend the human condition.”<sup>82</sup> This is the most “meaningful” type of hope, the “deepest level of hope [which] is an open-ended, trusting stance towards existence that perceives a future horizon that transcends the finite hopes expressed in our particular objectives.”<sup>83</sup> Lester acknowledges that he risks oversimplifying the complexity of hope here, and I find two aspects of his schema problematic. First, I find the bifurcation of hope into finite and transfinite reductionistic. Splitting the complex phenomenon of hope in this way reflects an old mind-body dualism in which the spiritual supersedes the material. This is particularly problematic for the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

religious environmental movement, which emphasizes the sacramental quality of creation and affirms the meaningfulness of bodily experience. Lester's dual characterization of hope does not carry over into his case studies, in which hope is clearly presented as a complex phenomenon in which hopes that are close to home are intertwined with cosmic purpose. Because of my resistance to potentially reifying mind-body, spiritual-material dualisms, and because of Lester's own hesitance in carrying the schema forward into the case studies, I posit that a more holistic concept of hope is needed.

A second hesitance is Lester's framing of God's agency in the hoping process. He holds a theological preference towards an ontological God intervening in history, which is not congruent with my own theological framework. God is the agent who makes all things well in the future tense, in Lester's pastoral theology. "God is at work giving shape to the future...Even when events are chaotic, Christians believe that God is immanently involved in the process."<sup>84</sup> Trust in an all-powerful, all-loving God who sees things through can invite hopeful participation for some Christians, but this is not the *only* way to vision the relationship between divine and human agency. As one who holds a less ontological theology and who preferences the mysterious love of God at work in the universe over a powerful God, I do not hold that God will make all things well. Rather, God, who is compassionate love desiring the flourishing of all things, invites us to say "yes" to that love again and again, even when all is not – and may never be – well by human standards.

While limited by the dualistic structuring of hope and tendency towards individualized meaning-making, Lester's frame is very helpful in how he attends to the power of future stories

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 69.

for current human action, and for pulling phenomenological and psychological observations together with theological ones. Lester helpfully illustrates that how people view God's work in their future and in the world's future is visible in the daily living of our lives. The invitation to address obstructions in future stories may be particularly helpful to religious environmentalists facing large-scale environmental devastation, and engaging the temporal dimension of human agency will help construct rich hoping paradigms reflecting the ways in which personal and communal narratives stringing together past, present, and future influence religious environmental praxis.

#### Jürgen Moltmann

One of the most comprehensive sources for ecologically framed systematic theology is the work of Jürgen Moltmann, the German Reformed theologian appropriately known as the “hope theologian.” Well known for taking up the natural world as part of his creative theological systems, he weaves them within traditional Christian orthodoxy in terms of the power and activity of the divine. For many mainline religious environmentalists, his inclusion of the creation in God's redemptive action and future story provides clear theological reasoning for their ethical commitments. Moltmann's theology “regularly redevelops doctrinal topics and biblical metaphors in light of environmental issues, consistently exhibit[ing] a broad ecojustice strategy.”<sup>85</sup> Eschatology as hope is Moltmann's primary hermeneutic for the Christian story, and helps critically frame the eschatological belief systems at work within the hoping paradigms of religious environmentalists.

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<sup>85</sup> Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 72).



Moltmann's eschatology is tied inextricably to his theology of creation through his conception of soteriology. Therefore, an overview of aspects of his theology of creation is warranted. Moltmann's regard for the more-than-human world is evident in his description of it as the home of God. He specifically identifies God in creation as the Holy Spirit, dwelling perichoretically in the created world, which is revealed as divine creation through revelation. This indwelling Spirit of creation makes this historical world the household of God (here Moltmann unpacks the etiology of the word ecology – *oikos*, the Greek word for household). Creation is “both in bondage, and open for the future” as shown through the messianic revelation of the Christian story, and thus is part of the redemption and transformation coming with eschatological promise.<sup>86</sup> God's spirit dwelling perichoretically within the world, or creation as the home of God's spirit, is an important theme for many religious environmentalists, who invite and care for the God's presence at home in the world.

Creation has a unique temporal component in Moltmann's organization that he lays out in his 1985 text, *God in Creation*. Its complexity is structured by three aspects of creation: *creatio originalis*, *creatio continua*, and *creatio nova*. *Creatio originalis* refers to the initial creation, in which Moltmann claims God creates without precondition. This creation signals the beginning of time, an opening of history that is subject to change and development. This creation is also directed towards a future, which is the revelation of God's glory. *Creatio continua* refers to the sustaining power of God in history, as well as God's movement of historical creation towards its eschatological end. Finally, *creatio nova* refers to “the consummated new creation in all

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<sup>86</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 56.

things.”<sup>87</sup> In *creatio nova*, time is transformed to eternity and the created beings move towards “eternal livingness, not their finite petrification.”<sup>88</sup>

Within his tripartite structure, *creatio continua* involves two other senses of time that relate to the enactment of eschatology. In his 1996 text *The Coming of God*, Moltmann structures his world-inclusive eschatology. Time in this case has two aspects: *futurans* and *adventas*. *Futurans* is the expected movement of historical time, where *adventas* “is about a breaking into the present from the future – the idea that the present anticipates in some way the future that is to follow, for it is a foretaste of a transformed reality.”<sup>89</sup> These moments that signal the movements towards eternal livingness also show that the redemption of creation is about the renewal of all things, rather than their restoration to a mythic pristine state. *Sabbath* serves as a rhythmic *adventas* signal, “holding within itself from the beginning the true promise of its consummation.”<sup>90</sup> With the coming of God to the redemption of creation, the Shekinah (God’s glory) will dwell completely with the creation to fulfill the Sabbath promise. This fulfilled time deifies creation, as “partakers of divine nature.”<sup>91</sup> This *adventas* of the *creatio nova* then signals eternity, the ceasing of historical time in a final moment that is the “fullness of time.” Here, God dwells fully within the creation:

The new creation is defined through a new divine presence within it...It is interpenetrated by divine presence, and participates in the inexhaustible fullness of God’s life. The

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<sup>87</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 286.

<sup>88</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 213.

<sup>89</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecotheology* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2008), 170.

<sup>90</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, transl. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 266.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

indwelling of God calls into being a kind of cosmic perichoresis of divine and cosmic attributes.<sup>92</sup>

Such an eschatology requires that persons actively engage history as a response to the hope fostered by the messianic promises of God. Religious environmentalism, when viewed from Moltmann's lens, can be viewed as faithfully participating with God through a hoping paradigm embracing that the fulfillment of God's time and the redemption of all creation will indeed come to pass.

Moltmann's system is carefully constructed within traditional systematic theologies; it is focused on the active presence and saving work of God, who acts for all of creation. It is helpful in its avoidance of anthropocentrism; the redemption of humanity and nature are held together and the whole cosmos participates in redemption, transformation and deification through the indwelling Trinitarian God. Several critiques can also be made, particularly from an ecofeminist perspective (granting that these thought systems are not trying to stay within a framework of orthodoxy). First, there is an extent to which Moltmann's theology of "eternal livingness" and eternity of "fulfilled time" deny that death is a part of life. This denial of the reality of death and change leads to the need for a "new creation" for Moltmann (and most theologians). This new aeon is dependent upon an ahistorical intervention; salvation must come, finally, from outside of history. This seems problematic to me in terms of affirming the potentiality of the present creation, though Moltmann never discards the importance and potentiality of the present creation. As Catherine Keller notes, "What is intended as an ecotheological salvation *of* nature becomes salvation *from* nature – unless, of course, you buy the premise that you can have your

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 295.

nature and escape from its transience too.”<sup>93</sup> Moltmann’s eschatology functions well in its avoidance of anthropocentrism (all of creation participates in renewal and redemption), but does not fully escape hierarchical notions of God or the logic of domination and denial/denigration of embodiment that has plagued much of Christian eschatology. The divine must still act from outside of the creation, and the changing of time to eternity continues to make death something to overcome, instead of a natural rhythm of existence.

#### Catherine Keller

Catherine Keller is a constructive theologian sitting on the seams of many streams of thought. If Moltmann and Lester fall more towards transhistorical eschatologies, Keller’s work falls distinctly towards what C.H. Dodd described as “realized eschatology,” which holds that, for Christians, eschatology is a process of becoming and change that begins in the teachings of Jesus. In postmodern fashion, Keller’s work resists easy categorization, informed by process theology, ecofeminism, and deconstructionist postmodernist sources. Her consideration of eschatology starts with contextual particularity, where the struggle for life’s flourishing is daily reality. She insists that our “talk about the weather” is now peculiarly apocalyptic, a shift in discourse requiring the “greening of eschatology.”<sup>94</sup> This exploration of Keller’s green eschatology examines her understanding of the terms *eschaton* and *apocalypse*, her engagement of cultural understandings of those terms and their effects, and her biblical survey of the wide variety of eschatological visions. Finally, we will conclude with her reconstruction of a recycled

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<sup>93</sup> Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 184.

<sup>94</sup> See the following of Keller’s essays for examples: “Women Against Wasting the World: Notes on Eschatology and Ecology,” in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria F. Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 249-263; “Talk About the Weather: The Greening of Eschatology,” in *Ecofeminism and the sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 30-49; “Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 326-345.

eschatology, which calls for a thoroughgoing commitment to being “earthlings.” Keller’s eschatologies are outside the mainline Christian perspective in many ways. This means they may be inaccessible for some religious environmentalists, yet resonate with an emerging paradigm in religious environmental praxis for some others.

Keller believes that eschatology is vital to ecological engagement because of the kinds of fears people have around ecological devastation. Though we hope for a “common terrestrial future,” the crafting of long-range hopes for the children of Earth seems almost irrelevant for the privileged citizens of Western-identified societies:

Among those economically privileged earthlings primarily responsible for climate change, the thought of the future appears increasingly reducible to an individual life-span, projected ahead, if at all, through a child or two, and measured by an accumulation of wealth and private heritage. Ecologically sensitive theologians will rightly diagnose an inadequate eschatology. Yet most Christians care little more about the planetary future of the earth – at least of *this* earth, than do the most voracious secular corporations. If standard Christian eschatology does extend the individual life-span into an endless future, its trajectory at death breaks sharply *out* of the earth’s atmosphere – sometimes with body, sometimes without (sans flying saucers in either case). So the systematic indifference to shared planetary future is compounded of both spiritual and economic habits.<sup>95</sup>

Responsible theology “recycles its own resources,” says Keller, and so she proceeds to examine possible reasons *why* Christian theologies have fostered so many earth-disparaging eschatologies.<sup>96</sup> She sums up her search in this question: “Why has faith for most Christians

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<sup>95</sup> Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller, “Introduction: Grounding Theory,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 2-3.

<sup>96</sup> Catherine Keller, “Chosen Persons and the Green Ecumenacy: A Possible Christian Response to the Population Apocalypse,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed David Hallman (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 304.

through most of their history come down simply to this: the hope for an *afterlife* rather than for *life* itself?”<sup>97</sup>

Eschatology is traditionally thought of as the doctrine of “end” or “last” things. Yet the word *eschaton*, Keller reminds, denotes something spatial – the idea of standing on the edge of something. Indeed, we are also always standing at *apocalypse*. Popularly understood, this word denotes catastrophic endings, yet the word means, literally, “to unveil.” The reason to explore our ideas of endings is because we are always “standing at the edge of space and time, where and when the life of the creation has its chance at renewal.”<sup>98</sup> Keller finds that eschatology is about how we live well in the present, so that the future may flourish.

How does Keller go about her project of recycling eschatology? Her methodology is broad, drawing on current events as case studies, biblical interpretation, feminist theologies, process theologies, and postmodern philosophies. Biblically, she ties eschatology to creation, using the opening stories of Genesis and the closing chapters of Revelation to illustrate how dominant Christian paradigms have been plagued by “tehomophobia:” fear of the deep, the chaotic, the ambiguous and undefined.<sup>99</sup> This is illustrated by interpretations of the creation story that begin with *creatio ex nihilo* and move towards theologies of domination and subordination (e.g., humanity is atop a hierarchy to “subdue” the earth); God, who makes from nothing, does what God pleases with the creation, and so those made in the image and likeness of God may do the same, in this interpretation. The *tehom* of Genesis 1 is the fearful watery chaos

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<sup>97</sup> Catherine Keller, “Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 331.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>99</sup> See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and “No More Sea: The Lost Chaos of the Eschaton,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary R. Ruether (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 183-198 for further engagement with this concept.

of the deep, carefully occluded and constricted in these framings. “Tehomophobia” accounts in the Christian tradition are bookended; in the “New Jerusalem” of the Revelation to John, in which both seas and tears are dried up in a gesture of eternal celestial control. Such otherworldly eschatologies “transmogrified a historical and earthy Hebrew faith into a fantasy of final escape from transience and death.”<sup>100</sup> In short, this popular strand of theology moves from the control and dominion of the creation (first inspired by the divine act of creation and then passed to Adam), to the ultimate act of control, where the old created order will be fully subdued and a new, unearthly realm of eternity will unfold. “In other words, when Christian hope basks in such resplendent supernatural features, why would it worry about mere nature? Indeed, serious concern with the natural world...indicates in this framework a materialism that obstructs faith.”<sup>101</sup> Theologies based in fear of the untamable natural world, of the desire for humanity and the Divine to control and constrict, are unlikely to promote ecological flourishing. Religious systems supported by millennia of patriarchy help buoy the destructiveness of our current system. The pervasive nature of this way of relating creates the appearance that hierarchies of domination seem to be simply the way things are:

Western thought is so thoroughly habituated to the matter-transcending theory of Hellenized Christianity that a formative *idealism* underlies the most rapacious *materialism*...quantifying abstractions of capital replace the spirited bodies of planetary life, rendering them mere “externalities” to the working of economics. The fallacy itself has been “naturalized.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>101</sup> Keller, “Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy,” 330.

<sup>102</sup> Keller and Kearns, “Introduction,” 5-6.

The concern for the effect of our social imaginaries echoes Rosemary Radford Ruether's claim that Christianity needs to undergo a "conversion to earth."<sup>103</sup> There are helpful stories and pieces in the tradition to build from; Keller notes that while pictures of biblical eschatologies are too complex for a single view, the earthy Hebraic dream of *shalom* views wholeness and restoration in natural and historic terms, providing a green space in the tradition. She concludes with this call:

We cannot create or recreate this life. Our responsibility for the new creation is not to terraform planets and otherwise play God. It is to participate in our finite, interconnected creatureliness with metanoic consciousness – that is, facing up to the 'man'-made apocalypse...As earth-bound Christians, we may indeed embrace a utopian realism, bound to the rhythms of earth and its indelible history, but nonetheless still 'bound for the promised land' – a promised place and time which is the possible healing of this one.<sup>104</sup>

Keller's multi-stranded constructions are compelling in their responsiveness to present environmental concerns implicated in future ecological flourishing, and she carefully engages a liberative methodology in her rereading of Christian texts and theologies. She, like other ecofeminists, has been criticized for moving too far afield from mainstream Christian theologies, and Moltmann himself has critiqued ecofeminist hope (which does not typically make space for an ahistorical soteriology) as not being hopeful enough.<sup>105</sup> If one takes Keller's argument about the future to its scientific extent, astrophysics models show that the universe will end through either a "hot death" or "cold death." The reframing of hope within the scope of human history requires a more nuanced sense of what we might, indeed, hope for in the far future. Keller's work resonates with the material nature of religious environmental movement, and keys in on the

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<sup>103</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993).

<sup>104</sup> Keller, "Talk About the Weather: The Greening of Eschatology," 47.

<sup>105</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 276-277.



concern for the physical flourishing of future generations present in the work. It has less to do with helping religious environmentalists when their hope falters; her eschatologies are geographically relocated to our fragile planetary home, but the action of the divine is muted in this paradigm, and this may be too lonely a burden for the created world to bear. In moving towards dialogue among these various eschatological perspectives, I am left wondering how to 1) account for synergistic partnership of divine-human agency, motivated by creative Love that desires the flourishing of creation, that 2) still invites hope for potential future stories of the creation that do not evoke transhistorical, supernatural theologies pointing to redemption outside our evolutionary understandings.

#### Critical Dialogue Among Eschatological Frameworks

This section shows the great diversity that ecological future stories can take, and the diversity of their potential enactment in religious environmental praxis. Lester, Moltmann and Keller offer three different windows into how hope might look for the Christian religious environmentalists participating in this study. Lester's view offers language for how and why future stories matter for the present moments in which acts of religious environmental care are enacted; discerning how religious environmentalists move from concern, with its potential to shut down future stories with despair, to committed activism is a matter for pastoral listening. Listening to such stories of enacted hope and resistance to despair has the potential shed light and inspire hope in the wider church. Moltmann and Keller provide two very different ways of thinking about eschatologies, through anthropologies of interconnection that diverge in their understandings of the power and location of divine activity. Most mainline Christians are familiar with the general concepts of God that Moltmann professes; his extension of God's activity to the whole of creation provides a language bridge for religious environmentalists who

advocate partnership with God in caring for the world. Keller's concept is less orthodox, and consequently less familiar to most practicing Christians. Her framework would face challenges in the congregations participating in this study; yet it is the least troubling in terms of the necessary dialogue between religious practices and the environmental and biological sciences. The work of each of these scholars either implicitly (as in Lester's case), or explicitly (in Moltmann and Keller's case) allows for the notion of creation's interconnectedness. However, each of these theological frameworks is vastly different in scope, method and conclusion, and I do not seek to reconcile them in this project. What I hope to show by offering these very different viewpoints is that the kind of futures envisioned by our own particular eschatologies influence our faith praxis in the present. The unity of belief and practice represented in the cohorts of this study presents a range of hopes for more just relationships between people and the natural world; eschatologically, the question of God's agency and humanity's agency is engaged by the visions of the future present in their hoped-for futures. For Lester, the future *functions* to shape our choices in the present, and God's demonstrable activity in the historical Christian witness means that humanity's future is held safe by that God. For Keller, much of the apocalypticism in the Christian tradition means that humanity has forgotten that the earth, too, is a subject of God's care, and our agency is required in bringing about the redemption of the whole of creation. Finally, the portion of Moltmann's thought highlighted here emphasizes both the unity of all creation as the subject of God's transformative love, and God's ultimate agency in bringing the final transformation of creation about. How people conceive of their relationship to God in working for the good of all creation is visibly important in the theological hoping paradigms of the religious environmental cohorts in this study, and each person in the study makes theological sense of this based on their own contextual norms. In short, each of these

frameworks poses strengths and limits for describing the hoping paradigms evident within religious environmental praxis; particular and temporal narratives, the involvement of God, and commitment to the flourishing of this very earth are key threads carried forward in the constructive sections of the ethnographies and in the constructive hoping paradigms chapter.

### **Religious Environmental Practices in Congregational Context: Towards Praxis**

“It is in the murkiness of everyday life that one searches for and finds practices of hope that change the way the world does business.”

- *Anne Dalton and Henry Simmons*

One of the lenses for carrying out this study is that of practices, for reasons both theoretically compelling and pragmatic. The concept of “practices” has a rich and complex history that is thoroughly engaged later in this section, but I begin with the notion that practices are worldviews in action, and praxis is the enactment of reflected-upon worldviews. Beginning with the pragmatic, the practices of these ecologically-minded faith groups helped me identify them. To this point in the larger history of the church, faith groups have done more to articulate theological and moral senses of how persons ought to relate to Earth through things like belief statements, creeds, and open letters than they have to consistently enact the positions articulated in those works. A significant body of resources for religious environmentalism exists at the level of denominational institutions or other institutions of religious leadership. Anna Peterson notes the challenge of moving these values to congregations and individuals within those congregations:

One of the most sustained and large-scale efforts has been the Environmental Justice Working Group (EJWG) of the National Council of Churches (NCC)...Despite the time, energy, and resources that have been dedicated to initiatives such as this, however, it is far from clear that significant numbers of individuals and congregations affiliated with the NCC have reduced their energy consumption, or indeed changed their environmental

practices in significant ways. In other words, even when religious groups make environmental issues a priority and devote resources to developing environmental values, these values do not automatically generate a significant transformation of members' behavior.<sup>106</sup>

Finding congregations where these practices are both clearly articulated *and* actively part of community life allows for inquiry as to how these theologies become alive within the communities, and how these meaning-making systems support or hinder their involvement in ecological justice-making. Additionally, by finding places where inclusive theologies of ecological justice are already active in the form of practices, we can, in a sense, take “a tour of the world we need,” to borrow a phrase from author Chris Turner.<sup>107</sup> If, as Moltmann claims, eschatology is finally about hope, and, as Keller claims, it is also standing at the edge of what is possible, then starting with the narratives of groups and congregations who are enacting ecologically possible futures will be generative. A complex notion of practices demonstrates how religious environmental praxis emerges from intentionally working towards ecological transformation because of particular theological commitments.

By highlighting concepts of practice from pastoral theological, social science, and ecotheology, a thick description of practices and their relationship to praxis is developed. Pastoral theological resources from Friedrich Schleiermacher, Don Browning, Elaine Graham and Susan Dunlap provide diverse perspectives that move through the history of pastoral theological interpretations of practice and praxis grounded in the particular human experiences. From there, we move towards a social scientific and ecotheological perspective of how these concepts, as lived expressions of belief, come to change over time at the level of groups and cultures. Charles Taylor's work on “social imaginaries” and the implication of these imaginaries

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<sup>106</sup> Anna L. Peterson, “Talking the Walk: A Practice-Based Environmental Ethic as Grounds for Hope,” in *Ecospirit*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>107</sup> Chris Turner, *The Geography of Hope: A Tour of the World We Need* (Canada: Random House, 2007).

in ecotheological pursuits offers a way to reflect on affecting the kind of large-scale change that religious environmentalists seek. Finally, reflections upon my working definition of practices and praxis will be discussed in light of the work of these scholars.

Even the word “practices” holds complexity – practice is both a noun and a verb, rendering it ambiguous. Generally speaking, practice is often understood simply as observable, external behaviors, though this definition denies the relational dimensions of practices as well as the complex sociocultural factors distinguishing varieties of practice. The concept is diversely used throughout the world of the social sciences, philosophy, and religion to refer broadly to things that people *do*. It connects at points with Max Weber’s theory of social action and the Marxist notion of praxis. Pierre Bourdieu’s view is a helpful one for this project; he theorizes that nuanced forms of practice arise in various social spheres when individuals with their particular set of abilities (various forms of “capital”) begin to relate to one another on a particular “field” where social realities are enacted.<sup>108</sup> Yet, as pastoral theologian Susan Dunlap notes, “Because we are so accustomed to a belief/behavior dualism, many of us still have a strong tendency to place “practice” in the category of behavior, and ignore its meaning or convictional context.”<sup>109</sup> A rich understanding of how “practice” is understood and lived out in congregational life means tracing back towards the inception of the dualistic split between theory and practice, and then moving forward towards acknowledging the complexity of relationship between discursive ideas and their enactment.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>109</sup> Susan Dunlap, *Caring cultures: How Congregations Respond to the Sick* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>110</sup> It is worth noting that this theory-practice split contributed to the idea of pastoral and practical theologies as “applied theology,” which made them derivative of the “purer” disciplines of philosophical theology and biblical

### Pastoral Theological Sources for Praxis

The historical period known as the Enlightenment brought a tendency to group areas of study into discrete disciplines. With the modernization of theological education, particularly in eighteenth century Germany, areas of study were grouped together in a “scientific” manner for more technical study. This allowed for more specific study in particular theological areas while dislocating the previous, centuries-old emphasis on piety and formation. Edward Farley sees the publication of a theological encyclopedia, which attempted to group theological texts according to their primary emphasis, as the primary factor in helping to solidify the fledgling modern classifications.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s categorization of theological disciplines into philosophical, historical and practical areas created a ripple effect in which the practical “crown” of the theological education tree was reduced to applicationism in theology studies. In the lives of churches this had the effect of blunting churches’ recourse for providing critical input into professionalized systems of theological education. This strict professionalization and lack of emphasis on human experience began to shift with the advent of the psychological sciences and the philosophical mode of inquiry known as phenomenology. Phenomenology, philosophical reflection on consciousness and subjective experience, offered a cultural discourse that gave voice to human experience as a source of knowledge, and powerfully influenced the 20<sup>th</sup> century pastoral care movement.<sup>112</sup> In the late twentieth century, pastoral

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studies. Pastoral theologians have done much work in establishing the text of human lives as being of inestimable value as sources of dialogue for the more textually oriented theological disciplines.

<sup>111</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The fragmentation and unity of theological education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 56-84.

<sup>112</sup> The use of modern psychologies as an adjunct discipline in pastoral theology, care and counseling has been an important partnership. One of the downsides to the use of these disciplines towards regaining voice in theological academia was the risk of having particularly theological constructions subsumed by psychological discourse. Recent scholarship has done much to remedy this psychologization of pastoral care. See, for example, Barbara McClure’s recent text *Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*.

theology continued finding voices of support for its integrated praxis-based methodology, drawing on emerging liberation theologies (which attended to the real effects of oppressive hierarchies), an increasingly pluralistic North American culture, and an increasingly educated laity (which dislocated some of the distant professionalism of pastors).<sup>113</sup>

Don Browning's focus on locating values and norms implicit in practices – first within modern psychologies and then in the “value-laden practices” of congregations helped further the shift from focus on individual, intrapsychic models of care towards the emerging “communal-contextual” paradigm named by John Patton.<sup>114</sup> This approach had a momentous effect on the methods of pastoral theologians; while Browning's insistence on the primacy of a rationally-based system of moral reasoning has been heavily critiqued (particularly in its lack of acknowledgement of the role of context in shaping those systems of moral reasoning), his locus of authority for theological meaning-making rested finally with the communities of faith which must continually respond to the culture around them through faithful practice.

From this starting point, Elaine Graham's study of the *phronesis*, or “practical wisdom” of faith communities offers a dramatic reinterpretation as her postmodern feminist perspective sifts much of what she finds helpful from Browning while leaving much of its rational paternalism behind. She notes:

Rather than congregational life being the expression of ethical principles and pastoral actions the outworking of moral reasoning, I want to assert that faithful and purposeful practice springs from participation in a value-and-vision directed tradition. The *practical wisdom* of the faithful and practicing community is the medium by which truth claims and value commitments come into existence.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 80-81.

<sup>114</sup> See Don Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), and his *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>115</sup> Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 140.

Both Browning and Graham locate the practices of faithful people as the starting place for pastoral theology, but they differ in how they understand the relationship between the process of creating meaning and the outward behaviors accompanying those understandings. Graham's emphasis on the contextual nature of praxis (which she defines as "the enactment of faith towards social transformation") is a significant bridge between the individual cognitive structuring that shapes particular worldviews with the more publicly visible performative acts that occur through various types of relationship.<sup>116</sup> Community praxis is an expression of local, situated knowledges (which she draws from postmodern feminist author Donna Haraway) that authorize local practices without absolutizing those practices for all times and places.<sup>117</sup> Graham's proposal could go further; she does not extend her ideas of communally enacted values and norms to include the broader social imaginary at work in shaping faith communities, nor create a complex sense of how the praxis of particular communities can also contribute to broader shifts in the large-scale social imaginary. Graham's ideas about how communities construct lived theologies is important for this dissertation because of her emphasis on the power of local, particular praxis and the potential for shifting cultures at the grassroots level. Placing her ideas in conversation with Charles Taylor's understanding of the construction of social imaginaries provides a rationale for how this kind of praxis, occurring at multiple sites throughout the cultural, holds the potential for ushering in broad shifts in the discourse surrounding our cultural self-understandings.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>117</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991).



### Social Imaginaries: The Malleability of Cultural Practices

Communities of faith are living carriers of particular historical traditions, interpreting those traditions anew through their experience in a local context and the broader social discourse in which they are embedded. Individual congregations participate in ancient rituals and add new layers to them because of their unique identities; these communities also use ancient stories to create new rituals, which speaks to the processual nature of community identities. The effects of the dynamic nature of community identity, as discussed in previous sections, can be explored through multiple lenses to produce a rich concept of social change on multiple systemic levels. Religious environmental hoping paradigms are enacted at the level of the local and particular, yet the combined effect of these groups throughout the North American landscape is shaping the character of American religious culture. Philosopher and social theorist Charles Taylor uses the concept of social imaginaries to study how the process of enacting ideals effects broad cultural collectives, and how those broad collectives in turn shape enacted ideals.<sup>118</sup> Social imaginaries are “how we imagine our lives together and how that imagination gives rise to the practices of our lives. The social imaginary is the interplay of understandings and practices that have broadly shared moral legitimacy. And the social imaginary is malleable.”<sup>119</sup>

Charles Taylor relies on Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities, because the societies in which we participate consist of many members we will never meet or know.<sup>120</sup> According to Dalton and Simmons, Taylor contributes a “focus on the interweave of theory and practices that constitute the dynamics of the imaginative process” by which societies are

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<sup>118</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23-30.

<sup>119</sup> Anne Dalton and Henry Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, xi.

<sup>120</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed.<sup>121</sup> Taylor offers a three-fold definition outlining his use of the term:

I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.<sup>122</sup>

In this understanding, there is recognition that ideas are themselves a form of practice, and there is great complexity in the relationship between how understandings carry practices forward, yet practices always carry understandings; each modifies and shifts the other. Social imaginaries are “factual and normative,” in the sense that they authorize and legitimize ways of life. They involve a “background” of understanding that lacks fixed boundaries; in the “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation,” particular features emerge according to individual contexts within the imaginaries.<sup>123</sup> Social imaginaries are also temporal: they come to be during historical seasons, and pass away as other cultural practices emerge and take priority over them.

