An Approach to Ecological Mission
in and through the Christian Community
in Australia:
Beyond Apathy to Committed Action

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School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics.
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My eight grandchildren have contributed to the project simply by their presence and innocent expectation of a liveable environment in the future, and it is to them and their generation that this work is dedicated.

Clive W Ayre
The thesis sets out to consider the role of the Christian Church in the context of the emergent ecological crisis. The essential context for such a study is twofold. First, within the Australian Church there is clearly a dominant emphasis on an anthropocentric mission strategy, and consequently it will be argued that such a position is inadequate. Second, it will be argued that it can almost be taken as a “given” that the ecological or environmental crisis facing life on planet Earth is immediate and critical, and covers a range of well-documented categories – global warming, extreme weather events, degradation of the soil, and other factors. The loss of biodiversity is gathering pace, while the threat to iconic features such as the Great Barrier Reef is very real. Even just from a pragmatic or humanitarian point of view, it seems important for the Christian Church to be part of a global response.

From that background the thesis proceeds in three essential stages. The first issue is the identification of a sound ecological theology, or ecotheology. From the background of a large and increasing volume of literature, a range of both human-centred and eco-friendly theological positions is considered, concluding with an argument in favour of theistic biocentrism, but acknowledging that a responsible Christian environmental response may emerge from other theological positions. Thus, the thesis proposes that in addition to the scientific evidence, there is a compelling theological argument for Christian action in caring for the environment as God’s creation, and this represents a clear rationale for eco-mission.

In the second part, the issue that is considered is the range of existing theologies of mission. This literature has tended to be strongly anthropocentric and very weak in the ecological area; however, there is an increasing volume of literature demonstrating a shift in emphasis towards an enhanced awareness of an ecological dimension, and in identifying that trend the thesis seeks
to develop an eco-mission theology. However, there is still a perception in many congregations and denominations that ecology is not really part of the Church’s agenda. While practical action guidance models are not common, this thesis aims to challenge such a perception, and to change the culture of apathy and non-involvement in building on a foundation of ecotheology and a theology of eco-mission.

Third, the thesis then explores the range and extent of Christian eco-mission, beginning with a study of how that is practised in England, and continuing with a comparative study of emerging eco-mission activity in Australia. Thus, it addresses the fundamental question as to why Christian denominations (and, by implication, local congregations) are not more actively involved in ecological mission, and explore possibilities for that position to be changed. The thesis is set within a practical theology paradigm, and employs a qualitative methodology. This involves a series of interviews supplemented by written comments and personal observations, from which dominant themes will be drawn and analysed.

Thus the thesis is designed to help the Christian community to understand the seriousness of the situation as well as the biblical and theological rationale for appropriate action in “the greening of mission” and the establishment of an Australian eco-church model. In grasping the ecological aspects of its divine charter in caring for God’s creation, the Church may operate with greater confidence alongside other concerned people and groups in the community.
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Ecotheology; eco-mission; ecology; environment; biocentrism, anthropocentrism; theocentrism; stewardship

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

One afternoon in 1988 our son indicated to us that his High School had decided to nominate him for the Lions Youth of the Year competition. Among other things, that involved the preparation and delivery of a speech on a subject of his choosing. So having been inspired by his geography teacher, our son chose to speak about threats to the environment; it was a speech we were to hear a number of times as he proceeded through stages of the competition. For him it was to lead not only to a passion for the environment, but also to a postgraduate qualification in environmental education. Thus it was that through this process my own awareness of and concern about environmental issues received an important impetus.

In the early 1990’s I had the opportunity to build on that beginning through the completion of an MA degree on the theme, “Christ and Creation: Towards a Theology of Creation and Redemption in the Context of Ecological Crisis”. The fundamental aim of the thesis was to consider what it means to believe in God as Creator in the face of the emerging eco-crisis. That work established some of the theological underpinnings of the issue, including historical factors, and demonstrated that the notions of creation and redemption must be held together in theology, spirituality, and service, with very real implications for the environment.

Since that time there have been a number of significant developments, two of which may be mentioned here. First, it has become increasingly apparent that the global situation is deteriorating, and that the environment on which all life depends is in trouble. That in itself is of course a multi-faceted problem; it will be addressed in chapter 3. Nevertheless there is mounting evidence to support a growing consensus not only about the basic facts of the crisis, but also
about human responsibility in creating or at least exacerbating the problem. Thus, for example, in the area of global warming, Dupont and Pearman in their 2006 Lowy Institute report are prepared to state that “there is no longer much doubt that the world is facing a prolonged period of planetary warming, largely fuelled by modern lifestyles, which is unprecedented in human history…” and to add, “With a few notable exceptions, even sceptics now seem prepared to accept the validity of the basic science underpinning climate change forecasts” (2006, p.vii).

Governments in Australia, led by Queensland, have set up instrumentalities to deal with climate change issues, and scarcely a day goes by without a news story on the subject. More than that, there has been a substantial increase in the volume of ecotheological literature over the past 15 years or so.

At a more personal level, as a Minister first of the Methodist Church and subsequently of the Uniting Church, I have been concerned about and involved in the mission of the Church in a whole range of theoretical, practical, and ecumenical ways for well over 40 years. My concern has been for the theological integrity and intentionality of that mission at all levels. I have also been concerned about the historical propensity for the scope of Christian mission to be understood in relatively narrow terms, rather than, for example, in the light of Jesus’ image of the Kingdom of God. I am able to draw some consolation at least from the fact that ecological and environmental issues have started to show on the radar of the Christian community generally, although there is still a long way to go. That certainly appears to be the case in Australia, where such awareness seems to reflect a minority position. Consequently it seemed a natural step to bring together these dual concerns about the global environment and the mission of the Church.

Thus, at the risk of stating the obvious, it should be clear that I am approaching this research from the perspective of a committed Christian faith, and a desire to see the Christian Church
playing an effective and positive role in response to the global issue and the imperatives of a sound theology of mission. However, that should not be interpreted as implying a dogmatic approach to theology; as I will make clear, effective eco-mission may be built upon a range of differing philosophical and theological positions. If the main goal is kept in view, partnerships may be built across some of the traditional divisions, both in the community at large, and certainly within the Christian community.

