



Is the Gospel Really Good News in Our Climate Crisis? Yes!

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The increasing existential threat of global warming is also increasing “climate anxiety.” Too many have heard the dire news of the effects of climate change and extreme weather events with billions of dollars of loss—in addition to many precious lives lost—and have become despondent.¹ The news media focuses on conflicts and crises that make attention grabbing headlines, which supports subscriptions

¹ In addition, some have been directly impacted and are grieving the loss of livelihoods and loved ones, and the church has continued to care as it has done for millennia. While absolutely not dismissing the great loss of directly impacted people, this article focuses primarily on addressing climate anxiety for the indirectly impacted within church communities.

The care of creation is something incumbent on all humanity, so what specific contributions can Christians bring to this work? One of the issues with the current situation is the sense of despair that often pervades these discussions, but Christians know that the power of God gives hope to them and to the world to meet the challenges ahead.

and advertisement, and thus, it stimulates the sensational and angst. While we need journalism to keep us informed, we need to understand that the news can magnify natural emotions of fear. What is the response of the church?

Yes, we can be involved in creation care projects. This is important! Yet distinctively, we can access spiritual resources that go beyond glorified environmentalism. Thus, the church has an opportunity to mobilize a deeper hope, proclaiming the perfect love that casts out fear.

This examination identifies that with a grounding in the gospel, we—the church—can bring a prophetic voice of hope to counter climate anxiety through biblical teaching that integrates climate science and practical creation care, as well as engaging identifiable goals, pathways, and agency that nurtures hope. A current project in Tanzania—where most people are dependent upon the natural resources—provide examples that are adaptable for other faith communities, including Euro-American contexts.²

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ECO-ANXIETY

The status of climate change is grim. Johan Rockström stated in July 2024, “We earth system scientists and climate scientists are getting seriously nervous. The planet is changing faster than we have expected. We are, despite years of raising the alarm, now seeing that the planet is actually in a situation where we underestimated risks.”³ I am not going to belabor this point, as it is well documented by Rockström in his TED talk and by many others.⁴ Instead, I will focus on the

² I was an ELCA volunteer teacher for three years in Tanzania. After many short-term interstitial visits with church and student groups as well as PhD research, I am back in Tanzania for two years with a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellowship.

³ Johan Rockström, “The Tipping Points of Climate Change—and Where We Stand” (TED Seattle 2024, Seattle, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl6VhCAeEfQ>.

⁴ If you are wondering about conversations with anthropogenic climate change deniers, in my experience, I do not get into a debate that stimulates “reactants” or defensiveness. I start by asking, “What is important for you in all this?” Then, after listening to seek to understand, not just to gain “ammunition,” I invite them into God’s ongoing biblical commission of creation care that is not contingent upon believing in human-caused climate change. This is usually a mutually agreeable way to move forward. Yes, there are a few who believe that the destruction of the earth will hasten Christ’s return. It will take a willingness on both sides to continue constructively while engaging biblical teachings.

resulting climate anxiety and opportunities for hope-filled responses from the church.

Psychiatrist and psychotherapist Sophia Betrò makes it clear that our emotions are natural feedback systems that help us to make wise decisions in challenging situations.⁵ However, she identifies that the responses to the pervasive news of the climate crisis—the indirect effects—can be similar to those who are directly affected by extreme climate-related events, such as floods, hurricanes, and droughts. Betrò adds that results can be, “depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), insomnia, and suicidal thoughts.” Another response is a paralyzing effect manifested in either apathy or an inability to take action.⁶ These are all related to “eco-anxiety,” the dominant collective term, which is “a chronic fear of environmental doom,” or as Glenn Albrecht describes, an “ecologically induced dread.”⁷

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As I write this, I am facilitating a biblical-ecothological postdoctoral fellowship⁸ in Tanzania and collaborating with Lutheran colleagues from the Maasai indigenous people group. The pastoralist Maasai are one of the groups in climate change jeopardy, because their livelihoods are intensely dependent upon the natural resources. Together, we are integrating: first, biblical teachings on creation care; second, traditional environmental knowledge (TEK); and third, appropriating climate-science for pastoralist contexts into Bible studies and lessons that we are developing for Maasailand. Because several core concepts

⁵ Sophia Betrò, “From Eco-Anxiety to Eco-Hope: Surviving the Climate Change Threat,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 15 (2024): 2–3.