Taylor’s helpful construct could be nuanced; he speaks of the Social Imaginary of the West, tracing the rise of popularly held notions such as “the economy,” “the public sphere,” and “self-governance,” and yet does not offer significant space for the ways individual experience contextualizes particular corners of that imaginary. From the perspective of postmodern multiplicities, it would seem that there are multiple social imaginaries at work even within

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<sup>121</sup> Dalton and Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

particular cultures and broad social imaginaries, intersecting and cross-pollinating each other with dizzying rapidity in our media-driven culture of instant knowledge.

In addition to providing persons with a system of social mapping, social imaginaries importantly pull the future towards the present. Because they involve a vision of society based on ideas of what is actually possible, social imaginaries are filled with generative energy. Taylor cites popular uprisings such as Tiananmen Square 1989 and Manila 1985, stating:

It ought to be clear from the above that our images of moral order, although they may make sense of some of our actions, are by no means tilted toward the status quo. They may also underlie revolutionary practice, as at Manila and Beijing, just as they underwrite the established order.<sup>124</sup>

As ideas begin to have widespread recognition and transforming power, “people begin to take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices.”<sup>125</sup> The views emerging from the context of theory begin to make sense of these new practices, so that a “new understanding comes to be accessible in a way it wasn’t before. It begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things.”<sup>126</sup> An important factor in this diffusion of changing thought-practices is the notion of “drift.” As these new ways of being take root, they are often accompanied by changes that were unintended and often not seen or understood initially. This is called “drift” by social scientists – the build-up of activities and ways of thinking over time. This is especially helpful for bringing ecological discourse into conversation with current social imaginaries, due to the emotionally-laden nature of the issues:

One might conceive of the present ecological state of the world as a result of such drift. No one would argue that our ancestors set out to destroy the foundation of human

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

existence. Yet an accumulation of activities has created just such a dangerous state of destruction.<sup>127</sup>

If our current social imaginaries developed through historical processes consisting of the actions of various groups and tenacious individuals, then the turn towards a global ecological paradigm may signal larger changes on the horizon. Much of this change must occur in countries that are globally proportioned dramatically to the north and the west – those countries whose citizens have inherited the tangled legacies of being the colonizers are systematically positioned to current advantage, insulated from the many early warning signs already affecting the globally disenfranchised.<sup>128</sup> These issues will be engaged directly in the subsequent section on ecojustice. What is notable in this section is the constructed nature of the present broad ideas shaping our culture, and that these ideas can indeed be changed through the tenacious efforts of even small pockets of discourse. As Dalton and Simmons believe, “Our future will be negotiated between what presently exists and what we are committed to creating.”<sup>129</sup> Implicit in the hoping paradigms of religious environmentalists, I believe, is the conviction that a different way of life is morally imperative, and that the enactment of ecological justice within local communities is calling that can effect change on a larger scale.

Important, also, is that competing ideas are at work in the broader social imaginary, and some ideas are ecologically helpful, while others inflict harm to our planetary system on multiple levels. Take, for example, the current dominant notion of economic progress: while other forms of economic exchange are present in the world, the concept of a continually increasing GDP through the production and consumption of disposable consumer goods has helpful economic

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<sup>127</sup> Dalton and Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, 15.

<sup>128</sup> See for example, James Stephen Mastaler’s recent paper, “A Case Study on Climate Change and its Effects on the Global Poor,” in *Worldviews 15* (2011), 65-87.

<sup>129</sup> Dalton and Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, 17.

components, but is not sustainable on a finite planet with a population of seven billion persons. The need to shift to an ecologically sustainable economic social imaginary rests largely on those with the economic privilege, because they are driving a system with devastating environmental consequences (e.g., climate change, air and water pollution, dramatic reduction in biodiversity, waste management crises). The complexities of enacting justice for all the world's citizens is a challenge being addressed by many in the religious environmental movement. Recognizing the limits of powerful ideas and systems while being open to future possibility is one of the primary challenges of the dominant social imaginary of our context.

Accordingly, great discernment is needed as communities of faith seek to be more Earth-minded in their practice of faith. As Christian communities seek the green patches in their tradition and converse with the growing tide of ecological concern in the world, a conscious shift towards an ecologically minded spiritual praxis is emerging in the form of religious environmentalism. A broad cultural shift towards ecological concern influences the practices of faith communities, and the practices of faith communities in turn shift the broader social imaginaries in which they are embedded. Given the above, my understanding for this project is that religious environmental praxis is the intentional, theologically significant action of faith communities reflecting particular theological hoping paradigms. In the activity of faithful Christian praxis, theological visions of just futures are revealed. Graham's work provides the point for reflection on enacting theological commitment at the local level, and Taylor's concept of the social imaginary reflects how ideas in praxis have the capability of changing even the large-scale culture.

### **Ecological Justice Discourses and Religious Environmentalism**

What kind of faith is life-centered, justice-committed, and Earth-honoring, with a moral universe encompassing the whole community of life, the biosphere, and atmosphere together?

- Larry Rasmussen

The kind of transformation sought by religious environmentalists is a response to humanity's troubled relationship with the natural world. Distortion in the relationships between members of the human family and between humanity and our ecosystems reflects the troubling entanglement of injustice, a warping of our diverse visions for a good and fair world. Christian hope is inextricably linked to the thread of faith-informed justice running throughout the tradition, a strand picked up in this context of ecological turmoil by a generation of theological scholars known as ecotheologians. Because our notions of justice are particular to the contexts in which we perceive injustice, the following sections will outline three different justice discourses operating in the work of ecological justice-making. This will allow for reflection on my own normative concept of ecological justice for this project, one which holds both the "God of liberation" and the "God of creation," to use ecotheologian and ethicist Larry Rasmussen's construct.<sup>130</sup> I should be clear that I am creating this taxonomy of the discourses; in ecotheological literature, they are not generally delineated so clearly. However, I hope that by highlighting the different contexts in which they emerged, their different contributions can be highlighted and that dialogue regarding the potential transformation they invite may be more clearly engaged.

Ecotheology itself is diverse, covering a large range of perspectives and methods. This section of the review introduces three groups within ecotheology using justice-centered

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<sup>130</sup> Larry Rasmussen, "Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice: Moral Theory in the Making?" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* (2004), 3-28.

discourses to articulate the imperatives for transformation in our relations with all systems of life. Religious environmental praxis and the hoping paradigms that drive it reflect the conviction that a different kind of world is necessary to reflect God's *shalom*. The awareness that things are not as they should be, that our interwoven relations within the web of life are impaired, reflects a desire for the complex concept of justice. The justice discourses introduced below are, broadly termed, ecojustice, environmental justice, and ecofeminism; each of these concepts of justice reflect a particular vision for a world made right, and particular pathways for transformation in that direction. In this project, discourses around different ways of conceiving justice help elucidate the theological commitments about "who are we, where are we, what do we hope for, and how do we get there?" within the unique hoping paradigms of the cohorts.<sup>131</sup> In the reality of lived experience, these intellectual streams are not employed in isolation. For example, the Creation Care Team of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church (the focus of the following chapter) reflected a mixture of ecojustice and environmental justice commitments in its religious environmental praxis. While each discourse below focuses on justice imperatives connecting human beings to the more-than-human world, the eco-social location of these theorists, particularly their race, class, gender, and place has a significant effect on how care for all levels of our planetary system is understood. After describing the unique context for the emergence of these three discourses I will describe how they currently coalesce. I will offer my own understanding of ecological justice that operates in my constructive theological reflection later in this work, aided by James Martin-Schramm's careful elucidation of the aims and moral norms for ecological justice.

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<sup>131</sup> Eleazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 3.

## Ecojustice

The term “ecojustice” is commonly used when discussing the need to mitigate the negative effects of a large, industrialized human population on the more-than-human world. Combining the terms “ecological” and “justice,” the emergence of this discourse signaled the attempt to highlight the interconnected flourishing of the human and natural worlds, and drew attention to the moral imperative of creation care. In many ways, the emergence of ecojustice into academic discourse is related to a growing cultural awareness of the significance of ecological issues in the context of a larger consumer society. As James Martin-Schramm and Robert Stivers note, “Until recently the great ecological systems of the earth were a problem for human beings. Now the reverse is true. This reversal represents a revolution in the natural history of this planet.”<sup>132</sup> Sentinel events such as humanity’s first opportunity to view the Earth from space and the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* prompted reflective concern about the effects of human habits within a closed system. Lynn White, Jr.’s 1967 article for the journal *Science* indicted Christianity for significantly shaping our ecologically abusive culture, initiating a flurry of responses debating the role of Christian theology in the ecological crisis.<sup>133</sup> Within this dialogue, the body of work addressing the connections between human flourishing and the flourishing of the natural world began to be discussed as “ecojustice.”

The term has been part of mainline ecclesial life since 1984, when the National Council of Churches formed the Eco-Justice Working Group “designed to heal and defend creation,

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<sup>132</sup> James Martin-Schramm and Robert Stivers, *Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 9.

<sup>133</sup> Lynn White, Jr. “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 10 (1967): 1203-1207.



working to assure justice for all of creation and the human beings who live in it.”<sup>134</sup> Theologies using the term “ecojustice” developed in part through the discipline of ecotheology, which has steadily gained importance both in the academy and in congregational life, through the growing importance of environmental discourse in North American social imaginaries, and through the engaged practices of particular faith communities.

Ecojustice is the interweaving of concern for human social and economic flourishing with the concern for ecological wholeness and sustainability at the planetary level. Ecojustice scholar Dieter Hessel describes it thus in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*:

The eco-justice movement involves environmentally responsive Christians (along with adherents of other world religions) who seek the well-being of Earth and people through practices and policies that serve ecological wholeness and social justice together (ecology + justice)...The eco-justice movement...melds concerns for the natural world and for human life in ways that foster both environmental wholeness and economic justice. Eco-justice vision and values reshape the way we approach ecology and faith – stimulating broader expressions of environmentalism, challenging social activists to build sustainable community, and recycling religious doctrine, liturgy and social teachings to focus on the well-being of Earth community.<sup>135</sup>

The term ecojustice has become widely used in academic and ecclesial circles when referring to the extension of justice concerns to the natural world, and many use this term interchangeably with environmental justice.

The ascendancy of this term and the concerns it represents is not without critics; this term is most often employed by members of the academy, particularly those belonging to predominantly white, historically privileged institutions and denominations.<sup>136</sup> While ecojustice

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<sup>134</sup> National Council of Churches of Christ, “Ecojustice Defined,” NCC Ecojustice Working Group, <http://ncccecojustice.org/about/> (accessed September 4, 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Dieter Hessel, “Ecojustice” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum Press, 2005), 539-42.

<sup>136</sup> For example, Carl Anthony, in his interview for the text *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, asks the question of why it is easier for white persons to think like mountains, than to think like people of

scholar-activists and environmental justice scholar-activists share similar concerns – the imperative of connecting humanity to the habitat sustaining us in a cohesive effort to bring holistic justice to the world – there are important contextual differences in both histories and current focus of both groups. The differences rest primarily in how the human-nature relationship is framed, and how “environment” is defined. One of the major critiques leveled at early ecojustice work was its tendency to homogenize humanity and nature, by overextending the concept of interconnectedness to imply that “we are all the same.” The sentiment that humanity needs to reform its relationship to the natural world appears a functional truism; yet, not every human person is equally responsible for ecological devastation, and (as part of the natural world ourselves) not all humans experience the effects of environmental distress equally. As Larry Rasmussen phrases in an address to Christian ethicists, “...those in Christian ethics who have done the most to extend moral community to the full community of life have not yet brought the same inclusion to the standing of human members on grounds other than species status...The God of creation tends to cover, if not smother, the God of liberation.”<sup>137</sup>

Ecojustice considers experiences of ecological suffering, human and beyond human, to ask questions and seek practical responses in matters of ecological flourishing. By beginning with the premise that planetary flourishing is interconnected, ecojustice attempts to understand the pervasive nature of ecological damage wrought by human economic and social systems, and to transform those systems towards justice and ethical relationship.

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color (pg. 273). The ecojustice movement, in its early years, was critiqued for seeking the well being of the natural world at the expense of people of color, who have been systematically subjected to environmental injustice since the inception of industry.

<sup>137</sup> Rasmussen, 28.

## Environmental Justice

Environmental justice advocates begin their work in the context of environmental racism, a very different starting place than globalized ecological suffering. The particularity of the problems and the complex intersectionality of race, gender, class and ecological context create a challenging discourse to accompany historical ecojustice work. As environmental justice advocate Carl Anthony notes, “It’s not an accident...that the environmental justice movement is focused on both toxic waste *and* race. If you throw people away and you throw material away, it is no accident that they are not separated. You just throw them away together.”<sup>138</sup>

Vernice Miller-Travis, the principle research assistant for the ground breaking report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, offers the insight that “environmental issues are *not* distinguishable from, but rather are woven into, the fabric of racial, social, and economic justice.”<sup>139</sup> The 1987 study mentioned above found that, more than any other predictor (including socioeconomic class), race determines how closely persons live in proximity to toxic dumping sites.<sup>140</sup> Miller and Charles Lee (the principle investigator for the study) were initially surprised by the findings, believing they would find class to be a stronger predictor. However, other studies, including a twenty-year follow up study with even more stringent methods of analysis

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<sup>138</sup> Carl Anthony, “Ecopsychology and the Deconstruction of Whiteness,” in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszak, Mary Gomes, & Allen D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 271.

<sup>139</sup> Vernice Miller-Travis, “Social transformation through environmental justice,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 571.

<sup>140</sup> Benjamin J. Chavis, Jr. and Charles Lee, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987).

that was conducted in 2007, corroborated the findings of the original study.<sup>141</sup> Nancy Wright describes the disproportionate effects of industrial waste on marginalized communities:

Environmental abuse, more often than not, directly and negatively affects human communities, and disproportionately affects people of color or lower class in all countries, especially poorer countries, populated by people of color. Environmental injustice lodges the toxic effluent of industry in communities of people marginalized by race, class, or gender and offers the benefits to others.<sup>142</sup>

Galvanized by the findings of the 1987 study and the efforts of the UCC's Commission on Racial Justice, environmental justice groups began to address the racism implicit within mainstream environmental groups, including the assumption that urban environments were not actually "the environment."<sup>143</sup> Many large environmental groups had focused their efforts on wilderness preservation, protection and cleanup, excluding the well-being of urban areas inhabited predominantly by persons of color from their missions. Some of the disagreement has to do with the place of humanity within the system; some ecojustice and mainstream environmental groups have argued that a focus on justice for people is in error because humanity is the perpetrator of environmental harms. Environmental justice advocates, however, have responded to these claims by pointing out that poor persons and people of color are also victims of environmental harm, and creating a "universal division between humans and nature is deceptive, theoretically incoherent, and strategically ineffective in its political aim to promote widespread

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<sup>141</sup> Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha, Beverly Wright, *Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007 – A Report Prepared for the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries* (Cleveland: Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, 2007).

<sup>142</sup> Nancy Wright, "Christianity and Environmental Justice," in *CrossCurrents* 61 (2011), 164.

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, the letter written by Richard Moore, former director of the SouthWest Organizing Project, to the "Group of 10" mainstream environmental organizations after being told that groundwater contamination caused by area industry was not relevant to environmental mission (<http://www.ejnet.org/ej/swop.pdf>).

environmental awareness.”<sup>144</sup> Criticized on grounds of exclusionary practices, lack in organizational diversity, and failure to support the work of the environmental justice movement, many mainstream environmental groups (including the Sierra Club, which now hosts an environmental justice branch) have shifted their focus towards an interconnected world through the tenacious efforts of grassroots environmental justice groups. The preamble to the document, *Principles of Environmental Justice*, sums up the mission of the movement eloquently:

**WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR**, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples.<sup>145</sup>

The scope of the environmental justice movement bridges person and place, economy and ecology, and retains the complexity of the interlocking nature of oppressions. That there can be no justice for earth without justice for the oppressed inhabitants of earth is a clear commitment of many religious environmentalists, and resonates particularly well with the ethical imperatives for social justice inherent in Jewish and Christian traditions.

While the unity of flourishing for people and planet is highlighted in the “Principles of Environmental Justice” document, this discourse is not without its critiques, particularly from

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<sup>144</sup> Giovanna Di Chiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 301.

<sup>145</sup> First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, “Principles of Environmental Justice,” <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html> (accessed 5 September 2011).

those working towards interspecies justice.<sup>146</sup> Environmental justice norms of justice as distribution, recognition, and participation are focused primarily on the racial injustice towards human members of the community of life. “Intersectional analysis of interstructured privilege...is not done in a manner that matches the reach of human macropower across the community of life.”<sup>147</sup> The epistemological starting place for environmental justice is a compelling counter to the homogenizing privilege of older ecojustice discourses, and yet is not without gaps in its concept of a just world.

### Ecofeminism

Significantly, the work of various ecofeminists has influenced both of these groups. Ecofeminist voices from around the world have had remarkable impact on the field of ecotheology and its developing epistemologies. The great diversity of ecofeminist critiques, which arise from India, Africa, Latin America and North America, provide different insights into the effects of androcentrism and anthropocentrism. They insist on the interrelatedness of all life, and highlight the ways in which the logic of domination creates relationships of hierarchical power and oppression. These kinds of relationships reduce both women and the environment to objects for use and disposal. The term “ecofeminism” first emerged in 1974, when French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne first called for a feminist revolution to intervene ecological devastation.<sup>148</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether was the first theologian to take up these concepts; her

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<sup>146</sup> Interspecies justice advocates seeks the flourishing of non-human life forms, recognizing that the richness and diversity of life and the humans are not the only life form with the right to well-being and ecological security. Many interspecies justice advocates critique the anthropocentric assumptions contributing to the steep declining in biodiversity, while also inviting humanity to become more connecting with diverse life forms and the ways our own humanity is enhanced by their presence.

<sup>147</sup> Rasmussen, 29.

<sup>148</sup> Françoise d’Eaubonne, “Le Feminisme ou la Mort,” in *New French Feminism: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

1975 book *New Woman, New Earth* deals directly with the collusion of oppressive hierarchies damaging both women and the natural world through objectification. The following provides an overview of particular ecofeminists and ecofeminist groups who have influenced the scope and analysis of this dissertation.

The diversity of ecofeminist work is one of its great strengths. In response to a critique regarding the lack of unity in the field, Carol Adams, a North American ecofeminist, notes that ecofeminism is not characterized by a single line of thought, but by solidarity, connected by themes of interrelationship, transformation, and embodiment.<sup>149</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, building on her early and influential feminist critiques of religion and ecocidal practices, continues to be a shaping force of North American ecofeminism today. She defines ecofeminist theology in this way:

The *theology* of ecofeminism brings feminist theology into dialogue with a culturally based critique of the ecological crisis. Patriarchal ideology perceives the earth or nature as female or as a feminine reality. As such, nature is considered to be inferior to men. As a material being having no spirit, no life in and of itself, nature is only a tool to be exploited by men. The cultural roots of the ecological crisis can be found in this common perception of both women and nature as realities without spirit and tools to be exploited by dominant males.<sup>150</sup>

While ecofeminists of varying cultures are shaped in advocacy and theory by their particular contextual challenges, these themes related to the domination of women, the poor, and nature are operative in various ways.

Because this dissertation is concerned with connecting local congregations to this world and their hoping paradigms for this world, Ivone Gebara's theological reconstruction of fall and finitude is especially instructive. Gebara, a Brazilian ecofeminist and one of the founders of the

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<sup>149</sup> Carol Adams, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 3-8.

<sup>150</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism and theology," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. D. Hallman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 199.

*Con-spirando* collective of Latin American ecofeminists, frames primordial sin not as disobedience that causes physical mortality, but as acting upon the fearful desire to escape mortality. As human fear of death became codified in powerful men seeking domination over resources, disconnection from the body and power over death became the ultimate way of avoiding vulnerability: “Our species’ evil is this excessive desire to take possession of life and make it our own.”<sup>151</sup> Commenting on Gebara’s notion, Ruether states, “It is this system of domination and distortion which is sin, as distinct from tragedy and death, which are natural and inevitable.”<sup>152</sup> The extent to which hopes grounded in the flourishing of this world, and in the efforts to connect to it, are influence the different cohorts varies, not surprisingly, based on their theological worldviews. The cohorts’ consistent commitment to the connections between human flourishing and the flourishing of the whole web of life do mean that their eschatologies are at least partially committed to mending human relationships with the marginalized persons and ecosystems of our world, fostering hopes approximating the following vision named by Robin Morgan.<sup>153</sup>

Bread. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman’s voice singing somewhere. The army disbanded. The harvest abundant. The wound healed. The child wanted. The prisoner freed. The body’s integrity honored. The lover returned... Labor equal, fair and valued. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting. Secure interiors – of heart, home, and land – so firm as to make secure borders irrelevant at last. And everywhere, laughter, care, celebration, dancing, contentment. A humble, earthly paradise in the *now*.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 168.

<sup>152</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary R. Ruether (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 105.

<sup>153</sup> *A Woman’s Creed* was penned by Morgan in collaboration with an international group of women at the Women’s Global Strategy meeting in November 1994. Pamphlets of the creed are available through the Sisterhood is Global Institute: [http://www.robinmorgan.us/robin\\_morgan\\_bookDetails.asp?ProductID=11](http://www.robinmorgan.us/robin_morgan_bookDetails.asp?ProductID=11)

<sup>154</sup> Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women’s Movement Anthology* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1996), 813-814.



Ecofeminist methodologies, because of their center in unraveling the logic of domination, speak not only of justice for the earth, or justice for human beings, but simply of justice, knowing that ways of living that offer justice for the earth will also offer a fuller life for marginalized human beings. The following is an excerpt from the opening words of the *Con-spirando* collective in the first edition of their journal:

We call for cosmologies that question anthropocentrism and expose relationships based on dominance of one class, ethnic group, gender, age, or sexual orientation over another and of the human over other forms of life. Such cosmologies will have profound political consequences. This ecofeminist perspective unmasks the hierarchies in which we live and points toward a more holistic vision of our inter-relatedness... To do this, we need to *con-spirar juntas*, a phrase that attempts to convoke the image of the planet as a living, breathing organism to which we are all intrinsically linked in one great but myriad breath of life.<sup>155</sup>

Each of the justice-oriented ecotheological perspectives discussed in this section are shaped by the contexts in which they arose. The communities of faith involved in this project are also shaped by diverse contexts that influence how they embody their understanding of ecological justice. This work joins together the concerns of the web of life in such a way that the complex relationships between all life systems remain intact. This is work that begins among the contaminated garbage piles amidst which the world's poor must live,<sup>156</sup> as Gebara reminds, and dreams of nothing less than a world where potential flourishing for all beings is recognized in the just structuring of our lives.

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<sup>155</sup> *Conspirando: Revista Latinoamericana de Ecofeminismo, Espiritualidad, y Teología* (Santiago: March 1992 vol. 1), 1.

<sup>156</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 3-7.

### Ecological Justice in a Paradigm of Intersystemic Care

The frameworks for justice discussed above inform my understanding of religious environmental praxis, aiding my understanding about how theological hoping paradigms create transformation and seek justice through particular acts of religious environmental care based on their moral ideas of justice. To critically reflect on my own understandings of justice reflecting the interconnected and embedded nature of humanity in the ecological circle of life, clear norms for engaging in justice making are needed. James Martin-Schramm offers such norms in his recent text, *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy*. He proposes the four moral norms of *sustainability*, *sufficiency*, *participation*, and *solidarity* to help humanity embody ecological justice. Sustainability engages the long-range need for natural resources to continue meeting basic human needs while preserving local ecosystems. In a society plagued by overconsumption, this norm then invites the accompanying norm of sufficiency forward. Sufficiency is closely related to equity; Martin-Schramm notes that it “emphasizes that all forms of life are entitled to share in the goods of creation...[sufficiency] repudiates wasteful and harmful consumption and encourages humility, frugality, and generosity.”<sup>157</sup> This framework accounts for unequal power distribution with its last two norms, those of participation and solidarity. Participation is “concerned with empowerment and seeks to remove the obstacles to participating in decisions that affect lives.”<sup>158</sup> This norm addresses the systemic disempowerment of those marginalized by human social and economic systems; its accompanying norm, solidarity, addresses the over-empowerment of those higher in the hierarchies of resources and power.

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<sup>157</sup> James Martin-Schramm, *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), Kindle edition chapter 1, location 492.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, location 525.

Martin-Schramm's norms offer a helpful starting place in constructing my own norms of ecological justice. For me, it is limited in how these norms relate to one another; sustainability and sufficiency focus primarily on human behavior with resources, where participation and solidarity seem to center around how we relate to one another in the use of those resources. Given my own methodological preferences for a hermeneutic of liberative interrelationship, I propose the following ethical norms for understanding ecological justice in this project: empowering reciprocal flourishing, embodying spiritualities of sufficiency, and standing against death-dealing cultural practices. Each of these norms is contextually relational and provides a platform for understanding the transformative potential of intersystemic care. Empowering reciprocal flourishing combines elements of the norms of solidarity and sustainability. It stretches the norm of solidarity to include the subversive power of those who may not appear to have cultural agency and systemic power. This norm accounts also accounts for parts of the norm of sustainability concerning itself with the diminishment of the richness and diversity of life on the planet when substantial portions of the biosphere are restricted in their ability to reach their potential.

Embodying spiritualities of sufficiency in a North American context attends to the need to limit cultural values of excessive consumption through spiritual practices and theological frameworks that help persons identify the boundaries of "enough." Our culture encourages a constant flow of information and goods, immersion in a culture that asks us to present ourselves in particular ways to prove human worth. Living simply for some, or vocalizing the need for more healthy resources for others, are practices that subvert culturally drawn lines of normative, class-defined behavior. The Christian tradition's invitation to consider one's own worth in God

and live with enough for each day provides a powerful resource for developing communities with this moral value.<sup>159</sup>

Finally, standing against death-dealing cultural practices means active participation in dismantling the systems that work against the above norms. The groups participating in this study engage in this part of justice making in light of the particular ecological suffering visible in their contexts. This norm accounts for the intersystemic nature of such practices, noting how the intersection of human injustice and ecological suffering are inseparable from the ways power is exercised in the global market economy.

Parts of these justice frameworks and my own understanding of ecological justice are operative in each of the groups participating in this study, and yet none of the discourses fully captures the idiosyncratic embodiments of religious environmental justice making occurring around specific issues. Religious environmentalism is most clearly seen in the efforts of particular communities seeking systemic change in order to promote the flourishing of life at multiple levels of our planetary systems, and embraces the principle of interconnection in both operation and discourse. The following chapters show the complex enactment of religious environmental praxis, demonstrating the ways in which understandings of justice are tied to theological frameworks. They also show how these theologies-in-action are constantly revised by continued praxis in community.

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<sup>159</sup> Cf. Matthew 6.25-34. While this passage is ecologically problematic in some interpretations, its message to not cling tightly to excess possessions to protect ourselves from finitude is an important corrective for those with the material resources to quell existential concerns through the consumer lifestyle.

### **Conclusions: Summary of the Literature Review**

This chapter developed key points in relevant discourses involved in the hoping paradigms of religious environmentalists. The theological worldviews I describe as hoping paradigms occur at the nexus of anthropologies of interconnection and eschatology, inviting the transformation of their particular social imaginaries through the praxis of ecological justice making. How to go forward as humanity is a key concern for religious environmentalists, taken up in the concept of Andrew Lester's future stories, Jürgen Moltmann's creation-inclusive orthodoxy, and Catherine Keller's constructive, earth-bound eschatology. These hoping paradigms are enacted as intentional praxis, with the hope of shifting the larger social imaginary towards ecologically just futures. The conceptual paradigms presented above are thoroughly muddled in the ethnographies following this review; human lives transgress expected boundaries, and create novel ways of enacting our hopes based on contextual realities. However, attending to the ways that ecological justice norms and eschatological hope surface in the transformative praxis of the cohorts makes constructive proposals based on their experiences more salient. Research involvement with these religious environmental groups allowed for dialogue and observation regarding the dynamic activism of these groups, as they constantly adapted to new contextual information from ecological discourses, faith discourses, and their relationships as community members. Describing the hoping paradigms of these religious environmental groups offers a window into a broader frame for engaging human experience as pastoral theologians; a planetary pastoral theology inclusive of the interrelated web of life, the temporal dimension of evolutionary history, and the activity of God at work in the whole biosphere.

CHAPTER FOUR  
GULF COAST LUTHERAN CHURCH: “MAKING A DIFFERENCE”  
IN LOCAL ISSUES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

**Introduction**

This chapter follows the narratives of the Creation Care Team of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church, exploring how their experiences creating a community of religious environmental care contribute to a constructive theology of intersystemic caring praxis grounded by particular theological hoping paradigms and local communities. United by their commitment to viewing life on Earth as an interconnected whole and by a theological value of creation care, this community demonstrates the integration of their individual ecological experiences with their faith tradition through reflective praxis. This cohort’s hoping paradigm embraces “making a difference” through ecological discipleship, bolstered by their belief that they are partnering with God in this work. This paradigm is visible in their narratives of coming together to integrate the practice of creation care into their spirituality, and in their joint response to the environmental justice issues in the wider ecosystemic community where they live.

