THE ECUMENICAL REVIEW

World Council of Churches

Environmental Justice and Ecumenism

The Lacuna in African Christianity

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Abstract

The shape of African Christianity is overly concerned with an otherworldly focus that fails to consider the environmental concerns of Christian theology. Environmental theology seeks to understand that creation, as God's world, is crucial to Christian stewardship. A triumphalist gospel ignores the Indigenous understanding of the environment and how spirituality should be integrated in our daily lives. The contemporary and ecumenical necessity of environmental theology for the 21st century is similar to the task of liberation theology in the contemporary context of multiculturalism of the 20th century. Borrowing from various Christian traditions and Indigenous cultures, this paper will pursue an ecumenical focus to call the African church and academy to environmental justice by offering practical suggestions.

Keywords

African Christianity, African theology, ecumenism, environmental theology

What the World Council of Churches (WCC) has contributed to global Christianity is a unified voice in a world that is increasingly defined by interreligious conflict, a breakdown of public institutions, and a vision for a postmodern and plural world that challenges Christian witness. The 10th Assembly of the WCC, in 2013, stated that climate change is a global issue that is a grave threat to the most vulnerable people.[1] Noting the importance

[1] World Council of Churches, "Minute on Climate Justice," World Council of Churches 10th Assembly, No. PIC 02.12 (8 November 2013, Busan, Republic of Korea); see Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr., eds, *Encountering the God of Life: Report of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 301–302, WCC Digital Archive: https://archive.org/details/encounteringthego00unse/page/n311.

DOI: 10.1111/erev.12635
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of the mission of the church in the world, paragraph 62 of the WCC document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* captures the "moral challenges of the gospel" well:

> The ethics of Christians as disciples are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God's will within the various circumstances of time and place. The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote not only those individual moral values which are essential to the authentic realization of the human person but also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment, since the message of the Gospel extends to both the personal and the communal aspects of human existence.[2]

Several reflections stand out from this statement on environmental justice for the ecumenical witness of the church. First, God's call to humanity flows from God's love to include God's people into God's life and being. Second, the gathering of God's children forms the universal church, which exists within particular contexts around the world and belongs to plural communities with different convictions and callings. Third, Christian values stand in solidarity with many values that can be found in different traditions around the world, and this forms a basis of unity. Chief among these values and social concerns is environmental justice, which is multifaceted: reforestation in areas with depleting forest covers, sustainable use of depleting energy resources, the curbing of environmental pollutants such as plastic waste in innovative ways, and the conservation of flora and fauna.

Yet a survey of the issues that the African church and academy have focused on reveals a huge gap regarding the environmental dialogue. The African continent has dealt with pertinent topics, such as witchcraft, AIDS, and poverty. This, however, has been at the expense of environmental justice. A Pew Research Center survey among 44 countries, including nine African countries (Tunisia, Nigeria, Egypt, Senegal, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda) shows evidence of this lacuna. People were surveyed about five of the greatest dangers in the world: religious and ethnic hatred, inequality, AIDS and other diseases, nuclear weapons, and pollution and the environment. People in all but one African country ranked pollution and the environment as the least important of the five concerns.[3]

[2] World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 33.

[3] Pew Research Center, "Greatest Dangers in the World," Pew Research Center, 16 October 2014, http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/16/greatest-dangers-in-the-world.

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The global assessment on religious and ethnic hatred was highest, with inequality, AIDS, and nuclear weapons preceding the environment. An African assessment reveals that AIDS is the prime social issue facing most countries in the east, west, and south of the continent (41 percent of respondents in Tanzania, 28 percent in Senegal, and 35 percent in South Africa). Given the religious influence of Islam, outliers to these statistics in the north and west exist: ethnicity ranked first in Tunisia with 39 percent, in Egypt with 34 percent, and in Nigeria with 38 percent, as a result of the religious and ethnic violence that arises in such multifaith contexts. If this lapse in environmental concern is descriptive of the public sphere, how much more out of touch might the church be with this crucial conversation?

