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Religious Communities as Actors for Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond

Report

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Executive Summary

Climate change and environmental degradation are threatening livelihoods in many parts of the world. One of the regions most affected is Southern Africa, where temperatures are predicted to rise by up to 4°C by the end of the century. To develop pathways into a sustainable future and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, **fundamental socioecological transformations are needed**. This process requires not only appropriate policies as well as scientific knowledge, but necessitates radical paradigm shifts and changed mindsets and behaviour. Religious communities are crucial stakeholders for achieving these paradigm shifts: religion shapes social imaginaries, and people's values and religious communities have the ability to act as agents of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological change. By fundamentally shaping people's world views, **religion can be an important source of sustainable development**.

Against this background, this report seeks to **further elucidate the role of religious communities for ecological sustainability in Southern Africa**, with respect to their theologies, lived religions and activities. It **summarizes, discusses and contextualizes the results of two transdisciplinary consultations** that involved academics, development practitioners, environmental activists and religious leaders: the capacity-building webinar *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* jointly hosted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Water, Environment and Climate Action (WECARE) Work-stream of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) as a side-event of the General Assembly of members of PaRD 2020 and the conference *Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability*, a joint initiative by RCSD, Brot für die Welt and the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria.

The report provides **resources for religious communities and faith-based organizations (FBOs) and to thereby facilitate knowledge exchange and to spark further engagement**. It engages in ecotheological debates and highlights best practice examples of Southern African religious communities' environmental initiatives. Overall, the report and the various examples presented in it substantiate the hypothesis that **religious communities in Southern Africa possess great potential for ecological sustainability and increasingly use this potential to promote ecological sustainability at various levels**.

Finally, based on the two consultations the report highlights **policy recommendations** for governmental and intergovernmental actors, religious communities and FBOs for further engagement with ecological sustainability in Southern Africa.

→ To **local and national governments and intergovernmental actors** the report recommends the **cooperation with religious communities in the promotion of ecological sustainability** and the creation of opportunities for the engagement of religious communities and natural sciences. Environmental action should be supported as interreligious action, including all religious stakeholders. Moreover, government actors should work towards protecting the environment in order to protect religious freedom and protecting religious freedom in order to protect the environment.

→ To **religious communities and FBOs**, the report recommends **strengthening climate change awareness among religious leaders and in religious communities**. Religious communities should become environmental learning spaces and the involvement of children and youth is crucial. Environmental and climate advocacy by religious communities should be strengthened at all levels. United religious voices increase the effectiveness of advocacy. Moreover, religious communities and FBOs themselves need to develop climate change adaptation strategies.

→ To **academic research**, the report recommends conducting **in-depth studies on local religious knowledge about and action on the environment** and evaluating the effectiveness of religious advocacy initiatives. Moreover, it advises the foundation of a Southern African research initiative on religion and ecological development, and the preservation of intergenerational and local knowledge.

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Foreword

This report summarizes, discusses and contextualizes the results of the capacity-building webinar *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* held on 1 September 2020. The event was jointly organized and hosted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Water, Environment and Climate Action (WECARE) Work-stream of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). The webinar was held as a side-event of the General Assembly of Members of PaRD 2020 in Berlin, Germany and hosted by the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The webinar brought together over 50 participants from across sub-Saharan Africa, Germany and beyond and engaged academics from different disciplines, religious leaders as well as development practitioners and environmental activists in highly transdisciplinary discussions of the role of religious communities for environmental sustainability in Southern Africa. The event provided an interreligious approach by including speakers from different Christian traditions (mainline Protestant, African Independent, Pentecostal), Muslim and Baha'i representatives as well as Buddhist and African Traditional Religious perspectives. The event formed part of the ongoing WECARE Work-stream's collaborative work as well as the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development's key initiative on religious communities and ecological sustainability in Southern Africa. It had three aims: firstly, to engage in discussions on different aspects of ecological sustainability and to foster knowledge exchange on the role of ecological sustainability in the theologies and the activities of different religious communities and faith-based organizations in Southern Africa. Secondly, to raise awareness of the ecological situation and of ecological actions of religious communities in Southern Africa. Thirdly, to contribute to the increasing Southern African religious communities' engagement and commitment for ecological sustainability and to facilitate a networking and knowledge-sharing event.

Moreover, this report draws on the insights from the conference *Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability* from 28 to 31 October 2019 at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. The conference was jointly organized by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, Brot für die Welt and the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. It assembled over 60 participants from academia and development practice as well as church representatives from Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe along with participants from Germany as well as Argentina and Uruguay. The conference not only facilitated intensive South–South and South–North knowledge exchange but also for the first time brought together a diverse group of Christian traditions from the region (mainline Protestants, African Independents, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Evangelicals) on the issue of ecological sustainability. The extensive programme of climate science lectures, excursions to ecological projects and theological reflections on the topic created a strong sense of urgency for action and further joint ecological engagement among the participants. One of the key initiatives emanating from this conference is the Green Teaching and Learning Community (Green TLC) driven by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the University of Pretoria and the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute along with religious leaders. The Green TLC provides a grassroots-based platform for knowledge exchange on ecological sustainability in Southern Africa for religious leaders. The 2019 conference was a direct response to the call of an earlier *Consultation on African Pentecostal and Independent Churches' Approaches to Development* held in 2018 to provide a forum of engagement with and capacity-building on religion and ecological sustainability in Southern Africa. The 2020 webinar continued and broadened this approach through interreligious engagement and by linking it to the WECARE Work-stream of PaRD.

1 Introduction – Religious Communities and Environmental Sustainability in Southern Africa

The current global debates about climate change have gained a new momentum since the Fridays for Future movement initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018 began to publicly denounce politicians' failure to act against climate change in school strikes and other forms of public protest. A crucial factor propelling this movement is that the effects of climate change can be felt in all parts of the world. People worldwide started to *experience* the impacts of climate change through unprecedented extreme weather events. The year 2020 was the hottest year ever recorded and its heat waves, droughts and storms were felt worldwide.

African countries are among the most affected by climate change. The rise in temperatures is predicted to occur sooner and faster there than in most other parts of the world (Engelbrecht et al. 2015). Environmental disasters such as droughts, floods and reduced crop yields and livestock capacities, as well as the spreading of climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria and cholera, threaten the continent. The United Nations Environment Programme warns that "low adaptive capacity makes Africa highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change" (UNEP 2016). Southern Africa is especially affected by the rising global temperatures and the damaging effects of climate change are felt by the populations already today. Temperatures in Southern Africa are predicted to rise by 3–4°C by 2100 (Engelbrecht et al. 2015). To develop pathways into a sustainable future and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), fundamental socioecological transformations are needed. This process requires not only appropriate policies as well as scientific knowledge, but necessitates radical paradigm shifts and changed mindsets and behaviour (Parry 2007).

1.1 Religious Communities: Driving Forces of Transformation

Religious communities are crucial stakeholders for achieving these paradigm shifts, particularly in those areas of the world where religion is highly relevant in individual and public life. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, "roughly nine-in-ten people state that "religion is very important in their lives" (Lugo 2010; Mbiti 1990). Religious communities as important societal actors are among the largest *social* service providers in many parts of the world today. They often reach believers across social strata and age groups and influence politics and media. Most importantly, religion shapes social imaginaries and people's values (Gottlieb 2006). In this context, religious communities have the ability to act as agents of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological change and to function as sources of knowledge. They bear a fundamental transformative potential, a "capacity to legitimise, in religious or ideological terms, the development of new motivations, activities, and institutions" (Eisenstadt 1967) and strongly shape social and cultural values and world views. By fundamentally shaping people's world views, religion can be an important source of sustainable development and long-lasting change.

As a recent strategy paper by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development highlights: "Religion ... influences people's way of thinking and their actions" (BMZ 2016). Similarly, the African Union's Agenda 2063 highlights the role of "religious and spiritual beliefs, which play a profound role in the construction of the African identity and social interaction". UNEP's report on *The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Galvanizing Nature Based Solutions* (Abumoghli and McCartney 2020) further elaborates the essential role of religious values in shaping the behaviour of people towards sustainability. Religion has long played a role in promoting sustainable development. The existence of large, influential faith-based organizations (FBOs), such as World Vision, Brot für die Welt, Islamic Relief and many others, is testament to this, as are the impressive activities by religious communities which actively contribute to a context-bound and long-term development of their communities through

education, health-care and social cohesion programmes, for example (Bompani 2010; Swart and Nell 2016; Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2020).

Nonetheless, religion can also hinder these processes and constitute a source of exclusion, marginalization or opposition to transformations towards ecological sustainability. Whatever may be the case in a given context and for a specific religious community, it remains clear that religion is of fundamental importance for society-encompassing changes as they are necessary in light of climate change and further environmental degradation. Even where religion might have a retarding effect on the implementation of the SDGs, its fundamental influence in people's world views and actions makes it important to engage with religious actors to bring them on board in the sustainable development agenda.

1.2 Religious Communities in Southern Africa: Driving Forces of Ecological Sustainability?

Against this background the fundamental question arises how religious actors, as vital societal stakeholders, position themselves with respect to the current global ecological crisis. Are they indifferent to or even hindering climate action and care for the environment? Or can they be considered vital driving forces of transformation to ecological sustainability. If so, how can they become stakeholders in this transformation?