The integrated nature of ecological and social justice is perhaps most clearly seen in cases of environmental justice, such as those encountered by the team later in this chapter. Engaging with people and places that have been ecologically marginalized by the presence of industrial pollutants and waste in their communities is a complex endeavor requiring discernment, planning, and many kinds of support for possibilities of transformation to be realized. Acts of

religious environmental care emerge from a dynamic mixture of contextual ecological needs requiring specific ethical action, theological worldviews that provide a scaffold for the emerging ethical commitment, and a community supporting the activism. The congregational context for religious environmental care offers theological norms encouraging action. It also provides a community of people with shared interest in those actions, and spiritual nourishment to sustain the hope and momentum of the work. Congregational contexts also present challenges to religious environmental cohorts because the need to shift congregational viewpoints and practices is often present. The process of fostering institutional awareness within congregations so that collaboration on ecological issues can occur requires time and commitment on the part of these cohorts. Groups such as the Creation Care Team face the struggle for buy-in on the part of their own communities, alongside the challenges of environmental service to the wider community of life.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between the experiences of the Creation Care Team, their theological worldviews, and their ecological contexts through a mutually critical dialogue between theological and ecological discourses. The cohort's diverse yet overlapping theologies converge with the contextual urgency of local environmental issues, fostering transformative action that shapes both their congregation and the wider neighborhood they call home. By placing their theological norms in conversation with discourses of environmental justice and thick descriptions of praxis, constructive theologies and strategic pastoral responses emerge. First, ethnographic descriptions of the group's identity and intersystemic context provide experiential engagement with challenging contextual issues. Next, theological reflection about the themes surfacing in the process of observation and conversation help us consider how ecological discourses shape and challenge these themes. A constructive theology of religious

environmental praxis as a model for intersystemic care structures these thoughts towards possible pastoral responses. Finally, the descriptions, reflection, and constructive theological proposals point towards possible pastoral responses for communities considering religious environmentalism as a form of caring spiritual praxis.

The Creation Care Team lives a theology of committed Christian service and ongoing discipleship, encouraging others to join with them in acts of ecological care and environmental justice. The ethnographic portrait and constructive theological response below addresses how particular concerns raised by ecological suffering became transformative visions of ecological justice enacted through caring responses. It also sheds light on the ways this particular faith community has been transformed and sustained through nurturing their commitment to theological and ecological hope, a community ethic that increases their potential for faithful action in the face of ecological suffering.

### **Contexts: Ecological, Historical, and Congregational**

#### Ecological Context: The Gulf Coast of the Southern United States

The Gulf of Mexico borders five of the southern United States, a large geographic region with multiple subregions shaped by the unique interaction of water, soils, plants and animals creating this particular ecosystem. Hot summers, cool winters, and normally reliable rainfall create arable land and pine forests in many parts of the ecosystem. The lush variety of coastal and marine habitats including wetlands, barrier islands, beaches and reefs, provides a rich tapestry of ecological, economic and cultural diversity for the region. The wetland complexes along the coast are extremely valuable havens of biodiversity. Migratory birds nest and forage



here along one of largest annual migration flyways in the world, and coastal marshes are the nursery for an abundance of fish and invertebrates.<sup>160</sup>

In spite of its vibrant environmental, economic, and cultural heritages, the Gulf ecosystem is imperiled on a variety of fronts. Even apart from acute oil and gas industry tragedies such as the Deepwater Horizon explosion and spill of 2010, ongoing economic and cultural development continues to take significant environmental tolls. The combination of land subsidence and sea level rise related to climate change, dead zones from excessive nutrient loading from human agricultural sources, ocean acidification, and a variety of industrial and residential developments along the coastline and barrier islands creates significant threat to the potential flourishing of the diverse life forms of the region.<sup>161</sup>

#### Historical and Economic Contexts

Embedded within the ecological circle of life is the economic need of human societies. The ecological promise of this unique landscape provides fertile and fragile potential for human development in the region. The variety of natural resources available, such as agriculture, timber, trade, and seaways for shipping and fishing, have provided economic staples for human development in the region since early Native American civilizations first settled in the region.

The more recent economic boom of the petrochemical industry in the mid-twentieth century created an oil and gas corridor along the Mississippi River and at other transport hotspots along the coast, sometimes called “Cancer Alley” by environmental justice advocates due to the high levels of industrial pollutants like dioxin and benzene pervading the air and water. The search for drilling sites in area marshes led to the dredging of thousands of canals, severely

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<sup>160</sup> The United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Gulf of Mexico Regional Ecosystem Restoration Strategy*, by Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, Washington, D.C.: 2011, <http://www.epa.gov/gcertf/pdfs/gcertfStrategy10052011.pdf> (Accessed 2 November 2012), 6.

<sup>161</sup> This threat certainly extends to human inhabitants of the region.

damaging the wetland habitats of the region. The increased extraction of crude oil necessitated the construction and operation of related facilities like polymerization plants and refineries to synthesize chemicals used in the processing of crude oil; this agglomeration of industries creates a much higher risk of atmospheric exposure to known carcinogens than the refining industry alone. Additionally, a large population and expansive regional transportation industry further stress air quality. Chronic and acute exposure to high amounts of ozone and air toxics in urban areas of this region has been linked to lung problems such as asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema (ozone exposure), and cancer, reproductive difficulties, and birth defects (air toxics).<sup>162</sup>

As the petrochemical industry grew, cities along the Gulf became centers for refining, transporting, and managing oil and gas, resources that are in global demand for their ability to power our rapidly paced consumer society. The growth of this industry provided economic security for millions of people, anchoring the development of Gulf Coast urban centers. This industry remains the primary economic force in the region, and continues to constantly alter the ecological landscape through urban development and industrial processes. The inhabitants of the region, human and otherwise, live in constant relationship with industrial pollutants. There is a constant tension between the economic security of millions of people, and the potential for the vibrant health of all beings belonging to this place. The myriad inhabitants of the Gulf Coast live in complex, dynamic relationship with the ecological habitat they call home.

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<sup>162</sup> See, for example, the recent study: Cook, Richard, Madeleine Strum, Jawad S Touma, Ted Palma, James Thurman, Darrell Ensley, and Roy Smith. 2007. "Inhalation exposure and risk from mobile source air toxics in future years." *Journal Of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology* 17, no. 1: 95-105. MEDLINE with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed November 23, 2012).

## Congregational Context

The ecological abundance and economic opportunity of the Gulf Coast region are primary reasons the urban area where Gulf Coast Lutheran Church is located exists.<sup>163</sup> The population influx of this urban center over the course of the last century brought significant growth in the number of local churches. Gulf Coast Lutheran Church became part of the local landscape in the mid-1940s, when it was founded as a mission congregation near a local university. From its earliest days, this congregation served the local community through ministries of care. Over the years, the community has demonstrated this commitment through their efforts to alleviate poverty in the area, in their care for community members struggling with HIV and AIDS, and in their engagement with worldwide mission projects focused on social equity. The Creation Care Team at Gulf Coast Lutheran Church is the newest iteration of this congregation's identity as a caring community, taking up the congregational tradition of serving persons and communities on the margins in a contextually insightful way.

Today, Gulf Coast Lutheran Church is a large congregation of about 900 members located in what is now an upper-middle class part of the city. This neighborhood is economically bolstered by the presence of the nearby university, and socially influenced by the academic values of that institution. Gulf Coast Lutheran Church is a theologically moderate, socially engaged congregation belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Gulf Coast Lutheran Church's membership reflects the highly educated, professional class of the local neighborhood, though people commute to the congregation from various parts of the city. The

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<sup>163</sup> The identities of the specific city, congregation, and team members have been altered per the participants' agreement to participate in this study. While I view their work as creative and constructive, they are the growing edge of their congregations and face many challenges in establishing themselves as a ministry team. I wish to honor the candidness of their theological responses by ensuring they are protected by the boundaries of confidentiality.

congregation focuses on a variety of community needs, global missions, and rich traditional worship emphasizing classical music and contemplative prayer services.

### **The Creation Care Team at Gulf Coast Lutheran Church: Description, History and Aims**

#### Group Description & History

The Creation Care Team at Gulf Coast Lutheran Church is a new ministry, growing from the synergy between the grassroots interest of church members and a denominational initiative for religious environmental care. Individual group members reflected how their own commitments to earth care were drawn together by the leadership of two team members and their facilitation of this denominational initiative in the church community. In 2010, Allan and Teri, a couple involved with a similar team at their previous church in the northeast, attended a breakout session on creation care that was hosted by a sister church. During the session, they met the leader of creation care activities for the synod and discussed their mutual interest in integrating environmental work into the ministry of the church. Teri agreed to attend a national training for Lutherans Restoring Creation, and began the process of becoming a local ministry chapter of Lutherans Restoring Creation through forming a “covenant relationship” between their parish, the synod, and the denomination.

With the blessing of the local church leadership and the beginnings of a formal ministry covenant, Teri began the process of recruiting members in the fall of 2010. Using methods easily accessible to the congregation such as an annual ministry fair and annual survey for member involvement, eight initial group members were recruited. Finally, after receiving formal endorsement to proceed with the Creation Care Team, the group had their first official meeting in the early spring of 2011. The team is currently composed of approximately 11 regular members,

with others who visit from time-to-time. The group has a wide age range, from a 12-year old member to senior adults. There are several adults in their forties and fifties, and the remaining group is made up of older adults, aged 65 or older. The group has more women than men, and is mostly white, with one African American member. Teri is the group leader, providing much of the organizational leadership through scheduling regular meetings and events, offering theological insight, and sharing personal passion for religious environmental praxis.

#### Partners in Research and Reflection:

##### Collaborating to Understanding the Hopping Paradigm of the Creation Care Team

It is of note that from the moment I contacted the Creation Care Team about participating in this study, my interactions with them began to shape the character of the narratives they shared. I feature materials garnered through a process of observation, dialogue, and relationship with team members, and my interactions invariably shaped not only my telling of their story, but also the way they chose to share their information. The very questions I asked in the research process influenced the interpretation of theologies and events by team members; even the process of holding interview conversations moves those theological experiences into different spaces through an ongoing process of implicit and explicit theological reflection.

Additionally, I am neither a Lutheran nor a resident of the Gulf Coast. This was helpful in the sense that it fostered my curiosity about the team's Lutheran identities and their ecological context. Not claiming insider knowledge about their faith or environmental contexts helped me attend to the assumptions I brought to the process. This status as researcher-outsider was challenging throughout my research process with the different congregational cohorts, in that I did not always ask follow up questions that may have elicited further reflection, and perhaps missed opportunities to further engage their cultural and theological worldviews.

The Mission of the Creation Care Team:  
Making a Difference Through Ecological Discipleship

Implicit in the concept of hoping paradigms is a notion of transformative justice, nuanced by the individual understandings within the group yet providing the impetus for the caring activities of the cohort. For religious environmentalists, this commitment to a transformative vision has an explicitly ecological dimension, a hoped-for wholeness of creation in which God's *shalom* is displayed. The transformation sought by the Gulf Coast Lutheran Church cohort focuses in two specific directions: inward towards themselves and their own community of faith, and outward towards service beyond the boundaries of the congregation. As a group, the Creation Care Team balances the work of encouraging environmental discipleship within their own congregation with their call to engage in service to the world beyond Gulf Coast Lutheran Church. Their commitments to religious environmental praxis are a combination of personal experiences, faith practices, theological worldviews, and conviction regarding the importance of the ongoing transformation of the world through discipleship of the whole community of faith. When interviewed about their hopes for what the group could do together and future plans for the team, group members began by expressing a desire to shift the beliefs and practices of their local congregation, so that wider participation from church members around the issues of environmental justice would be evident in their community. Normalizing the idea that creation care is part of a faithful identity in the continuing the process of "discipleship," was repeated several times in this part of our conversation. Matthew, a Euro-American man in his seventies, stressed the importance of helping the congregation understand "there is one world and this is it." He hopes that through this message, the team can offer opportunities for formation that "encourage discipleship" in the area of creation care. For Judy, a Euro-American woman in her fifties, looking at every aspect of life through the lens of faith is a particularly important message

the Creation Care Team offers. Sharing the knowledge that “how I interact with people and how I care for the earth is all part of integrating faith” is key message to convey to other members in their faith community.

Other group members focused on their goal of shifting the practices of the local congregation towards the concept of institutional sustainability, focusing on messages that encourage thoughtful awareness of resources being used. These messages are shared through the language of worship, the practices of group members, and through team events specifically focused on connecting faith and caring for creation. Susan, a Euro-American woman in her seventies, expressed her commitment to raising awareness of environmental issues through liturgical prayers and fostering sustainable practices within their large congregation. She notes how “large groups of people who meet together regularly are messy, and they don’t usually recycle or do the kinds of things that make the earth a better place.” She implied that the practices of the community as a whole do not reflect some of the values that it claims as part of its identity. Judy built on this thread of the discussion, noting how the nascent commitments of the Creation Care Team have been present all along in certain parts of congregational life. The church uses typically uses china and cloth napkins, uses Sunday school materials that do not require significant physical resources, and has made efforts toward recycling for a number of years. The team hopes that making connections about why these actions are matters of faith will resonate with the implicit congregational value of thrift and simplicity. As conversations about the mission and future plans for the group unfolded, the theme of balancing work within the congregation while reaching out in service beyond their own church context emerged as significant.

When asked about the relationship between discipleship within the congregation and engaging the wider community, group members clearly stated that this is not a linear process. Matthew noted the relationship between events happening outside the congregation, and how this affects the motivation within: “I don’t think it can be a linear process, because I think a lot depends on the community within responding to the outside world.” Teri was animated as she shared their connection to the Church’s call to service, describing how Lutheran theology supports the team’s mission in this area:

I think the understanding in the Lutheran church is that the church exists for the sake of the world. We are not here to take care just of members or of ourselves – we are here for the sake of the world. Now, should we care for each other? Of course we should. But it’s beyond that – that’s not sufficient. The church is a place with no walls, and the doors are all open. That’s our understanding.

The team members discussed how “setting the example” in the areas of environmental outreach combined with promoting discipleship around issues of sustainability is a significant part of their initial strategy. By planning events beyond the congregation while changing practices within it, they hope to simultaneously transform Gulf Coast Lutheran Church and the ecological state of the city in that is their home. This commitment to making a difference through ecological discipleship is clear in the ongoing transformation in their own lives and in the team’s desire to foster the transformation of the world beyond their church. Transformation through service comprised a significant theological theme for the group, and is at the heart of their religious environmental hoping paradigm.

As the conversation unfolded, it became clear that as a newly emerging ministry within the congregation, group members hope for more involvement from their community. An interesting word play emerged around the concept of sustainability. In ecological circles, this word is generally used to refer to lowering the rates of human impact and consumption in effort



to reduce the amount of resources used and waste produced, thereby maximizing the potential continuation of specific activities. In the group context, members discussed the idea of a “sustainable group,” reflecting on the power of their personal “grassroots” interest in environmental issues and how this brings considerable energy to the group. Judy noted,

One of the things fostering sustainability in this church is the philosophy here. There’s not a committee who decides, ‘we need to have a group and we need to do this.’ It provides space for people to come with their passion and say, ‘I would like to do this.’ The philosophy of service and care within a congregation can be really important in fostering this kind of group – I think it’s important that it comes from the grassroots.

Group members nodded in agreement, discussing how their own passion for engaging this kind of work has increased through being around other team members. Laura summarized the conversation by noting, “You can’t force passion from above. People just don’t respond to that.” Group members reflected on how to share this passion, acknowledging the difficulty of doing so much as a small team in a large church.

I think that the tough part is that you have to lead by example initially and that makes it hard on all of us. We’re a small team and we wind up doing all this stuff...but I think the goal is to grow participation on the part of the congregation, as they are made aware of the significance of this vocation that we all share as humanity.

Supported by the denominational program of Lutherans Restoring Creation and the leadership in their local synod, the team is moving forward with plans for events, participating in worship, and leading by example on issues of sustainability. In spite of the challenges of forming a new ministry team, the Creation Care Team has a clear vision for making a difference through transforming their community’s relationship with the natural world, and an ethical framework for acting on issues of environmental discipleship and environmental justice.

### **Focal Beliefs: Theological Narratives Supporting the Work of the Creation Care Team**

The stated aims described by Creation Care Team were passionately theological, rooted in their common language as Lutherans and oriented towards involving the whole community in a relational process of transformation. Additionally, each team member involved in the interview process shared their unique story of how they integrated environmentalism into their practice of faith. Given their different yet related concerns as team members, how did the individual members begin to pay attention to matters of ecological concern? Why was it important for them to join this kind of group, in this kind of setting?

A significant component of religious environmental hoping paradigms is the notion of *call*: religious environmentalists experience a call to effect change in current circumstances; often due to witnessing some kind of environmental harm, or sometimes through exposure to faith discourses inviting the care of creation. The religious environmental worldviews of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church's Creation Care Team developed in individual ways prior to their joining the efforts of the team, and their common experience as Lutherans shapes how these values are expressed. Awakening to the ecological as integral to human life comes in the form of many individual stories, with unique amalgamations of how scientific and ecological discourses began to interact with their experiences as people of faith in unique traditions and settings. Group members participating in the interview session expressed varied views on what initially compelled them to become involved in the new, relatively unknown ministry of the Creation Care Team. Their reasons included relational, vocational, rational, ethical and sacramental dimensions, painting a textured canvas displaying the ways group formation is shaded by individual stories and traditions held in common. Their diversely embodied praxis reflects the

complex ethical challenges of religious environmental care, highlighting the relational and contextual forces shaping praxis.

All group members included a relational component within their reasons for joining the group. Members talked about their interactions with their families, especially how their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews compel them to think about the future of the planet. Judy shared how her daughter's passion for ecological issues keeps her "grounded;" she offered a humorous anecdote illustrating how relationships help keep her accountable to environmental responsibility:

[My daughter] came for a visit. I'm normally very conscientious, using china and washing dishes. But things were kind of pressed, so I pulled some paper plates out of the cupboard that I'd had up there for about 10 years, and I totally forgot it was Earth Day. I thought my daughter was going to have a fit! She said, 'Mother! You are *not* using paper plates on Earth Day!' So, she keeps me grounded. I think it's important – you can't separate your faith from your everyday life, really. They're blended.

Discussion about responsibility to one another evoked some conversation about professional identities and vocations; here, there was a clear overlap in how vocational tasks and ethical positions developed. Matthew cited his years as an environmental biologist before becoming a teacher, and Judy spoke of how being a nurse shapes your ideas about health. Teri spoke of the challenges of working as an engineer in the petrochemical industry and her call to push for change from the inside out. Teri, in particular, talked about how her identity as a Lutheran really stretches her sense of vocation because of the stewardship implications she sees as being key to this faith identity:

For a number of years, I felt that I was being called to a certain vocation, but I didn't know what it was. I still don't *know* if I've found that out, but I know that the understanding we have as Lutherans is that God commands humanity to care for all that [God] has made. That is our purpose, that is our vocation, the theology helps answer that question for me.

Judy also resonated with how her identity as a person of faith brought her to this team, citing her own growing awareness of humanity's potential as both positive and negative: "I think as you grow in your faith there is a level of accountability that comes into play for a lot of different things. As I've matured and become aware of what's going on in the world, and our potential for harm as well as good, it just makes sense to do what we can."

Susan noted that "making the earth a better place" was a value she seems to have always held, shaped by early experiences with valuing nature. For her, it is significant to remind people of their obligation as people of faith to responsible stewardship. She expresses this through advocating for an ecological dimension to the community prayers each week, seeing it as a significant force for shaping the ecological consciousness of their faith community.

The various experiences of vocation and ecological "call" shared by the cohort members inspired a commitment to changing their own level of involvement in environmental work, and their congregational commitment to community care made joining the Creation Care Team an accessible way to engage their ecological concerns. The team members' discernment that things are not ecologically well in the world combines with their desire to care for God's creation both now and for future generations, making the congregational setting a fitting place for their praxis.

Another component of religious environmental hoping paradigms is *specific theological claims* fostering the work of the groups. After experiencing various "calls" to increase their level of commitment to environmental involvement, participation in a faith-based group helps provide moral and theological reasons for continuing this challenging work. Theological claims regarding religious environmentalism help group members locate their work within the realm of faithful spiritual praxis, though this is sometimes a difficult process of connection.

The primary beliefs named by the team at Gulf Coast Lutheran Church fall into three categories:

- We are called to ecological discipleship
- We make a difference
- We are not alone

While the schema above is an oversimplification of their stated beliefs, it reflects the general themes of the conversation. These beliefs, shared in the context of talking about their work as religious environmentalists, may or may not reflect the comprehensive theological worldviews of team members, given the particular scope and focus of the discussion.

#### Called to Care: Ecological Discipleship

One of the most animated portions of this group discussion unfolded as group members began to talk about the ways they understand their faith in connection to their work as Lutheran environmentalists advocating for care of creation. In various forms, group members shared their beliefs that they have been called to care, that care means responsibility throughout one's life, and that lives of care and service follow the example of Christ.

Being "called to care" shows up in how team members join their love of the earth and their faith. Matthew stated, "It's very important to me that my faith and my love of the earth...be one and the same. They're interrelated, you might say, because if we believe in God, God created this earth for us to take care of and not exploit." Teri emphasized at several points throughout the interview that care of creation is humanity's vocation, and that sharing this message with the whole congregation is key for members of the team, so "that they are made aware of the significance of this vocation that we share as all humanity."

This concept of caring for creation takes the form of responsibility for this cohort. The words accountability, responsibility, and stewardship were prominent throughout this part of our

conversation. Judy raised the idea of “dominion,” in reference to the creation story of Genesis 1. She interprets this story as a call to responsibility: “The word ‘dominion’ or control bears a huge responsibility. It’s not a free pass to do as you will. I read, personally, that there’s responsibility along with this gift.” Matthew shared that, for him, there is a strange tension between caring for the earth and using his faith to justify his own existence.

I just feel a need to take care of the earth – because I’ve always felt that way. Now does that mean it goes with my faith? Probably, because I think it’s so important for me to justify my existence. Literally, to say, okay, I’m here, and if I’m here, I need to be a good steward on the earth. I need to take care of it. Is it because God said so or because I believe God said so? I don’t know. But I know that from time to time I do pray for the environment, for the outcome of it, and pray that when my grandchildren are grown they’ll have an earth they can go to.

Group members reflected on the ways that advocating for creation care makes them more thoughtful in the discipleship and formation of their whole lives, because it requires them to change the way they live in their every day existence. Acts such as bringing their own coffee cups to church, changing their shopping habits, and giving their time to plan events related creation stewardship have shifted how they practice their faith in a context of ecological distress.

### Making a Difference

The changes team members are making in their everyday lives, through group and individual efforts, remind them that the process of transformation is ongoing. Group members described their conviction that individual lifestyle changes matter. Matthew noted, “Every journey begins with a step. I bring my cup and maybe no one says anything – well, I’ll bring it next week. Somewhere down the line, somebody else will start bringing their own cup.”

Teri and Judy talked about how the group magnifies their potential for making a difference through reminding them of their Christian calling to be “people of hope.”

**Judy:** Yeah, I’m only one person, but what I do can and *does* make a difference.

**Teri:** And all of us collectively, what we can do can makes a huge difference. So it's my responsibility to engage in this thoughtful process.

**Judy:** Right! Because the other side of the coin is, oh, I'm just one little person and it doesn't matter, so I can just go off and do whatever.

**Teri:** And that goes against our faith, because our faith says we are people of hope, because the world is in God's hands ultimately.

This exchange illustrates the team's hoping paradigm of making a difference through ecological discipleship fostered by partnering with God. It highlights their dual commitment to individual and community transformation through personal willingness and divine empowerment. It also points to the final group of theological claims made by group members: that they continue this work because they anticipate the transformation of the world through their partnership with God.

#### We Are Not Alone

Several group members noted that their faith fosters their work, either because God holds ultimate responsibility for transformation, or because their community of faith provides structure and community for continuing their religious environmental praxis. Teri, a self-proclaimed "theology wonk," offered strong belief statements regarding the group's call to be "people of hope." In addition to the conversation described in the previous section, she noted that "We are called to live in hope, and we are called to act in hope...I remind myself of that when I get frustrated." She also was clear in her belief that the empowerment of God's Spirit keeps her from retreating from the team when she is tired: "In the end, we are here doing what we believe is the right thing as people of faith, but God's in charge. It's not my responsibility to fix it all – that's Gods. It's my responsibility to do what I can as I'm empowered by the Spirit." Other group members focused less on the potential for transformation as empowered by God's Spirit, and more on their commitment to enacting hope as an "ongoing process." Judy reflected on how the group provides another pathway to an integrated faith in which care and responsibility

permeate all areas of her life, and Matthew reflected that hope is not oriented towards outcomes, but towards faithful action. He noted, “Hope is an ongoing process. I always think if I do something it will make a difference. Maybe I’ll never see it, but that’s okay. I’m not there to see, I’m there do hope it occurs.” The community of faith, then, provides opportunities for faith action that reflects the hope of transformation.

The portrait of theological worldviews that the group members shared during the interview process – that of a distinct call to environmental care, of belief that these actions make a difference, and that they are not alone in this process – offers a glimpse into the complex religious environmental praxis of the Creation Care Team. The opportunity to reflect on group identity, beliefs, and practices offers one lens for engaging their religious environmental praxis, but is limited by both the artificial nature of an interview setting and the limited number of group participants during the interviews. Observing the group’s praxis in action allows for fuller engagement of the theological implications of their praxis.

### **Enacting Transformative Hope: An Environmental Justice Conference for Lutherans**

"But isn't that the price we pay to have jobs and economic progress?" an elderly church member from a neighboring parish asked the group of conference attendees. Approximately thirty-five Lutherans from parishes across the metropolitan area were gathered over a simple lunch during which a slide show presentation of local environmental justice issues was featured. The presentation highlighted problems of illness related to air toxics, dreary aesthetics due to illegal dumping, and the systematic underdevelopment of neighborhood infrastructure. A pause settled over the group. Teri, the leader of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church’s Creation Care Team, stood up. "No," she said firmly, and then continued:



The idea that the choice is us or the environment, or jobs vs. the environment is old thinking, both on the part of environmentalists and industry, and demonstrates a certain lack of creativity or mental laziness. With more thought, we can come up with creative solutions that benefit both people and the environment. As an engineer, it is my job to constantly improve how things are done to reduce environmental impact. It's a question of doing something the easy or cheap way vs. the right way. We must insist that things are done the right way.

This exchange between the leader of the Creation Care team and one of the conference participants characterized the hope of the event: calling their fellow Lutherans to connect their faith tradition to environmental engagement. After months of planning, a day-long conference featuring a morning of speakers on religious environmentalism and environmental justice issues, an afternoon "toxic tour" of some of the most ecologically degraded sites in the city, and a concluding service project was underway. The group's hoping paradigm of making a difference through ecological discipleship in partnership with God was visible in the unfolding events and conversations.

Walking in to the small church sanctuary of the sister church hosting the event, the display of colorful posters describing Lutheran theological understandings of creation care was striking. Red-trimmed posters adorned with photographs outlined sources from scripture and Lutheran theology, interpreting them through the lens of ecological suffering. An explanation of the purpose of Lutherans Restoring Creation was featured prominently in the display, "Lutherans Restoring Creation is a grassroots movement in the ELCA, seeking to foster care for God's good creation in all expressions of our church's life." Noticeable among the displays was a poster display featuring theological categories such as "Theology of the Cross," "Ecclesiology," and "Sacramental Theology;" another board featured "Tradition," "Creation," and "Stewardship of Creation." Members of the Creation Care Team and participants in the event walked through the displays, greeting one another and talking about the posters and photographs, some of which

were taken at synod events in the recent past. The group seemed congenial and curious, and perhaps unsure what to expect from the day.<sup>164</sup>

The conversation between Teri and the other participant over lunch sparked multiple conversations among conference attendees about what their identity as faithful Lutherans calls them toward. These conversations continued as the group transitioned to the most emotionally powerful portion of the conference, an environmental justice tour led by Gerardo, a community organizer and political activist. Driving through neighborhoods full of small, worn houses in the grey, rainy weather seemed to make the lack of parks, sidewalks, and abundance of waste more prominent. When we arrived at our first stop to explore one of the local waterways affected by heavy industrial dumping, the proximity of loud mechanistic sounds to nearby homes was startling. Walking towards the local bayou, the degree of metal scrap unintentionally entering the waterways through falling off of barges and sliding down banks was clearly observed; participants wondered what the effects were on local aquatic life and if this waste affected the area's drinking water.

Leaving this site, the tour continued around the neighborhood. Gerardo pointed out numerous chemical plants and refineries, stopping at one site to point out the proximity of a chemical plant to residential neighborhoods occupied predominantly by Latino families. Residents from the neighborhood have suffered from various lung ailments; after series of conversations with the city and facility leadership, the company placed a large privacy wall between their facility and the neighborhood. While this improves the aesthetics for local residents, it does nothing to alleviate the concentration of particulate matter (PM) harming the airways of local residents.

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<sup>164</sup> My impressions undoubtedly reflect my own sense of anticipation and uncertainty about what was unfolding.

Several blocks past this plant was an elementary school, where Gerardo stopped the bus to inform us that the cancer rate for children attending this school is three times the national average. Many participants on the tour were quiet during this part of the tour and appeared concerned; some questions were asked regarding what is being done currently about this. Gerardo shared that it has been difficult to garner media attention to the issues in this neighborhood, because its citizens are predominantly poor people of color, many who work in the industries causing the environmental health issues. Participants discussed how gentrification of the area was shifting attention to this neighborhood; a new light rail line and condo development at one side of the neighborhood is bringing an influx of upper middle class Euro-Americans into part of the neighborhood. One participant wondered aloud how this demographic shift was affecting the neighborhood, noting the complexities of the needs and wishing to respect the agency of the local community who has suffered the effects of industrial pollution for decades.