The church's response to environmental concerns is directly related to its theological reflection on the same. The theological task in Africa has taken several routes: inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction. In the first instance, the church sought to make the gospel message relevant to the Indigenous cultural symbols and language. Kwame Bediako, an influential Presbyterian minister and mission theologian and author of *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture in Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa,* noted that the most important task of his day was finding an African identity with regard to the gospel. His contemporaries included John Mbiti, who approached traditional religions as *praeparatio evangelica*; Bolaji Idowu, who viewed the continuity in less clear terms; and Byang Kato, who proposed a discontinuity of African religious experience and Christian revelation.[4] In its second phase, African theology sought to overcome Western categories of thought in theological exploration. And last, in its reconstructive task, it seeks to build a theology that is relevant for contemporary issues. A forerunner of this reconstructive task in the Kenyan context is the philosopher of religion J. N. K. Mugambi, who has also been foundational in the work of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the WCC.[5] In his own words:

> Theology at its very best must respond to the joys, sorrows, hopes and fears of the community of faith which the theologian represents. The theologian's primary audience, therefore, must be the community of faith on whose behalf he or she engages in the theological quest.[6]

[4] Kwame Bediako, "The Roots of African Theology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13:2 (1989), 58–65.

[5] Preface to Robert S. Heaney, *From Historical to Critical Post-Colonial Theology: The Contribution of John S. Mbiti and Jesse N. K. Mugambi* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015).

[6] J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1995), 11.

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Given the circuitous route of African theology, if it is to be relevant to the African, it must take the issue of justice seriously – especially as it relates to the triad of economics, environment, and religion. Therefore, environmental justice should be at the core of Africa's theological enterprise and the church's witness. A contemporary theologian who collaborated in the work of these two institutions (EATWOT and WCC) and who might provide a contextual methodology for engaging in environmental justice is the Black Methodist theologian James Cone.

Environmental Justice and Liberation Theology

At first sight, environmental justice may seem far removed from the task of liberation theology. However, Ezra Chitando cites the view of South African theologian Ernst Conradie in Conradie's book *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home in the Earth* that the role of environmental theology in the 21st century may be similar to that of liberation theology in the 20th century.[7] Chitando makes this observation to remind African religious leaders to integrate their spirituality with courageous action in light of the environment. African religiosity views personal and public occurrences in spiritual terms, such that in the face of calamity, Africans first resort to prayer. However, prayer in itself is action, and this means that spirituality must be practical. So, what is the interrelationship between Black liberation theology and environmental theology?

Black liberation theology emanated from the civil rights movement of 20th-century America. African American theologians in the United States needed to find a way of speaking into the dialectic of religion and race in light of the slavery enterprise of the region. Black liberation theology was birthed to respond to the African American experience, which was synonymous with that of the minority and the marginalized. James Cone, having grown up in the context of racial segregation and having been nurtured within the Christian Methodist tradition, launched a theological project that reverberated in Latin America, Asia, and Africa in the mid-20th century. He said in effect that any theology that does not have a liberative praxis is not Christian theology.[8] Christian theology must alleviate personal, societal, and structural oppression. How does this correlate with environmental justice in Africa?

Liberation theology envisioned a paradigm with which African theologians could engage the issues of African identity in postcolonial Africa. Chief among these theologians were Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu in South Africa, Ka Mana in West Africa,

[7] Ezra Chitando, "Praying for Courage: African Religious Leaders and Climate Change," *Ecumenical Review* 69:3 (2017), 425–35, at 428, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12304.

[8] James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

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and John Mbiti in East Africa. In this way, the liberative model has borne fruit in terms of carving out a unique African identity in global discourse and exploring the intersection of the gospel and culture. In Latin America, the Brazilian Catholic scholar-priest Leonardo Boff has taken a liberation approach to the conversation on environment in several of his writings, including *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (2012) and *Toward an Eco-Spirituality* (2015). I suggest that similarly, contemporary theology in 21st-century Africa cannot ignore the issue of environmental justice. African spirituality must grow beyond its individualistic concerns with material prosperity and its spiritual warfare with powers and principalities, and it must courageously address social justice issues such as state corruption, economic injustices, and environmental care.

While poverty and disease are crucial social issues, their reality is an interlinked web of economics, environment, and religion. And therefore, if the liberation of African people must awaken them from their oppressed state, environmental justice must be at the crux of such a paradigm.[9] What James Cone provides for Africa is a theological method that seriously takes into consideration the context of the people of Africa. Environmental justice must be embedded in African theology and Christianity if Christian witness in the contemporary 21st century is to be taken seriously at all.

Environmental Justice in African Theology

Theologians who have taken the issue of the environment seriously include Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), Lynn White Jr (1907–87), and Thomas Berry (1914–2009). Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest and paleontologist whose contribution to ecotheology was the scientific exploration of the natural world. The medieval historian Lynn White Jr in the mid-20th century proposed that the ecological crisis is a result of scientific and technological explorations that have a capitalistic thrust without consideration of environmental consequences.[10] His essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" centred the environmental crisis on the medieval Christian anthropocentric understanding of the world. Thomas Berry was a Passionist monk who, inspired by Asian spirituality and Catholic Thomism, advocated for environmental care against the backdrop of interreligious dialogue. Perhaps the most systematic statement from the Vatican is the second encyclical by Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015). In this encyclical, Francis begins with a canticle from St Francis of Assisi, reminding us that the earth is truly our home, especially in light of the environmental

[9] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), 1.