The United Nations Environment Programme and the Fifth Assessment Report on the region of Africa for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stresses the importance of community-based adaptation as follows: "local-level [climate change] adaptation is best achieved by starting with existing local adaptive capacity, and incorporating and building upon present coping strategies and norms, including indigenous practices" (Niang 2014). Religious communities thus seem to be ideally suited to fulfil their potential for ecological sustainability and to provide the structures and narratives for these adaptive strategies and practices.

An increasing number of studies have recently begun to investigate the relation of religious communities and ecological sustainability in Southern Africa (Olúpọ̀nà 2006; Sakupapa 2013; Amanze 2016; Ntreh, Aidoo, and Aryeh 2019; Anim 2019; Chitando 2020). The existing literature on ecological religious teachings and initiatives in the region, however, only provides first indications on the role of religion for ecological sustainability. Moreover, it is by no means clear that religious communities always act in the interest of the environment and ecological sustainability (Taylor 2016). On the contrary, religious communities can also be hindering forces for ecological transformation (Carr et al. 2012). The diverse roles that religious communities play with regard to ecological sustainability thus still remain an important subject of further research.

Many reference points corroborate the hypothesis that religious communities increasingly act as relevant drivers of ecological sustainability and increasingly take on this role (The Holy Father Francis 2015; Stork and Öhlmann 2019; Andrianos et al. 2019). Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, religious communities worldwide can be found to be very active in the field of ecological sustainability. In a survey on *Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona* conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at HU, 75% of responding religious leaders worldwide considered "strengthen environmental protection" as highly important in the post-Covid-19 future – environmental concerns thereby constituting the overall highest priority.

One of the most prominent examples of religious communities' engagement with ecological sustainability is the global "Care for Creation" movement emerging in Christian mainline churches (World Council of Churches 1975; Hallman 1995) from the 1970s onwards and which has recently received a new dynamic (The Holy Father Francis 2015; Kowanda-Yassin 2018; Ntreh, Aidoo, and Aryeh

2019; Andrianos et al. 2019; Vogt 2021). Such a dynamic is also visible among religious communities in sub-Saharan Africa. In a previous paper, we highlighted that also African Initiated Churches increasingly engage with climate change theologically, especially if the churches' members are affected directly (Stork and Öhlmann 2019).

A leading example is that of the Zion Christian Church, Southern Africa's largest religious community with a membership of over 15 million across the region. Its Bishop, The Right Rev. Bishop Dr Lekganyane, urged government, companies and churches to act for environmental protection and elevated the care for creation to a matter of redemption: "our redemption is dependent on our ability to show that we can take care of what God has entrusted upon us" (Lekganyane 2019). A move towards engagement with climate change and ecological sustainability is also visible in Pentecostal churches (see Section 2.2.1 below).

This is mirrored in the activities of several grassroots initiatives across religious communities in the region such as the interreligious Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), the interdenominational Green Teaching and Learning Community (Green TLC) or the Organization of African Instituted Churches' (OAIC) Livelihoods Programme and the Green Anglicans Movement. The dynamics of ecological engagement also become visible in small-scale local initiatives by religious communities initiating clean-up campaigns or in educational programmes as in the Gilgal Bible Church in an informal settlement between Johannesburg and Pretoria (see Section 2.3).

Engagement with climate change and ecological sustainability is by no means limited to Christianity; similar dynamics are visible in different religious communities across the region – be it the Baha'i interfaith environmental advocacy, Islamic theological rationales for ecological sustainability or the perspective of African Traditional Religion.

1.3 Aim and Scope of This Report

This report seeks to further elucidate the role of religious communities for ecological sustainability in Southern Africa, with respect to their theologies, lived religions and activities. It provides resources for religious communities and faith-based organizations and in this way aims to facilitate knowledge exchange and to spark further engagement. Lastly, it highlights policy recommendations for governmental and intergovernmental actors, religious communities and faith-based organizations for further engagement with ecological sustainability in Southern Africa.

Drawing on the capacity-building webinar *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* and the conference *Religious Communities as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability*, the approach is highly transdisciplinary: it facilitates dialogue between natural sciences and humanities and brings together academic perspectives with those of religious communities with environmental activists and development policy and practice. Moreover, it approaches the topic in an interreligious way, including voices from Christian traditions (mainline Protestant, African Independent, Pentecostal), Muslim and Baha'i representatives as well as Buddhist and African Traditional Religious perspectives.

The focus area of the report is Southern Africa. While Southern Africa's histories, languages and religions differ across the region, the countries of the region similarly experience changing weather patterns and environmental destruction and face similar challenges of climate change mitigation problems – producing similar dynamics of ecological engagement in the varied religious communities in the region responding to these shared challenges. In a comparative perspective, this report also goes beyond Southern Africa, including voices from and perspectives on other African countries and other world regions that contribute to the understanding of religious communities as actors of ecological sustainability.

What is presented in this report can by no means claim to outline final conclusions on the role played by religious communities for ecological sustainability in Southern Africa. The report rather presents a spotlight on selected cases, perspectives and current dynamics and outlines best practices of religious communities' engagement with ecological sustainability. It seeks to establish a sound, empirically grounded *opening* of the topic. The results of the two consultations this report is based on serve as points of reference for a first analysis and interpretational framework of how religious communities act as drivers for ecological sustainability in their communities in Southern Africa. The policy recommendations concluding this report draw on these reference points and aim to strengthen the steps that religious communities are currently taking as actors for ecological sustainability and to highlight the need for further transdisciplinary knowledge production and engagement.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. The main part of this report in Section 2 begins with an outline of climate change predictions and the current state of ecological degradation in Southern Africa from a natural sciences perspective (Section 2.1). It proceeds to outline different approaches to theologies on ecology, drawing on the ecotheological discourse in Christian theology, but also considering African Traditional, Baha'i, Islamic and ecofeminist perspectives (Section 2.2). In a third step (Section 2.3) it moves on to best practice examples of ecological actions by religious communities of different faiths and sizes to spotlight the diverse environmental action taking place on a grassroots level in Southern African religious communities. These examples focus on the sub-themes of forestry and agriculture, water, waste and pollution, and ecological education and advocacy. Section 3 summarizes key points and results in comparative perspective. Section 4 concludes with policy recommendations highlighted at the *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* webinar and the *Religious Communities as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability* conference and based on the findings presented in this report.

2 Religious Engagement with the Environment in Southern Africa

2.1 Climate Change Predictions for Southern Africa and Environmental Degradation Phenomena

In his opening keynote on "Restricting global warming under the Paris Agreement: benefits and the consequences of failure for Africa and the world", Francois Engelbrecht, climate scientist at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, made a strong argument for global climate change *mitigation* and local climate change *adaptation* in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. The 2018 IPCC special report on global warming pointed out that a continuous warming of the planet of 1.5°C is likely to increase the frequency of droughts in Southern Africa (IPCC 2018). Furthermore, while local extreme weather events impact the local population, local food security and local health, *global* climate change consequences, such as the melting of the big ice sheets and the consequential rise in sea levels, will also impact Southern Africa strongly. Although in 2015 the world had warmed by approximately 1°C on average compared to pre-industrial temperatures (including water surfaces), some land masses already displayed warmer temperatures: Figure 2 shows that parts of the land masses of Southern Africa have been warming far more than the global average. This means that, even if the world successfully restricts global warming to 2°C on average, temperatures in Southern Africa would still increase by about 4°C.[1] According to Engelbrecht, Southern Africa expects a temperature rise of 3–4°C if the Paris Agreement is fulfilled and global average temperature increases remain at 1.5°C. He reported that the South African government committed to climate change mitigation measures in 2019 at the United Nations' climate change summit, where President Ramaphosa announced a transition from the South African dependence on coal as the main energy source to alternative sources of energy.[2] Engelbrecht pointed out that even a successfully implemented Paris Agreement will imply future temperature increases and more frequent heatwaves, tropical storms and multi-year droughts. The IPCC special report concluded that 3°C of global warming would result in approximately 6°C of regional warming in Southern Africa. Such an extreme temperature rise could make the maize crop, currently the most consumed vegetable, as well as the cattle industry, unsustainable in the region (IPCC 2018).

These projections by climatologists call for urgent action among all parties, but the effects of climate change are already being felt throughout Southern Africa. It is these threatening perspectives for the region and the direct experiences of climate change which religious leaders experience daily that motivate religious communities to become actors for ecological sustainability.

Leaders of African Initiated Churches already commented on ecological changes in this regard in interviews conducted from 2017 to 2018 by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development in nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The interviews showed firstly that some African Initiated Church leaders experienced climate change directly and secondly that they were ready to use their churches' infrastructure to act against the effects of climate change. The overall results from the study showed that African Initiated Church leaders were more concerned about climate change and its results such as changing weather patterns than about other environmental problems such as plastic pollution, mining or air pollution, although these are among the biggest problems in African countries.

[1] https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/. Most land regions are experiencing greater warming than the global average, while most ocean regions are warming at a slower rate. Depending on the temperature dataset considered, 20–40% of the global human population live in regions that, by the decade 2006–2015, had already experienced warming of more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels in at least one season.

[2] http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2019/cram0923.htm.