**Research Problem and Hypothesis**

The research problem with which I plan to deal emerges clearly from what I have written thus far, and is expressed in the title: *An Approach to Ecological Mission in and through the Christian Community in Australia: Beyond Apathy to Committed Action*. It thus picks up a number of related issues that in their interaction become the subject of this thesis.

The term “crisis” can be overused, but the point of beginning is clearly an environmental situation which, as I have already suggested, is increasingly recognised as a crisis that is real, significant, and global in character. The global nature of the crisis is important in the sense that what happens in one particular nation impacts not only on that nation, but also on the earth as a whole. Thus one of the factors at work in spreading desert in Africa may be the destruction of the Amazon rainforest in South America; and the massive emissions of carbon dioxide from coal fired plants in the United States and China impacts not only on those particular nations, but have global implications as well. Having affirmed that, in this thesis I will be focussing on the way in which those environmental issues impact on Australia.

In recent times the most immediate and obvious environmental impact in Australia has been climate change and global warming, with its associated issues of prolonged drought affecting rural and urban areas alike. To take February 2007 as an example, the Press quite correctly has
reflected widespread concern, based on the connection many people were starting to make between the drought and global warming. As dams in South East Queensland reached 20% of capacity, and other towns far less, Brisbane’s “Courier Mail” reported, “We could run out of water” (28th Feb). Debate has raged about the building of new dams, the creation of desalination plants, and what some critics emotively styled as “drinking recycled sewage”. The phrase “Armageddon situation” has slipped into the vocabulary of leading politicians. At the same time the “Guardian” ran a story entitled “Australia suffers its worst drought in 1,000 years”, subtitled “Depleted reservoirs, failed crops and arid farmland spark global warming tussle” (2nd March). With more than half of the nation’s farmland in drought, in some cases for five years or more, the situation is clearly causing widespread concern. There are, however, other environmental factors involved as well, including ecological degradation on a global scale, extreme weather events, soil degradation, species loss, and much more. These issues will be discussed further in chapter 3.

The second issue relates to the role of the Christian Church, which in many instances is not involved in this critical issue, although there are exceptions to that judgment. Some Church jurisdictions, confessional bodies and ecumenical bodies have made statements, while the volume of academic literature on ecotheology has certainly escalated in recent years. Without making excuses, there are probably a number of factors at work. As I will argue, part of the problem is the volume of highly anthropocentric theology in the past; in fact one of the issues that will be addressed is the charge that theology is largely to blame for the crisis. Further, there has often been an assumption that Christian mission is essentially focussed on human issues, or even simply “winning people for Christ”. Further, it must be said that until quite recently the eco-crisis has largely been the preserve of a minority working through various environmental groups.
A further dimension of the Church’s dilemma is the matter of public opinion in the pews. However, through a lack of relevant current data, that is difficult to determine; the results of the National Church Life Survey in 1995 are clearly dated and therefore of little relevance in the present time. Moreover, the question posed by that Survey related to support for environmental groups, which is a somewhat different issue from the primary focus of this thesis. At the same time it may be noted briefly that there was a basic difference between two major groupings. Worshippers at “mainstream” denominations, such as Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Uniting Churches, averaged 50% support for environmental groups, while “Pentecostal” groups registered only 21%. There were other differences. For example, while 55% of graduates supported environmental groups, the figure fell to 39% for non-graduates. Rural people were more divided. It would be wrong to put too much weight on these dated figures, but they may be illustrative of a trend. In any case there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that as a crisis of some sort becomes more evident, Christian support for environmental action could be rising in line with the community at large.

It is the seriousness of the global eco-crisis that adds a sense of purpose and urgency to the question of the Church’s role. At the same time, the task of saving the planet from the excesses of its human population is by no means the task of the Christian Church alone. A response must come from all levels, including environmental groups, business, government, and the population at large. Rising out of those two issues, therefore, and building on the firm principles of a sound ecotheology, it is my contention that ecological issues must be on the Church’s agenda at all levels – both denominationally and ecumenically, at regional, state and national levels, in theological education, and in local congregations.

One problem is that while there is an increasing volume of literature on ecotheology covering many different facets of the subject, there is relatively little relating to the mission side of the
issue. My tasks in this thesis are therefore to bring the crisis and the Church together, clarify the theological underpinnings of the issue, and to facilitate a more effective and faithful response by the Church for the good not only of humankind, but also indeed of all life.

**Aims and Objectives**

Thus, the background issues in this research are threefold, namely an emerging consensus in the scientific community, an increasing volume of ecotheological material, and the development of a theology of Christian mission that includes eco-mission. The aim of this research is to examine the response of the Christian Church in terms of a practical theology and specific forms of eco-mission. It may be expressed in the form of several crucial questions. First, what is the Australian Church doing in eco-mission? Second, what obstacles and roadblocks stand in the way of committed Christian ecological action at various levels of the Church’s life? Third, how can that situation be changed in positive ways?

The literature review represents an essential part of the task. If the Church’s basic theology is inadequate and fails to take sufficient account of the biosphere as creation, it is unlikely to be aware of a range of legitimate implications. Further, while a theology of Christian eco-mission can emerge from a number of different theological positions, eco-mission nevertheless relates strongly to ecotheology. This is most evident, for example, in the notion of stewardship of the Earth, a stance that clearly rises out of the theology, and which in turn becomes a key point of an eco-mission theology. Such a theology poses serious questions for the practical mission of the Church that need to be addressed by the empirical research. In short, how can practical action in and through the Christian community on behalf of the environment be more effective?

Thus, the empirical research is bedded in the theology. As suggested in the crucial questions indicated above, the ultimate goal is to help the Christian community to understand its
ecological role, and to discover ways in which it can contribute, alongside other groups, in alleviating and hopefully beginning to reverse the ecological crisis facing the planet.

