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Towards an all African Christian environmental network : suggestions and perspectives

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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Werner, Dietrich;Matloko, Cain Lerumo
Publisher	Globethics Publications
Rights	2024 The Author(s).;Attribution 4.0 International
Download date	2026-07-12 09:21:19
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4311695

20. TOWARDS AN ALL AFRICAN CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK: SUGGESTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

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The following working paper out of one of the workshops of the Pretoria consultation brings together a short presentation on the European Christian Environmental Network as well as initial ideas to form as an analogy an All African Christian Environmental Network.¹

One of the most far-reaching decisions of the ecumenical movement was taken during the Vancouver assembly in 1983, in which the WCC declared a conciliar process on commitment (covenant) for justice, peace and integrity of creation to be pursued by all churches together in order to deepen and continue their commitments for the interrelated dimensions of social witness as referring both to justice, peace and integrity of creation. For the first time issues around care for creation and sustainability gained primary and equal importance. Churches could not continue to distance themselves from one of these agendas arguing that justice or peace are the sole and primary role only of churches in another region in the world. Environmental care and protection were not any more seen as a luxury issue of some saturated churches in the west, but as a global issue which is of urgency for the whole of Christianity as the planet as such and its integral and ecological balances are at stake. Three European Ecumenical

¹ Paper presented at the conference “Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability” in University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, 28–31 October 2019.

Assemblies followed in in Basel (1989), Graz (1997) and Sibiu (2007), all of which deepened and broadened the learning process of both Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in the European continent on issues of eco-theology and environmental protection.

The Basel Assembly affirmed with very strong statements and new and common commitment of Christian churches related to environmental care and protection:

“74. We consider it to be a scandal and a crime, that irreversible damage continues to be inflicted on creation. We are becoming aware that there is the need for a new partnership between human beings and the rest of nature. We do not want to solve problems any longer at the expense of other people or by producing additional new problems. We will work for an international environmental order . . .

76. We consider it to be vitally urgent to learn that the resources of this earth are to be shared with the coming generations and future life. We commit ourselves to a new lifestyle in our churches, societies, families and communities.

77. As Christians we are living in God's covenant with us and the whole of creation. We are all part of the one body of Christ. Because God changes hearts and minds, we covenant with one another. Our first loyalty belongs to Him. All other loyalties (national, cultural, social, etc.) are of secondary importance.

This is the basis for our engagement for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.”²

In the sections on environment (No 87ff) some very bold and specific recommendations were agreed upon to strengthen public engagement and concrete political action to take up burning issues in terms of the destruction of the ozone layers, the disappearance of species and different modes of energy use and supply in industrialized countries:

“(a) All technological development has to be assessed according to the above- mentioned criteria of sustainability (see para.84(a)). This entails a complete reversal of the concept of sustained economic growth as well as in the use of natural resources.

(b) The wasteful use of energy in the industrialized countries has reached such gigantic proportions that there is an urgent need for a drastic reduction in their use. Some churches have committed themselves to work for a significant reduction in the use of energy. We appeal to all the European churches and Christians to do the same within the limit of their possibilities and untiringly to challenge decision-makers in political, technological and business life to more efficient policies for saving energy.

(c) We are referring in particular to fossil fuels, a reduction of the use of which can be achieved through effective energy-saving techniques and through the development of renewable energy supplies (sun, water, wind). The necessary financial resources could be collected by appropriate taxation. Nuclear power should

² See Basel European Ecumenical Assembly, *Final Document* (1989), accessed 26 August 2023. <http://oikoumene.net/eng.regional/eng.reg.basel/eng.reg.basel.7/index.html>.

not be the basis of future energy supply because of its social, technical, ecological and military risks. Safety requirements in nuclear power plants should be to the highest international standards.

(d) According to the Brundtland Report the technical possibility exists of reducing per capita energy consumption in industrialized countries by 50% and increasing the per capita energy consumption in the Third World countries by 30% (on the basis of predictable increases in population). In so doing the total world energy consumption would only be increased insignificantly. This is the only worldwide energy perspective which combines the preservation of creation with justice. This approach should be considered seriously by Christians in the industrialized countries, particularly as the Brundtland report has increased substantially public awareness of ecological issues and is well regarded in the scientific community.

(e) Special measures have urgently to be taken in order to protect the ozone layer, to counteract the greenhouse effect, preserve what is left of the rain forest, and to prevent the spread of desertification.

(f) There is an urgent need for an international and controllable regulation on waste disposal, particularly for nuclear and other dangerous waste. On no account should European countries dump their waste at the expense of other countries, in their seas or international waters. Special attention in this matter is deserved by the question of nuclear waste disposal (e.g., in the Pacific).

(g) International agreements on border-crossing emissions in order to prevent the further pollution of water, air and soil, and to undo

the damage already done, are an urgent priority for all European countries.