From a South African peri-urban perspective this was also related to by church leader Apostle Siboniso Ngobese (see Section 2.3.3) during the webinar in 2020. He described his experience in his Gilgal Bible Church located in the Kaalfontein in South Africa as follows:

> *We are surrounded by a lot of informal businesses … Therefore, half the time we breathe polluted air resulting from fires, smoke and this may lead to respiratory illnesses since we are surrounded by them. That is one of the problems we are having. We breathe polluted air! And then the other one is contaminated water. Most of the water around us is not hygienic. Major health problems result from the streams that are not clean. Environmental pollution is the major problem we have in my area.*

The experiences of environmental destruction and climate change results were shared by all experts consulted during the webinar and the conference. They were often accompanied by ecological theological reasonings, which are the focus of the following section.

2.2 Ecological Theologies in Religious Communities in Southern Africa and Beyond

2.2.1 Ecotheologies in African Christianity

Perspectives of Mainline Christianity

Rev. Dietrich Werner, senior theological advisor at Brot für die Welt, Germany, spoke on the acute task for African churches to develop ecotheologies informed by their faith perspectives and cultural traditions in view of the effects of the ecological crisis in Southern Africa and in the world as described by natural scientists. He advocated for an inclusive dialogue on climate change and ecological degradation between all religious traditions in Southern Africa. This call for interreligious and interdenominational cooperation in light of the challenge of climate change, which effects all religions and denominations in the same area, was taken up by other speakers expressing different views on the urgency of interreligious dialogue for ecological sustainability.

Werner also touched on another highly debated point among the participants of the consultations: the role of African Traditional Religions and African Traditional perceptions on the environment in the different Christian church families in Southern Africa. African Traditional Religions are often seen as encouraging responsible ecological behaviour based on a holistic understanding of nature. At the same time, much of this traditional knowledge seems to be forgotten or to have been suppressed with the arrival of Christianity (Anim 2019). Werner asked whether Christianity had committed a grave mistake with regard to the environment by replacing the ecologically sensitive African world views with a dominating or subduing outlook on nature. The role that Christianity played in shaping a mindset of natural exploitation to fulfil "man's needs" was taken up by many Christian scholars and practitioners during the consultations.

Ernst Conradie, systematic theologian at the University of the Western Cape, spoke at the consultation in 2019 on mainline Christian ecotheology from a Protestant perspective. His contribution was later published in the South African journal Scriptura (Conradie 2020).

According to Conradie's contribution, ecotheology emerged as a scholarly discourse in the 1970s, partly in response to growing ecological concerns, as for example stated in the contested report to the Club of Rome on Limits to Growth (Meadows et al. 1972), and partly in response to the equally contested thesis by Lynn White (White 1967) that Christianity caused much of the environmental crisis due to its deeply anthropocentric orientation. Ecotheology should offer an "ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction". Conradie stressed that the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power was still active, for example in ecumenical calls for climate justice, in which the World

Council of Churches had taken the lead. This helped according to him to frame environmental issues as matters of justice (and not merely as matters of nature conservation or wilderness preservation). He admitted though that such calls were hardly heard by those in positions of political and economic power and that these calls were too often made from a safe distance, from which the Christian "prophets" of climate justice did not have to carry out the consequences of their words. Moreover, he pointed out that Christians are not taking the lead on climate justice and that, on the other hand, environmental activists typically did not align themselves with Christianity: "In fact, one may observe that natural scientists, against their own methodological inclinations, have become the prophets of our day by reiterating warnings over climate change, the loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification and a range of other 'planetary boundaries', speaking truth to power." He continued to argue that it was not Christianity itself that was to be blamed, but the ways in which the Christian gospel had been appropriated to legitimize domination over the creation. According to Conradie, the problem was not the "domination" command in Genesis 1:27 but that this command had been misinterpreted. "The more the ecological critique of Christianity is emphasized, the less room there seems to be for a Christian critique of ecological destruction. To point any fingers, leads to a recognition of more fingers pointing back at the complicity of Christianity." Finally, he said that the church first needed to react to these criticisms by "bringing its own house in order" before any credible prophetic role could be taken on by the church again in environmental matters.

Wilhelm Gräb, head of the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, responded to Conradie's presentation. He pointed out that a theocentric Christian theology, telling the story of God's work of creation, was still addressing the human position. Therefore, anthropocentric or theocentric ways of doing theology did not represent alternatives in Christian theology but should be seen in a dialectical relationship. He stated that the Christian God who became human in Jesus Christ would never operate without cooperation with humans but that this cooperation must not lead to a negative anthropocentrism of enhancing human selfishness. It is the privilege of human beings to have this consciousness of absolute dependency. The consciousness of being the creatures and not the creator of the world is according to Gräb the consciousness of being dependent on given conditions of living, which humans cannot replace or renew. To underline that, he said that a theology of creation reflecting on human dependency remained the true intention of anthropocentrism in theology. This consciousness of being *creatures* and not the creator, according to Gräb, enforced the responsibility of human beings to preserve the unconditionally given natural environment and to act regardfully and carefully to all other creatures. He stated that it was a misunderstanding of anthropocentrism to regard this concept as one of the reasons for the ecological disaster. A new interpretation of the creation account in Genesis could result instead in a changing concept of the relationship between humans and non-human creatures: "We as humans do not have to dominate nature. Our obligation is stewardship." Gräb went on to say that humans must recognize that they are creatures (and not creators themselves) beside other creatures and must deal carefully with the conditions of life given to all creatures from the creator. For Gräb, it is therefore not theologically correct to say that humans should *preserve* the creation that is not theirs to preserve. Humans should instead realize that they are not responsible for the preservation of the whole creation – which is a creator's task – but instead for their *own interventions* in the God-given conditions of life. The main challenge of theology is to differentiate between what is God's work and what is the work of human beings, what is the ultimate and what the pre-ultimate. Ecotheology could enforce the courage to be and to act with rational fantasy based on goal-oriented negotiations for sustainability transformation in the global village. The contribution of ecotheology in Gräb's view is to tell repeatedly the unbelievable biblical story that God the creator is at the same time God the saviour. Christians who understand their life in the light of the story of God's creative and redemptive work would be hopeful and courageous to act thoughtfully in desperate (ecological) situations where this seemed to be of no avail. For Gräb, liturgy

transforms theology into a human resource of repeatedly gaining hope for opportunities of human activities amidst distress. Filled with hope, Christians could act on the forefront of the sustainability transition of the global society. He concluded by saying: "Christian communities fight at the forefront of the ecological movement as agents of civil society searching for the best ways of sustainability transition in all spheres of society."

In a different contribution on mainline Christian perspectives, Loreen Maseno, lecturer at Maseno University in Kenya, pointed out that ecotheologies in the Global South first function as practices before they are (sometimes) only afterwards transferred into writing. One example of this process are the accounts of a tree-planting eucharist ceremony that were described by Martinus Daneel for African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe (Daneel 2006). This liturgical ceremony was developed orally in group meetings and spontaneously in the course of the practice of the ceremony itself. The discussion following Maseno's lecture centred around the resultant need for comprehensive learning material that explains the different approaches to ecotheology. Maseno reported that in Kenya, young adults showed a new interest in ecology and brought environmental contents to their congregations from the university campuses. She suggested disseminating learning materials on ecotheologies via the influential Christian media channels in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, the academic field of religion and development should assess the translation of the different theologies into actions. Maseno concluded by remarking that the interreligious dialogue in Kenya mainly focused on the themes of politics and the environment. The environment could according to her be observed to be the main connecting topic and meeting point between the different religions. International FBOs and governments could support such interreligious dialogue forums on ecology to strengthen religious communities' joint environmental action in the local communities while at the same time fostering interreligious partnerships.

An African Pentecostal Perspective on Salvation in the Context of Ecology

Apostle Mangaliso Matshobane engaged with ecological sustainability from an African Pentecostal perspective with a contribution focusing on Southern African Pentecostal eschatologies and their implications for the environment. According to Matshobane, traditional Pentecostal views on ecology rely on two biblical arguments: firstly, on an anthropocentric *dominion theology* based on Gen 1, which regards humans as the dominant creature over any others. Following this approach, saving the human soul is favoured over saving any other part of creation. Secondly, they rely on an *apocalyptic eschatology* (the teachings of the last things) that interprets climate change as part of a world that is close to its liberating end in a destructive apocalypse of the earth leading to a better, new life in the heavens. This interpretation of apocalyptic theology centres around the belief that the destruction of the earth is a necessary prerequisite for this new heaven and earth to be built by God. All alterations to the planet caused by climate change are according to this perspective a result of God's will and a sign of the long-awaited apocalypse and redemption of the world. Withstanding climate change might therefore either hinder God's plan or at least – even if climate change itself was not a sign of the apocalypse – the world would in the end be destroyed in any case. The protection of this earth would according to this view be unnecessary.

In a second perspective, Matshobane presented a different understanding of apocalyptic eschatology among Pentecostals which interprets the apocalypse as a transformation of the current world into the new heavens and earth. This second interpretation favours ecological preservation as a holy eschatological exercise in accordance with God's plans for the redemption of the world. Consequently, Matshobane said there was an *emergence of ecotheology in this regard among Pentecostals*. Salvation is seen here as multidimensional and as affecting the material, social, cosmic and eschatological spheres over and above a personal salvation. Ecology in this view is not related to nature as opposed to human culture, but instead it becomes personal, ecclesiological and universal. Drawing on Clark Pinnock, who

argued that the Holy Spirit – a key concept in Pentecostal theology – plays a critical role in creation, Matshobane pointed out that the Spirit was not only involved during the creation of the world, but was involved with creation even before humans were made, and also continues to be involved with creation today and in the future until the redemption of the world at the end of all time. According to Matshobane, this pneumatological ecology can serve as an angle for ecological spirituality for Pentecostals.