[10] Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155:3767 (10 March 1967), 1203–07.

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degradation of our time.[11] Noting the technocratic nature of current human government, he proposes an "integral ecology" that involves societal institutions, the environment, and human lives.[12] The priest-theologian John Chryssavgis proposes an Eastern Orthodox view that looks at the environment from three theological foci: icons, liturgy, and ascetism.[13] In his view, iconography seriously considers the doctrine of the incarnation and how divinity meets materiality, hence affirming the sacredness of the environment; liturgy connects God and God's people through worship in a manner that renews the whole "polluted cosmos"; and ascetism holds our capitalistic and selfish interests at bay while elevating a spirit of gratitude toward God's world.

Within the African context, we find only a handful of theological perspectives on the environment. One of the few African theologians in this space is Ernst Conradie from the University of Western Cape. One of the reasons for this lack may be that environmental dialogues are not scaled down to the lives of ordinary Africans. For the environmental dialogue to have impact, Conradie suggests, it should translate into the everyday lives of Africans.[14] Further, he says that the church should be at the forefront of raising awareness about the environment, as the church enjoys trust at the grassroots level. This, he says, is because of the other social concerns the African church and academy have focused on, instead of the global environmental crisis. Nico Vorster, a South African who is professor of systematic theology at North-West University, proposes redefining dignity to recapture the intrinsic value inherent in creation and the role humanity can play in caring for the environment.[15] Both of these African theologians employ doctrinal and hermeneutical approaches to translate environmental concerns to the church and academy.

I suggest that African environmental justice has the advantage of resourcing its task in two ways. African environmental justice can borrow from both the Christian tradition in an ecumenical perspective and the Indigenous or traditional knowledge systems. In any dialogue on justice and human dignity in Africa, we must always be aware of the inherent contextual realities at play. Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary of the WCC, noted that discourse in development is largely based on Western contexts of affluence and strength, to the detriment of African contextual realities. A similar point

[11] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

[12] Ibid., 106.

[13] John Chryssavgis, "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Orthodox Theology and an Ecological World View," *Ecumenical Review* 62:2 (2010), 214–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2010.00059.x.

[14] Ernst Conradie, "How Can We Help to Raise an Environmental Awareness in the South African Context?" *Scriptura* 82 (2003), 122–38.

[15] Nico Vorster, "The Relationship between Human and Non-Human Dignity," *Scriptura* 104 (2010), 406–17.

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is made by South African theologian John Klaasen when he says, "Policies need to consider both the intra and inter structures of the developed and developing nations. Instead of merely an economic approach, a political-ethical approach needed to be considered seriously."[16] Unifying the ecumenical voice from the various Christian traditions, environmental justice must consider environmental and economic policies from a theological perspective.

In Kenya, for instance, the government mandated the National Environmental Management Authority to regulate environmental practice through enforcing energy policies. Among these has been the need for building owners to conduct energy audits that can then inform energy management procedures for the sustainable use of energy. In a country that has seen many building contractors pursue unscrupulous engineering practices to increase their profit margins, building collapses have been reported in several places. Further, building owners evade such precedence of energy audits for similar capitalistic reasons. While environmental policies have been made in Kenya, enforcing them becomes difficult where people pursue a capitalistic and individualistic ethos that is short-sighted and severs environmental responsibility from the equation. However, Christian theology notes the reality of fallen humanity through doctrines of hamartiology and anthropology. Similarly, only a theological engagement can bring these disparate issues into one whole. Integration of environmental concerns is best done through a theological lens.

First, the Judeo-Christian heritage that can provide a robust basis for environmental justice begins in the Old Testament and is fulfilled in the New Testament in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Garden of Eden perhaps best captures the responsibility of humanity with God's created world. While some have read the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26 from a militaristic takeover approach, given the Pentateuchal arch of God's sovereignty, human beings are merely stewards of God's creation. The Psalms also acknowledge the crucial harmony that creation plays in God's creation: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers" (Ps. 24:1-2 ESV). Similarly, creation is caught up in doxological praise to the sovereign Lord: "All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, Sing praises to your name" (Ps. 66:4 NIV). The entire Old Testament corpus, including Prophetic literature, notes the primacy of the environment (Job 37:14-18; Is. 11:9, 43:20-21; Ez. 34:2-4; Jer. 2:7). Harmonious coexistence between God, humanity, and the environment happens through the sacred

[16] Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, "The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement," *Ecumenical Review* 70:1 (2018), 105–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12343; John Klaasen, "The Ecumenical Movement and Development: The Role of Personhood," *Missionalia* 43:3 (2015), 323–35, http://dx.doi.org/10.7832/43-3-87.