(h) Strict legislation and controls for genetic research and genetic engineering and professional codes of conduct are needed. There is equally an urgent need for the churches to continue to reflect on the latest developments in the field of bio-technics in order to provide ethical guidelines for these issues about the implications of the value of life, not only of the human person, but of all living creatures and of nature itself.

(i) Urgent measures have to be taken to preserve the variety of species and variety of genetic riches within the species. The churches can be instrumental in making this problem known. The United Nations World Charter for Nature of 1982 is a first step. The next step could be an international Species Convention such as the International Union of Nature and Natural Resources has proposed. Financial agreements should be reached which ensure that the countries, particularly in the poor world, receive an equitable share of the benefits and earnings derived from the development of these species.”³

It is amazing to read these visionary statements from the year in which the reunification of Germany and Europe happened like an unexpected and very surprising gift of God as many of the items spelled out at that period still are on the political agenda today.

³ *European Ecumenical Assembly Basel*, accessed 26 August 2023, <http://oikoumene.net/eng.regional/eng.reg.basel/eng.reg.basel.7.1/index.html>; also in German language: https://www.ecunet.de/fileadmin/mediapool/gemeinden/E_stiftungoekumene/Oekumenische_Treffen_Weltregional_und_National_Basel.pdf.

It belongs to this context of a growing environmental movement in European churches in the 1990s that the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I extended in 1989 a global call and invitation to establish 1 September each year as a day of prayer for environment. The second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, Austria, in 1997 further strengthened these efforts. The assembly recommended that a network of persons with environmental responsibilities within the churches should be set up at a European level. The European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) is a response to this call. The network was established in October 1998 in the Orthodox Academy in Vilemov in the Czech Republic. In 2007 the European Ecumenical Assembly, building on the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarch, recommended that the period from 1 September to 4 October be dedicated to prayer for the protection of Creation and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles that reverse our contribution to climate change. Thus, the initiative for the annual repetition of the period of Season of Creation was born.⁴ Today many different church related networks for environmental care and climate justice groups and initiatives are part of the ECEN network.⁵ The aim of the ECEN is to share information, experiences in environmental work among widely varied Christian traditions and to encourage a united witness in caring for God's creation. ECEN works closely with the Conference of European Churches (CEC) in addressing the need for environmental engagement and responding to climate change. ECEN is also related to Council of European Bishops' Conferences (Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europe, CCEE), thus maintains close collaborations with Roman Catholic churches and networks. It comes together in an annual

⁴ *Season of Creation*, accessed 26 August 2023, <https://seasonofcreation.org/>.

⁵ European Christian Environmental Network, "About Us," accessed 26 August 2023. <https://www.ecen.org/about-us>.

assembly⁶ and has different thematic working groups as well as an office in Brussels in collaboration with CEC and Peter Pavlovic as executive secretary.⁷ Thus, ECEN serves to strengthen cohesion of collaboration of European churches in issues of climate justice and environmental care, provide chances for capacity building in expertise and knowledge for environmental issues between all Christian churches in Europe, enhance chances for common lobbying work on environmental policy with regard to dialogue with the European Union and support visibility for regional and local initiatives on Christian environmentalist action which otherwise would not find a common platform just within their local or regional contact.

The question as discussed whether a similar common platform would be helpful in the southern region of the African continent or even with the perspective to be extended as an All African Christian Environmental Network. An initiative was formulated by a group of African activists, theologians and environmental to formulate a platform for AACEN (All African Christian Environmental Network).

It is an ecumenical response to the call heard at the heart of the *Laudato si'* encyclical from Pope Francis who asked: "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" In his encyclical he also argues: "Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results." Thus, the *Laudato si'* document brings to our attention a dual cry: the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor!

From the conversations, certain common convictions were articulated: There is "complacency and a cheerful recklessness" within the Body of Christian Africa; there is a deficiency of a more careful 'Life Culture' and

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

adequate thought leadership on creation care in church and society; there is a need to provide more encourage and willingness to change lifestyles and to develop more sustainable production and responsible consumption patterns.

However, currently the church in Africa does not yet have a unified voice on the current ecological crisis. This is so, because the church is still fragmented and lacks the necessary *prophetic will* to speak up on the preservation and protection of life into the ecological crisis. Therefore, there is need for a coordinated, informed and effective Christian voice in Africa to allow ecumenical efforts to advocate, lobby and educate Christians and policy makers for sustainable change. Therefore, the creation of a common platform like AACEN is agreed and deemed helpful and necessary.

The AACEN would exist to, among other things, to sharpen and embolden the prophetic voice of the church to speak truth to power on the ecological crisis we face. It would be a safe learning space to share knowledge and best practices, allowing to reflect, discern and conceptualize on major pending issues (i.e., a sustained evolution from our heavy reliance on the burning of fossil fuels to renewable energy sources). Moreover, it would be a forum to engage in common lobbying and advocacy work for favorable environmental policies. Lastly, it would build the church's capacity to effectively advocate for change in ecologically destructive industrial practices (mining, waste production, air and water pollution and deforestation).

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