Matshobane also referred to the above-mentioned tree-planting ceremonies held in Zimbabwe and described by Daneel (2006) and pointed out that pneumatological ecology had laid the ground for the founding of the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches in Zimbabwe, which developed a tree-planting liturgy including Christ as the saviour of the environment. Matshobane followed Asamoah-Gyadu (2009) in that Christian "dominion" over creation needs to be seen as taking responsibility for rather than dominating over creation by Pentecostal and Charismatic church leaders.

Matshobane concluded by stating that salvation must be seen in the context of all creation and that the role of the spirit extended to all creation. He suggested that African Initiated Churches must develop liturgies based on scripture and reflective of their African heritage. This would also help African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in *formulating an African-based ecotheology*. Matshobane stated that the turn towards ecology by Pentecostals will potentially have a strong impact in Africa, due to the swiftly increasing influence of Pentecostalism in Africa ("Pentecostalization of African Christianity"). Although Pentecostals are engaging in the advocacy of the environment later than the discussions on the environment taking place in the global ecumenical movement since the 1970s, their environmental engagement would steer many more than "just" Pentecostal churches towards environmentally friendly beliefs and actions. For the time being though, Matshobane saw the internal advocacy among Pentecostal communities who are still divided on the question which eschatology to follow as the most important task for Pentecostals. According to Matshobane, a change in Pentecostal spirituality constitutes the basis for environmental actions in Pentecostal churches in Southern Africa – a notion reflected again in Rev. Rachel Mash's insights on the strategy of change applied by the Green Anglicans (see Section 2.3.4 below).

An African Independent Perspective on Ecology as a Topic of Redemption

During the 2019 consultation at the University of Pretoria, His Grace the Right Reverend Bishop Dr B.E. Lekganyane, leader of the largest church in South Africa, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), spoke on "Ecological Sustainability as a Topic of Redemption within the Theology of the Zion Christian Church". His speech was later published in the church's magazine *The Messenger*, which reaches millions of church members.

Lekganyane made clear statements on the importance of the preservation of the natural environment, stating that "ecological sustainability is the foundation of life, and therefore discussions of sustainable development can take place only after ecological sustainability is guaranteed" (Lekganyane 2019). Lekganyane based his arguments on the creation account in the Bible and emphasized that humans had a sacred relationship with nature as they could not be sustained outside of nature. Lekganyane connected this sacred relationship with God's gift of nature to the philosophical life principle of Ubuntu – a concept that highlights the interdependence of all life. He went on to explain that the connection of humans with all life expanded beyond the immediate time and space and back in time to the ancestors of people and forward in time to future generations. Harming the environment, he stated, would cause harm to all these generations of species and eventually also to oneself because the relationships to all beings form the basis of one's identity. Making reference to the natural sciences, for example the Brundtland definition of sustainability (UN Documents 1987), and simultaneously referring to the Bible, Lekganyane presented a plurally informed picture of the basis for an ecotheology that culminated in an

analysis of the consequences of environmental degradation. The bishop reported that environmental degradation also led to land deprivation for many black communities, which resulted in social injustice and spiritual identity problems through the dispossession of relations to the beings on this land. He said that: "To exploit without limit destroys the environment. This in turn destroys the ability of all of us and others to become; in the full Ubuntu sense" (Lekganyane 2019). The church leader finished his speech by clearly marking the devastating influence that environmental destruction already has on people in South Africa, where "the unpredictability of weather patterns has effectively wiped away subsistence agriculture" (Lekganyane 2019). To mitigate these destructive climate effects, Lekganyane urgently called for action by governments, businesses, communities and churches in his conclusion: "The time for action has come. No one can sit behind and watch. We all have to take a stance" (Lekganyane 2019).

2.2.2 Perspectives of Traditional Leaders on Ecological Sustainability

Cosmo Mapitsa, legal scholar and research fellow at the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, recently conducted a study on the perspectives on ecological sustainability of traditional leaders in the Bolobedu region in Limpopo Province, South Africa. He contributed the following passage of this report.

In rural Bolobedu, traditional structures play an important role in the daily lives of members of the community. Every village is under the leadership of a traditional leader who is a local representative of the Queen. Traditional healers play the role of "priests" of traditional religion and traditional leaders are the custodians of traditional systems. Both play a role in traditional religion and were consequently included in the study.

Ecological sustainability is viewed as intrinsically integrated with all aspects of Bolobedu life. Traditional leaders expressed that ecological sustainability was progressively being lost, as part of the general diminishing role of traditional values and lifestyles. Three main factors are highlighted as contributing to the erosion of traditional values, and with it the promotion of ecological sustainability. First, the loss of traditional values, which are symbolized and embodied within the concept of Kheila (which is a set of rules that forbid actions by certain persons, either in specific circumstances or generally). Secondly, governance issues, relating specifically to the vision of governing authority between traditional leadership structures and municipality structures, make traditional leadership less relevant to people's daily needs. As a result, rules set by traditional leaders, such as rules aimed at reducing the cutting down of trees, overhunting or the destruction of wetlands, are not adhered to. Lastly, socioeconomic factors, poverty and population growth make the policing of behaviour more difficult.

The concept of Kheila consists of rules forbidding specific behaviours, akin to the setting of taboos. These include not hunting or foraging in forests or parts of forests that are held as sacred. Animals and fruits that are found in those forests are both symbols of spirits of ancestors and considered a "home" and "food" of the ancestors. The Kheila comes in to ensure that individuals don't break these rules even when not seen, because if it is Kheila and you do it anyway, something bad will befall you. While discussing these practices specifically in their African Traditional Religious spirituality context, traditional leaders also highlighted the role of these "reserves" in ensuring that ecosystems can be self-replenishing. Kheila also operated outside sacred forests. In a normal forest, and even in the village itself, it is forbidden to cut down a fruit tree or an old/big tree. Custom dictated that there was no hunting or cultivating after the very first rain of the rainy season. It is a possibility that these rules allowed for foraged plants and hunted animals to be replenished prior to being utilized by the community.

Traditional leaders generally held a view that gradually, and with increasing intensity as time went on, the role of traditional values has been diminishing in the daily lives of people. Participants referred to

Mefoko as an example of disappearing practices. Mefoko is a rainmaking ritual that involved a group of people dispatched from the royal village to go around the whole Bolobedu area and going house to house performing a ritual. This occurred at a similar time with other rituals that formed part of rainmaking ceremonies. While some participants indicated that they were not sure why these were no longer done, most participants pointed out that it has become impractical, as it cannot involve every household as it might be offensive to some members of the community.

Ordinarily, traditional leaders are the custodians of cultural practices and customs. However, the constitutional arrangement in South Africa is that legislative and executive authority of the local sphere of government rests with municipalities. These are run by elected representatives who represent local areas (wards). On the other hand, land (often the most valuable asset at the local level) in rural areas such as Bolobedu cannot be individually owned but is controlled by traditional councils on behalf of members of the community as a collective. Municipalities have to consult with traditional leaders, who have ex officio representation in local municipalities. These factors contribute towards dynamics that are seen by participants as contributing to the diminishing role of traditional leadership structures. Participants indicated that the actual constitutional arrangements were well suited to ensure best local governance through cooperation, but lamented failures in implementation.

Lastly, factors that were indicated by participants as influencing the applicability of African Traditional Religious values in ecological sustainability can be categorized as socioeconomic. In particular, participants pointed to the fact that practices that were conducive to ecological sustainability worked best in traditional Bolobedu villages, which were spaced out households (akin to farms), with large spaces for cultivation and forests for foraging between villages. This could no longer be practical, according to participants, not least because of the significant population growth that has occurred. Another factor pointed out is that, while population density has meant that cultivation and foraging are no longer practical as means of maintaining livelihoods, there have been fewer replacement economic activities. Because of poverty, traditional leaders pointed out, traditional rules forbidding the destruction of ecosystems by cutting down trees, mining sand and overhunting could not be enforced, as the livelihoods of many households are dependent on these activities.

In conclusion, traditional leaders expressed views that traditional values that encouraged ecological sustainability worked best in traditional settings, and the applicability of such values were becoming less significant in the daily lives of Balobedu people, following the pattern of other traditional religious values and practices. However, they pointed out that there is room to ensure the applicability of such values, and lessons can be learnt that are more widely applicable. This required approaches dealing with a number of social factors, including the management of poverty, ensuring the participation of traditional leaders and traditional religious leaders in local government, and encouraging the learning of African Traditional Religious values even for people who were not necessarily adherents of traditional religion.

2.2.3 A Bahá'í Perspective

Mrs Tahirih Matthee from the Bahá'í community of South Africa gave an insight into the theological reasoning behind Bahá'í engagement with the environment. She said that Bahá'í believed that humans are essentially spiritual beings in a material space. The oneness of God, religion and humans was according to her at the heart of the Bahá'í community. Matthee explained that the Bahá'í writings clearly stated that humans must not worship nature but should be custodians of the environment. The overarching unity paradigm also called Bahá'í for global unity in environmental actions. Matthee suggested therefore "the global establishment of community building activities such as children's classes, junior youth groups, study circles in the institute courses and devotional gatherings ... to learn about the stewardship role towards nature and to carry out acts of service." God has provided all that

we need for us in nature, she said, and that: "Our collective responsibility is to live in harmony with nature for ecological sustainability." Matthee furthermore highlighted that "Bahá'í Faith institutions have provided communications calling for an urgent response to climate change more than a decade ago." One of the tasks for faith communities was to educate their believers, to take up the knowledge of the environmental sciences, and to "implement practices aligned to stewardship of the environment".