Assumptions

It will be clear that there are a number of assumptions inherent in those objectives. First, there is the assumption that the scientific consensus to which I have referred is well founded. A number of high-level reports suggest strongly that it is, but in any event the theological premise on which this thesis is based does not require a crisis to establish its validity. Insofar as there is an eco-crisis, a degree of urgency is added, but nothing more; the validity of eco-mission is, in the final analysis, theologically based.

Second, there is a sense in which I am assuming that a sound biblical theology is by no means focussed merely on the next life, and that many issues in the Bible relate to this present life; in other words, biblical theology embraces a whole-of-Earth and whole-of-life perspective. However, because this is foundational in nature, I will be seeking to establish the theological basis in chapters 4 and 5.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, I began with the assumption that very little is happening by way of eco-mission in the Christian community in Australia, and that apart from some occasional declarations by Church hierarchies, most of the action is limited to low-key projects promoted by local eco-enthusiasts. In some respects of course that is a subjective judgment based on anecdotal evidence and many years of involvement in the Church at all levels; it would require another thesis to establish the fact! However, two points may be made here. First, it is entirely appropriate that many facets of the Church’s mission will have a human focus, even if human issues can never be divorced from Earth issues. Second, during the course of my empirical research, strong anecdotal evidence began to emerge that while to a large extent
Christian mission remains human-focused and anthropocentric in character, that situation is changing as more and more congregations and regional bodies embark on mission activity on behalf of Creation or the environment.

A fourth assumption may be that the situation can be changed, and for two essential reasons. First, community concern about the environment is clearly rising. This is reflected, for example, in opinion polls and media exposure regarding global warming and a water crisis. It has become a major political issue. For pragmatic reasons even if not for theological ones, the Church will not be able to ignore this issue; and it has to be said, there are many who do not want to ignore it. But second, my hope is that as the Christian community begins to come to terms with ecotheology and a consequent theology of eco-mission, many will come to embrace what I believe is the correct biblical and theological stance with regard to life, and our home, the Earth.

**Methodology**

I will address methodology in greater depth in chapter 2, but at this stage it may be noted that the thesis will begin with a literary approach, followed by an empirical methodology. This is based on a practical theology paradigm in which theory and praxis interact in a dynamic relationship. As Bevans (2005) and others have observed, all theology is contextual; thus, the context of this research is two-fold. In some ways, the world in which we live provides the most immediate and obvious context in which our action is shaped. But if that was the whole story, our actions would be little more than applied pragmatism. In fact, however, Christian action is shaped also by our perception of the word of God expressed through the Scriptures, our theological insights, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The literary phase and the empirical research are therefore interdependent, and relate as the essential context in which the Christian community seeks to understand the mind of God and perceive a sense of direction in the complex issues of our time.
It is true in a very general sense that positive action on behalf of the environment may emerge out of a range of quite different positions, both theistic and atheistic. However, the focus of this thesis is the Christian Church; and within the Church the undergirding theology becomes very important. What Christians believe about God and the world in theological terms will tend to shape their theology of mission, and that in turn will largely determine the nature of their mission within human communities.

Thus, a Church that focuses on the imminent return of Christ, that believes this world is coming to an end, or believes that the most critical issue for the Church is to seek people’s commitment to Christ to order to ensure their bliss in an after-life, is not likely to be strongly motivated to care for the Earth. The challenge facing such Christians is to be open to the demonstration that eco-mission is firmly rooted in the Bible. Moreover, when theology perceives that God not only created the world and called it “good” (Gen 1), but also that God is immanent in the world, then the divine call to “tend the Earth and keep it” (Gen 2:15) will find a deeper resonance.

Once an eco-friendly theological stance has been adopted, it is not essential or even appropriate to insist on a particular “correct” position regarding broader theological issues. Like most others, I have a preferred theological position, and it is one that I consider is conducive to positive ecological outcomes; however, within the confines I have outlined, effective ecological mission is able to emerge from differing theological positions.

In the next chapter I will indicate how the empirical research will employ primarily a qualitative methodology, but with some quantitative dimensions, and will involve a series of interviews and focus groups. The purpose of those interviews will be to discover perceptions of the Church’s ecological role, and importantly, ways in which a sound ecotheology may combine with effective action for the sake of the natural environment, and indeed of all life.
Outline of Thesis

Chapter 1 represents an Introduction to the thesis as a whole. Following this outline, I will identify and define some of the significant terms used in the thesis. The chapter concludes with delimitations of scope.

Chapter 2 will deal with issues of methodology, hermeneutics, and the main features of the practical theology paradigm that will be employed. A related issue to be identified is the relationship between faith and science, and I will argue that a complementary partnership is both possible and necessary. I will reflect on the concerns of a qualitative research methodology as it applies to social issues such as attitudes to ecological concerns. Following a qualitative research methodology, but also with some elements of a quantitative approach, this section indicates the process of data collection, semi-structured interviews, and analysis that will be followed, and how that will be applied in my research. Ethical issues will be noted.

The scope of the crisis is the subject of chapter 3, and this will begin with a summary of some of the ecological areas of concern based on the consensus within the scientific community. However, I will argue that the scope of the crisis is in reality much broader that just ecology, and that there is a point at which Earth issues and human issues meet.

Chapters 4 and 5 will examine theological approaches to ecology, and will begin with a short segment addressing the ambiguity of ecotheology, or the charge that Christianity should have no substantive ecological dimension. Although there is a considerable body of literature on ecotheology, this review will of necessity be limited in the sense that while it is essential background material, it is not the central focus of the thesis. The biblical notion of dominion forms the backdrop for a discussion on a number of human-centred approaches that easily become ecologically exploitative. Here I will argue that “dominion” too easily becomes an
exploitative “domination”, and that many criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of the Genesis text. The section on “Nature Disenchanted” outlines some rationalist approaches to nature that may lead to abuse. An econocentric approach applies to a short-sighted focus on the economy as the central issue. Anthropocentrism takes a number of different forms, and leads either to indifference or exploitation. I will then sum up the main points from this segment.