After the tour, remaining group members participated in trail maintenance at local nature preserve bordering a creek that feeds into the local bayou. This portion of the day's events allowed for a great deal of informal reflection to take place among the working groups; the beautiful natural space and minimal structure made for easy conversation space. Amidst the shared work of spreading mulch and carrying tools, candid reflections of what the day's events unearthed for different individuals emerged. Lutherans from all over the synod began discussing why local churches should engage these kinds of issues, and how they might begin to implement groups like the Creation Care Team at Gulf Coast Lutheran Church. One conference participant, a woman in her thirties who came to the conference with her mother and fellow church member, described her hopes of using a similar model with the youth of their church.

Others wondered how their voices as people of faith could matter in asking industry leaders to limit their pollution and care for the health of the local residents with whom they share neighborhoods. New ideas and new relationships emerged during this portion of the day, which gave needed opportunity for reflection after the challenges presented by the conference events.

At the end of the service project, I joined Teri on the bus ride back to the neighborhood church that helped host the event. She seemed tired, but smiled when I asked how she felt the event had gone. “Seems like people really learned some things,” she said. The few remaining group members, muddy and tired, also had satisfied looks on their faces throughout the quiet bus ride back to the church.

### **Pastoral Theological Reflection and Responses for Community Praxis**

#### Theological Sources and Norms

Pastoral theological reflection on the Creation Care Team’s experiences as religious environmentalists requires taking their theological norms and experiences as people of faith seriously. Their hoping paradigm of making a difference through ecological discipleship in partnership with God reflects their commitments to a sense of call, belief that their work is important, and assurance that their work is supported by God’s care for them and for all of creation.

The team’s experiences of connecting faithfulness to care for the environment have been both frustrating and rewarding for them. Supported by their Lutheran theological heritage, they express a call to love and serve the world as Christian disciples. This is also a challenge within their faith tradition, as service and discipleship have not traditionally been interpreted as being for the ecological spheres of human existence. The team’s expression of this value comes

primarily through social justice lenses; they are concerned for future generations of people and for their neighbors suffering because of environmental justice issues.

Lutherans Restoring Creation, the national organization in which the Creation Care Team participates, uses this norm from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's statement on caring for creation as their impetus for religious environmental care: "Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the Earth as God cares for the Earth."<sup>165</sup> This norm was echoed in the group's sense of being called into religious environmental work through their experiences with the creation, seeing their participation as a form of faithful discipleship.

#### Theological Reflection on Community Norms

Participating in the Creation Care Team's environmental justice conference offered a glimpse into an in-breaking of God's *shalom*: in the many reflective conversations in which I listened and participated, conference attendees wondered aloud what God was calling them to change in their own lives and in the lives of their congregations in order to respond to the ecological needs in their local community. The Creation Care Team's hoping paradigm of ecological discipleship in service and partnership with God was at least momentarily realized in the open hearts of the invited community. Their invitation to other Lutherans reflects their norm of partnership with one another and with God, requiring active service and an openness to other interpretations of this discipleship.

Creation Care Team members show a deep willingness to be transformed through service to God's creation and discipleship as Lutheran environmental stewards. Given this visible enactment of religious environmental praxis, how are we to understand the hoping paradigm of

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<sup>165</sup> "Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice," The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Department for Studies, Division for Church and Society, approved September 1993.

Gulf Coast Lutheran Church's Creation Care Team, in light of the particular theological norms I have used to shape this project? I posit that this paradigm serves to invite the group towards intentional relationship with their specific ecological context and to pay careful attention to the particular theological worldviews that help them envision and enact their own human possibilities for intersystemic care within their Gulf Coast community. Their understanding of who they are as human beings reflects a sense of purposeful connection to the creation. Their sense of God's care for the whole world helps them care about the future of the planet, which they view as God's creation for which humanity bears significant responsibility. To live into these anthropological and eschatological ideals, a vision for change is needed. The team members' description of why they do their work is their hoping paradigm – making a difference through ecological discipleship because they are called to care in partnership with God. In the following paragraphs, I will engage my norms for ecological justice making and place them in dialogue with the Creation Care Team's experiences. These norms are derived from my experiences, and should not be conflated with the language the team shared.

Ecological justice norms, which I described in Chapter 3 as empowering reciprocal flourishing, embodying spiritualities of sufficiency, and standing against death-dealing cultural practices, give insight into the key components of this group's hoping paradigm. The Creation Care Team lives into their call to be ecological disciples through fostering practices of simplicity and sustainability within their congregation. It is indeed a matter of ecological justice that they choose to make less waste by washing china dishes instead of throwing away Styrofoam plates and cups. The team members deep concern for sustainable practices reflects an embodied spirituality of sufficiency that I believe is key to ecological justice making. Their awakening to serious environmental justice issues within the wider community invites them into other norms

for ecological justice; Teri's firm belief that we are called to hold corporations morally accountable for suffering inflicted upon all members of the local ecosystem exemplifies a commitment to standing against death-dealing cultural practices. Finally, the team's commitment to future generations leads them to advocate for environmental issues now, and displays a courage that augments my norm of empowering mutual flourishing. Their own language of being connected to God in partnership gives them courage and strength. These commitments allow for ecologically transformative work to continue by empowering the mutual flourishing of both human beings and the natural world, which certainly requires courage. Perhaps their courageous work as a transformative community will help prepare them for the many transformations through which they will undoubtedly pass. Their experiences affirm my sense of the importance of anthropological interconnectedness in the present, and humanity's enduring relationality with the creation across time. Their experiences are rich and diverse, and could lead to many further reflections nuancing how we understand the nature of human and divine agency across time. However, I would like to conclude this section with their commitment to praxis: the Creation Care Team is transforming their congregational and ecological contexts through their shared praxis, drawn from their ongoing commitment to dialogue with their theological tradition. Their actions for justice are critically connected to their present theological community and to the community of their Lutheran tradition.

**Empowering Transformative Hope:  
Religious Environmental Praxis as Intersystemic Care**

The team's experiences provide a frame for reflecting on constructive theologies of religious environmental praxis as a generative form of intersystemic care. The experiences of

the Creation Care Team described above represent part of the early stages of their work together as a congregationally based cohort of environmentalists. Our conversations clearly reflected the beginnings of their process together as a cohort, describing a movement from individual awareness towards community action. This has informed my understanding about the process of hoping paradigms, and how they support understanding religious environmentalism as the praxis of intersystemic care. In Chapter 3, I describe the theological nature of hoping paradigms as the vision-and-value locus of the practical wisdom of congregational cohorts. Here, I focus on *how* these value frameworks emerge from a process of dialogue between novel experience and existing meaning-making frameworks that subsequently become embodied as deliberative praxis. This process creates a framework for a theology of intersystemic engagement.

#### Hoping Paradigms in Process

I have previously described the theological nature of hoping paradigms as belief structures occurring at the nexus of theological anthropology and eschatology, enlivened by a value of justice. How do these hoping paradigms come to be? The *process* of theological hoping paradigms moves from a sense of *call*, towards a set of *theological claims* supporting that call, towards *practices* that foster transformation. The complex process unfolding in the lives of individual religious environmentalists and the cohorts to which they belong points to the multi-faceted nature of religious and spiritual practices. Hoping paradigms do not emerge from a void; they are shaped by particular experiences, religious traditions, and contextual influences. If they foster shifts in the social imaginary and in the particular communities that birthed them, they first find footholds for expression in praxis.



Elaine Graham describes praxis as “the enactment of faith towards social transformation.”<sup>166</sup> For religious environmentalists to enact their faith in ways that connect their ecological concerns and religious traditions, they must first experience a need to connect these areas of their lives. Earlier in this chapter, team members described how they awakened to ecological concerns through “call” experiences. These experiences most often happened through relationships that made them concerned for the wellbeing of the planet and how this would effect the potential flourishing future generations of people. Call experiences signal to persons that something is wrong, and that it needs their attention. If attention is given to this call, as it was in the cases of the group members above, questions regarding what must be done and what needs to change must then be addressed. Awareness of religious environmental calls flourishes in communities that point to our theological and ethical mandates to participate in caring relationships with the whole web of life.

How to respond to the call once it is heard is a challenge particular to the context in which the call arises. Each ecosystem has specific needs arising in the interactions between all of its participants. Members of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church live in an ecosystem shaped by the presence of a body of water that brings them economic and ecological promise, as well as peril through natural events and contamination of the Gulf through human industry. The Creation Care Team is beginning a process of responding to the call of environmental justice issues in their community, the effects of which are apparent in the air, water, soil, and human lives around them. Their recent conference is the beginnings of a response, raising awareness of these local concerns for a larger group of Lutherans.

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<sup>166</sup> Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 133.

Once religious environmentalists respond to the call to engage and transform particular relationships within the local ecosystem, theological claims supporting this work help form their identity as religious environmentalists. Commitments to ecological discipleship, the transformation of self and community, and partnership with God described by the creation care team help them answer theological questions such as, “Why should we do this?” Commitment to theological dialogue between experiences and faith traditions helps communities wrestle with the gifts and challenges that our dynamic theological traditions offer. Listening to the life within the tradition and community is the heart of embodying spiritual practices as transformational praxis.

Contextual concerns and theological commitments create change through embodied praxis. The Creation Care Team’s theological attentiveness to the suffering in the place they call home signals a vibrant faith and the vitality of its embodiment. Elaine Graham’s notion of the *performativity* of faithful identities connects here with Charles Taylor’s claim that social imaginaries are malleable and constantly shifting. Generativity within current social imaginaries occurs as particular ideas begin to gain cultural currency. Competing claims within the imaginary struggle against as different groups inhabit their ideals. The Creation Care Team’s embodiment of religious environmental praxis exemplifies this struggle between an individualized cultural notion of economic and spiritual success, and an interdependent notion of ecological discipleship.

The process of hoping paradigms, from call to theological claims to praxis, reflects a shift in meaning-making towards a wider notion of the communal-contextual paradigm.<sup>167</sup> By embracing a theological hoping paradigm of transformation through ecological discipleship in

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<sup>167</sup> See John Patton’s text, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* for a description of the communal contextual paradigm as he conceived it (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

partnership with God, the Creation Care Team offers a means of reflecting upon religious environmental praxis as intersystemic engagement.

#### Religious Environmentalism as the Praxis of Intersystemic Engagement

Taken together with Elaine Graham's assertion that religious practices reflect the practical wisdom of the living community of faith, the notion of malleable social imaginaries makes space for understanding religious environmental praxis as a transformative caring activity. If the practical wisdom of the community, enacted through its practices, reflects the need to reconceive and repair our relationship with the natural world, the practices through which that repair and reconceiving take place may be understood as *care*. More specifically, the organizing, advocacy and educative functions of this kind of care point towards the notion of *engagement* as a frame for understanding these activities.

Pastoral care as a ministry of the church is often interpreted as religiously based ministries of care offered in the context of Christian community. Its identity has broadened considerably over time, transforming to engage the contexts in which it is practiced. It is currently understood by many as including support, formation, and advocacy roles, widening from mid-twentieth century identifications of the term, which highlighted support from pastoral leaders to congregational members in moments of crisis.<sup>168</sup> To these observations of the diversity of caring activities, I add Graham's notion that practices of care are constitutive of the relational identity of communities of faith. More than the moral and ethical reasoning processes espoused by Browning, "Christian pastoral practices might be imagined as the bearers of living principles of hope and obligation."<sup>169</sup> The Creation Care Team inhabits a particular hoping

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<sup>168</sup> Ramsay, "A Time of Ferment and Redefinition," 3.

<sup>169</sup> Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 111.

paradigm that is in constant conversation with the larger parish and with the ecological community. Their religious environmental praxis requires ongoing interpretation as they connect their work to more traditionally understood theological language and practices. In this way, the interpretive and performative identities of this community nuance and validate the theological significance of their work together. Their praxis together functions to support the community in a period of ecological crisis, aids in formation regarding the normative call to creation care, and advocates for people and ecosystems suffering at the ecological margins. Such a model of care recognizes the interdependence of human flourishing on all the systems of life: ecological, social, economic, political, communal, congregational, familial, individual, and planetary. Reflections on this intersystemic way of conceiving the caring activities of the community of faith point towards the need for a planetary pastoral theology as our social imaginary widens to include ecological values.

#### Strategies for Fostering the Praxis of Intersystemic Care

The Creation Care Team has begun their work of transforming their local faith community's relationship with the natural world, practicing an ecological model of discipleship that calls them to engage the environmental justice issues in their Gulf Coast community. Their hoping paradigm is in dynamic relationship with their praxis, as they reflectively engage the purpose and possibility of their work. The following strategies suggest possibilities for furthering the work of communities seeking to foster holistic, intersystemic religious environmental care.

The conversations with the team showed different degrees of connection between their personal experiences of ecological "call" to the parts of their faith tradition supporting this call. While some group members shared vivid examples of Lutheran theology enlivening their work,

others had not found such points of connection. Further group reflection on the strengths and challenges of the spiritual resources within specific traditions could help the spiritual formation process of religious environmentalists. It may be especially helpful for this group as they seek to integrate these practices into their Lutheran identity. Such conversations could highlight the connections between the interrelationship of life and their theological sense that God calls us to care for one another. Strengthening the sense of relational support between co-members of religious environmental cohorts could be encouraged through these processes of group theological reflection.

Additionally, the experiences of this team highlight the significance of support from the wider faith community. Team members shared their desire for increased awareness and involvement with the Creation Care Team, both from members of the congregation and from their pastoral leaders. Creating opportunities to foreground the work of this team and others like it would facilitate possibilities for wider involvement. Team participation in worship and at community gatherings, pastoral participation in events, and community-wide conversation about the significance of creation care as part of Christian life would help new teams like this one find support and encouragement.

### **Conclusions**

The unique experiences and hoping paradigm of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church's Creation Care Team present two significant insights for this project: their experiences offer a way to think about how theological anthropology and eschatologies of enduring relationality come together in expressions of transformative justice, and they help us understand religious environmental praxis in this context as a form of Christian caring. This kind of praxis shows the transformative

trajectory of care, and its personal, community, and systemic dimensions. This chapter demonstrated the dynamic nature of hoping paradigms in the lives of religious environmentalists, and how the process of coming together shapes their shared understanding of why their work is significant. These experiences illuminate a praxis-based theology of intersystemic care that seeks justice for their neighbors suffering the effects of ecological harm, and explores norms of ecological justice that nuance and evaluate future caring praxis. Their transformative praxis of ecological discipleship in partnership with God illustrates the complexity of relations between systems of life, and the challenge of interpreting how to embody the Christian tradition in a time of ecological crisis. Their work also points to the need to be sustained and to have something for which to hope; sustaining religious environmental praxis through diverse theological hopes will be engaged as the work of Southeast Baptist Church unfolds in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE  
SOUTHEAST BAPTIST CHURCH: SUSTAINING HOPE  
WHILE ENGAGING CLIMATE CHANGE

**Introduction**

Hoping paradigms reflect how persons choose to live in the face of what is not well with their world. This chapter engages the narratives of the Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church, exploring how their experiences as a religious environmental cohort cultivate their activist praxis and theological worldviews. The team members' individual convictions regarding the ecological kinship of the web of life ground both their work together and the theological hoping paradigm aiding in their reflective community praxis. Their hoping paradigm is one of "organic" community action supported by relationships of care and empowerment, resulting from a shared commitment to love and respect the whole community of life. This theological framework is found in the group's actions and shared identity, facilitating their continued ability to seek an ecologically just vision of God's future through acts of transformative religious environmental praxis. Their experiences together create a matrix for constructive theological reflection about the role of eschatologies inclusive of the whole of creation in their redemptive hopes.

One of the most visible fronts in the religious environmental movement is the religious community's response to climate change and natural resource equity. Congregational groups choosing to engage this area of ecological concern face numerous challenges in speaking against prevailing cultural norms. Within their wider congregations, their local communities, and

throughout the North American social imaginary, humanity's use of planetary resources is a contentious issue. The problem of climate change and ecological sustainability is a thorny one, in that the "enemy" is a cultural way of life understood as benign and/or good by our forbearers. In American culture, human flourishing is often conflated with fiscal success and the ability to access and use as many material resources as our finances allow. Confronting the ecological effects of ecologically unsustainable cultural practices within and beyond our energy economy requires the cultivation of courage, thoughtfulness, and supportive community from religious environmentalists like the Earth Care Team of Southeast Baptist Church.

Discussion about the relationship between the group's experiences as environmentalists and their theological hoping paradigm unfolds through a critical correlational dialogue. This critical dialogue highlights how perspectives from ecology and ecotheology bear on the experiences and theological traditions of the Earth Care Team, in order to construct a local pastoral theology and pastoral care response. First, thick ethnographic descriptions of the Earth Care Team's experiences as a religious environmental cohort offer an account of the contextual discourses and particular identities shaping group praxis. Next, a process of pastoral theological reflection details theological themes that emerged in conversation with the team and considers what interpretive shifts are required in light of ecological values. The ways that hope is named and practiced by this cohort raises questions of both theological anthropology and ecclesiology, suggesting that attention to interrelationship, interdependence, and an ethic of love are constructive theological keys. These theological norms provide a platform for constructive theological proposals about the kinds of eschatologies fostering intersystemic engagement. The team's hoping paradigm is a local and particular embodiment of empowered and faithful praxis;



their willingness to share their experiences for pastoral theological reflection and constructive response contributes greatly to a planetary pastoral theological framing of eschatologies.

### **Contexts: Ecological, Historical, and Congregational**

#### Ecological Context

Southeast Baptist Church is located in a large urban center in the southeastern region of the Appalachian Piedmont plateau. The region is known for its rolling hills, abundant waterways, and beautiful and lush vegetation. The climate is humid and mild, providing a desirable and pleasant place for the people participating in its ecosystems. In my conversations with group members, many highlighted the ways that the region's beauty inspires them to love and care for it. Four of the twelve persons in the interview explicitly named gardening as a means of spiritually connecting to both God and their region, and others mentioned regular involvement with local conservation projects as part of what sustains their connection to their green homeland. All but two of the members spontaneously mentioned their childhood experiences in the natural world as formative in developing their current caring attitudes towards the local ecosystem. These experiences ranged from going to area church camps to growing up on farms in the nearby Appalachians, and evoked a profound sense of "how it all comes together," as group member Anna noted. Another group member, Liz, summarized these sentiments well when she said, "We won't care for [the earth] if we don't know it and love it."

Situated in a rapidly expanding urban center that is a hub for energy companies, the financial sector, and the transportation industry, issues of sustainability and stewardship are constantly visible in the group's local economy. The ways in which the ecological world and human economies are intertwined at the global level have pushed this group to focus on

sustainability ethics in the energy industry, as well as sustainable resource ethics regarding land, animal and water use as part of human economic systems. Group members are involved in “greening” their own community of faith through specific actions like implementing a system of solar panels, as well as education and activism in their region through co-hosting events with other faith communities and environmental groups. Education and action around sustainable energy and climate change is a frequent topic. Kelly, the current organizer for the Earth Care Team, describes their religious environmental praxis as courageous: “I find that the work we begin here and within our smaller community is reaching out to this larger community, and we’re starting to be known as the green church that is really focusing on these issues. We’ve been a brave enough congregation to do that.”

### *Climate Change Discourses*

Why does the Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church, belonging to the Christian tradition that holds stewardship of creation and experiencing God in nature as a significant theme in our biblical texts, require courage to do their work? Andrew Hoffman provides an efficient answer in his description of the difference between *scientific consensus* about anthropogenic climate change, and *social consensus*.

Today, there is no doubt that a *scientific consensus* exists on the issue of climate change. Scientists have documented that anthropogenic sources of greenhouse gases are leading to a buildup in the atmosphere, which leads to a general warming of the global climate and an alteration in the statistical distribution of localized weather patterns over long periods of time. This assessment is endorsed by a large body of scientific agencies – including every one of the national scientific agencies of the G8 + 5 countries – and by the vast majority of climatologists... And yet a *social consensus* on climate change does not exist. Surveys show that the American public’s belief in the science of climate change has mostly declined over the past five years, with large percentages of the population remaining skeptical about the science.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Andrew Hoffman, “Climate Science as Culture War,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 10 (2012): 31-32, accessed 24 February 2013, *OmniFile Full Text Select (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost.

Outlining what is at stake in the problem of climate change illuminates some of the ways these discourses have influenced the Earth Care Team's experiences. Sally McFague reminds us of the challenges at stake when she says, "We must realize that the 'problem' is in our heads and hearts as much as it is in the policies of governments and multinational corporations."<sup>171</sup> The multifaceted and dynamic nature of changing individual hearts and minds while changing human behavior through public policy and other means works across complex levels and systems.

The heart of religious environmental hoping paradigms lies in imagining changes in the way our social imaginary is currently understood, which shapes decisions about what actions must be taken to invoke the imagined future. When groups like the Earth Care Team choose to engage the problem of climate change and its accompanying discourses, they create tension through enacting belief systems that require a change in the status quo. As Hoffman notes, "We must acknowledge that the debate over climate change, like almost all environmental issues, is a debate over culture, worldviews, and ideology."<sup>172</sup> The material realities of climate change are far reaching in their implications, and have thus encountered significant opposition in the current North American social imaginary, which holds ideals of individualism and unlimited economic progress to be nearly sacred. Countering these ideals requires thorough understandings of the problems at hand, a vision of an alternative future, and tenacious commitment to action. This section outlines the major implications of ongoing climate change and some of the proposed means of mitigating the consequences of processes already set in motion.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) conducts extremely thorough assessment studies on current climate data, released in a series of reports every few years. The

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<sup>171</sup> Sally McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 24-25.

<sup>172</sup> Hoffman, "Climate Science as Culture War," 32.

most recent report was published in 2007, and the newest report will be released sometime in 2013.<sup>173</sup> The three IPCC working groups explore different aspects of climate change: the physical science data; impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability to climate change; and mitigation of climate change compose the three groups. The IPCC is a conservative organization in its judgments and recommendations, representing the consensus view of hundreds of scientists who study published peer-reviewed articles. Because of this, their assessment of the impacts is based on the “lowest common denominator” of the data, and readers should be reminded that there is a significant range of possible effects more severe than those noted here. As Australian scientist Tim Flannery notes, “If the IPCC says something, you had better believe it – and then allow for the likelihood that things are far worse than it says they are.”<sup>174</sup>

The overall conclusion from the IPCC’s most recent published report was “unequivocal” in its confidence that global warming is underway, and holds “very high confidence” (90 percent) that climate change is anthropogenic in nature.<sup>175</sup> “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea level.”<sup>176</sup>

Underlying these conclusions are several important points:

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<sup>173</sup> Early copies of the report have been leaked at the time of this writing. However, until the source can be officially cited, data from the 2007 report will be relied on.

<sup>174</sup> Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How We are Changing the Climate and What it Means for Life on Earth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 246.

<sup>175</sup> This degree of consensus in the scientific community is extremely rare. Consensus in the scientific community is found when experiments and arguments for the other position come to a halt, meaning that the available interpretations of the data are scientifically satisfactory. In a 2004 study, Naomi Oreskes surveyed all peer-reviewed abstracts on global climate change published between 1993 and 2003. She studied only peer-reviewed, published journal articles and did not find a single rejection of the hypothesis that climate warming over the past 50 years is predominantly anthropogenic. 75% of the papers agreed with the anthropogenic consensus position, and 25% made no comment either way, because of focus on method or paleoclimate analysis.

<sup>176</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate*

- Greenhouse gas (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) concentrations now far exceed concentrations prior to the Industrial Revolution.
- The worldwide increase in carbon dioxide emissions stems primarily from human use of fossil fuels.
- The concentration of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere far exceeds the natural carbon range of the past 650,000 years (the entire history and pre-history of *homo sapiens*).
- Long-term changes have been observed and recorded at global, continental, and regional levels, including Arctic temperatures and ice as well as ocean salinity and wind patterns. This results in an increase in extreme weather events and patterns, such as severe droughts.
- Increased temperatures and rising sea levels will continue for centuries, regardless of how much humanity is able to lower the levels of carbon in the atmosphere. There is 90% likelihood that extreme weather events and patterns will continue and worsen.
- There is a possible 6-degree Celsius rise in global temperature average by the year 2100. The IPCC's best estimate is a 4.5-degree rise over the course of the century.<sup>177</sup>

The troubling implications of this data are more complex than these points make them appear.

The concept of a climate change “feedback loop” that is now in progress means rapid acceleration in the effects of anthropogenic climate change. The clearest example of this feedback loop is observed in the Arctic ice melt; as the climate warms, a greater percentage of the ancient arctic ice sheets melt each summer. Snow and ice reflect light back into space, acting as a heat buffer. As more ice melts and more water appears, the sea begins to absorb additional heat, making the atmosphere even warmer, which causes additional ice melt. This rapid melt is one major cause of the worldwide rise in sea levels. The summer of 2012 saw the most devastating and rapid ice melt ever recorded: on September 16<sup>th</sup>, Arctic sea ice reached its lowest point ever, covering 18% less than the previous record. Scientists were extremely concerned because no weather events accompanied the rapid breakup of the ice, as is typical with rapid break up and

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*Change*, by Core Writing Team, Pachauri, R.K and Reisinger, A. (eds.), Geneva: IPCC, 2007. Accessed 28 December 2012.

<sup>177</sup> I am in debt to Sally McFague's organization of these key data points, found in her 2008 text *A New Climate for Theology*, pg. 10.

melting patterns. The loss was attributed to rapid Arctic warming and continued loss of older, thicker ice. “We are now in uncharted territory,” Mark Serreze, director of the National Snow and Ice Data Center commented. “While we’ve long known that as the planet warms up, changes would be seen first and be most pronounced in the Arctic, few of us were prepared for how rapidly the changes would occur.”<sup>178</sup> Past predictions that the Arctic would be ice-free by the summer of 2030 have been updated to the summer of 2016, based on current projections.

In spite of the enormous and far-reaching implications of the data described above, it remains a challenge to connect the vulnerability of the planet to our particular lives. Some religious environmentalists have suggested that the face of climate change should be shifted from a polar bear cub to that of a human child, to reflect the significant impacts climate change will have on humanity’s children. The changes in climate and accompanying extremes in the weather mean that *weather*, which we once understood to be beyond human control, is connected to the ways we human beings live our lives.<sup>179</sup> Many of the things we have understood and valued as good in past eras must now be reevaluated for their global impact, particularly in light of justice and responsibility. The world poor will experience the effects of climate change most severely. Economically prosperous persons and societies have disproportionately affected the levels of atmospheric carbon, which will have disproportionate effects on the economically marginalized of the world. Those with fewer resources will have small recourse to mitigate the survival extremes induced by anthropogenic climate change.

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<sup>178</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, John Vidal, Damian Carrington, and Fiona Harvey, “Drought, Icemelt, and Superstorms: A Review of 2012’s Environmental News.” *The Guardian* Friday 21 December 2012.

<sup>179</sup> I should note that weather and climate are different phenomena. However, climate conditions affect individual weather events. Single extreme weather events cannot be conclusively linked to climate change, but the likelihood that such extremes will occur rises as anthropogenic climate change continues to unfold.

Religious environmental groups like the one at Southeast Baptist Church have recognized the threat of climate change and how their own lifestyles and communities are complicit in the phenomenon. The team's ability to think theologically about why changing our human behavior is necessary addresses the critical role of who we think we are as human beings. Their commitment to seeing life as an interconnected whole compels them to take action that is global in scope. As McFague urges, "Climate change is surely the most severe test we have ever faced, not only in regard to our own survival, but equally important, in regard to our 'humanity.' It is for this reason that 'who we think we are' becomes of critical importance."<sup>180</sup>

#### Historical & Congregational Context

Southeast Baptist Church was founded in the early 1940s by a group of Baptist families who intended the church to be a center for family and community life. Early pastoral leaders established a trend of speaking boldly on social issues, helping to establish the church as a strong voice for justice in their community.

Today, Southeast Baptist Church is a large congregation of approximately two thousand members. It claims an ecumenical identity and openness to those claiming different faith heritages than the Baptist tradition. In keeping with traditional Baptist values of congregational polity and affirming individual freedom of conscience, Southeast Baptist Church affirms to their membership that questioning and debating their faith tradition is an important part of the life of faith. Departing from the dominant norm of Baptist life in the South, Southeastern Baptist church belongs to a socially progressive Baptist denominational group, affirming the religious leadership of women and members of LGBTQ community.

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<sup>180</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 22.

In addition to these identity markers, Southeast Baptist Church continues to emphasize service to families, outreach to the local and global communities, and worship that honors the Christian tradition aesthetically and theologically. The congregational values of critically holding their faith tradition, supporting the convictions of individual community members, and reaching out to the community are evident in the work of the Earth Care Team of Southeast Baptist Church. From “stirring up trouble” in their neighborhoods to “creating interest in different areas,” this cohort offers a vital example of congregational community action.

### **The Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church: Description, History, and Aims**

The Earth Care Team is a vibrant congregational group with a significant presence in their church and city. About ten core members meet weekly for prayer, fellowship, and to discuss environmental action on individual, congregational, and community levels. The group’s history stretches back over the course of twelve years. Rita, Martha, and Sarah, three of the founding members of the team, shared the initial experiences of discovering the idea for the group and working their way through the church committee structure to make it a reality. Rita and Martha were on a retreat that immersed them in the natural world and highlighted experiencing creation as integral to their spirituality. They wondered if they could foster this kind of awareness through a group at Southeast Baptist Church. Martha had recently served on two of the churches boards, helped bring their idea before the strategic planning committee to form the initial group structure. As this institutional process went on, church members began to actively care for a piece for land adjacent to the church called The Point, which serves as a place for members and the surrounding community to spend time in the natural world. Martha, Rita, and Sarah described the work that went into creating an initial vision statement, which was



initially focused on the grounds of the church and the Point. I asked the group how this had changed over time, knowing the team's focus to be much broader at their current stage. Martha noted how different people and contexts have brought this about, saying the vision "has taken many different avenues. People with different interests right here in this room have brought energy to different kinds of things. So it's no longer just the grounds or the Point, but it's broader than that."