Of crucial importance for the Bahá'í is interfaith dialogue, as Matthee highlighted. This is, for example, reflected in the view that the diversity of perspectives offered in interreligious dialogue brings truth. Interreligious alliances and strong interreligious voices are vital to successfully engage with political decision makers on the topic of environmental protection – especially when political decisions were not made in the interests of the poor. Religious communities could act on their behalf as they cannot expect much support from other communities and don't have another lobby. The strong point of *religious* communities was in her view that these communities could take on the perspective of the poor and stand up together and make a strong point and challenge the politicians on their neglect of the environment that in consequence affects the poor the most. Matthee therefore called for a united voice of faith communities for the environment and encouraged science and religion to come together to converse on climate change. She concluded by emphasizing the commitment to moral principles and values in lifestyle choices of their members that would impact the environment negatively and by pointing out the serious intention of the Bahá'í community in South Africa to play a positive role in behavioural change for ecological sustainability.

2.2.4 Muslim Perspective

Muhammad Gallant, Islamic Studies scholar at the University of the Western Cape and founder of the Environmental Affairs Department of the South African Muslim Judicial Council, spoke on an ecotheological Muslim perspective, focusing on water in the Qur'an.

Quoting Sura 23, Verse 18 of the Qur'an, he emphasized firstly that Allah sent water in the form of sufficient, but not destructive, rains, and that Allah controlled in his mercy the quality and accessibility of all water. The Qur'an highlighted according to Gallant in several places the preciousness of freshwater, as a source of life to all creatures, that is subject to the power and goodwill of Allah. Freshwater was, in Gallant's account, in this sense a reminder to all creatures to be thankful to their creator.

Furthermore, Gallant pointed out that from a Muslim perspective "every living species on the earth must have a right to water" as Prophet Muhammad had declared that water, pasture and fire could not be withheld from anyone. Gallant derived concrete rules from these writings and stated that as a result it was "not permissible to withhold excess water where there are others who have need of it". He translated this into a concrete prohibition of the building of upstream river dams or the obligation to freely share water from pumps or ponds with anyone in need of water. In addition to these concrete social-justice-related rules, Gallant also derived a general request for gratitude to Allah for freshwater from his readings of the Qur'an. This gratitude should according to him prevent any pollution or waste of the precious freshwater. As a third point, Gallant gave an account of the socio-religious function, that water takes in the purification ritual before prayer in Islam. Water, in his account, was essential for the ritual prayers to Allah. He highlighted how wasting water was forbidden for any purpose and regardless of whether it was scarce or abundant. In conclusion, Gallant highlighted that the Qur'an demands a careful and sparing use of water on the basis of social justice arguments such as the sharing of water with those in need in a society with limited water access, as well as ritual-related points in the ablution ritual and on spiritual accounts such as gratitude and respect to the creator.

2.2.5 An Ecofeminist Perspective

Tanya van Wyk, senior lecturer at the University of Pretoria, elaborated on the approach of religious ecofeminism. Ecofeminism was coined as a term in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne, who defined it as women's potential to bring about ecological change. Different branches of the women's environmental movement have developed since, which acknowledges that women's contexts and how their personhood and livelihood is affected by climate change are not the same for all women. Ecofeminism emphasizes that the domination and degradation of nature and the exploitation of women have significant connections. *Androcentrism*, which situates maleness at the centre of one's world view, is at the heart of this double exploitation. Van Wyk referred to Rosemary Radford-Ruether highlighting that ecofeminist movements refer to the complex reality of how women and nature have both been exploited by their own societies. It furthermore includes how women and nature have been exploited by colonizing powers, how women function as the mediators of nature's benefits to their families and may be caretakers of nature in this context.

A cultural-symbolic approach that has an ideological superstructure unites the different strands of ecofeminism under the appreciation and critique of the woman–nature connection. The connection was established in an attempt to include the ideals of a tradition around interpreting the earth as mother into ecofeminism. This relationship of motherhood and earth was originally derived from spiritual understandings of the caring, giving, nurturing earth that humans are dependent on like the child on the mother. However, this notion has been debated and strongly rejected in the academic discourse for its essentialist perspective on women, who are according to this approach more linked to nature, to giving, caring and nurturing, and also to a spiritual connection to the world than men are. A socioeconomic perspective inclusive of race and class perspectives does not deny but criticizes this romanticizing connection between nature and women as it analyses how women's bodies and labour are exploited to create wealth in capitalism just as nature is. Instead of following along with the image of the nurturing woman, men should also be taken into the responsibility of caring for the earth.

Van Wyk raised the question of whether a distinction was necessary between ecofeminism in the Global North and the Global South as the impoverishment of women and of land were often at the centre of ecofeminism and as these were experienced more strongly and occurred more often in the Global South. Does the Global South have a more direct and urgent connection to ecofeminism than the Global North? Although asking this question to provoke thoughts on the necessity of direct experiences of climate change or land pollution for the effectiveness of ecofeminism, Van Wyk warned of the proliferation of stereotypes of first and third world divides possibly enforced by this notion. In her opinion, it was more important to focus on a unified effort to combat the exploitation of women and nature, while recognizing differences in experience and context. Van Wyk also suggested that there was a need to come up with a term related to ecofeminism that was more inclusive, for example queer ecologies, global feminist environmental justice or gender and the environment.

In Van Wyk's view, it is not the "natural" responsibility of women to protect the environment, but because of global power hierarchies, women might be better equipped to deconstruct current global power structures that exploit the environment. In the discussion on Van Wyk's contribution it was pointed out how important role models are for women, for example Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai. In light of this importance, the absence of leading women who could function as such role models in the Pentecostal movement and in the mainline ecumenical movement was criticized.

2.3 Ecological Best Practice Examples in Southern Africa and Beyond

2.3.1 Actions on Reforestation and Agriculture

Agricultural Training by the Organization of African Instituted Churches in Kenya

Rev. Nicta Lubaale, general secretary of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), spoke on sustainable agriculture and the agricultural education programmes by the Organization of African Instituted Churches in Kenya. He started off with the statement that the ecological crisis was similar to the health crisis of Covid-19 in its consequences. Many people could be affected by hunger and poverty through both crises, leading to a third crisis: severe famine. He called on the audience for action to prevent this: "We should be prophets of what we want."

Based on the OAIC's vision that the African people are transformed by Christianity, "building on their cultures and living an abundant life in community for their children and the world"[3], Lubaale introduced the activities of OAIC focusing on agriculture and ecological sustainability. As a continental network of churches, the OAIC uses church structures of African Initiated Churches and their liturgies to disseminate their work, but also closely cooperates with other religious communities in its programmes. Working mostly in rural areas and focusing on agricultural production in individual households and on ecological education during agricultural training. Relying on cultural structures and cultural narratives that reflect "ecological harmony" and local languages, OAIC opens opportunities to speak about ecological problems and problem-solving strategies in appealing ways that engage people more easily and directly.

In light of the fact that two-thirds of the people in Southern Africa live in severe or moderate food insecurity, Lubaale raised the question: "How do people who live in hunger pray about the earth?" He emphasized that hunger in the region is partly a result of the environmental changes, as the nutritional value that land might produce decreases with ecological degradation. Soil degradation and unsustainable, genetically modified crop seeds lead to the need to buy seeds from professional seed companies every year. The consciousness of soil health has increased among farmers because of the experienced substantial decreases in yields. This has led to a wide acceptance of the sustainable farming programmes that the OAIC offers. Farmers are currently also raising their voices in the fight against climate change and engage politically with the topic upon experiencing droughts and floods themselves. One of their questions for the future is how their governments are going to deal with the expected unemployment due to the impact of climate change on the high number of jobs in agriculture. Lubaale also named the transformation of wetlands into farming land or construction sites and deforestation as important problems in the region. Deforestation is hard to stop because almost every household uses wood from living trees and bushes as firewood for cooking as electricity is too expensive and unavailable for most people.

Lubaale reported that the interest of participants in the OAIC development programmes resulted from the direct positive impact that these programmes had. A core motivation was to be part of sustainable seed banks instead of being dependent on genetically modified seeds that could not be replanted and provided for lower-quality foods than the traditional seeds. These existential needs motivated people from different faiths to work together, share their knowledge, and then spread it again in their own faith communities for action. He emphasized that the collective processes of agriculture he had witnessed were not only processes of environmental consciousness-building, but also of peace-building and community engagement. The acceptance of the OAIC's work has been so wide that currently 70% of

[3] https://www.oaic.org.

their resources are donated by the local churches as they realized how strongly agricultural work is linked to the survival of the communities.

Working for ecologically sustainable communities, the OAIC applies the following strategy: first to create environmental awareness, secondly enabling communities to come up with their own structures for ecological sustainability (seed banks, independent marketing) and thirdly analyse the process and results with the community. The communication processes within the communities are organized in multigenerational, multi-faith and multi-gender groups. The elders would for example convene in their own age group, speak about the ecological changes since their childhood among themselves and then report to the youth group about the observed changes. The younger generation thus learns from people they know and trust that the environment in their own area was much healthier 50 years ago. The elder generation is at the same time held accountable for their impact on the lives of the current and future generations.