Eco-friendly approaches to theology in chapter 5 generate two primary responses. The first of these is bio-centrism, which includes a number of different approaches, beginning with Aboriginal approaches to land and the environment generally; but eco-justice, eco-feminism, process philosophy, some scientific ideas, and deep ecology also offer some important insights. All of these responses move towards the notion of the unity of all life. I will argue that while there is real merit in the values associated with the biocentric approach, some responses tend to go too far. Theocentrism as a God-centred approach also covers a number of varying options, but I take Santmire’s position that they fall into three main categories, namely Reconstructionists, Apologists, and Revisionists. There is a further possibility. There are a number of theologians – and I include myself in this group – who consider that theistic biocentrism is the most adequate approach.

Chapter 6 will first establish the connection with the ecotheology of the previous chapter, and go on to introduce and analyse a series of ecological responses. Included here is stewardship, partnership, sacramentalism, and a prophet-covenant approach. I will examine the way in which the various models relate with each other, and will propose a composite model.

That discussion will continue in chapter 7, which will survey what the literature reveals about the Church’s understanding of its mission theology. It will include perceptions and limitations, the way it relates to evangelisation, and background theology – such as context, incarnation, and
ecotheology. Most importantly I will identify theological approaches to mission that seek to respond to the wider concerns of the creation. An eco-mission theology will then be constructed, and this would include the following elements: Policies at all levels reflecting sound eco-mission theology, contextual issues (local issues in global context, and postmodernism), clear eco-mission goals, worship and spirituality, environmental and ecotheological education, personal lifestyle issues, and ecumenical and community links.

Against the background of an ecological theology and a theology of eco-mission, and with the Australian context in mind, chapter 8 will relate specifically to ecological mission as it is practised in Britain, with special attention to the role of peak organizations and denominations; it will also outline the eco-mission approach of some British congregations, and the way in which they relate to and are inspired by the peak groups. Furthermore, it will seek to identify inhibitors of eco-mission. Data for this chapter will be gleaned from interviews with some 15 key people in the UK, in addition to first-hand impressions of the British context.

Chapter 9 will relate to an emerging eco-mission consciousness in the Australian Church, and will begin to clarify an understanding of what such an eco-mission might include. In the first instance I will gather data from a series of semi-structured interviews chosen from among judicatory groups (denominational leaders, mission consultants, theological educators); in addition I will gather data from detailed questionnaires and conversations with a representative sample of emerging eco-congregations, environmental commissions, and leaders identified as being committed to eco-mission. This analysis using qualitative research and grounded theory techniques will begin to clarify the key inhibitors of eco-mission and possibilities for a positive way forward in eco-mission. As part of that process, a dialogue between the British and Australian situations may be instructive.
The conclusion in chapter 10 will be an important summary of the main findings of the thesis, and draw out of that any theological implications of the research, as well as implications for Church policy and the practice of mission. I will indicate any limitations, and note some areas of possible future research. This final section reflects on the thesis process and offers any appropriate observations, including those of a personal nature.

**Definitions**

Macquarrie (1977) is undoubtedly correct when he suggests that definitions can be misleading. Nevertheless, in order to add a degree of precision, it is important at this stage to attempt to define a number of words which are used throughout this thesis.

**Theology and Ecotheology**

It is not my intention to elaborate on theology as such at any great length, but Macquarrie’s definition may be regarded as an adequate starting point: “Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most cogent language available” (1977, p.1). Beyond that, it is usual to speak of particular branches of theology, such as Systematic Theology or Practical Theology, concerning which I will elaborate in the next chapter. In that context, ecotheology is a recognised descriptor of an approach that sets theology in dialogue with contemporary ecology, and asserts that our care of the natural world, or of God’s creation, is not just a practical issue, but it is a faith issue as well. Thus, it does not in any way set out to deny or diminish the traditional and legitimate issues that theology addresses; it is simply a term of convenience to identify a particular aspect of that theology.
Mission and Eco-Mission

One other significant word that appears in the title of this thesis needs an explanation, and that is “mission”. It may be noted, however, that books on Christian mission frequently fail to define the word, apparently assuming that its meaning is self-explanatory. As I will suggest in chapter 7, that often translates into an overtly anthropocentric approach, often with an excessive focus on “the Great Commission” of Matthew 28. Another possibility is that Bosch (1991) is correct in suggesting that “mission” is ultimately indefinable. However, although chapter 7 will be devoted to an exploration of the term, especially in its ecological implications, a brief interim explanation may be attempted. In basic terms, I take it to refer to the role of the Christian Church in the world in its wholeness, including worship and spiritual disciplines, pastoral care and a compassionate response to human need, in addition to social justice and ecological issues as suggested by Jesus’ use of the term “kingdom of God”. In short, as Bosch states, “mission gives expression to the dynamic relationship between God and the world” (1991, p.9). But as in the case of theology and ecotheology, eco-mission builds on the foundation of ecotheology to express the conviction that Christians are called to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to exercise their mission in such a way that the life of the Earth is sustained and renewed. As such it operates alongside other valid forms of Christian mission; it makes no claim to be the whole of mission, but in an ecclesiastical ethos that has often overlooked this field, it has its part to play.

There are four different words commonly used to describe the natural world. These are nature, environment, ecology, and creation, and while they are often used more or less interchangeably, there are some subtle differences to be noted.
Nature

Nature is probably one of the more commonly used descriptors of non-human life, and includes both flora and fauna. However, it is clear that the word has a fundamentally much broader application. The “Australian Oxford Dictionary”, for example, describes it as a “thing’s or person’s innate or essential qualities” (2004, p.854) and it is in that sense it applies in a wide range of circumstances. In a more particular sense the dictionary understands nature as “the countryside”, and defines it as “an uncultivated or wild area”. Nature study is defined as “the practical study of plant and animal life” (2004, p.854).

Nature is understood by some to include a scientific study of the natural order, and also the assumption of a different relationship between humans and the ecological system. That “different relationship” is often assumed to be one of dominance rather than partnership. However, James Nash illustrates the danger of assuming that the meaning of a word is self-evident when he defines nature as “simply the biospherical world, of which humans are parts and products” (italics mine) (1991, p.22). The question of whether humans are part of nature has important implications in terms of the attitudes we bring to it, and I will therefore be arguing that Nash is correct in his assessment. To see ourselves as separate from nature is to invite an increased likelihood of abuse.