As the group developed, the realities of bringing about institutional changes became apparent for this team as they experienced opposition from some church members and staff. Rita noted how she had envisioned, "...sheep grazing on the lawn. I wanted it to be nature-friendly and an inspiring teaching place with college students walking through it – but that didn't happen, as the realities came in." Group members noted that as some of the institutional difficulties set in, they set out to become a support system for the individual causes and concerns of group members. This kind of supportive community identity has become key to this group, as they discern together how to support one another through individual and community action. The metaphor that emerged for this kind of listening and discernment was the term "organic." When asked about how the group understands its purpose and vision, Sarah shared, "I don't think we've operated out of a 'what are we going to do next, what is our big objective, what can we try to take on' agenda. That's where the organic happens...I think that's helped the group have a particular kind of life."

In recent years, the group has shifted their focus towards supporting individual endeavors and transforming their church community's approach to creation stewardship with involvement in regional environmental action. Group leader Kelly describes the range of their approach comprehensively:

In addition to the personal and the big things, there is also the middle, which is transforming this church and its consciousness. It is really happening; even though we only have a core group of about 10 people who meet regularly, there are at least 80 people in the congregation that consider themselves Earth Care members...when we have something important, they respond.

Several of the group's members are involved in public activism and service; their work in this area invites action on issues of climate justice and environmental justice from the whole team.

Group member Della described how Liz's experiences as an activist changed her way of thinking, because the group decided to screen a documentary and host a letter writing campaign for regulating coal-fired power plants. Liz shared how the group has responded in support of her involvement as an activist:

I'm an Earth Care member, but am kind of in and out as far as meetings go, because I've gotten so concerned about climate change. I'm a full-time activist in the community about climate change now...I have even participated in nonviolent civil disobedience and gone to jail and stuff like that. I value what this group is doing, and I also feel a sense of urgency about really trying to impact public policy.

Liz's activism extends well beyond the work of many of the Earth Care Team members, and her commitments push the group towards further engagement.

Kelly, the group's leader, provides a second example of how individual concerns shape the group's praxis. Her early experiences as a Catholic taught her the importance of social justice, and she has spent much of her adult life advocating for various causes of social and environmental justice. She joined the Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church soon after joining the church, finding a supportive community to further her involvement with environmentalism. The team inspired and supported her application to the GreenFaith Fellowship program, an eighteen-month training program designed to foster religious environmental leadership. Kelly's involvement with GreenFaith expanded their networks in the religious environmental community and their involvement in local and national issues.

GreenFaith's emphasis on the moral and ethical dimensions of religious environmental engagement has helped offer a public platform for why the work of the Earth Care Team is a matter of faith. Kelly's efforts have helped make the Earth Care Team more visible to the congregation, through membership surveys and community publications.

As the Earth Care Team's scope of involvement has expanded through the work of its individual members, their initial vision of emphasizing the sacramental in the natural world on the grounds of the church and the surrounding neighborhoods has slowly been realized. While some of their efforts, such as attempts to eliminate the church's use of Styrofoam cups, are ongoing struggles, many significant efforts have already come to fruition. The group continues to care for The Point, and over time helped establish a community garden. Perhaps their most visible effort towards climate stewardship is the establishment of a solar panel array on the church's roof. One of the church members wrote a matching grant for solar panels at the beginning of the recent recession. In spite of the economically challenging times, the Earth Care Team sponsored a fundraising campaign that actually went over the \$25,000 they needed to raise to complete the project. The solar panels are now an immense source of pride for the community and a visible sign of its commitment to energy stewardship.

The Earth Care Team has not been without challenges, both internal and external. Some church leaders mischaracterized early efforts as unnecessary; as one group member put it, "this was before environmentalism became more popular. We were not exactly welcome on all fronts – one day, one of the ministers even came and apologized for being mean to the Earth Care Team!" The team's value of supporting individual efforts and joining with those efforts after a process of discernment has also occasionally caused conflict. Team member Sally described the tensions of this approach compared to her history as an executive: "This is a very organic, some

might say ‘loosey-goosey’ group. Honestly, the first two or three meetings I was like, ‘Do I care about Planet Earth this much? The people are wonderful, but I was used to coming from a corporate environment and a much more structured approach.’ In spite of these initial challenges, Sally described her eventual appreciation for how the Earth Care Team enables people to bring their “passion” to the team for support. They have recently been recognized by their pastor as a model for forming small group communities throughout the church. Kelly noted with laughter how “we’ve been a model for creating these small group connections. This is a small group that’s worked and bonded around an issue for twelve years. There’s no other group that I know of that’s met around an issue weekly for twelve years!”

This description of the group’s history stories their embodied hoping paradigm. Creating a community of support and discernment invites “organic” involvement around issues for which individual group members have concern and energy. This involvement invites wrestling with their individual and community faith traditions as they seek a meaningful platform for their religious environmental praxis.

### **Focal Beliefs: Theologies Supporting the Earth Care Team’s Praxis**

The Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church brings their diverse commitments and worldviews together in their shared work of ecological care. The observations regarding how the cohort describes itself and embodies its unique hoping paradigm were drawn from their narratives of how they function together, their stories of individual beliefs and practices contributing to the group’s work, my participant observations of the group’s praxis. This section focuses more closely on specific theological themes emerging from group conversations, and explores how these themes influence their experience.

The theologies undergirding Earth Care Team's hoping paradigm have already been described as containing notions of relational community, a missional commitment to act on what "organically" arises from the group's experiences, and love and respect for all of life. During group conversations and in the interview process, I asked participants if and how particular beliefs or stories from their faith tradition shape their religious environmental work. A group as diverse in opinion as the Earth Care Team holds a wide range of views, from conflict between Christianity and their environmental commitments to reflection on how Jesus' message of caring for each other extends to the environment. Regarding reasons for involvement, members were on a continuum between contextual ecological concerns and theological reasons, balanced in the context of a supportive community.

The key theological commitments of the Earth Care Team connect back to their primary theological commitment: a loving respect for all of life. Whatever care is to be extended to one another as people, it must be understood in the context that human beings are part of an ecological whole. Drawn from this shared commitment is knowledge that many aspects of our relationship with the natural world do not reflect this kind of love and respect, so working for justice and equity is required. Finally, the commitment to meet together for support and encouragement is drawn from their participation in a vibrant local community of faith.

#### Love and Respect for All of Life

The theological norm of love and respect for the whole of life was expressed in multiple ways: motivation, sustenance, ethical imperative, and wonder all emerged in the group's descriptions of this value. For some group members, love and respect for life is expressed through the lens of the Christian tradition, as when founding member Martha reflected about the teachings of Jesus: "To me, Jesus' message was caring for each other. As far as I'm concerned,

that covers everything...I see the whole world tied into that. That may be an oversimplification, but that's it for me. [The invitation to care] in all kinds of ways, that's the really basic thing for me." The ability to extend Jesus' imperative of love and care towards the ecosystems that sustain humanity represents a reflective theological claim based on Martha's current context and faithful activism.

Group member and climate change activist Liz reflected how despite feeling disconnected from the tradition, the concept of "Do Unto Others" resonates powerfully in her work as an activist. "I still have faith, though my connection with the natural world is more of what sustains me now than the type of faith I was raised with. I do believe that 'Do Unto Others' is the root of all faiths, and I think that we who are trying to keep the world from being destroyed are trying to 'do unto others.' So I go back to that." Liz's engagement with climate change is connected to a moral commitment to habitable world: for her, even loving other people must first begin with caring for earth's atmosphere, the breath that fills the lungs of all human beings and vertebrate creatures.

A third group member, Vera, discussed how her vegetarian ethic commits her to working for a loving, peaceful world between the life systems of different species. "If I'm going to have respect for all life, I do not feel that raising, killing, and eating animals has any place in a loving, peaceful, society. That is part of my faith, my ethics." When asked if she drew on resources from her Christian tradition to support this, she replied,

Not really, because people interpret it as, "In the beginning God gave us dominion over the animals." Everybody interprets that the wrong way: that we have dominion, therefore we can use them whatever way we want to. I interpret that differently. I interpret it as needing to be compassionate, and making this a safe place for the animal kingdom which we are part of as human beings."

Vera's answer exemplifies the tension many group members face in relating to the Christian tradition: traditional understandings of love and care do not extend to all beings, yet the life experiences of this cohort call them towards ethical involvement with various ecological concerns.

Love and respect for the whole of life has many expressions and theological motivations in this group, but it connects team members in a transformative hoping paradigm of ecological engagement.

### Justice and Equity

Related to love and respect for the whole of life is the Earth Care Team's commitment to seeking justice and equity, demonstrated through their ongoing efforts to seek change in how human beings consume resources. The widespread education efforts around consumption and climate change undertaken by this group demonstrate purposeful action connecting cultural lifestyle habits with issues of justice. Our accustomed norm in North American living is very comfortable, built around the idea that if we can individually afford something, it is our right to access those resources. The Earth Care Team regularly sponsors events around efficiency and sustainability, which highlight the ecological and social costs of "normal" life in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. As part of their grant for solar panels, the group began hosting quarterly sustainability education events several years ago, and most recently, they held a workshop for low income communities on saving money through energy efficiency measures like weather stripping.

When asked about why education and advocacy around sustainability issues were significant for them, many group members came back to values of justice and equity, honed either by their experiences with the stories of the Christian tradition or their participation in Christian community. Sarah, a former minister, describes how her approach to environmental

issues comes from her passion for seeking justice, which surfaces in different ways depending on the needs of her context. “Environmental justice issues keep hooking me. I care about the beauty of nature and it’s very renewing, but [environmental justice issues] keep calling me back. That’s what Christian community is about: not everyone being in the same place, but being where we need to be and offering it to the whole.” Kelly, the group leader, shared a similar experience in noting how her history as an activist for social justice grew from her early experiences as a Catholic in a parish that emphasized “the message of Jesus and the beatitudes.” Her combination of faith and activism led to her realization about the connections between social justice and ecological concerns: “My involvement with social justice issues led to my involvement with the green movement back in the 80’s...It’s been an evolving process, but it has its basis in my Christian roots and those beautiful teachings of Jesus.”

Other group members shared how their vocations and lifestyles help them value action connecting justice and spirituality. Alice is a yoga teacher, and the emphasis on the integration of mind-body-spirit in her work has deeply influenced how she thinks of justice. “I have an appreciation for social justice and justice for the environment. They come together for me. I have an appreciation for social justice, which means we need to take care of this earth for the future.” Even group members who do not find resources from Christian theology helpful found this vision of justice and activism important. “Caring for the earth is part of having an integrated life. It isn’t prayer, or belief, it’s how you want to be in the world,” author and former executive Sally declared. In this way, volunteering to clear invasive plants from a native plant sanctuary and speaking out against new coal-fired power plants are forms of spiritual practices for these group members. Acting for a more just and sustainable world is a matter of advocating and empowering vulnerable people and vulnerable ecosystems.



### Community: “Keeping the Flame Lit for Each Other”

Finally, the Earth Care Team deep value of their relationships with each other provides an important theological lens. Whether because the group provides a connection to a faith community, support and structure for ecological work, or a way to be in conversation with diverse ways of believing, one of the key reasons the Earth Care Team exists is their commitment to being together. Liz notes, “This is my connection to church now – the people here who I feel do understand.” Carol noted the dependability of the group for support, describing how “I can call anyone here in a minute’s notice and get their response. And that’s caring for each other, which is the religious part of it.” One group member characterized the team’s significance as “keeping the flame lit for each other.” The act of meeting together and specifically recalling their history of making changes in the community empowers the team to take the next step in discerning how to be faithful activists in the areas of climate change, sustainability, and resource equity. Founding group member Rita illustrated the character of the group vividly, describing their ongoing support through meeting and remembering:

One of the beauties that has happened here is the way we’ve lifted each other up when somebody starts to flag. We point and say, ‘remember that?’ ...and when it would get really bad, Sarah would quote Margaret Mead and say, ‘a meeting of five people can change the world!’ That was our bottom line: Margaret Mead says we can change the world!

The Earth Care Team enacts hope through faithful community action funded by community support and discernment, and grounded in a shared commitment to love and respect for the whole of life. Pastoral theological reflection on the notion of faithful activism that emerges from these discussions will be enhanced through thickly describing some of the shared community activism sponsored by the Earth Care Team, in the form of a regional conference on sustainability and activism co-hosted by their cohort.

### **Hoping Paradigms in Action: A Regional Interfaith Conference on Climate Change**

The voices of the talkative crowd dimmed as a conference facilitator took the stage and invited the crowd to prepare themselves for the interfaith worship service. A local member of the Cherokee nation invoked the caring relationship between humanity and the Earth, facing north, south, east and west in rhythmic counterclockwise turns. Christian hymns, readings and symbols from many different traditions, a Sufi dance, and a Jewish homily followed, joining conference participants together in worship centered on the creation-honoring themes of many faiths. Thus began a conference for religious environmentalists, co-hosted and facilitated by the Earth Care Team of Southeast Baptist Church. Over the course of two days, exhortation and education for religious environmentalists would unfold, enabled by the grassroots efforts of local team members, with the help and partnership of religious environmental leaders from GreenFaith and the local chapter of Interfaith Power and Light.

The worship service, preceded by opening educational workshops, was followed by a time of food and fellowship at Southeast Baptist Church. Conference participants made connections around environmental issues and faith concerns, talking together about the role of faithful people in shifting the hearts and minds of the local community towards engagement with environmental concerns. Members of the Earth Care team acted as hosts, engaging conference participants in conversation and ensuring details unfolded smoothly. They smiled at each other, checked in with their community in quick whispers and hand shakes, and went about their work of advocating for the church to be involved with environmental issues.

A sister church was the site host for the second day of the conference. This day featured powerful speakers, a panel of local faith leaders taking action on environmental issues, and

breakout sessions on a number of topics from environmental justice to effective political engagement. About 75 participants shared in listening, discussing and taking action around local issues, and about half of the participants joined in an environmental justice tour of some of the most ecologically vulnerable sites in the area. As different conversations unfolded, themes of courage and urgency prevailed. Earth Care Team members participated with excitement, more able to join in the workshops as they became freer from their responsibilities as conference co-hosts. Throughout the conference, group members facilitated, supported, hosted, and learned; their efforts in supporting one another and reaching out to the local community through advocacy and education once again furthered community connections and opportunities for action.

My experiences with the Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church provide multiple opportunities for pastoral theological response. Given the team's theological norms of love and respect for the whole of life, justice and equity, and community support and discernment, a theological discussion of *faithful activism* and potential for continued response is relevant.

### **Pastoral Theological Reflections and Responses for Empowering Community Praxis**

#### Theological Sources and Norms

Constructing a pastoral theological interpretation of the Earth Care Team's hoping paradigm begins with their identified theological norms of love and respect for the whole of life, justice and equity, and community support and discernment. These norms invite questions around how they could be understood and useful to both the group and to others going forward.

The Earth Care Team's experiences can be seen as part of an ongoing struggle to connect faithful Christian living with knowledge and passion for environmentalism. The theological and ethical norms described in the group's dialogue and praxis suggests that their hoping paradigm of

faithful and discerning activism in Christian community describes their ongoing work together as they seek to embody loving and respectful relationships with the whole of life. The fact that these ideas arose within the cohort's context of Baptist heritage, which values individual freedom of conscience and personal discernment for theological interpretation, makes using their "organically" expressed theological norms especially germane.

Southeast Baptist Church, as part of a justice-oriented and ecumenical Baptist tradition, holds the gospel stories of Jesus' concern for social justice and community care to be theologically normative. Connecting justice and care to the cohort's work of ecological transformation seems a promising place to begin. Theological tensions between some popular interpretations of the Christian tradition and the realities of climate change and other forms of environmental destruction was clear in group discussions, causing frustration and disconnection from potentially rich theological support. Nuancing the group's understanding of the justice-centered discourses of the Christian tradition may offer a way to clearly communicate the importance of their vision to their wider congregational and community conversation partners.

### Theological Reflection

Individualistic dominion and stewardship tropes combined with individualized cultural anthropologies create a gulf between popular notions of faithful Christian praxis and faithful response to ecological problems. Popular notions of dominion and interpretations of Genesis 1 include hierarchical exertion of control; those atop the "great chain of being" have a "God-given" right to use those who are lower on the chain as they see fit. Most human beings and all non-human members of the ecosystem are then subject to objectification and abuse by those empowered by systems of domination. Individualized anthropologies view human flourishing as both the right and responsibility of individual persons, leaving people to work for their own

satisfaction and subsequently their own enjoyment of material compensation resulting from that work as an entitled right. This individualism passively discourages love of neighbor in favor of individual satisfaction. Theologically, this individualism reduces the concept of salvation to an individual transaction between a single person and God, who then “owes” them soul-salvation as a result of their payment of a prayer of commitment and individual moral uprightness.

These implicit cultural and theological values combine to trap participants into a system where everyone and everything loses. People, animals, and the earth itself become objects on a hierarchy, to be used rather than respected for inherent worth. Those having higher placement on the hierarchy suffer the damage of being the perpetrators of violence. Many people find themselves somewhere in between, simultaneously being used while participating in a system that all but demands the abuse and objectification of the Earth and its inhabitants. Rampant individualism creates loneliness and exacerbates frustration when desired levels of material success are not possible. It promotes the hollow accumulation of material privilege as reward tokens for the few who succeed. Both ecology and richer interpretations of Christian theology resist this deeply unsatisfying culture of material objectification and individualism.

The ecological counters to discourses of hierarchical dominion and individualized anthropologies lie in notions of interconnectedness and interdependence. Evolutionary biology tells us that every living thing shares a common ancestor; from the moment of the Big Bang (the physical science basis for the creation of the universe), all of life on Earth assembled and evolved from unity into incredible biodiversity. Interconnected by a shared physical and evolutionary history, we are also interdependent in the current web of life. While individual human beings make choices influencing the course of individual lives, we are in every moment

dependent on the molecules that make up the air we breathe, on the photochemical processes that create the intricate world of plant life, and on the diverse ecosystem that gives us physical life.

The Christian theological counter to these discourses of individualism and domination is love. Theological imperatives towards love of neighbor and care for the vulnerable are the aching heart of the biblical tradition. The desire for a world where all flourish in peace and plenty is poignant, displayed at the longing of God in images like that of Isaiah 11.6, in which the wolf lies down with the lamb. From the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew prophets that began with Moses responding to God's care for enslaved and dehumanized people, to the teachings of Jesus condemning the accumulation of wealth as unjust, care for the vulnerable is identified with love and faithfulness to God. Jesus develops an ethic of love: as human beings, we are beloved participants in creation. Therefore, we are not to be consumed with worry about our lives, and instead are to go about the work of making God's love evident in the world.<sup>181</sup> The ethic of love and care forming the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition make action for justice imperative. Indeed, if we do not enact love, we are only a "noisy gong or a clanging symbol."<sup>182</sup> John Caputo notes that in a postmodern world, any understanding of the love of God rests in the translation of love into transcendent human action for a more just world:

In the translatability of the love of God it is *we* who are to be translated, transformed, and carried over into action, carried off by the movements of love, carried away by the transcendence that this name names and commands. The translation of the love of God is transcendence; it is the movement that it names, the deed that it demands, for the love of God is something to *do*.<sup>183</sup>

Ecology and Christian theology should not be conflated; the web of life is often violent and wasteful, the seeming opposite of love. Christian theology is not ecology; our sacred myths

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<sup>181</sup> Matthew 6.24-34

<sup>182</sup> 1 Corinthians 13.1

<sup>183</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 140-141.

and ways of meaning-making cannot be substituted for the scientific knowledge needed to create more sustainable human societies. Yet, combining such knowledge with rich and meaningful theological traditions can be the beating heart supporting the conversion to an ecological paradigm for human flourishing. Given the ecological knowledge of the interconnected web of love, any kind of loving Christian action undertaken must be engaged by asking how this action effects the whole community of life. The frightening global consequences of climate change evoke apocalyptic fears that certainly encourage worrying about one's life; and yet, our freedom and hope must be found in becoming love through relationships of ecological kinship.

The Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist is learning to do this very thing. Their theological norms of love and respect for the whole of life are evident in their acts of justice and supported by their caring connections to each other. In this way, they resist the apathy of disengagement and the frantic fears of apocalypticism. Theological reflection on how to interpret eschatological hope in light of these kinds of experiences emerges as a significant question from these experiences.

### **Constructive Theological Dialogue: Ecological Eschatologies**

The dominant forms of the Christian tradition hold anthropocentric theologies and practices that have kept our focus away from the ecological embeddedness upon which our existences is predicated. Naturism is so entrenched in our cultural practices that it is nearly invisible. The hoping paradigm of Southeast Baptist Church challenges this kind of theology through reinterpreting the meaningful of faithful living in a time of ecological distress. Their community ethic of love and respect for the whole of life is entwined with an ecological view of life as interconnected and interdependent, compelling them to seek the transformation of our damaged

relationship with the web of life. How do discourses like those of climate change invite us to listen again to our traditions, that we might seek the meaning of faithfulness in our time and places? What community and pastoral responses emerge from these reflections?

#### Re-visioning Eschatologies for Religious Environmental Praxis

The experiences of Southeast Baptist Church's Earth Care Team, the theological resources of the Christian tradition, and the ecological discourses related to climate change are constructive dialogue partners for framing eschatologies within our context. Significantly, the critique of world-abandoning apocalypticism and climate science combine to powerfully point towards ecological engagement and accountability as inseparable from eschatological understandings. Viewing eschatology through the lens of *enduring relationality* is a vital way to understand the theological shift of this religious environmental cohort. Here, I will discuss and critique apocalyptic eschatology and illustrate how the different theological models offered by Keller and Moltmann point to *enduring relationality* as an important lens. Finally, in light of this, I note that engagement and accountability are two of the norms for an intersystemic model of pastoral care that are visible in the work of Southeast Baptist Church.

Catherine Keller asserts that fundamentalist apocalypticism diminishes possibilities for hope, engagement and transformation of the present world, because the world's renewal can only come through its destruction.<sup>184</sup> The popularity of theologies promoting the imminent return of the Messiah and the Earth's destruction as a sign of the Messiah's return ebb and flow in popular culture, but have remained a consistent historical force since the era of the New Testament writings. Western culture's persistent beliefs in a literal beginning and a literal end of fiery destruction have shaped the social imaginaries of the Western world, powerfully colluding with

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<sup>184</sup> Keller, "No More Sea," 187.



our economic institutions to legitimate the objectification of the natural world as a commodity for use and disposal. This belief in a literal apocalyptic end promotes giving up on the future in the face of the world's troubles, and is exacerbated by humanity's entrenched hierarchical relationships to one another and to the ecosystems in which we participate. Reliance on an otherworldly continuation of our human experience emphasizes humanity's specialness and separateness from the rest of Earth community, legitimizing our use of the planetary community as a disposable object on the journey "home." Two pastoral theological challenges are apparent in these observations. First, we must consider the degree to which apocalyptic thinking influences disengagement and despair about the environment. Second, the extent to which believing that "heaven" is our true home influences our use and consumption of resources on this planet deserves reflection.

Keller's claim that apocalyptic eschatology creates ecological apathy can only be somewhat substantiated here, by both the prevalence of apocalyptic thinking in our culture and by the ethnographies in this study. Our constant exposure to ecological devastation in the form of media consumption leads to apathy and despair regarding the possibility to engage in meaningful acts of transformation. In a recent ecotherapeutic case study, Mary-Jayne Rust cites an experience with a client regarding the influence of ecological apocalypticism on present behavior and future stories. In this interaction, Rust is engaged in a therapeutic dialogue with a woman in her mid-thirties, who regularly engages in physiologically dangerous behavior through extreme use of recreational drugs and alcohol. Her client has a fulfilling work life, a strong intimate partnership, and a close circle of friends. Traditional therapeutic lines of inquiry, such as family history, trauma, and mental illness did not shed light on this "wipeout" behavior, and

traditional addictions models did not seem to fit this woman's experience. In what Rust describes as "a moment of wild thinking," she asks her client, "How do you feel about the future?"<sup>185</sup> Her client replies matter-of-factly that she believes humanity has no chance in the long run because of our behavior towards the planet.

I swallow a gasp and ask her what she means. She explains that we humans do not stand a chance as we consume and pollute the earth, causing climate change and widespread destruction; our future looks so very bleak. As we explore this future, I tentatively ask if she thinks there is a connection between this and her drinking. "Oh definitely," she replies. "Why not drink and do drugs? There's no future. We might as well go out having a party."<sup>186</sup>

Ecological activism as a spiritual practice fosters the potential for different kinds of future stories. Whether these stories hold on to the possibility of a world made right, or simply hold to the significance of one's own transformation through moral courage, fostering agency in the face of ecological disaster is a key component in what Andy Lester calls "functional" future stories.<sup>187</sup> The experiences of Southeast Baptist Church reflect a commitment to transforming this world and resistance to apocalyptic eschatologies. Group member Frank described a key reason for his involvement as "making Baptists more active for *this* world." Apocalyptic thinking seems to take the cultural form rather than the theological in this group. Group members do not expect the ecological apocalypse to usher in the Messiah's return, but instead reflected about what a future of ecological catastrophe would mean for humanity's future, grieving the diminishment of the natural world and the lowered potential for human flourishing in such a world.

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<sup>185</sup> Mary-Jayne Rust, "Why and How Do Therapists Become Ecotherapists?," in *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, ed. Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2009), 42.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 125.

By living their theological value of love and respect for the whole of life, they affirm that their future story is joined with that of creation as a whole. This affirmation is linked to the second eschatological concern named above, that of how we use the resources of our ecosystem in light of our eschatological beliefs. The effects of individualism and anthropocentrism in theological interpretation are more readily observable in their ecological effects. Economic exploitation of nature is, as I have noted, encouraged by these powerful discourses, creating systemic ecological crisis through failure to respect “the spatiotemporal rhythms of earthly ecology.”<sup>188</sup> If, as Browning and Graham highlight, our practices enact our values, the Earth Care Team enacts its resistance to a future that discounts the web of life through its many acts of ecological care. This intersystemic engagement, fueled by their particular hoping paradigm, is transformative both in human social systems and local ecosystems.

“Any model of ecological eschatology must affirm, without reservation, the importance of the processes of the world, both human and nonhuman, in the final consummation of all things.”<sup>189</sup> This notion of clear affirmation of humanity’s inextricable connection from all of creation is present in constructive ecological eschatologies. While Keller’s approach to eschatology has its critiques, it points toward the need for human accountability towards our relationship with the creation.<sup>190</sup> Moltmann’s eschatology points to God’s care for the *whole* of creation through its ultimate transformation. How can we understand the need for intersystemic engagement in light of these temporal discourses of the present, immediate future, and a dim

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<sup>188</sup> Keller, “Women Against Wasting the World,” 255.

<sup>189</sup> Theodore David McCall, *The Greenie’s Guide to the End of the World* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2011), 139.

<sup>190</sup> See Chapter 3 for a detailed description of these critiques. In addition to Moltmann’s critique that Keller is not hopeful enough, McCall critiques her for not developing concepts of God in her eschatology, accusing her of using science to leave only a vague notion that the future is important for generations to come. Her ethical pull towards care *now* is not balanced by the eschatological sense of ultimacy; i.e., why does care matter if the universe is ultimately bound for destruction?

sense of *eschaton*? I suggest that both evolutionary biology and theology point to *enduring relationality* as a theological norm for re-visioning eschatology. The theory of evolution points to life's constant reinvention of itself in response to context, which takes place through time in the recycling of creation's resources, and in the present through the current configurations and interactions of those resources. At its mysterious heart, theology points towards the enduring presence of God in relationship with all of creation, as co-author and co-sufferer in the process of existence. In caring for one another through living in ecologically just ways, we enact an ethic of enduring relationality that continues through time and is held by the mystery of God's presence in the universe.

#### Fostering Ecological Engagement as Religious Practice

The Earth Care Team is situated within a large faith community. Their hoping paradigm is already inviting transformative ways of being faithful to the larger church; it is also possible that the theological resources of this community may further empower their work for climate justice. The remainder of this section outlines multifaceted pastoral responses in the hope of further fostering the powerful work of this team.

Pastorally, the Earth Care Team could be further encouraged to name and describe their theological tension points with the Christian tradition. The Christian tradition has many "green" places within it, set alongside parts that are distinctly not. Being able to argue with the tradition's limits while buoying helpful hermeneutics may strengthen their theological norm of love and respect for the whole of life. They could also identify how theologies of love and relationship strengthen their work together, describing how they point to God's care for all of life through their stories of ecological care.

Additionally, the team and pastoral staff could find opportunities to speak publically to the congregation through preaching, bible studies, etc. Such public God-talk about a Christian ethical imperative for ecological care could to more to foster “the whole congregation becoming Earth Care Team members.” Public discourse around ecological justice and the work already in progress by the team may further the congregation’s support through lifestyle changes and other local action.