The following discussion evolved around a method to document these intergenerational encounters as the participants agreed that the intergenerational learning was so normal to the communities that they would not document the insights of the elders in writing, as a result of which they would eventually be lost. The intergenerational learning was expressed to be a specificity to an African way of learning in the community that should be officially included in the local school system for environmental learning.

Tree-Ordination Rituals in Buddhist Communities in Thailand

In a comparative view focusing on South East Asia, Robekkah Ritchie, scholar on Buddhism at Freie Universität Berlin, reported that Buddhist communities engage with the environment in many different regions and forms. She chose Thailand as an example where Theravada Buddhism is practiced a lot and builds on a long tradition of monks wandering through nature (Forest Tradition). She explained:

> *The Forest Tradition has spread internationally, in part due to the influential monk Ajahn Chah (1918–1992), who founded an international monastery in northeastern Thailand where a number of Westerners ordained and practised. Arguably the greatest challenge to monastics practising in the forest has been the widespread deforestation in Thailand in recent decades, which has impacted and altered the forests, physical landscapes, and the relationship to the forest.*

With the developing deforestation and the close approach to climatic tipping points, Buddhist communities in Thailand saw the need for environmental action. The wandering monks noticed the increasing deforestation early as their areas for religiously motivated wandering decreased. As a consequence of the bad state "their" forests were in, the monks developed new religious rituals and started to "ordain" trees as Buddhist monks. This ordination of trees into the rank of a monk was symbolized by the wrapping of the trees in Buddhist monk robes. According to Ritchie, monks' robes are deeply embedded in and an important aspect of culture in Thailand. The robes convey meaning not just for the monastic community itself but in wider social contexts as well. The respect that society shows the monks is extended to the trees and thereby protects them from being cut down. The religious rituals successfully helped to protect the forests. Ritchie explained: "The creation of this ritual began as a way to raise awareness of deforestation and combat it with reforestation, and it has developed into a broader movement that has also spread into neighbouring countries."

The ritual became entangled in the complex relations of political, religious and social strata in Thailand when it became

> *an asserting sense of 'Thainess' for ethnic and religious minorities as the ritual entered the mainstream in the mid-1990s. In 1997, the king officially endorsed the practice, and asked Thai citizens to ordain 50 million trees in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of his accession. This proclamation became an active campaign, the 'Program for the Community Forest Ordination of 50 Million Trees in Honor of the King's Golden Jubilee,' which involved outreach to hundreds of villages. Not only did this legitimize tree ordination as a mainstream practice, but it also allowed groups whose Thainess had fallen into question to perform tree ordinations to reassert their citizenship as Thais.*

Ritchie concluded by stating that Buddhist movements can be observed to respect the environment far beyond Thailand: while the predominantly Buddhist country of Bhutan is the only country in the world with a negative carbon footprint, also in China the Buddhist-inspired popular vegetarian movement has a CO_2-reducing impact on the society.

2.3.2 Actions on Water

Religious Communities' Importance in Community-Based Water Management

Esper Ncube, water and sanitation expert at Rand Water, spoke about the important role that religious communities have in preserving natural resources like water, in coping with droughts and with the effects of natural disasters. Ncube pointed out that religious communities in general, but especially traditional religious communities, had a high potential in engaging with these topics beneficially through their often gentle religious practices and stances towards the environment. She stressed the natural water scarcity of Southern Africa, exacerbated by the unequal access to water, leaking and aged water pipe systems as well as climate change. Drought has been a continuous threat to the agricultural sector and at the same time "water is universally known as a religious symbol", so her argument. Its spiritual character should be more strongly emphasized and made fruitful during the development, interpretation and analysis of water laws. She found that religious communities were strongly connected with water resources through ceremonial uses as a spiritual symbol and as an object of worship. Ncube stated:

> *The protection of the abodes of the Gods from entrance, utilization and exploitation overtly or covertly encourages conservation and management of natural resources. ... These African Traditional Religious strategies for natural resource conservation and management have somehow been eroded by acculturation and enculturation of most African communities through the introduction of Christianity as a modern way of worship.*

With this observation she took up the critical argument against the influence of Christianity on nature conservation that had been brought up in the contributions on ecotheologies by Conradie, Gräb, Werner and Maseno and that was a recurring theme during the consultations. In her talk, Ncube as a renowned water expert made the suggestion to take up the traditional religious knowledge on water and natural resources in state regulations. By introducing this approach, she proposed a bridge between religious communities and natural sciences in practice.

Saving Water in Times of Drought in Muslim Congregations in South Africa

Muhammad Gallant spoke on water from a Muslim perspective. He started by quoting that only 8% of the global freshwater consumption was used for domestic purposes. Instead, agriculture uses up to 70% of freshwater resources and pollutes them with nitrate through the use of fertilizers and pesticides. According to Gallant, the rules of Islam prohibit the selling or owning of water. Excess water should not be withheld from those who are in need of it. Gallant reported on the water-saving initiatives in the

Islamic community in South Africa during the severe drought in 2018. Water used for the ablution ritual was saved in mosques and reused for gardening. The community was also able to donate saved water from their households to the mosque for the spiritual use in ablution. The Muslim community educated their members on saving water and using wastewater for flushing. Gallant reported on a fatwa (legal opinion in Islamic law) issued in Oman that allowed the use of treated water for ablution in the mosques and for anything else but drinking. The same fatwa was installed in South Africa during the times of water scarcity, although freshwater needed to be used for ablution whenever enough water was available.

2.3.3 Actions on Waste and Pollution

The Gilgal Bible Church – An African Independent Local Best Practice Example

Apostle Siboniso Ngobese, spiritual head of Gilgal Bible Church in the township of Kaalfontein north of Johannesburg, reported on his church as an example of a local religious community engaging with the environmental problems experienced in its community on a local and practical level. The community in which the church is located is affected by environmental pollution on a daily basis. Polluted air leads to respiratory illnesses and contaminated water causes major health problems. Ngobese attributed both to informal businesses operating without environmental protection standards in Kaalfontein. He also accounted for the problems of illegal garbage dumping in the neighbourhood of this congregation and the ensuing dangers for children playing at these illegal dumpsites. Overpopulation and electricity shortages lead to health problems as people had to resort to lung-damaging paraffin and wood fires. In addition to environmental pollution, Ngobese described that his church members experienced climate change in the form of heatwaves and decreasing harvests from small-scale gardening. The church responds to these environmental problems through community outreach programmes in gardening and a cooperation with the schools for environment education programmes as well as clean-up campaigns in the neighbourhood. Gilgal Bible Church promotes recycling and the implementation of environmental cleaning habits into members' daily lives to conserve natural resources, reduce energy consumption, and reduce global warming. Apostle Ngobese said that his church teaches that "godliness is next to cleanliness". This meant in effect that Christians were to be stewards of the earth and to protect creation.

2.3.4 Actions on Ecological Education and Advocacy

The Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI)

Kate Davies, co-founder of the Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute, spoke about the interreligious work of SAFCEI.[4] Davies suggests that faith leadership is influential and trusted by all age groups, making congregations ideal centres of life-long learning about sustainable living practices. SAFCEI has worked on the supposition that the way humans treat nature depends on their perception of it. She stated that African spirituality saw a spiritual presence in all of nature. In contrast, the Abrahamic faiths and Western spirituality has a human-centred worldview. Because of this, secular materialism has prevailed and nature has been largely evaluated according to its economic value.

SAFCEI's experience from working with different faith communities across Southern Africa suggests that the lack of environmental action among the communities often results from the absence of a mandate from the faith leadership. This is related to a religious narrative that centres around human salvation rather than stewardship, a lack of environmental knowledge and of dialogue between science and religion. Additionally, the perception in South Africa that environmental conservation was a middle-class or privileged area of concern was, until a decade ago, strong among many marginalised communities.

[4] https://safcei.org/about-us/.

According to SAFCEI's observations, the interest in environmental protection is currently increasing in faith communities because of degraded life support systems and a growing awareness of climate change impacts.

To achieve the aim of supporting religious leaders to become "change agents and eco-justice activists", SAFCEI works on different levels. Firstly, the organization strengthens religious leaders' capacity to advocate for ethical governance. Leaders are encouraged to speak out and issue statements and resolutions on eco-justice. They are also motivated to protect the environment and establish sustainable practices in their own congregations. SAFCEI works with people of faith at the grassroots level encouraging them to develop and mark environmental liturgies and celebrations. It shares information on resource management and on local and global community advocacy and action. Community clean-ups and praying presences, vigils or demonstrations at threatened natural sites and campaigns and court cases against nuclear power, fossil fuels and pollution were other examples of involvement of religious communities. SAFCEI encouraged the celebration of special environmental days, with symbolic tree-planting ceremonies after collective decision-making and action. From Davies' point of view, the collective decision to engage with the environment was the most important basis for a faith group to be effective.

One of the most important pillars of SAFCEI's work is their Faith Leader Environmental Advocacy Training (FLEAT) programme. Participants are selected from local leadership. During extended workshops, environment-related challenges are shared and future plans are formulated collaboratively. Davies reported that SAFCEI has established a network that connects these leadership groups from different faiths. In this way, environmental and multi-faith dialogue and peace-building are interwoven through the focus on the common goals of building resilience and environmental restoration and protection.