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stewardship of God's covenant in the world. A Catholic perspective on the environment assesses how the doctrines of creation, eucharist, and Trinity affect ecological thought.[17] Visser 't Hooft reminds us of the *imago Dei* in humanity as the basis for the *oikoumene*, and that in Christ's reconciliation of all things to himself, Christians have grounds for human reconciliation with one another, with God, and with the environment.[18]

Second, various Indigenous African traditions have a holistic understanding of ecology's bearing on human life. The Akan from West Africa viewed the cosmos as sacred due to divine presence.[19] Likewise, the Agikuyu in East Africa hold certain lands and trees as sacred because of their traditional cosmology. As a result, medicines drew from the natural world of plants and vegetation, traditional ceremonies and rituals were anchored in distinct environmental locations, and agrarian practices honoured the natural make-up of geographic locations.[20] Several other scholars borrow from the cultures of the Kipsigis in Kenya and the Shona of Zimbabwe to remind us that we must develop ecological theologies that are grounded in contextual realities, such as scarcity of water in African communities.[21] Indigenous cosmologies help us to see with eyes that eschew contemporary carelessness. Borrowing from the wisdom of the past can be beneficial in integrating our faith in the world, especially among African communities longing for wisdom that is practical and that corresponds with their worldview.

This even-handed approach of listening to the wisdom of other cultures and traditions is at the core of the ecumenical mandate going forward. Samuel Kobia, in his long

17 Anthony J. Kelly, "The Ecumenism of Ecology," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 22:3 (2015), 6–12.

18 See Visser 't Hooft, "Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement." Creation seems to be part of redemptive work (Rom. 8; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:16-20) – see "New Heavens and New Earth" in 2 Peter 3:11. From an exegetical study of Romans 8, Mavulu notes that creation is not a passive player in God's redemptive purpose. Creation will definitely be restored as it was before the fall through human responsibility as wise stewardship of God's creation. Though ecological stewardship is not the main idea in Romans 8, it is possible to do what Mavulu calls "task theology," that is, draw insights from the text. See Rev. Joseph Mavulu, "The Groaning of Creation: An Exegetical Study on Romans 8:19-22," paper presented at the ASET annual conference 2018 at St Paul's University, Limuru.

19 Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, "Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church," *Scriptura* 107 (2011): 145–55.

20 Joseph Kamenju, *Transformation of Kikuyu Traditional Architecture: Case Studies of Homesteads in Lower Mukurwe-ini, Nyeri, Kenya* (Oslo: 2013).

21 Adam K. Arap Chepkwony, "Tulwab Kipsigis: The Sacred Mountain of Kipsigis People of Kenya," in *VOICES: Ecological Vision in a Groaning World*, Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians xxxvi (2013), 75-88; Joram Tarusarira, "African Religion, Climate Change, and Knowledge Systems," *Ecumenical Review* 69:3 (2017), 398–410, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12302; Lucy W. Waweru, "The Blessed Artisan of Shalom," *Ecumenical Review* 63:1 (2011), 77–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2010.00096.x.

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journey as an ecumenist, reflects on what the current shift of global Christianity means for the global church:

> The ecumenical movement has come to realize that representatives of churches in the North must learn to listen more carefully to what theologians of the South are saying – just as southern Christians must reject the tendency to stereotype northern cultures, listening instead to the actual voices of people from churches in Europe and North America. Scholarship from the various regions must be given equal weight in our deliberations, even as we take into account the fact that the "typical" 21st-century Christian putting her faith into practice lives neither in the New York suburbs nor in the international community of Geneva, but more likely in a Tanzanian village, a Brazilian *favela*, or in the slums of Jamaica.[22]

A truly ecumenical approach honours not only the different Christian traditions – East and West, South and North – but also the cultural traditions in all the places of the world. We must also be cautious about syncretistic nuances as well as cultural imperialism, where certain cultures are seen as superior to others. Christian hospitality and unity must be willing to learn from cultures different from its own. This is the basis of Paul's multiple efforts at reconciling different Jewish groups as well as Jewish–Gentile relations (Acts 15; Rom. 11:28-36; Gal. 5:1-15).