Finally, the team could be supported and empowered as they seek future ways to love and respect the whole of life. Community support and discernment for “organic” responses is already part of the group’s identity; pastoral support and support from the wider church as they discern causes for religious environmental action may help continue this process of ongoing religious environmental care.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter illustrated the religious environmental work of Southeast Baptist Church’s Earth Care Team, using thick descriptions of the team’s experiences to create a critical dialogue between the cohort’s theological hoping paradigm and the ecological discourses supporting their work. It also used these experiences to generate theological reflection on the critical role that re-envisioned eschatologies of enduring relationality play in the theologies supporting religious environmental activists. This community’s unique experiences at this particular point in their history provide a window into faithful responses to climate change at the level of the local congregation. These experiences also offer a way to reflect on the significance of community praxis in the role of sustaining meaning and hope, while addressing some of the problematic theological interpretations of Christian eschatology. Their praxis is a local theo-ecology, and

provides insightful experience into congregationally based religious environmental activism as transformative love and justice. It also points to questions of how to understand what justice *is* and how communities of faith can seek change in the midst of existing institutions and structures, which is the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX  
CENTRAL TEXAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH:  
ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE-MAKING THROUGH SACRAMENTAL LIVING

**Introduction**

If hoping paradigms help create imagined futures that are not yet present, the hoping paradigm of Central Texas Episcopal Church's Environmental Guild expresses love and hospitality for God's creation through living sacramentally and cultivating awareness of the whole creation's right to flourish. As with the preceding chapters, this cohort's theological hoping paradigm springs from a shift in understanding humanity's relationship to the web of life as one of interconnection and interdependence. This kind of shift fosters an ethical imperative to work for the intersystemic flourishing for the whole web of life. This chapter explores the narratives of the guild, considering how their experiences promoting congregational sustainability and creating an urban wildlife habitat shape the integration of their ecological and theological praxis. Their hoping paradigm promotes an everyday spirituality of sustainable living practices and invites variegated expressions of life's flourishing through cultivating urban biodiversity on the grounds of the church. Theologically, they are supported by norms of "sacramental living," love and hospitality for the whole of creation, and affirmation of all creation's right to flourish. The group's religious environmental praxis has already fostered significant changes in their urban context. The transformation and reflection fueled by the Guild's ecological activism upon invites them to relate with the natural world as a vital participant in their praxis of faith.

Living as one species in the midst of life's diverse expressions is a serious challenge for our age. Many religious environmentalists seek transformation in their relationships with the biosphere through spiritualities of sustainable living. These intentionally chosen practices reflect lifestyle attempts to live mindfully within the limits of our planetary system. Sustainable living patterns are not necessarily forms of spirituality, but this is often the case for religious environmentalists. Some religious environmentalists also practice a kind of hospitality by cultivating biodiversity in places that people have made unwelcoming for otherkind.

As with the preceding chapters, the discussion of the relationship between the group's theological hoping paradigm and their environmental activism takes place through process of dialogue that is both mutually critical and correlative. It highlights how ecological and ecotheological discourses of biodiversity and sustainability shape the ongoing work of the Environmental Guild. From this dialogue, constructive pastoral theological reflections on justice in the context of ecological crisis emerge.

A rich description of the contextual factors at work in the particular identities of the Central Texas Episcopal Cathedral's Environmental Guild unfolds in the sections to come through methods of ethnographic story-gathering. This multi-layered description of experience provides an entry point into the critical dialogue between their experiences as a group and contextual discourses influencing their practice together at a specific time in their work together. Next, theological reflection upon the themes emerging from the narratives provides consideration for how these must be interpreted freshly in light of ecological discourses and a changing environmental context. In this group, hope is embodied through fostering sustainable living practices throughout their large faith community and in the city they call home, and by inviting the rich presence of creation in the form of a habitat for native plants and animals. They have



chosen to focus on these community practices because of their love for “this fragile Earth, our island home.”<sup>191</sup> This love has grown through recognizing their daily practices of living as a form of spirituality, because they cultivate an awareness of the holiness of all life through the routine of everyday choices. These experiences invite a process of constructive theological reflection regarding the implications of radical interrelatedness and interdependence for how people of faith understand and enact justice. The concluding section of this chapter offers constructive theological responses for ecological caring, grounded in the particular work and identities of this community of faith.

### **Contexts: Ecological, Historical, and Congregational**

#### Ecological

The Central Texas region began to urbanize during its colonization by Euro-American settlers as they established themselves around area springs and rivers during the nineteenth century. The region’s primary river is situated along a limestone escarpment that splits the area into rolling hills to one side and open plains to the other. The climate is a humid, subtropical one, strongly influenced by weather patterns off the Gulf of Mexico. Residents of the area experience very hot and dry summers with mild, dry winters. Many different biotic regions converge in Central Texas along the Edwards Plateau, making the region a hotspot for biodiversity. This biological community is threatened by severe habitat loss, decreased groundwater due to excessive pumping by the region’s human inhabitants, polluted surface water, and the introduction of non-native species.

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<sup>191</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1979), 370.

Drought conditions have severely impacted nearly all of Texas in recent years.<sup>192</sup> While it is difficult to scientifically assign blame to anthropogenic climate change for singular events, the region's climate has become warmer and drier in recent decades. This trend is forecast to continue in climate warming models. As the water table drops and population increases, the issue of water availability will be an increasingly salient and contentious one.

The visibility of urban expansion, severe drought, and other impacts on the physical health of the region's ecosystem serve as a local call-to-action for members of the Environmental Guild. The particular ecological challenges of their region have sharpened the group's focus towards sustainable living practices, specifically in the areas of reducing waste, energy conservation, and water conservation. In recent years, they have expanded their approach to include hospitality for the native plants and animals of the region, creating publically recognized niches of biodiversity in their homes and on the grounds of the Cathedral. Educating their large faith community and inviting them into their practice of expressing their love for creation is at the heart of their vision. Guild member Stew sees the group as a "catalyst" for the larger church, in that they provide a visible outlet for connecting caring for the environment to spirituality: "For people who are looking for what they can do in terms of expressing our spirituality, our love for creation, this group has provided a catalyst for the organization as a whole."

### ***Sustainability***

How does sustainable living become a practice of faith? Outlining some of the terminology and key components surrounding sustainability discourses provides a lens for understanding how these values are integrated into the regular practices of members of the

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<sup>192</sup> Kate Galbraith, "Assessing Climate Change in a Drought-Stricken State," *The Texas Tribune*, August 26, 2011, accessed January 14, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/26/us/26ttdrought.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/26/us/26ttdrought.html?_r=0).

Environmental Guild. Such an understanding will allow for a more nuanced engagement of the significance of these practices to the local ecological community.

Sustainability is a complex and taken-for-granted term, a “buzzword” in our cultural context. Typically, it is linked to efforts at making human development and consumption processes more ecologically efficient through lowering the consumption of all varieties of natural resources over time.<sup>193</sup> Thus, everything from energy efficiency, water conservation, waste management, food production and more comes under the umbrella of sustainability rhetoric. For our purposes, I propose a more specific definition: *human sustainability is choosing to live within the limits of the local ecosystems in which we are embedded, consuming at a rate commensurate with the ecosystem’s ability to restore and replenish itself.*

Knowing the limits of our particular systems is quite difficult. Our immersion in a system of global capitalism obfuscates our daily participation in a worldwide consumptive web that has an enormous ecological cost. Ecuadorian bananas, Middle Eastern oil, and bottled Italian spring water are normal features of middle class American lives, but they come to us through a system that collapses the interplay of systems and the systemic effects of accessing these products. Vandana Shiva’s elucidation of these different economies helpfully organizes the multiple valences involved in reorganizing our current system.

Shiva describes the relationship between three economies: nature’s economy, the sustenance economy, and the market economy. Dominant socioeconomic discourses separate ecology from economy. In spite of this artificial separation, nature’s economy is the very basis of our common life, the spirit and sustenance of our planetary home. “Nature’s economy

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<sup>193</sup> In regards to this term’s complexity, sustainability is also used by entities wishing to give the appearance of adhering to ecological ethics. The term “greenwashing” developed in relation to groups who use terms such as sustainability in efforts to improve their marketability rather than reducing their ecological impact.

consists of the production of goods and services by nature – the water recycled and distributed through the hydrologic cycle, the soil fertility produced by microorganisms, the plants fertilized by pollinators.”<sup>194</sup> While nature is the leading producer in the world, its products cannot be valued in language of traditional market economics. Instead, only things that can be commoditized into products are given value. The exploitation of these resources for gain in the market economy is causing vast destruction in nature’s economy, whose timetable is vastly slower than the demands of the market.

The conflict over what counts as wealth and who can access participation in the market economy is also evident in the second kind of economy, which Shiva describes as the “sustenance economy.” In this economy, “people work to directly provide the conditions necessary to maintain their lives. This is the economy through which human production and reproduction is primarily possible.”<sup>195</sup> Additionally, because of classist and patriarchal divisions of labor, it is also women’s economy and the economy of the world’s poor. The market economy’s systematic undervaluing of the sustenance economy while draining its resources through a process of privatization entrenches millions of people into lives of poverty and suffering. Shiva notes, “In the sustenance economy, satisfying basic needs and ensuring long-term sustainability are the organizing principles for natural resource use, whereas the exploitation of resources for profits and capital accumulation are the organizing principles for the market.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>195</sup> Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 17.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Market economies are based upon privatizing common resources so that profits might be made on those resources. Shiva describes the “enclosure of the commons” as a historical process that created goods for the market economy through the creation of private property. The enclosure of public lands and waterways created a division between owners and laborers, and reduced the biological diversity of crops through narrowing production to commodity crops. Current examples of enclosures on the commons include intellectual property laws on life forms, water privatization, and the dismantling of the legal protection of public spaces from economic development. The effects of an out-of-balance market economy are “enclosures that create new poverty, powerlessness, and, in the extreme, disposability.”<sup>197</sup>

Shiva’s description of the relationship between these three economies is a helpful one. In the stable constellation of the economies, “nature’s economy is recognized as the most basic, because it provides the foundation for the sustenance and market economies, and because it has the highest priority and claim to natural resources.”<sup>198</sup> The current relationship between these economies is unsustainable, because the market economy relates to the other economies as disposable.

The kind of sustainable living practices the Environmental Guild of Central Texas Episcopal Cathedral seeks to embody are those respectful of nature’s economy, which also allow for the development of viable sustenance economies. Their efforts at mindfully shifting their practices of consumption make room for a different way of life, and are synergistically related to their theological worldviews. By redefining their relationship with the natural world, several team members spoke of a “changed awareness” of the rights of other creatures, and a “love of

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 52.

creation” that invites them to make room for the marginalized people, as well as ecologically marginalized plant and animal species in their region.

### ***Biodiversity***

The theological worldviews of the Environmental Guild and of the clergy of Central Texas Episcopal support the team’s efforts to create space for biodiversity. Exploring two prominent aspects of biodiversity provides groundwork for integrative theological reflection later, for understanding how beliefs and practices come meaningfully together in this area. The term “biodiversity” has been in regular use since the mid-1980s.<sup>199</sup> Ecologists and environmental sciences define this term along a continuum from very broad understandings of biodiversity as the “variety of life,” to more precise definitions that allow for specific observation and engagement with particular species.<sup>200</sup>

Biodiversity as “the variety of life” connotes, as Kevin O’Brien points out, how this variety is part of the character of our world.<sup>201</sup> Biodiversity understood in this broad way provides a philosophy for valuing this great variety, the beginnings of a moral imperative to care for this wide array of difference as valuable. The stunning variety of Earth’s living things helpfully decenters the human species as from its place at the center of the web of life.

From a scientific point of view, this broad definition is not precise enough to move beyond an appreciation for the breadth and diversity of life. The sheer fact that the number of species on Earth is likely less than *half* catalogued at this point raises the issue that understanding

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<sup>199</sup> Walter Rosen coined the term “biodiversity” during the organization of the 1986 “National forum on BioDiversity;” the material from this conference was later collated into the 1988 text *BioDiversity*.

<sup>200</sup> See Kevin O’Brien’s *An Ethics of Biodiversity: Christianity, Ecology, and the Variety of Life* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 19-37 for an overview of the various schemas for understanding how the terminology used in reference to biodiversity effects various kinds of engagement with the topic.

<sup>201</sup> O’Brien, *An Ethics of Biodiversity*, 21.

humanity's impacts on this variety of life requires more precision.<sup>202</sup> Additionally, the rapid expansion of the human population into all varieties of habitats places serious pressures on many species, causing the rate of endangered and extinct species to rise precipitously. Although extinction is a natural evolutionary phenomenon, the best estimates for a "background" rate of extinction are about one species every five years. Our current era is one of massive die-off, with the number of species becoming extinct each *day* reaching into the dozens.<sup>203</sup> Precise definitions like this one from Packard, Gordon and Clarkson's recent chapter on biodiversity provide a way to act efficiently and ethically in the face of mass extinction: "The concept of biodiversity refers to (1) the number of types of natural ecological regions (ecoregions), (2) the number of native species within each ecoregion, and (3) the genetic variation within species."<sup>204</sup> More precise definitions help scientific professionals in this field raise and sometimes answer difficult biological questions, such as when human intervention may actually improve a species chance for survival, and what the possible implications for such survival might be.

The tension between these two definitions is ongoing and helpful, providing both a broad philosophical and moral basis for human recognition and involvement with biodiversity, and the practical steps forward, both for scientists for whom this is professional work, and human beings who hope to live in intentional and thoughtful relationship with the web of life. Theologically, much is at stake in how we frame our relationship with the more-than-human world; the

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<sup>202</sup> See Vernon Heywood, ed. *Global Biodiversity Assessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). This text represents a massive effort of more than 1500 scientists over the course of a decade.

<sup>203</sup> Eric Chivian and Aaron Bernstein, eds. *Sustaining Life: How Human Health Depends on Biodiversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>204</sup> Jane Packard, Wendy Gordon, and Judith Clarkson, "Biodiversity," in *The Impact of Global Warming on Texas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. J. Schmandt, G. North, and J. Clarkson, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), p. 135.

experiences of the Environmental Guild provide a helpful lens for reflecting on this kind of spiritual praxis.

### Historical and Congregational Contexts

The historical and congregational context for the Environmental Guild is long and complex, though their identity as a congregation active in community transformation has long been part of the parish's story. Central Texas Episcopal Church was founded in the mid-nineteenth century during the early periods of urban development in Central Texas. Its formative years were fraught with political divisions due to the Civil War era tensions and Texas' potential for secession, but a unified congregation emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The community began multiple outreach efforts through supporting the construction of a hospital, schools and mission centers and has a tradition of long, stable tenures from its rectors. Its identity as a parish involved in the local community continues today.

Currently, the church is located in the downtown area near a university and multiple cultural centers. It is a large faith community of around three thousand members with about eight hundred-fifty attending on an average Sunday. Diverse in the range of theological beliefs, the Environmental Guild describes its composition as "eclectic," and an "umbrella, with people of all generations and conservatives and liberals worshipping together." They name the Episcopal liturgy as the common ground that unites this diverse membership.

### **The Environmental Guild at Central Texas Episcopal Church: Description, History and Aims**

Key to the mission of this group's enacted hoping paradigm of sustainable living patterns and living in hospitable relationships with their area's indigenous plant and animal species is clergy



support, strong leadership, and a dedicated core membership. This enables the group to focus on both the ecological and theological commitments their involvement in the guild fosters, integrating them through personal narratives and ongoing praxis.

#### Key Factors and Initiatives in the Guild's Praxis

The Environmental Guild at Central Texas Episcopal consists of twelve regular members who meet for monthly meetings. An additional six people are part of their extended cohort and are involved on a semi-regular basis with projects and events matching their interests. The Guild is immediately visible in the large congregation; walking into the historic building, a well-kept area for collecting items that are difficult to recycle or dispose of properly is readily apparent. Information about the guild and their mission is visible in this area. Signs for upcoming events hosted by the Guild are conspicuous, and clear information on where and how to dispose of different waste products (through composting, recycling and landfill use) is accessible in multiple locations.

Significant to the ongoing visibility and importance of the Environmental Guild is support from the clergy of Central Texas Episcopal. The group benefits from the continued interest and enthusiasm of the parish rector and church staff, which began with the Guild's inception in 2003. This is apparent in the guild's beginnings as a clergy initiative. In the fall of 2003, the recently appointed rector approached the former Guild leader, asking for her leadership in forming a new environmental guild. Barb, already involved in these initiatives informally around the church, was "pleased to do this" and remained in this leadership position for nearly seven years. The clergy and staff support for the guild is ongoing; their visibility in church publications, worship and other events is the result. Guild member and current leader Rosie appreciates how this sends the message that "there's an outlet to talk about these things here at

Central Texas Episcopal.” Clergy support has helped make the guild’s work part of the rhythm of life at the parish. Regarding their visibility, group member Stew noted how

...a lot of it has to do with the support of the staff. None of us actually made the signs, even though we suggested them. That was really the staff helping us carry out what we wanted to do. They took it on and embraced it. That helps us, because we might be here one day a week, but it becomes ingrained in the culture because the people who work here care, too.

Such strong institutional support from the parish clergy has helped foster strong, stable leadership for the group as well. In the near-decade of the cohort’s work together, two women have emerged as its leaders. In 2003, Barb began recruiting interested members to help with their first major project, a system of “mug trees” fashioned with leaves on the top to promote both the discontinuation of Styrofoam cups at the church and reflection about why this was significant for the parish. Over the course of time, other efforts to foster sustainability in the practices of the parish and in the lives of its members developed. A battery repository was developed and maintained each week by one of the members for several years, until their city designated the parish as an official pickup location for batteries and similar kinds of hazardous waste. To date, they now accept a wide variety of difficult to recycle items, including eyeglasses, ink cartridges, cell phones, prescription bottles, aluminum can pull tabs, digital cameras, and CDs. They describe this as part of “cultivating loving and compassionate relationships, with God and with each other.” The Environmental Guild includes this statement in its information flyer:

Now more than ever, our love must extend not only to the neighbors we encounter today and in our own geographic community, but also to those across the globe and downstream from us in time. What kind of world do we want to bequeath to our children, grandchildren, and more distant descendants? What about our duty to love our neighbors who will inhabit this fragile Earth in the future? The well being of these future neighbors will be saved only by our actions, not by our good intentions alone.

Approximately three years ago, Rosie took over the leadership of the Environmental Guild. Supported by Barbara and the strong core of members, Rosie has helped the group take two important new directions: becoming a certified GreenFaith congregation, and developing an urban wildlife habitat on the church grounds. Group member Stan noted how “Barb and Rosie have provided strong leadership, which has been critical.” This strong leadership is synergistically related to the steady commitment and stability of its members, who mobilized to participate in the two initiatives, which were suggested by the guild’s leader Rosie and supported by the clergy.

The group decided to enroll in the GreenFaith Certification program, a two-year initiative that supports environmental leadership in houses of worship with mentoring, guidance and resources. As Barb put it, “GreenFaith...brought more depth and ways of thinking than we knew, plus the deadlines and benchmarks have really pushed us to do things and accomplish things.” Their experiences helped strengthen and publicize their already existing initiatives, and helped them consider other possibilities for environmental stewardship.

The creation of a certified urban wildlife habitat is a current significant project for the Guild. The National Wildlife Federation offers a certification process to create designated wildlife habitats tailored to the particular region for the party applying. They host a specific process for houses of worship, which the Environmental Guild decided to join. After careful planning, their outdoor labyrinth space and columbarium was transformed. Trumpet vines crisscross overhead on lattice of cables that allow for a dappled mixture of sun and shade, a recirculating water fountain surrounded by native rocks provides desperately needed water, and a variety of native plants provide some food and shelter from the Texas sun. The beautiful space is a welcome respite from the mostly concrete downtown environment just on the other side of the

parish walls. A variety of birds, small mammals, butterflies and other insects have begun to frequent the place, showing that the group's hope of extending hospitality to the natural world is being realized. Group members hope to become leaders in the downtown area by offering tours and workshops for area residents, who could create similar spaces in their homes and workplaces. One group member noted how even a space as small as the average apartment balcony helps stabilize the local wildlife population through providing food, water, and shade from the Texas sun.

### Group Aims

The Central Texas Environmental Guild names the following statement as its official mission statement: "We believe that God entrusted all of creation to our safekeeping and that we are therefore called to be responsible stewards of God's beloved earth... [Central Texas Episcopal] commits to take an ever active and holistic approach to environmental stewardship through education, service, and sustainable practices." Group members discussed the variety of views they have on the guild's purposes, the challenges they face, and how they seek to embody them in the present and future.

Guild members agreed that their central vision involves transforming the common life of the parish. Group leader Rosie summarized this as doing "what we can do to be more environmentally aware, what we can do to help Central Texas Episcopal become more environmentally responsible, and helping each individual person make changes in their own lives at home." Member Bill built on this statement, noting how they "continue to look for ways to be pacesetters" in terms of their "core function of reduce, reuse, recycle." Their efforts have had a spillover effect into the local community through their willingness to share their experiences with other local parishes. Group members believe they are becoming a "resource parish,"

supporting other congregations in the local community as they live into their religious environmental callings. One member gave an early example of the effect: “Within the first three months of our beginning, the First Baptist Church came to us. We talked through some of the things we were doing at the time, and their program started as a result.”

The group’s stable community was named as one of the key factors in their ability to overcome challenges. Since the group has enjoyed strong support from their parish community, their primary challenge rests in the overwhelming nature of the ecological crisis. Group member Joy notes how “this group is like a rule of life for me. It keeps me grounded, keeps me focused...this group has always been focused on practicality, which keeps me in the present and keeps me in *this* day.” Rosie noted how the community’s presence greatly furthers her ability to take meaningful action:

Being a part of this group is one of the things that keep me going, thinking about this stuff and wanting to do more. If I were just thinking about these things on my own, I would’ve given up or just read a book about it and felt very righteous about what I know. So yes, being a part of this group – these people in particular – helps keep me going.

Other group members also described how this group helps them be more connected to the church by connecting their passion for the environment to their life of faith. Barb described how “coming together and being kindred souls reminds that in being Christian, I am also a steward of the Earth. I make that connection because ‘this fragile Earth our island home’ is all we have for now.”<sup>205</sup>

The Guild’s supportive community and consensus around its aims creates space for considering the future role of the Environmental Guild. As they talked about the future together, they brainstormed ideas about increasing their commitment to sustainability through solar panels,

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<sup>205</sup> Barb is quoting from the *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1979), 370. This prayer is read by a Guild member at every meeting.

moving more intentionally into the realm of political activism, and encouraging each other to continue their own processes of transformation for the sake of future generations. The idea of “greening” the consciousness of their parish was very prominent; group member Stan described his hope this way: “In a way, in ten years I’d almost like for this group not to exist, in that it’s just so much a part of the culture of the church that you don’t need a special group to bring these things up.” Rosie echoed this in her remarks that she would like religious environmentalism to become “everyday spirituality” for people: “That’s my vision for our community and beyond – getting everyone to have that everyday, common spirituality and concern for one another. Doing that through environmentalism seems such the natural way to do that, because we’re either going to survive or not.” The support of the “kindred souls” in the group is the cornerstone of their ability to imagine the different kind of future evidenced in their hoping paradigm. The Environmental Guild’s commitment to expressing love and hospitality for all of God’s creation through sacramental patterns of living and supporting the flourishing of all of creation is implicit in these hopes and their continuing work together.

#### **Focal Beliefs:**

##### **Theologies Supporting the Work of the Central Texas Episcopal Environmental Guild**

The theological hoping paradigm of the Environmental Guild supports the unique identity and bridges the areas of ecology and spirituality for group members. Given the variegated personal histories of the individual members, it is not surprising that there is significant range in the theological views fostering group involvement. Several members’ professional lives raised their ecological awareness, and all of the interviewed group members began their journey with religious environmentalism through their ecological concerns prior to seeking the context of their faith community to put these concerns into practice. The possibility of integrating the ecological

principle of interconnection into their existing spiritual practices facilitated their involvement with the Guild.

Group members described how their involvement with the Guild shifted their understanding of how to embody their faith. Members had no trouble describing the theological reasons for doing their work; while these all differed slightly, broad points of connection between them led me to create several categories for the purpose of further reflection on how these themes influence their experiences as religious environmentalists. The hoping paradigm of the environmental guild consists of an ethic of love for all creation expressed as hospitality, sacramental living, and affirmation of all of creation's right to flourish. The group's theological commitments appear to connect to a desired transformation of their everyday habits as an act of faithful love and care for the God whose spirit is evident in all aspects of the natural world. Roseie summarized her expression of the group's theological commitments this way: "To be sustaining, we have to love one another. To love one another, we have to look around and see what's happening."

The specific themes were chosen through multiple conversations with group members, the guild interview session, and observations of the Earth Day events of the guild. The following section details the group's narratives of these themes, and how they support their community praxis of religious environmental engagement.

### Sacramental Living

The most common theme that emerged among group members had to do with the spiritual formation of their daily lives. Group members used a variety of terms to describe how viewing practices of daily living through the lens of ecology invites them to consider the holiness present throughout creation. "Sustainability," "simplicity," and "responsibility" were all used to

relate the notion that common, everyday actions of living matter. Living mindfully and intentionally in daily life, both individually and through parish practices, is transformative both theologically and ecologically. Group member Joy encapsulated her transition to this mindset by relating a story that catalyzed her shift to an ecological worldview. During a friend's journey to Japan, he stopped to eat in local restaurant.

As he was sitting there, somebody walked by outside and dropped a piece of trash on the sidewalk. This woman got up from her table, went outside, and picked up the piece of trash to dispose of it. Then she sat back down at her table. The thing that was so astonishing was how natural it was for her and how nobody paid any attention to what she'd just done – where, as an American, my friend was just astounded...when I feel overwhelmed, I pick up the next piece of trash. That keeps my chain of involvement intact.

Elaborating further on this story, Joy initiated the phrase “sacramental living,” which resonated with group members. She said, “My spiritual acts can take place anywhere, anytime. That means that more and more of my life is becoming holy. It's sacramental living.”

Rosie related a story with similar themes, regarding how her daily routine is a significant part of how she relates her faith and her environmental commitments.

I started coming more from a secular perspective, wanting to be more environmental and wondering what our church was doing about it. Boy, I was not prepared for the spiritual aspect to it! For me, it's become like - riding my bicycle somewhere and waiting until I find a drinking fountain instead of just buying a bottle of water. To me that has become a spiritual decision. It's a practice – I intentionally decide to do that. That's how I stay plugged into things greater than myself, to people I don't know, to animals and to nature. It's my way of not putting myself and mine first, always. It's my way of being Christian. It's about compassion, and thinking beyond myself.

The group as a whole highlighted in multiple ways how their daily practices illustrate this value, ranging from composting to community education. Members reflected on how engaging environmentalism through the lens of faith helps integrate this kind of mindful living into their identities and makes it more meaningful. Guild member Leena helpfully summarized this shift with her statement, “Thinking about the environment spiritually and studying Franciscan



spirituality has helped me think of all this less as an activity and more of a way of being in the world.”

### Love as Ecological Hospitality

The deep motivation of the guild’s sacramental living and the font of what makes their work together worthwhile is their conviction that their intersystemic engagement expresses their love for God and neighbor. This love makes a difference in how it widens how they understand love and who they consider those neighbors to be, in light of God’s presence throughout all creation. Rosie’s claim that “to be sustaining, we have to love one another” grounds their work in a relational context. Their process of shifting how they understand the subjects with whom they relate reflects how the praxis religious environmentalism is shaping their theological worldviews.

Understanding that human beings can relate to creation as full of subjectivity and richness is not a new idea. Threaded throughout the Christian tradition in the biblical narratives, in psalms, parables, and theological writings, the natural world as an expression of God’s self is one of the “green threads” running through the tapestry of the Christian faith. Guild members pick up this thread when they speak of fostering loving relationships with creation as part of God’s own life. Guild member Bill described how his involvement with the Guild strengthens his love for creation, which then helps in his struggles working as an environmental engineer for the oil industry. Bill used Martin Buber’s notion of “I-Thou” relationships to describe how this shift occurred for him:

...Jesus said, “Whatsoever you did for the least of my brethren you did for me.” I think the idea that we can be in relationship with creation, an I-Thou relationship rather than an I-It relationship helps keep me from this idea that we can just objectify and have dominion. We have to embrace and share this place, together with the trees, the animals, and the whole circle of ecology.

Choosing loving relationship to creation as part of God's self-expression shifts how guild members use their human privilege in creation, a process requiring commitment and discernment. Guild member Joy cited a prayer from the Daughters of the King Guild that helps center her as she engages creation with love. In describing the enormity of the challenge, she said, "The Daughters of the King have this prayer, 'I can't do everything, but I can do something. What would you have me do?' I don't have to decide whether I'm going to move mountains or pick up the next piece of trash. I place that burden aside and make myself willing."

This desire to live in loving relationship with the whole of creation is expressed through the group's hospitality towards other species and towards future generations. Stan noted how the Guild's spirituality is grounded in this love for creation, and how this has been a "catalyst" for the parish as a whole. In this way, group member Willa's commitment to collecting the wine bottles from communion for reuse and recycling so that they do not become part of the intractable waste problem future generations will face is part of her spiritual praxis of love. The Guild's participation in learning about what native plants invite indigenous species onto their property is an act of love, creating hospitable community between species for more intentional relationships with the wider community of life. Making space for God's spirit through the present biotic community and thinking "downstream" about the opportunities of future generations for these experiences widens the vision of love practiced in the daily lives of the Central Texas Episcopal Environmental Guild.

#### Affirmation of Creation's Right to Flourish

Rosie's touchstone statement shared earlier in the chapter concludes with this observation: "To love one another, we have to look around and see what's happening." The guild's attention to the impact of the increasing population on the local ecosystem through water

use, waste management, and human development projects leads them to consider the importance of being in relationship with all of creation, both as part of God's creative expression and for the sake of all of life. Flourishing is an interdependent process; when human systems deeply wound the ecological circles of life, they invariably harm themselves as integral participants in the system.