Environment

Environment includes the whole context in which life is lived. Thus, environment would include not only the ecological system, but also the buildings that we create, the social structure of society, and all that is implied in the phrase “the political and scientific aspect of the whole” (Duchrow & Liedke 1987, p.49). In theological terms that is significant, in that the presence and action of God may be perceived in the whole human context. James Nash (1991) has a concern that “environment” carries an anthropocentric connotation, and relates primarily to the human
context. That concern must be noted, and certainly a human dimension is involved, but whether that is primary is another question. Its legitimacy, at least in Australia, may be doubted.

Ecology

Ecology may at first seem little different from a more general concept such as nature, and certainly definitions vary in their scope. It may be understood in the narrowly scientific terms of non-human organisms in relationship with their environment. Thus Cooper cites an unacknowledged source to the effect that ecology is “the study of the structure and function of nature” (1990, p.9), which is clearly not very helpful. In fact his quote is part of a wider definition by G Tyler Miller, in which he describes ecology as “a study of organisms in their home; it is a study of the structure and function of nature or of the organisms and groups of organisms found in nature and their interactions with one another and with their environment” (1982, p.44); in other words, the ecological ideal is the pursuit of a complete understanding of the entire ecosphere. Such an understanding provides the context for a more complete approach. From that basis it may appear that ecology has little to do with humankind. However, that would be quite deceptive.

A typical dictionary definition of ecology, for example as provided by the Readers’ Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary, sees it as a “branch of science dealing with relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits, modes of life, populations, etc” (1965, Vol. 1, p.282); the Webster’s Dictionary definition cited by Carmody also includes community issues and social interaction (Carmody 1983, p.12). More than that, Carmody calls on Tyler Miller’s analysis of the scientific and sociological aspects of ecology. In that analysis Miller uses the laws of thermodynamics to illustrate the need for environmental sustainability. That in turn illustrates the impossibility of defining ecology adequately without reference to humankind.
Thus, ecology speaks of a network of relationships between different life forms, in a natural non-political setting. Santmire sums it up well when he states that ecology is “a network of interrelationships between God, humanity, and nature” (1985, p.9). This can be taken at a global, regional, or local level. Every rainforest, for example, has its own particular eco-system, set within the larger network of global ecology. But it is also possible to draw on more general nuances of the word. Ruether relates ecology to biological science, describing it as “the biological science of biotic communities that demonstrates the laws by which nature, unaided by humans, has generated and sustained life” (1982, p.47).

Creation

Creation introduces a broader and deeper dimension to our understanding, and includes not only what we understand as ecology or nature, but also the universe itself. The key is the faith or belief that God created matter and is the source of life, and this is God’s world. Thus, it is not merely the belief that God “made everything”, but also that God alone is the basis of meaning and value in all things. As Moltmann states, “The limited sphere of reality which we call ‘nature’ must be lifted into the totality of being which is termed ‘God’s creation’” (1985, p.21); and that, as Duchrow and Liedke (1987) point out, includes an element of relationship with God. It cannot be extended to mean that all societal systems, for example, are God’s creation, but rather that all things are subject to divine authority. The concept of creation therefore, as an ongoing process, adds a new and deeper dimension to the current concern about the future of the planet. What will it mean to be answerable not just to our peers or even our children and grandchildren, but to our God for the quality of our stewardship?

Delimitations of Scope

It will be apparent that the broad theme of ecology and Christian mission potentially offers enormous scope, and thus some boundaries need to be set.
First, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to undertake a comprehensive theology of the environment, but rather it must content itself with a summary approach that is able to support a theology of ecological mission. Moreover, because this thesis will only be able to deal with general principles, it cannot explore particular programs or details concerning the way those principles may be applied. Local circumstances will vary widely; but in any event I believe that my work will facilitate the formulation of specific eco-mission plans and strategies.

Second, while I have already drawn attention to some of the scientific underpinnings of ecological concern, this thesis should not in any sense be viewed as a quasi-scientific exercise. As I have suggested, a degree of consensus is emerging in the scientific community, and while a summary of some key issues is helpful in understanding the current concern and urgency, it is nonetheless not a central component of the thesis. Further, I am not qualified to express scientific opinions; the main focus of the work is theological.

Third, while this thesis must of necessity focus on a Christian perspective, it is important to acknowledge the enormous scope and potential for an inter-faith approach to ecological issues. This is reflected for example in *Earth and Faith: a Book of Reflection and Action* published by the United Nations in 2000. Further, there is significant variation within the Christian community itself, and so in this thesis I will need to confine my research to a significant segment of what may be termed the “mainstream”, notably the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Uniting Churches. Differences between the mainstream churches and Pentecostal or fundamentalist churches in response to the ecological challenge would offer some fascinating material, but that is beyond the scope of this work.
Conclusion

In this introductory chapter I have outlined something of my own background and commitment both to the Christian Faith and to the Church’s ecological responsibility. I have indicated the nature and goals of the research, and in general have provided a foundation on which the thesis may be built. This is potentially a large subject with many facets, but with the imposition of some essential limitations, it is my hope that it will represent a positive contribution.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

In the first chapter I outlined the background and rationale behind my research, based on a concern for the deepening ecological and environmental crisis enveloping not only humankind, but indeed all life. I also indicated some of the key questions, and provided an outline of the thesis. Since this thesis is concerned not only about an analysis of the problem, but also and very importantly about moving towards committed action, it is clear that the basis will be a practical theology paradigm. A chapter on methodology, however, must begin with hermeneutics, since hermeneutics has to do with understanding; and the overall aim here is to generate understanding not only of the texts, but also of the events and experiences surrounding the eco-crisis.

Hermeneutics

The discipline of hermeneutics is based on a Greek word that means “to announce”, or to “translate” or “interpret”. In modern terminology, Heitink regards it as referring simply to “the theory of interpretation” (1993, p.179), although it has traditionally been understood as relating to the interpretation of texts. Thus, for Ricoeur, it is “the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts” (1991, p.53); in real terms that has frequently meant the texts of Scripture.