Davies also stressed the importance of international advocacy: more international solidarity, and a stronger multi-faith voice is needed. She named the international Christian call for ecological action issued in Germany in 2019, the "Wuppertal Call Kairos for Creation" (Andrianos et al. 2019), as an example of what could be developed by faith leadership in Africa. She said that it was important to establish a stronger connection between global advocacy and local action and pointed to the need for an African advocacy roadmap guiding religious communities on how to engage with national governments, the African Union and other African political decision-making bodies.

The Green Anglicans

Rev. Rachel Mash, Environmental Coordinator in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, spoke about the work of the Environmental Network of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, founded in 2004 and well-known today as the Green Anglicans movement. The basis for the Green Anglicans was to create new spiritual narratives for the communities they worked with for environmental protection. The movement aimed to tailor their ecological actions to the community so that every community could "change its spiritual DNA". According to Mash, for Christians this meant rereading the bible and starting with the topic of salvation asking the questions: Is it only humans that are going to be saved? Or the whole cosmos? What is the word of God? Is it the written scripture or the whole of creation that has the fingerprint of God? Did Jesus preach the word to the whole creation or only to humans? Finding the importance of the environment on the Christian faith through responding to these questions would provide for a starting point that thoroughly focuses the communities' *beliefs* on the environment, which was the stable basis for any environmental action to follow from it.

In addition to the spiritual message, also the right messenger needs to be chosen for a community to accept environmental spiritual teachings. In this regard, Mash emphasized the vital role of young people

as eco-messengers to their communities. The older generation on the other hand needs to confess that a massive part of environmental destruction had taken place during their lives. On the issue of intergenerational justice, Mash asked the older generation to listen to the younger generation, who are often more of the experts on climate change and the important factors impacting their futures. "Don't run campaigns without consulting the young people!", was her strong demand.

The young messengers need to be reached through the right means – social media in the experience of the Green Anglicans. Mash suggested "movement-building instead of institution-building!". Transformation does not take place when individuals change, but when *networked* individuals change. Mash also spoke about the importance of environmental education. To reach more young people, Sunday schools and madrasas needed to educate children so that they would "fall in love with creation". In a next step, youths would need to get involved in environmental actions, for example through clean-ups of their local neighbourhoods. These actions would be successful when the cleaning of the areas became a "reclaiming of the polluted lands" and resulted in "doing something fun and beautiful with it". The practical insights that Mash gave into the successful environmental campaigns of the Green Anglicans ended on a note about tree-planting. The tree-planting actions that had according to her become increasingly popular in sub-Saharan Africa should be substituted by tree-growing initiatives, as in her experience the trees were often neglected once a group had planted them. Just as Maseno had spoken about the successful oral tree-planting eucharist ceremonies in Zimbabwe, Rev. Mash spoke about tree-planting rituals as well. She highlighted the importance of not only planting trees but caring for trees and suggested connecting tree-planting with a long-term action or with personal celebrations like baptism or wedding ceremonies. Such tree-planting ceremonies were also suggested at the 2019 consultation by Charles Bakolo from the Malawi Creation Care Network, where tree-planting weddings, birthdays, confirmations etc. are regularly and successfully celebrated.

The Green Teaching and Learning Community

Tanya van Wyk presented the interdenominational initiative "The Green Teaching and Learning Community – Green TLC" and their approach to sharing environmental knowledge among Christians in Southern Africa. The Green TLC was founded in 2019 as a result of the consultation at the University of Pretoria with the aim to spread specifically targeted scientific environmental knowledge about Southern Africa and to connect scientific information with different religious perspectives on the environment. The steering group of the Green TLC has since been drafting interdenominational learning materials and has established a growing WhatsApp channel that provides inputs on environmental sciences and environmental theologies. The members take turns to provide the content to reflect their different Christian perspectives in the channel.[5]

[5] https://safcei.org/knowledge-base/category/green-teaching-and-learning-community/.

3 Summary of Key Themes and Points of Discussion

The growing dynamic of Southern African religious communities' interest in, engagement with and practical action on climate change and ecological sustainability was clearly visible in the contributions and discussions in the capacity-building webinar *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa* and the *Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability* conference. This section synthesizes key themes and conclusions discussed at the events.

The outline of the present ecological situation in Southern Africa and the alarming climate predictions for the future by climate scientist Francois Engelbrecht during the consultation resonated with a strong sense of urgency for ecological action among the participants. A shared responsibility was felt by all participants to start acting against climate change by advocating for strong climate protection regulations locally and globally and by teaching in religious congregations about the spiritual importance of nature as climate change mitigation measures. The debates about global social injustice between highly industrialized and less industrialized countries was mainly taken to a theological level. In this theological discussion the (negative) role of Christianity as a historical import from environment-polluting Europe to Africa was repeatedly debated, questioned and reconfigured – especially in its consequences and relevance for today's Christians.

Participants of the two consultations spoke in detail of the challenges experienced by Southern African communities and presented local solutions already implemented by religious communities. Many speakers elaborated on the importance of the recent *bodily experiences* of local effects of climate change that led people to actions. It was also pointed out that the majority of global emissions do not come from the Southern African region and that emission reduction in the region might jeopardize much-needed economic growth. Consequently, the focus of the conversations was much more on climate change *adaptation* measures and less on emission reduction. Religious communities were reported to be very active in finding and implementing adaptation solutions locally during water shortages in Southern Africa or as a reaction to the severe impacts of tropical cyclone Idai that affected around 2.6 million people across the region in 2019. Nevertheless, climate change adaptation has to be implemented on a political level in Southern Africa. Especially the effects of climate change on food security in the region have to be recognized and tackled internationally by NGOs, FBOs and governments.

Another central and recurring theme was the importance of interdenominational and interreligious dialogue. Joint interdenominational and interreligious action against climate change and for the preservation of the environment was highlighted as fundamentally important. At the same time, discussions on the pressing ecological problems felt by people of all faiths and the urgent need for ecological action visible across the different religious communities are important points of interreligious encounter and can be conducive to interdenominational and interreligious dialogue and cooperation. However, it was also highlighted that there also needs to be in-depth, theological engagement in each individual religious community in order to strengthen and clarify the respective theological standpoints on ecological sustainability of a community's traditions , perhaps even before engaging with other denominations and religions on this issue.

Within the Pentecostal tradition an important theological debate, referring to the relationship of economic development and ecological sustainability, concerns the issue of prosperity. Relating to the widespread prosperity theology in many African churches, one important conclusion of this debate brought forward specifically by Pentecostal church leaders was that prosperity should not be mainly understood in a material sense but in a wider, more comprehensive sense that includes environmental dimensions and ecological sustainability.

A generally relevant theological question is the question of eschatology. Eschatology refers to the ultimate things in a theological sense, the redemption of believers, the end of the world and the afterlife. The specific eschatology of a religious community has fundamental implications for its members' attitudes towards the natural environment. The question arose whether the Christian belief in an ultimate redemption of the world through God would mean that the current Planet Earth could be neglected by Christians – or whether this belief constitutes a theological imperative to treat the Earth with care. All speakers agreed that humans needed to act to preserve this current creation, but arguments differed as to why this was so from a theological standpoint. These debates gravely influence how believers interact with their environment. This point was also highlighted by speakers who presented best practice examples on ecological actions motivated by religious beliefs. It was pointed out that changing the foundational religious beliefs on how humans should relate with their environment is key to any behavioural changes.

In this context, the role of African Traditional Religious values for ecological engagement was discussed. Its possible role as a new ecological paradigm leading to a more ecological religious tradition in Africa and beyond is also a recurring topic of academic debate. A growing corpus of literature reflects on the positive impact of African Traditional world views on the environment (Olúpọ̀nà 2006; Sakupapa 2013; Ntreh, Aidoo, and Aryeh 2019). These authors argue that before the arrival of Christianity in Africa, traditional taboos and other behavioural rules in African Traditional Religions prevented an over-exploitation of the environment through a holistic world view that embedded humans in nature and that understood many single natural landmarks like rivers or trees as animate and filled with spirit(s). Chitando (2020), in contrast, has argued that unspecific African world views need to be critically researched in in-depth case studies for their individual contribution to environmental sustainability, as some of them might not have protected the environment for the sake of nature itself, but for the sake of saving humans from godly wrath. This scholarly debate was reflected in the consultations' contributions and highlights the need for further case studies on African Traditional Religious world views and their relationship to ecological sustainability.

Several best practice examples were presented, which highlighted effective approaches to climate change awareness-raising and action in local faith communities. In a first step, many initiatives work to change the underlying religious narratives about the relations between humans and nature. In a second step, they support communities to evaluate their local environmental challenges and to establish long-lasting and self-reliant group structures for action against the specific local challenges. The establishment of contextual *messages* about the environment in local languages was in most cases connected to the *right messenger*, such as local pastors, women's groups or youth leaders. In addition to the *right message* and the *right messenger*, oral or digital *means of communicating the message* were presented as best practice examples to reach out to the communities.

The participants moreover showed a common interest in new, contextually relevant and multilingual environmental learning material liturgies for different religions and denominations that would support local environmental actions and in additional learning opportunities on religious environmental perspectives for religious leaders and members to adapt to and mitigate the environmental impacts in their immediate surroundings. In some cases, this important small-scale engagement has led to larger interreligious or interdenominational environmental initiatives as the most effective way to learn from each other and provide support to the communities.