The setting of the church is significant for guild members in fostering this awareness and affirmation of flourishing. Stew described how his upbringing as a "cradle Episcopalian" shapes his ethics in this regard. "The idea that 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' and the way our actions impact other people were the first life-realizations I had that what we do affects others." This kind of spiritual awareness requires guild members to "think beyond" themselves. Rosie described how her children motivate her religious environmental work: "For me a big part of it is my children. I think about what kind of future I want for them and what kind of model I can be not just environmentally, but as far as sticking with something that really matters." Other members shared how the church helps them affirm life's goodness, and encourages them to reach beyond individual satisfaction. Stan noted how "the church also exists for those who aren't it's members...the model for environmental activism is the church! It's about thinking outside of yourself."

**Hoping Paradigms in Action:  
Earth Day Dedication of the Parish's Certified Urban Wildlife Habitat**

A squeal from a little girl prompted quick looks of concern from surrounding parishioners, who were settling into chairs on the labyrinth walk in preparation for worship. The girl's mother plucked a wriggling green caterpillar from the child's hair and held it in an open palm for the girl

to see. Smiles brightened the faces of those watching the event unfold, as a startling moment became one of wonder and discovery as the child gently touched the caterpillar and walked with her mother to place it in the leaves of a nearby plant.

Soft sounds from an acoustic guitar heralding the beginning of this Earth Day worship service, set aside to celebrate the garden labyrinth's official designation as a Certified Urban Wildlife Habitat. The green vines overhead rustled in the soft breeze as the priest began to speak the liturgy. As the homily began, she gestured behind her shoulder towards the columbarium and talked about the community of faith, which is broad enough to include past and future generations, and wide enough to care for all of God's creation. She spoke about life: how just as the parishioners come to find renewal and hope through worship and the beautiful garden setting, she hopes the creatures of their neighborhood will find rest and renewal in their shared garden habitat.

As the service ended, the crowd of about fifty began to ascend the stairs from the sunken labyrinth area towards the street level. The usual bustle of the city during the weekday was replaced by groups of people strolling casually down the sidewalk near the church. The occasional passerby stopped to glance through the many tables set up for the Earth Day information fair. At the far end of the tables, the electronics recycling booth was generating busy conversation about the challenging problem of electronic waste as the bins began to fill with old laptops, cameras, and other small household items. A team of reporters pulled up, intrigued by the publicity materials for the electronics drive and the promise of a "Bicycle Valet" service. Members of the Environmental Guild stood at the booths and made their way through the small crowd, answering questions and inviting people into conversation. Information tables provided parishioners and visitors with materials on water conservation, sustainable landscaping, and

“green” building. A petition and information table regarding the effects of climate change on the poorest communities and countries of the world generated a small group conversation, as did a petition regarding the Safe Chemicals Act, a bill that would required disclosure of the many chemicals used in the manufacturing of consumer goods.

An air of conversation and invitation filled the space, transforming the downtown street corner in front of the parish entrance into the public square. The curiosity and enthusiasm of guild members fostered both the exchange of information and specific actions to promote their community’s engagement with local and global environmental issues, and invited growth in love of God and creation.

### **Pastoral Theological Reflections and Responses for Empowering Community Praxis**

#### Theological Sources and Norms

The hoping paradigm of the Environmental Guild is one of loving hospitality for all of creation, supported by commitments to sacramental living and affirmation of the whole creation’s right to flourish. This is notably supported by their parish context; pastoral leaders provide space for reflection and embodiment of these commitments, and their Episcopal tradition as “people of the book” unites them in the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer. The prayers and liturgy of their tradition promote their awareness of Earth’s preciousness, reminding them of their responsibility to relate to it in ways of loving hospitality. “This fragile Earth our island home” is the lens through which the guild members vitally engage their spiritual tradition. What are the implications of their theological shift of regarding creation as a subject, which has its own integrity and worth?

## Theological Reflection

I suggest that the Environmental Guild has accomplished an impactful shift in vantage point. Relating to the creation as a subject requires something different than dominant cultural views, which see it as an object for our use. Sally McFague's use of the metaphors "the loving eye" and "the arrogant eye" is a helpful way to encapsulate the theological impacts of this ongoing shift. By engaging this shift in relational norms, I assert that reinterpreting our relationality as interconnected in nature and enduring across time changes both how we understand the praxis of faith, and how we live into our human identity.

We live in a culture that often tells us to treat one another as objects, rather than subjects. The Christian theological norm of neighbor love has long been a countervailing force for dominant social discourses; pointing to the sin, suffering and violence that result from subsuming another being's irreducible identity into an object for consumption and disposal. Seeing other people as selves to whom we relate evokes another way of being, a way of relationship that honors their right to be as consistently as our own.

Extending subjecthood to the whole of creation takes the story of the Creator God in Genesis 1 seriously. This God proclaims all parts of the creation as equally good; there is not a hierarchy of value in the creative self-expression of God. All parts of creation connect to each other, and the most humble components are vital to the flourishing of the whole. The Environmental Guild's consideration of "sacramental living" implies that they see the presence of this Creator in their daily lives, and that choosing to waste less and relate more intentionally invites them into the subjectivity of all creation.

Sally McFague uses the metaphor of "the arrogant eye" to describe the dominant way that Western cultures relate to nature. Western cultures use the power of description and observation

to create truth. The power of scientific *observation* leads to the universalizing of those observations as collective truth, minimizing other ways of experiencing the beings under scrutiny. This is not to dismiss scientific discovery and innovation, which has vastly improved the lives of many people around the world. By using the term “arrogant eye,” she foregrounds how the assumption that we can know and control nature has powerful implications. If nature is an object to be observed and controlled, we are free to do with it what we wish. The privilege and widespread effects of reason in our culture cause McFague to make the claim that “*the* fundamental dualism of Western culture is reason vs. nature.”<sup>206</sup> Guild members reflected on the uncomfortable reality of how they as Americans relate to the natural world thoughtlessly, reflected in Joy’s story about the unremarkable nature of the Japanese woman who left her lunch to pick up the litter on the sidewalk. The challenge of becoming more aware of how the arrogant eye operates in their daily lives is helped by the Guild’s hoping paradigm, with its emphasis on sacramental living and a biodemocratic affirmation of creation’s right to flourish.

The Guild’s hoping paradigm helps them foster McFague’s counter to the arrogant eye, which she names “the loving eye.” The loving eye sees that we simply cannot live as separate and apart from all others. The loving eye is multi-sensory, coming close to the world to touch and be touched, rather than distancing itself as required in the subject-object dualism of the arrogant eye. This model is a challenging one, requiring participants who are able to maintain a separate and secure sense of identity without needing to control the identity of the other. In world of subjects relating to subject, difference must be appreciated rather than feared.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Sally McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 88.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Can this model be extended to the natural world, which cannot “talk” to us as other human beings do? How are we to relate to the subjectivities of trees and rocks, subjects we must use for our survival? The appreciation of difference fostered by the nature of the subject-subject model makes space for different kinds of relationships between different sorts of subject. Respectful relationships with the native plants in an area nature preserve might include the removal of plant species that might threaten their survival, as many varieties cultivated to beautiful human-occupied landscapes do. Respectful relationships with other human beings means viewing their differences with the loving eye, and relating through curiosity and generosity rather than control. The point, as McFague argues, is to recognize a being that differs from we humans as “not merely an object in *our* world...but *a subject in its own world*.”<sup>208</sup> Even the caterpillar that dropped onto the child’s head during the Earth Day worship service had its own agency and intentions for life; the mother who graciously held it in her hand as a being to wonder at offered a moment of subject-subject relationship for all who witnessed the event.

What can emerge in Christian praxis as a result of transforming our relationships with otherkind to a circle of ecological kinship? Transforming how we *see* the world has a ripple effect on what we *do*. The Environmental Guild’s hoping paradigm combines the daily transformation of their lives through sacramental living with an ethic of loving hospitality and an affirmation of holistic flourishing. Their choice to be transformed at the grassroots level of their parish is rippling through the central Texas city in which they live, shifting its social imaginary towards more mindful relationship with the natural world.

These shifts in spiritual praxis reflect an important and dynamic change in theological worldview. If our understanding of who we are is widening towards interconnection, this

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 109.



interconnection stretches across time, requiring us to be hospitable and accountable to future generations of the citizens of Earth. This requires a significant expansion of how we understand the notion of relational justice.

### **Empowering Interconnected Flourishing: Expanding Our Commitment to Justice**

This constructive theological exercise links the experiences of the Environmental Guild to efforts toward embodying a wider understanding of justice by illustrating how pastoral theological commitments to social justice are interwoven with ecological justice concerns. My own norms for ecological justice making are also evaluated in light of these experiences. Within theological hoping paradigms, our concept of what it means to be human beings significantly shape our vision for the future and what we must do to pull that future towards the present. To borrow from Eleazar Fernandez's notion of theological anthropology, how we answer the question "Who are we?" is inextricably tied to "Where are we going?" and "How will we get there?"<sup>209</sup> Our understanding of human identity in the present and in the ultimate future shapes our notion of what we hope for, which allows us to interpret what is well with our world and what is not.

#### Ecological Justice Making: Agential and Interwoven Hope

Barb, one of the members of the Environmental Guild, described a conversation she had with a fellow parishioner on the morning of our interview. Rosie, the Guild's leader, created information cards describing the ecological impact of agricultural waste that were placed on the parish tables during the breakfast hour. As the conversation unfolded, Barb described how thoughtful conversations about daily life choices help people make choices that are more just and in keeping with the group's value of sacramental living.

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<sup>209</sup> Eleazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 3.

I sat down with some friends, and one of the gentlemen sat down with me and said, “I did not know that about agricultural waste. I’ll have to think about beef. One pound of beef represents the use of 2500 gallons of water? I had no idea.” It was a reminder that this helps plant those seeds of thoughtfulness in people. So I said, yes, you don’t have to become vegetarian, but if you’re used to having meat 5 days a week, why not try 4?

In a region entrenched in terrible drought, unsustainable systems of consumption become issues of injustice for people and the ecosystems they inhabit. At the level of social justice, participating in heavy water consumption further stresses small family agricultural businesses. Poorer rural communities outside the city have diminished access to water as drought conditions worsen. Prices increase and the ability to survive on the small farms and ranches that formerly comprised a large portion of the rural Central Texas economy is jeopardized. This forces a sell-off of small family businesses due to ecologically troubled conditions, further consolidating the food production system into the hands of large agricultural firms with little connection to the long-term health of the land or the people who consume their products. Ecologically, the desertification of various regions happening as the effects of climate change worsen contributes to the massive species extinction underway, further complicating the challenge of just choices in human water consumption. How can our theological understandings of justice contribute to faithful practice in this context?

Addressing our notions of justice means addressing our notions of “who we are.” Understanding the *imago Dei* of the Christian story as constituted in just relationships between creatures highlights both the unique personal experiences of our embodiment and the ways we experience God differently. It also highlights the interdependent and relational nature of our diverse embodiments and God’s presence within them all. As Larry Graham describes,

When characterized by love, human relationality in the image of God protects, sustains, and works toward the fulfillment of every entity in the universe, including the non-human

world. The image of God, therefore, is not just a personal quality or individual achievement, but it is a potential of humanity and even of nature.<sup>210</sup>

If the *imago Dei* is relational, then justice is a theological norm for Christian life. Expanding the concept of relational justice to include ecological dimensions of the *imago Dei* is imperative for the transformation of our relationship with the natural world, and has implications for our expressions of humanity now, and for the flourishing of life in the future. Larry Graham describes relational justice as fulfilling God's image in relationship through dismantling hierarchies of oppression:

...the image of God in human relationships, therefore, is to be liberated from internalized bondage and to create a human environment characterized by relational justice rather than oppressive structures of domination and subordination. Relational justice involves redistribution of power, resources, privilege, and risks in an equitable manner.<sup>211</sup>

Relational justice is more fully engaged by expanding our understanding of hierarchical and oppressive relationships to include how humanity's privileged children relate to the web of life. Ecotheological understandings of justice provide discourses that explore the dismantling of such hierarchies while weaving together justice for people and planet. My own norms of empowering reciprocal flourishing, embodying spiritualities of sufficiency, and standing against death-dealing cultural practices provide one set of lenses for evaluating how an expanded relational justice can be practiced.

Several kinds of ecotheological thought regarding justice exist, as explored in Chapter 3. Ecofeminist thought most clearly attends to the "logic of domination" that creates dynamics of oppression/submission both in human relationships and in how our social imaginaries construct our relationships with the natural world. This logic of domination creates a split between

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<sup>210</sup> Larry Kent Graham, "From Impasse to Innovation in Pastoral Theology and Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 6, 17-35. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2013), 23.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 25.

culture/nature, placing social justice concerns over and above ecological justice concerns. This entrenched split pits difference justice-making efforts against one another, creating a dangerous competition between efforts for social and ecological justice. The Christian tradition often focuses on social justice through the mission of Jesus and the prophetic tradition, placing most Christian justice advocates in the camp of “culture” in the nature/culture binary. However, the dangerous new world of ecological crisis on a planet with more than seven billion people necessitates making firm discursive connections between our social, theological, and ecological praxis. I believe this expansion of relational justice helps make these connections.

Deconstructing this false emphasis on competition between forms of justice allows for a fuller expression of relational justice. One of the most striking emphases of ecofeminism is its shift in epistemology. Women, whose bodies and experiences have been dominated and discounted through patriarchy and their close association with humanity’s “earthy” nature, provide a window into knowing differently. The ecofeminist notion of “embodied knowing” reflects how people experience the world through their bodies, which suffer when the ecosystems on which we depend suffer. This bodily suffering is not equal; people marginalized by gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are more jeopardized by the degradation of the earth’s living systems of support, because they are already jeopardized by other forms of oppression. Those who experience greater degrees of ecological marginalization hold stories that most desperately need our attention; their right to justice and flourishing is intertwined with relational injustice between the economically privileged people and the life-sustaining creation. Attending to our own parts in these stories of suffering connects us to the interwoven biosphere in which our lives are lived.

The question of praxis invites conversation around norms that allow this deconstruction to take place. My concept of empowering mutual flourishing requires that people attend to their locations, both social and ecological. People must first discern their role in creating opportunities for love of self, God and all of our neighbors, so efforts towards flourishing take account of the well-being of multiple systems. Seeking justice for one part of a system may leave others suffering. However, norms like “affirming creation’s right to flourish” emphasize each part creation’s imbuelement with a will to live and thrive; a particular feature of the human creature is our ability to recognize and appreciate this. We are somehow more human as we empower the flourishing of the disadvantaged of our own species and the marginalized of the wider ecological community, in part because we must ask ourselves why this is so. If we ourselves are a part of that “why,” we must see this and begin again. That we can be transformed is one of the wonderful graces of the Christian story.

Living into “spiritualities of sufficiency” also requires reflective personal and communal action. Since our normative understandings of “enough” are constructed in relationship to our social location, widening our sense of community to see various understandings of “enough” helps us move towards thoughtfulness in our lifestyles. In a culture that teaches that using and buying more things leads to happiness, such practices as the Environmental Guild’s “sacramental living” are truly subversive. Likewise, standing against death-dealing cultural practices involves both personal action and a willingness to be outspoken by the harms caused by socially and culturally acceptable practices. Such outspokenness has a multitude of challenges, for “who gets to say” what is death-dealing is a question fraught with power. Ecofeminism’s notion of listening to and from the margins helps us decide in local and particular ways, through being witness to the many stories of human and ecological suffering in our world.

### Ecological Hospitality Through Solidarity

Our interconnectedness with ecological suffering and ecological flourishing has implications for pastoral praxis in the lives of faith communities. Reconceiving justice allows us to see what we hope for in a different light. By fostering relational justice through awareness of interdependence, actions of solidarity, critical self-evaluation, and transformation are possible.

Howard Clinebell's text *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* captures this human-nature relationship in his description of the "ecological circle." Awareness of our place in the web of life begins through attending to our stories of connection to this web, through a process of being "nurtured by nature." Honor and respect for our complete dependence on the web of life for flourishing helps align our relationship to the natural world away from hierarchical domination. The ways our societal structures complicate our ecological ethics in everyday decision-making call us to complete the circle of responsibility by "nurturing nature" through grounding ourselves in an ecological spirituality.

Clinebell's ecological circle can be critiqued on two points. The privilege associated with cultivating ecological awareness in our culture through activities of recreation is a problematic interpretation of this model. The lack of access to the nurturing aspects of the natural world is a problem of privilege that lies within the model. Additionally, it lacks a clear theological framework that ties people to our responsibility to one another and the natural world. In spite of this, its emphases on cultivating the value of interconnectedness and its accompanying ethical implications are significant.

Relational justice that includes our ecological interdependence has several other pastoral implications. I suggested that shared grief, solidarity, responsibility, and transformation emerge as pastoral and ethical norms. Our interconnection means that the planet's suffering diminishes

the possibilities for the whole web of creation. When species are lost forever to extinction, part of the relational *imago Dei* disappears. When communities suffering from contamination by industrial pollutants experience ongoing health complications due to high concentrations of lead in the soil and water, their potential for flourishing is severely challenged. The people of God should share these griefs. As we share the burdens of grief, we also are called to solidarity with those who suffer. Shared stories of suffering and resilience in the midst of it, circulated among communities of faith, promote solidarity. This solidarity also calls us to evaluate our role in the suffering. How does our ecological and social location shape suffering at the ecological margins? Those who are ecologically privileged face complicated and challenging decisions in the call to solidarity. Finally, this kind of relational justice requires transformative action. The sacramental living of the Environmental Guild provides a glimpse into how these expressions are require careful attention to the particular communities in which we live and work. Expanding relational justice to include our relationship with the whole web of life is a complex but necessary call.

### **Conclusion**

The Environmental Guild of Central Texas Episcopal Church embodies a theological hoping paradigm that points to wider vision of relational justice. This chapter demonstrated the transformative potential of a shared vision of sacramental living as reflected in the interconnected nature of flourishing in the web of life, commitments which are fostered by ecological awareness and theological reflection. This particular embodiment of intersystemic engagement invited constructive reflection on broader understandings of relational justice and accompanying for justice within planetary pastoral theologies. In the final chapter, aspects of

eschatological transformation, discursively enacted theologies, and ecological justice-making dialogue in the construction of a planetary paradigm for pastoral theology.



CHAPTER SEVEN  
RESHAPING THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY:  
TOWARDS A PLANETARY PASTORAL THEOLOGY

**Introduction**

The preceding three chapters of this dissertation engaged the living praxis of three distinct religious environmental groups. Their particular ecosystemic contexts, theological traditions, congregational settings, and unique individual stories make their work together profoundly unique. Their transformative ways of embodying their particular place in the Christian tradition provide a glimpse into three key areas for this dissertation. First, their experiences illustrate the embodied hoping paradigms of these communities, shaped by their unique contexts and seen in their transformative praxis. The complex relationship between dynamic theological worldviews and the embodied practices of faith communities is demonstrated in the particular experiences of these religious environmental cohorts. These experiences provide means of reflecting on the theological character of their practices and their intersystemic effects. Second, the grassroots experiences of these congregationally based groups illustrate Charles Taylor's notion of shifting social imaginaries. The malleability of a given culture's collective thought-practices is most noticeable at the level of local and particular groups enacting change within their own corner of the imaginary. I maintain that the explicitly theological nature of the groups in this study uniquely positions them for effectively changing the cultural conversation about humanity's relationship with the rest of the creation. Their experiences of integrating ecological

commitments to interconnection into theological anthropologies funding creative religious praxis provide a springboard for constructive theological proposals. I offer two constructive proposals, suggesting that shifts in theological anthropology and eschatology undergird the particular theological hoping paradigms of these three religious environmental groups. The particularities of those proposals are my own contribution, rather than reflecting the specific language and worldviews of the groups.

Finally, the experiences of these groups help me describe a planetary pastoral theology. Viewing human experience through an ecological lens of interconnection allows us take our embeddedness in an ecological system seriously, offering a more complex and holistic approach to relational justice. This provides a key shift in theological anthropologies, stretching our relationality into challenging new norms for practice in an era of ecological crisis. By viewing care as intersystemic engagement, pastoral theologians can take the flourishing of interconnected life systems seriously. Such a method provides no easy answers, but instead invites us to live more carefully with the tensions in which we live our multi-storied lives with their interwoven systems.

### **Theological Reflection: Hoping Paradigms**

The concept of hoping paradigms creates a framework for thinking about hope as a complex *process* characterized by the relationship between the ways people make sense of their future stories through their experiences and by the actions they take to bring those possibilities into being. Hope is not so much a quality of feeling as taking action for the future. In constructing an understanding of theological hoping paradigms, I have to account for notions of hope as a quality, and yet the relationship between past experience, present action, and future stories is too

complex to be contained by that notion alone. Theologically, hoping paradigms occur at the juncture of theological anthropology and eschatology; the understanding of “who we are” connects firmly to the question of “where are we going.” As our cultural understanding of “who we are” shifts in response to environmental suffering, it affects persons’ theological worldviews. Religious environmental hoping paradigms are uniquely positioned to illuminate the complex character and processes of embodied theological hopes in light of ecological questions, as illustrated in the previous chapters.

#### The Character of Religious Environmental Hoping Paradigms: Complex, Particular, and Relational

The hoping paradigms of the individual cohorts are inextricably shaped by their various contexts. Even within each group’s commitment to religious environmental praxis, the individuals within the group varied in the kinds of theological stories at work in their lives. This noticeable complexity means that future stories are diverse, forged in the dreams and challenges of particular lives, congregations and communities. While always in context, the theological hoping paradigms of religious environmental groups share an interesting commonality: their hope is for the shared flourishing of life on this planet. The tensions of theological and contextual differences are important; no one individual or group has a “God’s eye” view on what a theologically and ecologically transformed world should be like. If we allow for different expressions of a shared ecological hope, perhaps the small, local transformations of particular communities will shape more ecologically justice futures.

Perhaps the clearest example of this theological diversity lies in the different roles accorded to human agency and God’s agency in caring for the environment. Three examples from the different cohorts illustrate the diversity of theologies fostering religious practices that are creative and constructive. They also illustrate the need for diverse pastoral responses for

supporting these activists in their challenging work. Teri, group leader for the Gulf Coast Lutheran Church's Creation Care Team, described a strong belief in God's ultimate care and agency for the creation as a motivation for her partnership in creation care: "We are here doing what we believe is the right thing as people of faith, but in the end, God's in charge. It's not my responsibility to fix it all – that's God's. It's my responsibility to do what I can as I'm empowered by the Spirit." Her position resonates strongly with Jürgen Moltmann's eschatology. Since God bears ultimate responsibility to bring *creatio nova*, the renewal and eternal livingness of all things, into being, she can trust that her partnership in caring for the creation honors God's intention for the world. Pastorally, how can we support Teri's theological commitments and passion for creation care? Theologically reflecting with her around how she understands the relationship between her responsibility, God's responsibility, and the community's responsibility to support one another may prove helpful as the group organizes itself. As one of the founding leaders of a group in its early stages, she shoulders much of the planning and organizing for the group's activities. In doing so, she is faced with the responsibility of making many decisions for the group and of negotiating potential conflict between group members. Pastoral conversations with Teri might involve discussions of sharing responsibility within the group, inviting conversations around how her spirituality supports her work, and creating visibility for the Creation Care Team in the public life of the congregation. In a group that is focused on the justice issues in their local community, theological reflection on how their ongoing involvement with such issues is changing them could deepen their participation and value of their work. Hope can be fostered through highlighting their commitment to the ability of future generations to experience God's presence through the creation, and through reflecting on the ways transformation is already occurring in their own lives and in their congregation.

Liz, cohort member of Southeast Baptist Church’s Earth Care Team, places much of the responsibility for environmental care into the arena of human agency. Her theological commitment to limiting God’s agency is more similar to Catherine Keller’s conception of an “earthy eschatology,” in which hope isn’t for a “perfected” creation in a far-off dimension, but one that understands that “our responsibility for the new creation...is to participate in our finite, interconnected creatureliness with metanoic consciousness.”<sup>212</sup> For Liz, “hope” in its conventional sense is not a helpful word. She has experienced too much in the way of witnessing ecological suffering, and too little transformation in the way human beings relate to the earth to believe naively that things will surely get better. Instead, Liz finds the notion of moral courage to be transformative. This courageous commitment is changing her own life and those around her through her willingness to continue in spite of the challenges of religious environmental work. “I don’t have hope. But I don’t think you have to have hope to keep trying to do what’s right.” Instead of hope as a positive sense that things will be well, courage and a shared commitment to continue working towards a course correction in humanity’s relationship with the natural world foster her religious environmental praxis. Liz’s struggle with despair is quite real, a rational response to the ecological destruction she has witnessed. In Lester’s conception of future stories, “dysfunctional” future stories are those that are moving towards negative goals. The pastoral response is to help move the stories from regressive ends to progressive ends.<sup>213</sup> However, ecological despair muddies the way forward here. If change happens through helping people access their agential power to produce progressive future stories, what happens when that agency cannot produce the hoped-for change? Liz’s efforts alone, and

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<sup>212</sup> Catherine Keller, “Talk About the Weather: The Greening of Eschatology,” 47.

<sup>213</sup> See Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 125-137 for a more thorough explanation of pastoral responses to challenging future stories.

even the combined force of all the world's religious environmentalists, cannot stem the tide of climate change. We are living in a world that is ecologically different from what our parents and grandparents knew, and reliable science points to the effects of this phenomenon worsening considerably over the next century. Liz has accepted this science, and is doubtful of theological worldviews that center on an afterlife as a source of comfort. What can be said to her? I believe Liz may have answered this question in the course of our conversation: "This is my connection to church now – the people here who I feel *do* understand. I still have faith, and my connection with the natural world is more what sustains me now than the type of faith I was raised with." Liz experiences meaning and theological sustenance for her journey through participating in a community that shares her love of the earth, and by being present to the natural world that inspires her love and care. Pastorally, supporting this love and connection even in the midst of ecological grief is a significant response.

Other study participants articulated a middle ground between these positions, naming hope as both energy for transforming the systems in which they participate and the strength required when it seems the brokenness of humanity's relationship with the natural world is a permanent fixture of life. Rosie, group leader for the Central Texas Episcopal Church's Environmental Guild, discussed her experiences with this tension. For her, hope is in the present. Involvement with the Environmental Guild focuses her attention on the issues at hand in their local community to which the group can respond. Her challenge is one that reflects the experience of many; the enormity of environmental challenges is so great that the temptation to despair is strong. She named a problematic future story as "the heaven/afterlife thought:"

Sometimes when I'm feeling really down and depressed, like "People aren't getting it, what's the point" – sometimes I find the place of "well, God's just gonna make it all okay, and there's this better place, so I guess I don't have to try as hard. At the end of the day we have heaven waiting for us and its gonna okay." Even though theologically I

know how to get past that and I know that *this* is the place, I still run into that sometimes, that “So what?” feeling. I wrestle with that, the “So what? I’m here now and I don’t care what happens when I’m not here, and I’m probably going to a better place anyway.”

The pastoral care issue of hope and despair in Rosie’s story results from a complex future story. Pastorally, what kind of responses might be meaningful for Rosie? Andrew Lester’s method of inviting future stories into pastoral conversation is an important one. Since “the future is the predominant home of hope and despair,” Lester encourages caring relationships that invite “people to tell us the ‘out there’ as well as the ‘back there’ and the ‘right now.’ We want them to tell us where they imagine they are going, what lies ahead, and what it is like out in front of them. We want to know what they are hoping for or dreading.”<sup>214</sup> In this case, the unique ecological dimension of Rosie’s experience must be attended to, through careful listening and a method of pastoral care that incorporates the impact of the natural world on human experience.

If a particular community is committed to changing their relationship with the ecosystem, such shifts in their social imaginary can come through diverse theological worldviews. The ability to hear and attend to these diverse worldviews is a key response for fostering the hoping paradigms of particular communities. The ability to discern waning hope and energy so that constructive theological reflection can take place depends on the praxis of deep listening and pastoral attention. A variety of beliefs can support transformative religious environmental praxis, which must in turn be supported by a caring community of faith. Whether through theologies highlighting God’s agency at the expense of human agency, or theologies of human responsibility that do not include some possibility of redemption, fear and despair run along a continuum of varying theological positions. The ability to continue when hope is thin and

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<sup>214</sup> Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 23, 107.

courage is scarce is fostered by communities that can hold the weight of our complex circumstances, helping us see through to some other possibility.

The role of relationships within the religious environmental cohorts should again be emphasized. The ability to continue in faithful religious environmental praxis is fostered by the relationships within the community of faith. In all of my encounters with the groups in this study, participants affirmed how important it was for them to have a community that shared their concerns bridging their faith and care for the Earth. The complex relationship between hope and action is evident here; as cohorts came together around particular environmental concerns, they devised plans to take action around these concerns. As their actions make small but noticeable shifts in their local communities and congregations, the possibilities of the different futures envisioned in the groups' hoping paradigms come closer to reality. As the moral agency of the cohort grows, it buoys their collective hope. If a different kind of world is only a dim possibility in a far off future, being a different sort of human does become possible in the embodied moments of the present. This possibility is greatly enhanced by the shared praxis and narratives of these groups.

In spite of the great diversity in theological positions, all study participants reflected a deep commitment to the importance of religious environmental work as an expression of their faith. Notions of the interrelated and interdependent character of the whole biotic community have influenced how these individuals interpret their faith story, a shift in understanding their humanity that is reflected in the dialogue between ecological discourses, local ecosystems, and theology underway in their lives. While theological interpretation is diverse, the expression of these values in various forms of religious environmentalism was constant. Caring for the earth is a significant part of the groups' ethical commitment to living faithfully.