It is of course wider than that, and Ricoeur himself goes on to broaden the definition of “text” to include, for example, discourse and action. Heitink similarly observes that in more recent times, hermeneutics has “been expanded to include non-textual phenomena” (1999, p.179), which may include spoken words, social phenomena, or actions. Such an extension is clearly significant in the context of my research. But the starting point for hermeneutics, in Gadamer’s terms, is that
“the person seeking to understand something has a relation to the object that comes into language in the transmitted text” (1979, p.262).

A great deal has been written about hermeneutics, and much of it is of a highly philosophical nature. From the perspective of this thesis, however, with Browning (1996), Forrester (2000), and others, a fresh understanding of practical theology in recent decades has been enriched by a contemporary approach to practical philosophy.

Thus, hermeneutics seeks to formulate the basic principles of understanding and interpretation. Schleiermacher wanted to draw a distinction between a theory of understanding and a theory of interpretation, but more recent thought has moved away from that position. Ricoeur (1991, p.53) regards the notion of setting explanation and understanding in opposition to each other as “disastrous”; for him, they must be complementary.

It is Gadamer’s work, however, that is of particular value in developing a practical hermeneutical approach. Browning, who draws heavily on Gadamer, describes his approach to hermeneutics as “a broadly moral and practical enterprise that emerges out of the situations of our traditions of our practice” (1996, p.39). From that perspective, Gadamer is able to argue that understanding, interpretation, and application, or praxis, are not distinct but are intimately related. It is at this point that, as Tracy (1983) suggests, the phrase “the contemporary situation” becomes significant in two ways. First, it signifies that “the situation is already involved in any interpretation” (1983, p.65). He goes on to cite Gadamer’s obvious point that understanding varies from person to person. Such observation leads in turn to an awareness of the plurality of any given situation, with differing ways of perceiving it. That applies to the Church in the context of the eco-crisis as much as to any other.
But how does one deal with the assumptions one inevitably brings to the text or event? Gadamer (1979) rejected the view of Dilthey and Husserl, that hermeneutics required objectivity and self emptying, and argued instead that this was both impossible to achieve and unhelpful in achieving a good understanding and praxis. Without question we all come with our biases and prejudices, which Gadamer called “fore-understandings” or “fore-concepts”. A positive approach would perceive that what is required is not neutrality regarding the object, nor an extinction of self, but rather, as Gadamer states, “The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (1979, p.236).

Perhaps at this point it may be appropriate to refer to the role of imagination and “a hermeneutic of suspicion” (Pagolu 2003, p.7), which Green (2000) develops in theological terms. He begins, correctly I believe, by stating the widely accepted view that there are no objective “facts” as such “that are not themselves a function of interpretation” (2000, p.17). Suspicion, Green argues, ultimately depends on a trust of some kind, so that the theological question becomes one of the bases of that trust. For him, Christians commit to “a form of suspicion more radical than the secular kinds because it is the hermeneutic expression of God’s judgment. And since God’s judgment is always the shadow of his grace, Christians are able to live their lives and do their thinking in the hopeful insecurity of the faithful imagination” (2000, pp.21-2). Browning also describes practical theology as “playful conversation” in which “the imagination – its questions, inquiries, and syntheses – is given free reign” (1996, p.243).

That argument cannot be developed fully here, except to note that Habel’s use of this notion in terms of an ecological reading of the Scriptures is significant. Habel’s “Earth Bible” team consciously avoided the assumption that the focus of the Biblical message is humanity, and sought “to focus on Earth itself as the object of investigation in the text” (2000, p.38); or as he
puts the issue in the form of a question, “Should we not then, with a new ecological consciousness, legitimately suspect that the text and its interpreters have been understandably anthropocentric?” (2000, p.39). Far from being negative, the “suspicion” enables the text to be heard in a fresh way.

Given that there is some distance between the reader and the text, especially the text of Scripture, one may ask how this distance may be bridged. Gadamer uses the concept of “horizon”, which suggests a larger and more universal vision than might otherwise be the case. And “the horizon of the present is being continually formed”, Gadamer argues, “in that we have continually to test all our prejudices” (1979, p.273). Thus, the distance is positive. As we move from those fore-understandings, of history or tradition, our situation is “hermeneutically determined by our own horizon of understanding”, and that horizon is something “into which we move and that moves with us” (Heitink 1993, p.185). For Gadamer, genuine understanding takes place with a fusion of the historical horizon with our own horizon of understanding. In that process of fusion that is going on continually, “old and new … grow together to make something of living value, without either being explicitly extinguished from the other” (1979, p.273). But Gadamer rejects the notion of a single horizon, and perceives the hermeneutic task within the tension between the text and the present.

Ricoeur also perceives a discontinuity between the reader and the author of the text, which he refers to as “distanciation”. Moreover, Ricoeur argues that “if it remains true that hermeneutics terminates in self-understanding, then the subjectivism of this proposition must be rectified by saying that to understand oneself is to understand oneself in front of the text”. Thus, it represents a crucial moment in the process of understanding.
These are important insights in terms of traditions or understandings from the past, whether that concerns the Christian Faith or our contemporary situation; but as Gadamer asserts, “We stand always within tradition”, and understanding allows itself to be addressed by that tradition (1979, pp.250-1). Tracy too indicates that information does not come in an immediate form, but is mediated through a particular filter of culture and language. “Neither Christianity nor the contemporary situation is present to us in immediate or static forms as objects-over-against-our-subjectivity. Both come to us in mediated and often unconscious forms, through verbal language and symbol. We must, therefore, mediate, translate, that is, interpret both realities” (1983, p.63).

As Farley suggests, the interpretation of texts and situations from the viewpoint and in the context of faith creates “a specific hermeneutic task”; and the first task, he suggests, is in identifying and describing the situation (1987, p.11). In the case of my research, the results of the environmental crisis and ecological devastation are increasingly obvious, and scarcely need elaboration. Yet I cannot undertake that hermeneutic task outside the faith perspective I bring to it. More than that, there is a range of philosophical, scientific, and theological responses that need to be taken into account, along with the very practical matter of the Church’s response to the crisis.