Environmental Justice and the Church

The question of environmental justice must transcend the bounds of Christian traditions. Clive Ayre and Ernst Conradie state:

> an ecological reformation of Christianity would need to become deeply rooted in each and every Christian tradition. Earth keeping efforts are required in each and every local context. However, some ecological problems also require global networking, because the threats are of a global nature . . . There is no other way. In the context of climate change, there are no Muslim forests, Catholic rivers, Protestant hills or Pentecostal fires.[23]

Given the postmodern and plural context of contemporary society, Christian diversity in unity is best poised to tackle such a complex issue as the environment. The church needs to embrace the idea that difference does not necessarily mean division. The different emphases in the different traditions can be celebrated even as we honour the concentric circles of what is at the centre and what is on the outside in the "household

[22] Samuel Kobia, "Ecumenism in the 21st Century," *Ecumenical Review* 70:1 (2018), 21–29, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12329.

[23] "Introduction" to Clive W. Ayre and Ernst M. Conradie, eds, *The Church in God's Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2017).

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of God." We need not abandon our theological foundations, which are primarily based on Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone, the self-revelation of the triune God, and the mission to reach out to the world through proclamation and witness, centred on the twin themes of love and justice. Our foundation as a church is based on diversity-in-unity modelled in the triune God, thus providing a true basis for unity. Also, our work of environmental justice is based not on the empty whims of a materialistic or pantheistic understanding, but on an understanding of the earth as God's vessel of revelation and in God's coming reconciliation of it. This means that the salvation of human beings and their glorification are somewhat linked to their treatment of the natural world. Therefore, the African church need not eschew the environment for spirituality but should instead integrate its spirituality into courageous action for the practical areas of life.

What, then, does environmental justice in an ecumenical perspective look like?

- **Ecclesiological self-understanding:** The African church must seek to understand itself and its heritage in order to be able to dialogue with others. Christian leaders must go beyond a fight over numbers of adherents and pursue self-understanding.
- **Ecclesiological ecumenism:** Interdenominational colloquia, seminars, and forums where such civil dialogue can improve the awareness of diversity-in-unity in ecumenical spirit may be helpful to unify the vision of the Christian witness to a global world that is watching closely.
- **Ecological missions:** Joint projects or outreach around environmental concerns must take centre stage in missiology and its practice. The church should weave its understanding of mission to incorporate environmental justice, and this can happen in local, regional, and cross-continental contexts. For instance, youth ministries could create exchange programmes where Christians with environmental awareness can cross borders and share an integrated gospel message through environmental literacy and education.
- **Christian education:** Christian education in the academy must investigate the positive aspects of Indigenous cultures so as to integrate these with biblical teaching in a manner that is contextual and healthy. Courses around environmental theology and themes could be offered in seminaries and theological institutions. These then should translate into the structures of ecclesial bodies and form the basis for education ministries in the local church. The advantage of the church is that it already has the critical mass and may be the best agent of holistic and integrated environmental justice.
- **Institutional partnerships:** Much more ground in environmental justice could be covered when we unite and let go of a "silo mentality," realizing that we are

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working toward the same goal. The Africa Society of Evangelical Theology had an environmental focus in its 2018 conference. Many of the presentations came from students and professors in higher education and seminaries. Similarly, some non-governmental organizations are pursuing environmental justice. What might a colloquium of theologians, socio-economic policy analysts, financial institutions, and ecclesial leaders result in? Institutional partnerships may make theological reflection and the church's witness much more tangible to the world, which often puts the first foot forward without the teleological and eschatological end in view.

Conclusion

African Christians and theologians have watered down environmental justice by focusing on other issues. There has been a failure to keep God's covenant with all the earth by abandoning our mandate to serve God, to love people, and to care for our environment. The text in Isaiah 24 notes that if we persist in this lacuna, coming generations will have a desolated cosmos (Is. 24:1). An ecumenical spirit must note that all traditions have grounds for shared values that should guide their environmental justice. Our global harmonious doxology must begin with the spiritual keeping of God's covenant and must transcend boundaries and honour God's earth and God's humanity (Is. 24:14-15). What this looks like practically has been enumerated as ecclesiological self-understanding and ecumenism, ecological missions, Christian education, and institutional partnerships. This is the legacy that the WCC and Christians of good will will leave, remembering that the groaning earth, with pregnant pause, is waiting for humanity to be its stewards. May the church of God, reconciled through Jesus Christ, be empowered by the Holy Spirit for God's environmental mission in the 21st century.

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