### The Process of Religious Environmental Hoping Paradigms: Storied Praxis

Researching with congregationally based religious environmental cohorts allowed access to narratives about the role of community in religious environmental praxis. Hoping paradigms for these cohorts are authenticated in at least two important ways: through the communal storying of belief in that a different kind of future is possible, and through praxis. This kind of shared hope for a future story supplies some of the energy for transformative praxis.

Hope is fostered and sustained through the telling of possible futures. The Christian tradition of the groups in this study strengthens their work together. They participate in a community of tradition and memory that is embodied in the present and tells us that love is God's intent for all of life. That the dreams of God in the Christian tradition include visions such as this one from the prophet Isaiah powerfully weaves a story of "right relationship" with the creation:

<sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
       the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
       and a little child shall lead them.

<sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze,  
       their young shall lie down together;  
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

<sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
       and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

<sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy  
       on all my holy mountain;  
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
       as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah's proclamation, one vision in a diverse biblical tradition, raises the hope that a future where all beings will experience justice, peace, and respect belongs in the dreams of God. The telling of such futures and the of raising honest questions in light of our constantly changing

human knowledge invites our participation in creating thoughtful futures, committing us to action on their behalf. The common language of hope combined with varying interpretations of justice helped the cohorts narrate why their actions are morally important. Hope is, interestingly, also sustained in the telling of lost dreams for the whole of life. When mutuality, respect and peace between the participants of creation seems unlikely, sharing sadness helps cohorts reincorporate their ethical commitments to their work, independently of their ability to effect transformation.

Hope also authenticates itself in praxis. Reason and ability to continue the work of ecological engagement can be deepened by the engagement of issues within a supportive community framework.<sup>215</sup> The ongoing transformation in the lives of these religious environmentalists invites those around them into an ecological conversation, a dialogue between the meaning-making centers of their lives and their experiences as creatures that must share the planetary commons with the rest of creation. The public praxis of these groups restarts the need to tell the story their particular hoping paradigms, grounding their identities anew in a story that bridges faith and the environment. With every curious question, cohort members claim their place in earth's community and theologically commit to creation as a community of dynamic subjects to whom God would have us relate.

#### Ripples in the Anthropocentric Social Imaginary

What is happening as a result of religious environmental praxis? Fueled by diverse and particular theological hoping paradigms and reified in communal story and praxis, the grassroots phenomenon of religious environmentalism is fostering a different understanding of the human-nature relationship around North America. The theological hoping paradigms of the groups

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<sup>215</sup> It is also probable that isolation or fractious community engagement might contribute to despair.

participating in this study demonstrate for me the significance of theologies that have been worked out in local communities of faith; the hope for the future expressed in the praxis of each of the cohorts reminds us that we are always at the edge of co-creating the future at the levels of our particular lives. There are substantial limits to this agency, but leaning in to the human role in working for the flourishing of life generates pockets of change, ripples in the current social imaginary. The synergy between committed local groups, denominational programming, political activism, and scientific research has readied the ground for this seismic shift in how we live our everyday humanity. Moving from an anthropocentric model of the separation and superiority of humanity over the rest of the creation towards models of ecological kinship is a necessary paradigm shift in this era of ecological crisis.

### **Transforming Our Social Imaginaries, Transforming Our Theological Imagination**

Charles Taylor uses the concept of “social imaginaries” to describe how particular societies come to their commonly held notions of cultural identity, and how these notions as they currently are can change. Taylor’s notion of the social imaginary differs from much of Western scholarship in his espousal of the discursive quality of social imaginaries. Rather than being awakened as a complete entity at a particular point in history, societies are invented, imagined, and constructed through the interweaving of discourse and action that create a sense of a collective “we.” These invisible bonds of community bind those under its influence into a collective vision of what is supposed to constitute the good, the moral, and the successful in a given imaginary. The distinctive point that Taylor makes is that it is more than the *ideas* that create this imaginary. It is their performative power that helps us creatively enact the imaginary in an ongoing manner.

Social imaginaries are constituted by multiple unique actions that live out the understandings of these imagined communities. This multiplicity and broad basis for action offers me reason to hope. The transformation of “all things” may, in the end, be rightly left to whatever our understandings of divine agency may be. However, creating change within a community at the local level is a possibility visible in the stories of the cohorts in this study. It is partly *because* interpretations and enactments of hope are diverse, particular, and multiple that social imaginaries are constantly shifting. Religious environmental communities are critically responding to the effects of the current dominant social imaginary of Western modernity. Their ability to see ecological abuses at the local level and to seek different ways of relating to one another and to the natural world bridge us to a different kind of future. Their creative faith praxis demonstrates the possibility that social imaginaries can be changed, “the basic principle that ideas and practice in the service of powerful convictions and imagination regarding a future are effective over time.”<sup>216</sup>

Throughout this dissertation, how the cohorts make sense of the questions “who are we?” and “where are we going?” have been a significant source for reflection. Anthropology and eschatology are threaded together through the praxis of intersystemic care, performatively creating alternatives to our current cultural narratives. I posit that two key shifts in how these religious environmentalists position themselves in the web of life ground their hoping paradigms. I offer my proposals regarding anthropologies of interdependence and interrelationship, and eschatologies of enduring relationality as a way to interpret our ongoing situatedness as members of the Earth community. These proposals are key to my understanding to how the work of cohorts such as these creates transformation.

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<sup>216</sup> Dalton and Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, 4.

### Anthropologies of Interdependence and Interrelationship

What are the effects of these many resistances to how the social imaginary of Western modernity is affecting the natural world? What is being shifted in response to this imaginary's effects on the creation? The hoping paradigms of the religious environmental cohorts in this study offer us clues regarding how dialogue with ecological discourses is revising many of our understandings of what it means to be human.

The narratives of the religious environmental cohorts suggested that a “conversion” experience of sorts happens to people who become involved with environmental issues. Through exposure to some combination of ecological discourses, the ecologically mindful pieces of the Christian tradition, and various experiences of connection to the natural world, people begin to consider our human connection to the ecosystem. The suffering evident in the many unfolding ecological crises highlights the harmful consequences of our current thought-practices. To varying degrees, theologies of religious environmentalists depart from historically dominant Christian norms emphasizing humanity's separateness and superiority over nature. The theological worldviews of the participants in this study varied from a soft anthropocentrism highlighting creation stewardship and responsibility towards explicit emphasis on our interdependent and interrelated relationship with the web of life.

The Christian theological notion of the *imago Dei* lies at the heart of this theological continuum. Much of Christian theology has emphasized the special and separate character of humanity in the form of the *imago Dei*. Some religious environmentalists engage a “soft” form of this theology, emphasizing the special role of stewardship as humanity's responsibility in caring for creation. Others show a move towards mutuality through their notions of experiencing

God's creative presence through all of creation, and still others make an ethical shift towards relating to creating as a fellow subject of God's care, describing the earth as "neighbor," and reflecting on how ecologically marginalized persons, places and animals all fit into Jesus' mandate to care for "the least."

Shifting our social imaginaries towards a more viable ecological relationship with the web of life will require some shift in our understanding of who we are. Two interpretive keys distinguish anthropocentric anthropologies; the view that we are separate from nature, and the view that we are superior to nature. Both have enjoyed theological support from the Christian tradition and have colluded with the success of the social imaginary of Western modernity. How might we understand ourselves differently, without sacrificing the important and powerful contributions of understanding humanity as a unique creature?

### ***Sustainable Anthropology***

The movement towards anthropologies inviting just relationships with one another and with the natural world involves stepping *away* from emphasizing separation and superiority, and *towards* emphasizing interconnection and interrelationship between unique expressions of God's creative love. The historical emphasis on the specialness of humanity is often expressed by the notion of the *imago Dei*, beings made in the image and likeness of God. This has theological value; the *imago* present in every person has often been the basis for interhuman justice claims. This has been a vital part of the tradition, and the norms it invites should not be lightly discarded! Yet, it is possible to extend this concept, so that our theological understanding of bearing God's image can also bear the weight of ecological sustainability. Emphasizing humanity's separation from the rest of creation has resulted in a dominant interpretation of human *superiority* over the rest of the creation, which justifies human exploitation of both the

human beings who are viewed by some as lower in the hierarchy and the ecological sources of life.

The explorations of physics and evolutionary biology over the past century offer resources for ecologically conversant anthropologies, providing insights unavailable to theologians of past centuries. Tracing humanity's story back through its birth in the Big Bang through the universe's process of cooling and expansion that set the stage for the formation of galaxies, solar systems, and planets widens our context for understanding humanity. Denis Edwards describes this as pointing to a God who creates "in an emergent and evolutionary way."<sup>217</sup> In the unfolding of life on Earth, from its origins in single-celled organisms to the incredible biodiversity present on the planet today, a thread of interconnection shines brightly. This thread highlights life as creative, responsive, and ongoing in its unfolding nature. How can we understand the *imago Dei*, knowing this story?

Here, Denis Edwards and Sally McFague are illustrative, respectively highlighting God's image as diversely expressed in each species and dynamically embodied in just relationships. Anthropologies of interconnection may be seen in the diverse beings of creation: the curiosity of human beings who explore the meaning of their world, the enormous, steady presence of the giant sequoias, and even the intent of the wood tick in preserving its own life reflect the diverse *imago*. Each being's self-assertion reveals a different emergence of the *imago*. Fritjof Capra describes the tension between two key features of life in noting that life is both self-assertive and integrative; both the flourishing of individuals and the well being of whole systems are in dynamic and sometimes conflicting relationship.<sup>218</sup> If the image of God is within all the

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<sup>217</sup> Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 10.

<sup>218</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 9.

individual expressions of God’s creation as well as in the relationships between them, then the reconciling work of the Christian story is for the whole of creation.<sup>219</sup> Anthropologies of interrelationship are present in the first law of ecology: *everything is related to everything else*. The biological interdependence of the web of life calls forth something from humanity, who, in our unique expression of the *imago Dei*, has the power to influence the whole system of Earth. Sally McFague notes that this interrelationship calls forth ethical norms of *appreciation* and *care*.<sup>220</sup> The justice norms I name earlier were crafted from my understanding of interdependence and interrelationship; *empowering mutual flourishing*, *embodying spiritualities of sufficiency*, and *standing against death-dealing cultural practices* are among the potentially helpful norms for human beings who seek flourishing of the web of creation.

#### Eschatology: Enduring Relationality as a Category of God’s Future

In the constructive reflections of Chapter 5, I illustrate how both Keller and Moltmann, in their very different theological worldviews, construct models of eschatology on the norm of enduring relationality. I noted in Chapter 3 that Andrew Lester astutely reflects on how eschatological character of hope directly shapes how individuals and communities live into their future stories. To make a further tie to the interconnectedness at the heart of ecological discourses, I posit that an eschatological relatedness is constitutive of individual and community identities, because of the implications this unfolding knowledge has for how we live into our human experiences.

Models of ecological eschatology necessarily include the entire known universe as within the scope of God’s care. From the perspective of the critical dialogue with ecological discourses

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<sup>219</sup> Cf Colossians 1, in which Jesus is described as both the *imago* and the reconciler of “all things.”

<sup>220</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 53.



in this study, any notion of the ultimate future must embrace rather than distance itself from the physical processes of the world. Whatever understanding of resurrection and ongoing being we come to, it is always in relationship with the wider whole of all that is. As Theodore David McCall notes, “If we are able to think of our bodily resurrection as being completely inseparable from the ultimate purpose of the entire universe, then we might be more predisposed to act in an environmentally responsible way, because we will be related to the natural world forever, with all its diversity and complexity.”<sup>221</sup> Expanding our theological imaginations to reflect our ongoing learning about the universe changes how we relate both corporally in the present, as well as temporally across generations.

As I noted in Chapter 5, Catherine Keller’s critique of apocalyptic eschatologies illustrates the ecological danger of belief systems that pit humanity against the rest of the creation. There are real effects on our human behavior in the present if we believe that the universe is simply a disposable service product for people alone. If, as the preceding discussion of theological anthropology emphasizes, humanity can claim no superiority or special entitlement over the rest of creation in this life, this also holds true for how we understand *after-life*. Human beings experience the sacred wonder of the universe differently than other members of the creation, but each piece of the physically and temporally entwined world is a particular expression of the identity of Godself in the universe that will be expressed again, differently, as atoms and cells reconfigured into new expressions of the creativity of the divine life. Yet, while we retain these particular human expressions of being, there is another dimension to our agency. In Christian terms, the culmination of all things is that God will be all in all – which is always an invitation in the present, as well as the ultimate future. So, the creative and dynamic expression

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<sup>221</sup> McCall, 261.

of our humanity as caring, intersystemic partners with God contributes to the flourishing of abundant life, rather than its diminishment. In this way, hoping paradigms that include these kinds of eschatologies are *constitutive*: they shape our identities in the present as participants in the life of God, and the shape *possibility* for future expressions of the divine life.

The concept of enduring relationality helps me envision how the cosmic destiny of humanity is inseparable from the whole of the beloved creation. The eschatological dimension of our self-understanding is significant here; if our hoping paradigms include the healing of our world, we are not separate from that healing. If, by the shining thread of our interconnected nature, our destiny is inseparable from that of the universe, ecological care is a foundational ethic for loving self, God, and neighbor. If we hope for the ultimate care and concern of God in some fashion, it is as part of an integrated whole that we experience this hope. Embodying this ethic of ecologically inclusive love from our unique ecological and social locations, across species and time for future generations, is transforming our social imaginaries. If all the inhabitants of earth are somehow our neighbors, the world must indeed be “charged with the grandeur of God.”<sup>222</sup> Humanity is accountable for how we relate to this earth and to one another, with the choice to be partners in its flourishing or complicit in its diminishment. The future inhabitants of the planet must relate to the decisions we make today, though the time for their agency has not yet arrived. *Enduring relationality* calls for us to remember the justice made in times past, to seek justice for the socially *and* ecologically marginalized of the present, and to see the right to flourishing of future generations of the variegated species of Earth. This kind of partnership and participation has direct and formative bearing on how we live our daily lives. This kind of belief-praxis is imminently and eminently constitutive.

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<sup>222</sup> From Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem, “God’s Grandeur,” in *The Complete Poems* (Lexicos Publishing, 2012), Kindle Edition. Written 1877.

### Imaginaries in Process

The changing social imaginary of Western modernity, with its particular actors, has the opportunity to change our way of relating from an individualistic notion of fragmented parts towards a holistic understanding of subjects-in-relationship. The need to move to an ecologically sustainable social imaginary is clear as the jeopardized potential for flourishing among human social systems and large scale ecosystems becomes glaring. The issues of environmental justice experienced by the Creation Care Team of Gulf Coast Lutheran Church, the global effects of climate change so passionately raised by the Earth Care Team at Southeast Baptist Church, and the extinction of non-human life challenged by the ecological hospitality of the Environmental Guild at Central Texas Episcopal give glimpses into the breadth and depth of the suffering caused by our currently entrenched imaginary. Lester Brown of the WorldWatch Institute captures the needed shift in his simple description of sustainability: “A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations.”<sup>223</sup>

What will our ecological future story hold? What will foster the deeply needed transformation in our way of relating to the whole community of life? These responses will be as diverse as the varying ecological needs, reacting to the particular social and ecological locations we each inhabit. For the global poor, empowerment and strength to continue raising their voices for environmental justice are significant. For the globally privileged, recognition and responsibility for the privilege carried and the harm it causes is a first step. For pastoral theologians, reflective theological praxis in a time of ecological suffering will require a shift in vision, a movement towards planetary pastoral theologies.

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<sup>223</sup> Lester Brown, *Building a Sustainable Society* (New York: Norton, 1981).

By folding the ecological reality of interrelationship across species and time into their worldviews, the theological anthropologies and eschatologies of religious environmentalists create space for the dynamic hoping paradigms that invite intersystemic engagement. Hoping paradigms fuel transformation in two significant ways: through shared community stories, and through shared praxis. These two are related in that they create a feedback loop for incorporating new experiences into shared stories (including, not insignificantly, the local group's shared understanding of the Christian story!). These local experiences are the basis for changing our wider social imaginaries. Social imaginaries as a whole are societal stories that shift with our human social action unfolding as history. In an ecological sense, it is incredibly significant that our social imaginaries are shifting towards ecological interconnected and interdependent understandings of humanity, creatures situated in a rich web of life.

### **A Planetary Pastoral Theology: Towards the Praxis of Care as Intersystemic Engagement**

One of the clear concerns of pastoral theologians is promoting human flourishing in its many forms. In an era of ecological crisis, the inseparability of human flourishing from our embeddedness in a planetary system highlights the need for an ecological framework for flourishing. Questions regarding who is flourishing, competition between different potentials for flourishing, and how to hold the tensions between them must be addressed in ecological paradigms for pastoral theology. Building from Larry Graham's understanding of the ministry of care as seeking an increase in "love of self, God and neighbor, and enabling careseekers to develop the capacity to work for a just social order and to engage in partnership with the nature order,"<sup>224</sup> I posit a model of intersystemic caring. This requires seeing the different potentials for

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<sup>224</sup> Larry Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds*, 48.

flourishing, holding the tensions between the needs of different systems, and responding with concrete actions of care in the service of love, justice and sustainability. Such a model offers no easy answers, but may help us attend to the potential for different kinds of flourishing and invite us to practice new ways of faithful living.

### Intersystemic Tensions

Barbara McClure understands the term *flourishing* to be a metaphor for the well being of the kin-dom of God, which I adopt for this framework.<sup>225</sup> Since God's kin-dom is as wide as the creation, the notion of flourishing carries with it questions of privilege and power. Who gets to flourish? Is flourishing different for different participants in the creation? Who gets to decide on these things? How do we determine if we are participating in the well being of kin-dom, or its diminishment? Balancing the needs of the various systems of flourishing through moving our human social systems towards relational justice is key to holding these tensions. Theological reflection on these complex tensions reveals that theological norms for the ecologically privileged begin with attention, engagement, and accountability.

Competition between the members of various living systems is part of the fabric of life in the natural world. Ignoring the harsh reality that for the members of some species to live and thrive, the members of other species must suffer and die risks romanticizing harsh biological and evolutionary realities. This tension between potentials for flourishing is clearly evident in the predator-prey relationships of the natural world, and between members of the same species who fight for a dominant place in their local hierarchy so that they win the biological privilege of passing on their genetic information to future generations. This competition is evident among

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<sup>225</sup> McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 217.

members of the human species as well, who bring suffering to others to achieve higher levels of material security and social status.

This competition is also evident between different systems of life. In these competing claims for flourishing, how are communities of faith to discern their responses? Currently, the tensions between our global ecosystems and human social systems are most visible in the struggle to harness the ecological effects of climate change. The polar bear has been the “poster child” for the climate change debate. Human use of fossil fuels for energy and factory farming of the animals people consume as meat have put large concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The warming effect on the climate has caused the collapse of ice fields in the Arctic, dramatically captured by wildlife photographers as the polar bear’s struggle to survive. However, flourishing in our current human social systems for most people means eating conventionally raised food and using various types of fossil fuels for energy sources. In the competition between the polar bear cubs and our human children, we are biological predisposed to choose the survival of our own genes, preferences supported by our social imaginaries. Competition between ecological systems and social systems is such that human social preferences will at least temporarily win out.

However, competition between different systems of life is not necessarily or exclusively determined. It is inflated by humanity’s social imaginaries that define what flourishing means for us in a given context. Human survival is *not* dependent upon extinguishing the polar bear’s potential for flourishing; our social imaginaries exacerbate the tensions and place them in direct competition. In fact, if we take a view that is temporally longer and ecologically inclusive, the survival of the polar bear through shifts in the human social imaginary may be the way to invite the flourishing of our human descendants.

In an ecologically balanced constellation of relationships between the different systems of life, potential for flourishing is managed by natural selection. Competition within and between species over long periods of time determines who flourishes in a given area, the arrangements of which usually shift gradually. Vandana Shiva's balanced and unbalanced triangles of the three primary economies at work in the world today offer a way of conceptualizing this relationship between systems. In her stable constellation of systems, balance and stability in nature's economy forms the base of the triangle of life. Respect for the sustenance economy, which is the economy of daily living that produces food, rears children, and makes goods for human consumption, forms the center of the triangle. Finally, the market economy, which trades in goods, capital, and power arrangements, forms a small portion at the top of the systems.<sup>226</sup> This portion is regulated by wisdom that respects the flourishing of the other economies that form the basis of supply for the market economy. However, in today's social imaginary the triangle is flipped: the market economy is the base through which the other economies are interpreted. The result is environmental degradation and human exploitation.

Recognizing the intersystemic tensions for flourishing is a moral and theological imperative highlighted by ecological crises. Theological reflection that is ecologically balanced and concrete pastoral responses that invite the flourishing of God's kin-dom are promoted through a theological norm of *deep attentiveness* reflected in praxis. This attentiveness helps those willing to take action to assess how to engage the work of justice making, through particular norms such as empowering reciprocal flourishing, embodying spiritualities of sufficiency, and standing against death-dealing cultural practices.

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<sup>226</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 52.

### Care that Holds the Tensions

Insight through this deep attentiveness is only a first step. *Engagement* in creating just relationships between and among these systems is a moral response to such knowledge.

Planetary pastoral theologies offer critical reflections on these tensions to determine the kinds of moral agency we have in the process of inviting the greatest possible flourishing of God's kingdom. Reflecting upon religious environmental praxis helps us glimpse these tensions in action, filtering them through an expanded sense of what justice means and the challenges of enacting this in a comprehensive way.

Planetary pastoral theologies need to think from the ecological margins. This is "thinking from the bottom" in Letty Russell's words, and "between noise and garbage" in Ivone Gebara's. Frameworks for ecological justice-making must begin with unraveling the logic of domination oppressing both people and planet in their interconnected flourishing. During the environmental justice tour of the Lutherans Restoring Creation event, participants learned about children exposed to carcinogens through the pollution of the air, water and soil surrounding them. These are members of ecologically and socially marginalized communities. Their potential for flourishing in the forms of both physical health and aesthetic beauty in a healthy natural environment is diminished. Their flourishing is jeopardized by different kinds of systemic sin and distortion. Our dominant discourses in the Western social imaginary of modernity reflect a particular vision of moral and economic success centered on the individual, often obscuring notions of the common good that invite many forms of flourishing. These discourses shape the economic structures of society, entrenching oppressions of nature, race, gender and class in their individualistic hierarchies. These social and economic discourses influence the politics of our local communities, which in turn influences the potential for flourishing in the daily lives of



those children living on the ecological margins. In a distorted system of survival, those suffering at the ecological margins serve as witnesses to the complexities of injustice. Those privileged by social location bear the responsibility for *engaging in justice-making* as theological and ethical imperatives. Opening our embrace to a holistic flourishing of God's kin-dom requires much from those who have access to systemic privileges. Planetary pastoral theologies must recognize the different needs involved in justice making, shaped by ecological and social locations. Agential engagement in justice-making is informed by the particularities of our embodied experiences.

#### Intersystemic Paradigms for Care

Finally, planetary pastoral theologies must be accountable to the various systems that participate in the flourishing of our common life. This accountability results from our unique expression of the *imago Dei*; our humanity gives us great power to influence the flourishing of our human neighbors and our kin among creation. Accounting for this power requires a method for engagement that moves between and among the systems of our complex world. Pastoral theologians and caregivers can mobilize concerns for a holistic sense of flourishing and justice in a violent world through intersystemic paradigms of care. Accountability to the ecological circles of life begins with including them in our ways of perceiving the subjects of care. Making good on this responsibility involves inviting our own regard for these subjects. This involves acknowledging our interdependence in the web of life through *metanoic* shifts in our regard for our place in the family of things, the kin-dom of God. This level of engagement highlights the political and discursive nature of our social imaginaries. It becomes public theology that is accountable socially, yet embraces a broader understanding of the political and ecological nature of our theological accountability. Outspoken movement by the ecologically privileged towards

simplicity and self-limitation in a world that does not challenge humanity's right to overabundance is a startling demonstration of this kind of accountability. Movement towards vocalizing the subjecthood of all the participants of creation provokes discussion regarding the fundamental dignity and worth of the common fabric of life. Connecting the diminished dignity and flourishing of the people marginalized by our anthropocentric social imaginary with the diminishment of ecosystemic flourishing changes the character of our ethical imperatives, and of our future stories.

### **Conclusion**

Learning from the lives of the religious environmental cohorts in this study provokes as many questions as it does answers. Their experiences invited reflection on the complex relationship between understanding who we are as human beings in an interconnected web of life, how our visions for where we are going are involved, and how we seek to live up to those commitments. These experiences prompted constructive proposals in the areas of theological anthropology, norms for ecological justice making, and eschatologies of enduring relationality. These groups also invited reflections that are not within the scope of this project, particularly around the nature of the church. The ecclesiological promise of these local communities, committed to living faithfully in their own parts of the creation, bears further reflection and constructive theological engagement. Additionally, questions about the influence of gender in religious environmental work remain unexplored; of the 23 participants in the study, 19 were women. Whether this reflects the congregational settings, the kind of activism the participants engaged, or other factors is a significant area for explorations. The age of participants raises similar questions, as 18 of the 23 participants were over the age of 55.

A serious limitation of the study is the narrow demographic set of the participants. The groups in this study reflect the European American middle-class Protestant character of their home congregations; in this study, only one African American shifted the nearly exclusively white racial makeup. This does not reflect the great breadth of the religious environmental movement as a whole, which stretches across race, class, gender and religious heritage.

In conclusion, it is my hope that the narratives of these cohorts and the constructive theologies their experiences invited offer new language for understanding possibilities for care, the significance of our diverse hopes, and the interrelated nature of humanity's flourishing within that of the whole creation, in the present era and across time. The hoping paradigms embodied by local communities offer a clear window into possibilities for transforming how the privileged of the human species can be engaged and accountable in the process of ecological transformation. They point towards new paradigms for situating human experience; for pastoral theologians, understanding the planetary scope of our theological constructions will invite richer and more complex engagements with relational justice, as we move beyond the scope of human-to-human relationships to include our relationships with the natural world sustaining and enriching us. This kind of relational justice holds within it important norms that I carry, named in Chapter three as my norms for ecological justice-making: empowering reciprocal flourishing, embodying spiritualities of sufficiency, and standing against death-dealing cultural practices. Norms such as these may provide something of a frame for understanding intersystemic care.

The power of commonly held and diversely embodied hopes offers the promise that the bright thread of life can be carried more lovingly and justly into the future. This thread is held by our traditions, even as we argue with them; by each other, especially when we are overwhelmed; by ethical calls that hold us accountable; and by the hope that we are not alone in

our dreams for a world transformed by love, wonder and respectful relationships. Understanding ourselves as integrally twined within the ecological circles of life creates hope for a wider embrace of justice in our future stories, invites changes in the unfolding lives of particular ecosocial communities, and opens our human hearts to wider enactments of planetary love.

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## APPENDIX A: SAMPLE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

August 29, 2012

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in my doctoral research project! Your consideration is much appreciated. To begin, my name is Genny Rowley and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Care program at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. I have long been interested in how people care well for each other and for the world we live in – and especially the connections between those things.

For my doctoral dissertation, I am researching congregational groups who are involved in environmental activism in their local communities. I am curious about how people's faith helps motivate them in this work and specifically how people describe the role of hope in this part of their lives. Through this study, I want to learn more about how caring for the earth impacts your faith, and how your faith has impacted your care for the earth. Through a process of a group interview and observing your group in action, I hope to learn more about the history of how your group came to be, what keeps you going, and what you think the future might hold for your group. I'd also like to hear about the challenges and struggles you face as a group, since it seems that meaningful work always has times of difficulty.

Here is what participating in the study means for you: agreeing (through signing one of the attached Informed Consent forms) to a group interview and allowing me to observe and participate in one or two of your group's activities. The group interview will last approximately 90 minutes. I will provide a list of questions that I am curious about, but these questions can be answered in any order or can remain unanswered as you begin to tell your story. Some of the questions may feel too personal; please do not answer any questions that seem too intrusive. Also, please feel free to comment on any questions that you think are confusing, unclear, or not applicable to the topic.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the group interview and take notes on both the interview and the activity so that I can go back to these stories with greater detail and accuracy as I write the dissertation. All of this information, written and recorded, will remain confidential and in a locked file cabinet when not in my direct control. You will be given a pseudonym for this project and information that might identify you or your congregation will be carefully disguised. I plan to use some direct quotes as well as my observations and interpretations of the research process.

If your group is considering participating in my research project, the first step is to meet together and discuss this letter (groups need a minimum of 4 participants). It is desirable that the entire active membership of the group participate so that all members have a voice in sharing the story of your work together, though this is not necessary since all of the group's identifying information will be carefully disguised. If you would like, I can be available by phone or email to any group members or the entire group to answer additional

questions or address any concerns you may have. If your group decides it would like to participate, please contact me to begin the process of consent forms and setting up our times to meet together. Again, please feel free to contact me with questions or comments related to this project using the information below.

Thank you for considering this!

Sincerely,

Genny C. Rowley, M.Div., Ph.D. Candidate

Phone: 469.236.5941

Email: [g.c.rowley@tcu.edu](mailto:g.c.rowley@tcu.edu)

## APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Guiding Questions for Group Interviews:**

**\*These questions are general guidelines to help get the conversation started. Please feel free to share other related questions, concerns and stories.**

- How did this group come to be? What got it started?
- Was it always this way? If not, how have things changed?
- What drew you to this group?
- What keeps you involved? Why do you come back/keep participating?
- How is your spirituality/faith practice different now than before you began in this group?
- What are the tensions/challenges in sustaining these kinds of practices?
- In what ways has your faith been helpful or challenging to you in religious environmental work?
- How have your thoughts about the future changed since this group came together?