⁶ Glenn Albrecht, “Chronic Environmental Change: Emerging ‘Psychoterratic’ Syndromes,” in *Climate Change and Human Well-Being: Global Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Inka Weissbecker (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2011), 50.

⁷ Albrecht, “Chronic Environmental Change,” 49; Betrò, “From Eco-Anxiety to Eco-Hope,” 3.

⁸ A Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship project “Ontological Bridge-building for Climate Change Mitigation in Maasailand” funded by the European Commission of the European Union. See <https://www.mamaanya.com/>.

from this project are transferrable to other contexts around the world, I share the ways that they can be leveraged by your church to both nurture hope and care for the creation.

First, we are gospel-centered. We, as followers of Jesus, have more to offer than glorified environmentalism or simply copying climate science messaging.⁹ We engage creation care from a gospel-motivated approach. As we are reconciled to Christ through faith, we are given the gift of ultimate hope and deeper peace (John 14:17; Phil 4:7). This relationship with Christ is lived out in many ways, including caring for creation in faithfulness to God’s commission to serve¹⁰ the land (Gen 2:15), and in social justice for our vulnerable siblings, including those in poorer countries (Matthew 25:40–44) who are more impacted by climate change—like the Maasai. It is a perverse irony that the poorer countries of the world—who did little in causing the climate crisis—are being hit harder with the cataclysmal consequences because of their reliance upon living off the land.

Being gospel-centered, we have a biblical hope that does not disappoint us (Rom 5:1–5). This is in contrast to statements of hope that are often only wishful thinking, like, “I hope it doesn’t rain during the soccer game.” Rather, we have an ultimate hope that manifests as an eager expectation for God’s promises to be fulfilled—both now and not yet—a hope that is grounded in the trustworthiness of our faithful God.

Indeed, God has promised to never abandon God’s good creation, as our Triune God is not just the creator but also the sustainer of the world. For example, in Romans 8, we read about this hope and the implicit promise that God will never forsake the creation, “...in hope [i.e., eager expectation] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (vv. 20–21).¹¹ Furthermore, when we hear, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16), we often think only of people, but the Greek word for “world” is *κόσμος*—that

⁹ I also have a bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Minnesota. So, while I value science, it is not adequate to stimulate transformation. See below.

¹⁰ Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020), 109. In Gen 2:15, *עָבַד* in Hebrew means both serve and work. I align with scholars that translate it as “serve” in this context.

¹¹ All Bible texts are from the NRSV.

we know as cosmos or universe—which means all the humans and non-human creation together! There is an unimaginable amount of ultimate hope in these promises!

Thus, every Bible study and creation care lesson that we are developing in Tanzania ends with a message hope. We never leave the participants in the *law* of all the urgent things that we need to do to respond to the climate crisis without upholding the *gospel* of Jesus Christ who is reconciling all things to himself (Col 1:20).

THE CHURCH AS A PATHWAY FOR TRANSFORMATION

But why did the European Union’s research commission award a postdoctoral grant dealing with climate change to an Old Testament instructor? Like me, the grant reviewers understood the huge barriers to environmental action as described by Gus Speth, former Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality under President Carter. Speth stated:

I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation, and we scientists don’t know how to do that.¹²

Yes, we need a spiritual transformation to get beyond selfishness, greed, and apathy!

Bingo! We—the church—know how to align with the transformative work of the Holy Spirit! We know the power of the Holy Spirit that has worked throughout history, in our communities, and in our own lives. These stories that tell of the work of the Holy Spirit sustain our hope even “though the wrong seems off so strong.”¹³ So, we have a glimpse of this power, even as I realize that I do not fully understand it. Consider the text of Ephesians 1:18–20 which absolutely amazes

¹² James Gustave Speth, interview, *Shared Planet: Religion and Nature*, BBC Radio 4 (1 October 2013)

¹³ “This Is My Father’s World,” ELW #824

me. Somehow, the power that raised Christ from the dead is available to us who believe!

So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the *immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe*, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places...(italics mine).

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We, the church, have a hope and a resurrection power undergirding our work of transformation! This encourages me as I navigate the responsibilities of facilitating this research project amid the challenges inherent with intercultural experiences. Really, for all of us who are either lay or ordained ministers of the gospel, we are reassured knowing it is the power of the Holy Spirit that is transforming us and blessing us to be a blessing.