Browning argues persuasively for the relevance of Gadamer’s practical philosophy for theology in a general sense, and more particularly in practical terms. What that means is that the application to practice does not follow understanding, but “guides the interpretative process from the beginning”. As Browning (1996, p.39) asserts, “Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory clearly breaks down the theory-to-practice … model of humanistic learning”, and places theology in a practical framework from start to finish. It is in such a setting that a practical theology model becomes most appropriate.
A Practical Theology Model

As stated earlier, the thesis is set within the framework of a practical theology paradigm, an approach that in reality has its roots in the ancient past, but which in the more modern era is traditionally traced back to Schleiermacher in the 19th century. Burkhart’s “Schleiermacher’s Vision for Theology” (1983) typifies that approach, which is also reflected in Forrester (2000), Browning (1996), and others. But of course a great deal has changed since those days, when practical theology, still in its infancy, was tied very much to a clerical paradigm. But if practical theology is to be regarded as something more than “hints and tips” on how to do ministry, how should it be defined? For Farley, practical theology is a “dimension” of theology, in particular that dimension “in which reflection is directed at a living situation in which the believer or corporate entity is involved” (1987, p.17). Others however, significantly influenced by the practical philosophy of Gadamer, would agree with Browning that “Christian theology should be seen as practical through and through and at its very heart” (1996, p.7).

But just as one is starting to feel a hint of over-statement in such a claim, Ogletree offers what I believe is a most helpful comment. “Theology is practical in the sense that it concerns, in all of its expressions, the most basic issues of human existence” (1983, p.85). It does have its theoretical side, he argues, in which we need to stand back from a particular experience in order to understand more clearly what is happening around us. But that is not an end in itself. Forrester’s observation is also compelling; while emphasising that practical theology is theology, he asserts that we cannot talk about God or talk to God while setting aside, even temporarily, the ethical or normative question: “What is God calling us to do?” In that context he recalls a familiar saying that he attributes to Bonhoeffer: “You may not chant the psalms unless you stand up for the Jews” (2000, p.53). More than that, Bosch points out that most of the New Testament was “written within a missionary context”; in other words, “mission became ‘the mother of theology’.” (1991, p.489); and that missionary context, Bosch argues, involves a
series of action words – “serving, healing, and reconciling a divided, wounded humanity” (1997, p.494). Perhaps we are only now re-discovering that point.

**Context and Locus**

But is there such a thing as ‘theology’? Bevans argues that there is not; “there is only *contextual* theology.” (1992, p.3) By that he means that all theology rises out of a particular context, whether that is feminism, the desire for liberation, environmental concern, or any one of many other options. He proposes a series of contextual models, one of which relates directly to praxis. He refers to human experience and Christian tradition as the twin poles of theology, and asserts that various cultures have their own preferred ways of doing theology. Within that framework, the starting point for any discussion on method would need to be a contextual location (1992, p.17). Muller takes a similar approach, asserting that “practical theology is only possible as *contextual* practical theology” (2005, p.6). Whether or not all theology is contextual, it is certainly a significant element of practical theology.

More than that, once practical theology moves beyond a clerical paradigm and the confines of the church, Groome’s position (1987) becomes very clear, that the primary reference point for theology is the unfolding of world events rather than the context of the church or the university; or as Ogletree expressed it, “practical theology concerns the concrete enactment of Christian faith in the ongoing course of worldly events” (1983, p.94).

Thus, context and locus emerge as two related and foundational components of a practical theology methodology, and that may be illustrated in terms of my research. My particular aim is to discover what eco-mission is happening in Australia, and why it is not a strong part of the Church’s agenda in Australia. What are the obstacles, and how might they be removed? The rationale behind this is essentially a twofold conviction. First, it seems increasingly evident that
planet Earth is in trouble, with climate change, extreme weather, global warming, species loss, and much more. Our survival demands that something be done. Second, the biblical and theological underpinning of our life in the world, in God’s world, demands that members of the Christian Church have a responsibility to act. In the case of many churches, however, that is just not happening.

The resolution of these questions may lead in due course to the development of a series of models for ecological mission, not only for the Christian Church in Australia, but also for local churches in a variety of particular situations, whether they are urban, rural, inner city, or something else. But the extension of the practical theology method into those very different contexts is a further step that is beyond the range of the present research.

Given the previous observation that the locus for theology is the world, it should be clear that the change in behaviour patterns I am seeking is not for the sake of the Church, but indeed for the world. That has local and immediate implications; and as Tracy has noted, from a sociological point of view there is no local situation that is devoid of global implications (1987, p.140). Bosch makes a similar point, that “missiology means globalisation”, and that “in order to achieve globalisation, it needs specificity, concretisation” (1991, p.496).

Thus, at one level my research is clearly set within the broad parameters of a global concern, or what could be termed the pain of creation. That of course easily translates into pain not only for masses of people, but also for all living things. At the same time it is important methodologically that this global aspect is limited and concretised, hence the focus on the Christian community, and ultimately on the local congregation. Yet out of necessity the “Christian community” in this case is generic rather than specific; as I have stated elsewhere, my research can do no more than provide general guidelines which will need to be applied in a
whole range of different circumstances. A single uniform approach will not work. The guidelines I will offer, which are based on a theology of ecology and Christian mission, will need to be reworked contextually before they can be applied in a particular congregational or regional setting. Thus, it is at the local level that the task of practical theology will continue. The clear purpose of this theological exercise is to generate change, and it therefore fits naturally into a practical theology approach.

Theory and Praxis

The *locus* of theology in the world raises an important methodological issue, namely the relationship between theory and praxis. But what is *praxis*? If, as Bevans asserts, praxis has its origin in Marxism, practical theology has certainly moved well beyond that point. He asserts that it is a technical term, and carries a greater weight of meaning than words like “practice” or “action” (1992, p.71). In theological terms, Forrester states that it is “a *habitus*, a disposition of the mind and heart from which action flows naturally, in an unselfconscious way” (2000, p.5). As such, praxis emphasises not merely the action itself, but rather more the significance or meaning of the action, or the reflective interaction of theory and practice. Heitink makes a similar point when he stresses the broader theoretical aspect of praxis, and the implications of the value systems it necessarily involves (1999). Thus praxis becomes a means of transformation and change.