Overall, the examples presented substantiate the hypothesis that religious communities indeed possess great potential for ecological sustainability and increasingly use this potential to promote ecological sustainability at various levels.

4 Ways Forward and Recommended Action Points for Development Policy, Religious Communities and Research in the Field of Religion and Ecological Sustainability

A great sense of urgency to engage with climate change and the ecological crisis was shared by all participants at the two consultations. Various recommendations and policy implications emerged from the contributions and discussions. In the following, they are channelled into action points for 1. Governments, 2. Religious communities and FBOs, and 3. Academia. The recommendations focus on actors on the micro, meso and macro levels of society and cover the action areas of environmental protection and climate action through measures of environmental and climate change awareness-building, advocacy, mitigation and adaptation.

4.1 Policy Recommendations for Local and National Governments and Intergovernmental Actors

4.1.1 Cooperate with Religious Communities as Local Actors for Ecological Sustainability

Climate change mitigation and adaptation requires fundamental shifts of values, mindsets and behavioural patterns. Religious communities know the impact of changing climate and environmental pollution on the lives of their congregants. Their input is vital on the most urgent and most effective areas of action for environmental protection. Furthermore, religious communities are very influential actors in the lives of many people and can communicate the necessary behavioural changes effectively, embedded in religious teachings and in accordance with believers' convictions.

4.1.2 Create Opportunities for the Engagement of Religious Communities and Natural Sciences

Many people, among them also religious leaders, are still unaware of the dramatic consequences that climate change will have in Southern Africa according to the projections by climate scientists. Education on environmental protection and climate change was repeatedly discussed during the consultations as an important cornerstone of involving religious communities in ecological sustainability programmes. Environmental education should be offered to communities in schools, universities and workplaces, but also via religious institutions. Natural sciences could provide a wake-up call for religious communities, while religious leaders are in a unique position to convey the natural scientific knowledge to their communities. In addition to their role as mediators of environmental knowledge from the natural sciences to their communities, religious leaders are in the position to formulate and impart *religious* knowledge on the environment that reaches believers at the core of their value- and behaviour-shaping religious identity.

4.1.3 Support Environmental Action as Interreligious Action

The environmental crisis creates a collective sense of urgent action for different religious and denominational traditions. This is the time to encourage interreligious and interdenominational initiatives and actions and to strengthen religious peace and cooperation alongside environmental protection. At the same time, context sensitivity remains one of the most crucial points for the successful implementation of ecological initiatives. Knowledge about local interfaith relations as well as about intra-religious factors needs to be included in the planning of any interreligious or interdenominational programme. Communication with *all* religious leaders in the region and religious literacy on the side of policymakers is essential for successful interreligious initiatives.

4.1.4 African Pentecostal Churches and African Independent Churches Need to Be Included

African Pentecostal Churches and African Independent Churches, also known as African Initiated Churches, are the fastest-growing movement in sub-Saharan Africa (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2020).

However, they are often not represented in Christian ecumenical bodies and have therefore often not been included in ecumenical environmental protection programmes. In many cases, African Initiated Churches are reacting proactively to environmental destruction through self-organized environmental clean-up campaigns, prayer weeks, agricultural training and a shift in their theological focus (Stork, Öhlmann 2019). Nuances within the teachings on the environment by the religious movement of African Initiated Churches need to be recognized by FBOs, governments, academia and religious leaders as influential actors in the promotion of ecological sustainability.

4.1.5 Protect the Environment to Protect Religious Freedom and Protect Religious Freedom to Protect the Environment

Many religious traditions in Southern Africa perform their worship in nature and have strong spiritual connections to the environment, land, vegetation, water sources, mountains or animals. Threats to the environment also threaten these religious practices and traditions. If spiritually loaded natural sites are polluted, believers lose the grounds for their practices and their beliefs. Religious traditions that have strong connections to their environment need to be protected in their religious freedom through environmental protection. At the same time, the protection of religious freedom can foster environmental protection.

4.2 Action Points for Religious Communities and Faith-Based Organizations

4.2.1 Strengthen Climate Change Awareness among Religious Leaders and in Religious Communities and Let Religious Communities Become Environmental Learning Spaces

All religious traditions described in this report have spiritual connections to the environment. Religious leaders and religious communities during the consultations were very interested in learning more about climate change and environmental pollution and destruction and about how their faiths respond to them. To fulfil their fundamental potential for promoting the necessary paradigm shifts towards climate protection and environmental sustainability, religious communities need to increase their knowledge about local effects and global connections of climate change. Responsible water consumption and soil-renewal strategies are two examples of practical knowledge that could be shared in religious communities as relevant information for short- and long-term survival. Religious communities already serve as venues of formal and informal education and should be supported in adding environmental education from the perspectives of their traditions to their curriculums.

4.2.2 Involve Children and Youth

Greenhouse gas emissions determine the future of today's children and youth, who in turn will have the opportunity to determine climate politics only in the future. Children and youth have started to raise their concerns on climate change, with considerable global momentum generated by the Fridays for Future movement. Children and youths need to be encouraged and supported in their engagement with the environment by their religious communities and targeted FBO programmes to become engaged civil society actors and to play key roles as messengers of climate-related and environmental protection information in their families, religious communities and societies.

4.2.3 Unite Religious Voices for Effective Advocacy

While many religious traditions worldwide are already actively engaged in environmental care in their local communities, a concerted global effort for climate protection is necessary. A worldwide prayer movement could be installed by religious communities and combined with a global joint advocacy effort

at future international and national climate summits. Through such a prayer movement, awareness of environmental and climate action *and* of religious communities' crucial position with regard to climate protection could be created. Additionally, politicians would be reminded of their responsibility for environment and climate by a strongly united religious voice that would also speak from their own religious traditions to them. A joint "African Kairos for Creation" document could serve the purpose of a united interreligious voice for environmental protection in Africa. National and local advocacy campaigns would also benefit from such a global campaign.

4.2.4 Strengthen Environmental and Climate Advocacy by Religious Communities at All Levels

In addition to a worldwide advocacy movement, more specific regional advocacy initiatives need to be started and strengthened by religious communities. Participants of the webinar stressed that an African advocacy roadmap explaining how to reach out to local and regional political bodies would facilitate this work. While environmental advocacy on a local level reaching out to political decision makers is very important, internal advocacy also needs to be strengthened within religious movements to convince religious communities of the spiritual importance of the environment based on theological arguments from within the same religious tradition.

4.2.5 Create Religious Learning Materials for All Religious Communities

A lot of learning materials on environmental protection and climate change already exist. Still, specific learning materials inclusive of the specific faith traditions are often completely lacking or unavailable in rural and poor communities. Learning materials in local languages that speak to religious communities on concrete local climate circumstances should therefore be produced and disseminated by religious communities and FBOs in collaboration with the local communities.

4.2.6 Religious Communities and FBOs Need to Develop Climate Change Adaptation Strategies

Religious communities need to plan a strategy of action for cases of climate emergencies such as droughts, floods and storms. Religious communities and FBOs know and can access local religious infrastructures to provide low-key and effective adaptation measures that can serve as adaption examples for other societal actors. Many religious communities already successfully run social development campaigns. A central request during the consultations was that these should also include environmental adaptation campaigns and actions.

4.3 Desiderata for Academic Research and Knowledge Exchange

4.3.1 Conduct In-Depth Studies on Local Religious Knowledge about and Action on the Environment

Although religious communities have served as actors for ecological development in many areas of the world for years, in-depth analyses of the different religious traditions on ecology are still lacking. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as well as effective development cooperation must rely on knowledge about religious beliefs and action on the environment. The effectiveness of religious environmental action was frequently referred to during the consultations. However, more specific knowledge from long-term and geographically comprehensive studies has yet to be generated in order to successfully support partnerships on ecological development between governments, FBOs and religious communities.

4.3.2 Evaluate the Effectiveness of Religious Advocacy Initiatives

Religious communities have often developed their own strategies to engage their communities for the environment and for environmental advocacy. The approaches differ substantially across religious communities. Research should set out to evaluate the effectiveness of the different engagement and advocacy strategies to identify best practices of religious communities' internal and external advocacy initiatives. This would constitute an important basis of mutual knowledge exchange within religious communities and between religious communities and other civil society actors.

4.3.3 Global Partnerships Need to Be Translated to a Local Level

Global partnerships by large development organizations invest in religious advocacy campaigns and knowledge dissemination to religious umbrella organizations. However, studies still need to establish how and if these international efforts trickle down to a local level and cause behavioural changes in religious communities' members.

4.3.4 Founding of a Southern African Research Initiative on Religion and Ecological Development

The consultations showed that much religious environmental action takes place in Southern Africa. A Southern African research initiative on religion and ecological development could expand this knowledge and support the potential of religious communities for ecological protection.

4.3.5 Intergenerational and Local Knowledge Needs to Be Preserved

Intergenerational environmental knowledge is often preserved in local communities. This formerly influential and context-sensitive knowledge on agriculture, biodiversity or water protection is lost with dissolving local relations due to passing generations and urbanization. (Traditional) Religious communities are decisive places where this knowledge is kept alive. The academic community should increase its efforts to capture and preserve this local and informal knowledge in close and equal cooperation with local religious communities.

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