THE CHURCH'S HOPE IN ACTION FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

While national and local governments—as well as each of us—have a responsibility to reduce our carbon footprint, the church has a distinctive calling for sharing prophetic messages of hope in the midst of the climate crisis. This is my role here in Tanzania, as the European Commission gave me an opportunity to be a blessing to the Maasai people group through developing best practices of creation care for a traditional pastoralist Maasai context. The Bible studies and lessons are disseminated through the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT) with the blessing of Bishop Godson Able of the

North Central Diocese. This project that I coordinate leverages the educational and social structures of the ELCT, expanding the model I learned from the late ELCA missionary, Mark Jacobson M.D., when the church responded to the HIV/AIDS crisis around the turn of the millennium. As the local church made a difference in the health of the people regarding HIV/AIDS, it can make a difference in the health of the environment and the people within it. Below are concepts from this ELCT project that are adaptable for other faith communities in the West and beyond.

Fusing our ultimate hope with the pragmatic hope described by Gwinn and Hellman, I now intersect three concepts identified by these hope researchers that are integral for nurturing hope and moving on beyond idealistic thinking. These are: goals, pathways, and agency.¹⁴ Above, I briefly described this Tanzanian project, but let me reframe it using Gwinn and Hellman's model:

1. *Goal*: developing best practices of creation care for a traditional pastoralist Maasai context that result in climate change mitigation and adaptation—with each lesson ending in nurturing hope.
2. *Pathways*: with the bishop's blessing, disseminating the lessons through the ELCT's educational and social structures, including confirmation and small group Bible studies.
3. *Agency*: undergirded by transformation—empowered by the Holy Spirit—the synergy of collaborative development with Maasai stakeholders and colleagues inspires action (more below).

So, what could this look like in your congregation and communities of faith? Here's a beginning for discussion in your context, adapted from my work in Tanzania for broader application.

GOALS

Gwinn and Hellman encourage the setting of goals that are desirable enough to motivate one to action.¹⁵ Following Goodall's model, find one thing you are passionate about and start small. Consider:

¹⁴ Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*, 9.

¹⁵ Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*, 9.

nurturing hope through gospel-centered creation care; *increasing our role in creation care*; and *engaging the passion of youth* in meaningful creation care.

As you collaboratively ponder your goals, consider both mitigation and adaptation goals. In my research for this project, I learned there are two important aspects of dealing with climate change: mitigation and adaptation. *Mitigation* means actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, like using public transportation and increasing the percentage of plant-based food in one's diet. *Adaptation* means decreasing vulnerability to the effects of climate change, like fostering hope in the midst of eco-anxiety and making homes more resilient to extreme weather events. Thus, mitigation seeks to reduce the causes of climate change, while adaptation seeks to make people more resilient or less vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. As the church, having goals for both are important, especially in places where there is a greater risk of calamities from superstorms. Gwinn and Hellman envision that pathways are the roadmaps in one's mind to allow the beginning of a journey to the future.¹⁶

When we hear biblical teachings of the ultimate hope we have in a faithful God—who has promised to never abandon us or the creation—our hope is bolstered. When we see the results of our actions that make a difference and know that others around the world are also making a difference, it helps to nurture our hope.

A. Preaching and teaching hope. There are many opportunities for preaching and teaching hope. Confirmation will be one great way to integrate Bible study with gospel-centered care for the creation. Jane Goodall has been encouraged by the spirit of youth with their plans and work that is making a difference for our future.¹⁷ Goodall affirms:

When young people understand problems, and they are empowered to take action and choose what actions they

¹⁶ Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*, 10.

¹⁷ Goodall, Abrams, and Hudson, *The Book of Hope*.

take, they are so filled with passion and determination. I go around the world and I meet all these young people now in nearly 70 countries who are taking action. They are so dedicated and passionate and they are making a difference.¹⁸

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B. Consider Bible study resources developed by A Rocha and Lausanne¹⁹ or articles by BioLogos.org (filter for creation care).²⁰ There are great resources available for free that make it an easy way to take the next step. Check out this article by ecologist Rick Lindroth at BioLogos who encourages us to go beyond recycling. Recycling is an important step, but we need to do more. Lindroth explains:

We've reduced our perception of creation care to a short list of duties and prohibitions—what I call environmental legalism. To be honest, this is why I wish recycling didn't exist. It gives people an easy way out. It happens to me all the time: the topic of creation care comes up, and people are quick to tell me, "we recycle!" I hate to break it to you, but we're not going to recycle our way out of the climate crisis or the biodiversity crisis. It's not going to happen.²¹

Of course, there are great ELCA resources too that can help us to get beyond simply recycling! The Creation Care Network is "a collaboration of ministries and organizations which support various ways to act on our shared calling to care for creation."²² In addition, the ELCA

¹⁸ "Jane Goodall: 'Reasons for Hope.'"

¹⁹ A Rocha International, "Lausanne Global Classroom Creation Care Study Guide," *A Rocha At Your Service*, January 26, 2021, <https://atyourservice.arocha.org/en/category/bible-studies/>.

²⁰ "Resources," BioLogos, <https://biologos.org/resources>.

²¹ Ciara Reyes-Ton, "We Can't Recycle Our Way Out of the Environmental Crisis," *BioLogos*, https://biologos.org/?post_type=articles&p=19665.

²² "Creation Care Network," *ELCA*, <https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/creationcarenetwork>.

collaborates with Blessed Tomorrow, a “faith community initiative that empowers climate action and advocacy.”²³

C. Agency. Gwinn and Hellman describe agency as a complex term that relates to the motivation to pursue our goals and the will-power to sustain us on the journey.²⁴ First of all, the power of the Holy Spirit: Above, I identified that the power that raised Christ from the dead is available to us who believe (Ephesians 1:18–20). Wow! Second, being undergirded by the ultimate hope: This biblical hope melts despair, apathy, and paralyzing effects of eco-anxiety. Gwinn and Hellman’s research also engages spirituality with hope, and they identify that “hope is the anchor of our souls,” drawing upon the biblical metaphor.²⁵ They explain:

When you are anchored to hope, you have the best chance to overcome difficulties and navigate challenges in your life. People of faith also have an advantage. No matter what you face, no matter how big the challenges, you can know that God is bigger than what you are facing.²⁶

We have a bigger God and are part of a magnificent story now and have an amazing future ahead of us. And finally, the synergy of working together: My number one leadership principle is “people support what they help create.”²⁷ As one who likes control, this has been a challenge to give it up while responsible for a research project. Yet, I have seen again and again how a sense of ownership is developed when collaborators determine core values and learning outcomes, when they see their own words shaping the project, and as I learn to appreciate other perspectives by listening more deeply. Consider Goodall’s recommendation for us to work together:

Whatever it is you care about, get together with some friends and take action. Do what you can do to solve what you are passionate about and you will finally make a difference. When you make a difference, then you understand

²³ “Environment,” *ELCA*, <https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/advocacy/environment>.

²⁴ Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*, 10.

²⁵ Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*, 181, 183.

²⁶ Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*, 183.

²⁷ Thanks to Tom Fuchs, former coworker at the Lutheran Bible Institute of Seattle.

around the world, there are people just like you making a difference.²⁸

Furthermore, it is encouraging to know that creation care works! Many people working together in little ways can make a big change. Engaging goals, pathways, and agency are means for nurturing hope among and through the people of God.

CONCLUSION: PROPHETIC HOPE IN CREATION CARE

Therefore, with the rise of eco-anxiety, the church matters with its worldwide communities of faith sharing prophetic messages of hope that are both ultimate and pragmatic—engaging goals, pathways, and agency—to work together in creation care. With a gospel-engaged worldview, the people of God who are reconciled to Christ respond with acts of love for what God loves—and has promised to never abandon—the Creator’s good creation as well as vulnerable people who are impacted by the effects of climate change.

Utilizing online resources that integrate biblical teaching, environmental knowledge, and climate science provide easy ways to move forward in being passionate about one thing or one goal desirable enough to motivate one to action. Aligning with the power of the Holy Spirit for spiritual transformation enables us to get beyond selfishness, greed, and apathy—and take the next step beyond recycling.

As each rural Kenyan women learned to plant a tree and make a little difference, just think what all our churches can do around the world in doing something little—that when combined—will make a big difference! ☩

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²⁸ “Jane Goodall: ‘Reasons for Hope.’”