Heitink refers to what he calls Praxis 1 and Praxis 2. Praxis 1 refers to the mediation of the Christian faith; for Heitink, the relationship between theory and praxis requires mediation, which may take many forms, not all of which are exclusively ecclesiastical. Praxis 2, or the praxis of modern society, is “the context of real life, where people … are the actors who bear responsibility for their own life, for that of others, and for society as a whole” (1999, p.168).
The complex interaction of Praxis 1 and Praxis 2 provides the setting in which theology takes place.

An earlier belief was that the relationship between theory and practice was essentially linear in character. Traditionally this began with theory, which was always primary and determined any subsequent action. Such a view is undoubtedly still alive and well in the modern Church. At the other end of the spectrum there are those in a liberationist mould who would propose a linear approach that begins with praxis. But whether one starts at one pole or the other, practical theologians almost universally reject a simple linear approach.

But as Heitink (1999) and others have shown, the real situation is far more complex, and indeed any theological exercise becomes a complex interaction between theory and praxis. In diagrammatic terms, it becomes an interactive loop, in which theory and praxis “inform and influence each other” (Anderson 2001, p.21). Each new situation forces the individual to interpret the Scripture in a fresh way, to make any necessary personal changes, and in the light of that to interpret the Scripture again as part of an on-going process. It therefore has a forward-moving circular motion, or what Forrester refers to as “the hermeneutic spiral” (2000, p.28), in which the theologian is constantly moving between the two poles. There can be no doubt that in ecological or environmental terms such a two-way process will be an important part of a practical theology methodology.

At what point though does one enter this hermeneutic spiral? Heitink asserts that “practical theology starts from the situation, the praxis” (1999, p.153); and from his background of contextual theology, Bevans similarly states that “committed action is a first requirement”, although he does acknowledge that “it makes sense to say that one might come into the circle at any point” (1992, p.76). In looking back over perhaps 50 years, and in a great variety of
different experiences, my own reflection would suggest that after a period of time the theory-praxis spiral becomes very complex indeed, and it is almost impossible to determine a point of entry for a particular concern. It is here that a distinction must be drawn between the primary practical orientation of theology, as in Ogletree’s helpful definition to which I made reference earlier, and particular practical issues that emerge from time to time. Thus it is a moot point whether my engagement with the specific issue of the environment had its genesis in faith or a commitment to action. Perhaps it was both! The practical theologians are doubtless correct, that the point of beginning for theology is always a practical issue. But from my perspective, the key is that out of practical experience comes engagement in the interaction between theory and praxis that is at the heart of a practical theological method.

**Research Methodology**

**A Correlational Approach**

I began this chapter by seeking to indicate the way in which hermeneutic theory relates to a practical theology methodology. Against that background I am arguing that the process of reflection and interpretation required in the present ecological context implies a hermeneutic-theological method. Heitink (1999, p.195) has outlined a number of possibilities, ranging from the dialectic approach of Barth to the identification of human and religious experience in liberation theology. Rational or experiential research must rise out of the theology of the Church at large, or what Heitink calls “the normative claims embedded in the Christian faith tradition.” (1999, p.221).

Having taken that into account, however, other perspectives are also essential. It raises the question of an inter-disciplinary approach, as reflected, for example, by Tracy and Browning. Browning draws heavily on Tracy, who in turn is profoundly influenced by Gadamer. Thus Browning is able to say, “Tracy’s view of theology is correlational; it correlates the confessional
beginning point of theology with questions shaped both by faith and by other aspects of our
cultural experience” (1996, p.46). Tracy’s approach to practical theology and the interaction
between faith and other cultural experience also serves to describe his approach to theological
reflection. He defines it as “the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis
of the Christian faith with the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation”
(1983, p.76). When considered in the context of the global environment or of eco-theology, I
would contend that such a reflective and interpretative inter-disciplinary approach is very
helpful, even essential for the outworking of a realistic praxis model. In following Tracy,
Browning’s assertion of a “critical correlation method” is surely correct.

I will argue, with Nash, Moltmann and others, that what has been called the eco-crisis is
complex and involves our whole way of life. Thus, the increasingly obvious need for care for
our planet Earth is interwoven with a range of issues relating to the human community,
providing a rich agenda for ecotheology. Moreover, this is a theology that must be carried out in
a very public place, for it raises the question of how it is interacting with other disciplines such
as social policy, politics, economics, and science. Each of those areas is important in its own
right; however, since ecologists, climatologists and other scientists have clearly added
considerably to our understanding of what is happening in our world, and therefore to our
awareness of the scope of the crisis, in my view the interface between faith and science becomes
an important background dimension of Christian ecological mission.

A Science-Religion Partnership
There has been a perception that science and religion are in opposition to each other, and
certainly the relationship between faith and science has never been straightforward. My
contention is that there is no real conflict between science and theology, and that when the
nature of both disciplines is properly understood it will be perceived that any lingering
difficulties between the two disciplines persist largely at the fundamentalist fringe of science and faith respectively. The bitter debate was never between science and religion, but between parodies of those disciplines (cf. MacKay 1991).

One difficulty is that “science” and more particularly “religion” are complex terms, each of which is capable of being expressed in a variety of ways. McGrath’s attempts (1999) to define religion illustrate that almost universal difficulty, while a definition of science is if anything more difficult, with scientists differing in their understanding of their discipline, and of how much it is prepared to claim for itself. An interim approach to the relationship between these disciplines may be expressed in the words of Abrecht et al: “The tensions between science and religion centre not only on specific scientific and theological ideas, both of which often change, but also, on a deeper level, on what is sometimes called a ‘scientific world view’” (1978, p.12), including the positivistic stance that “only truth is objective”, whatever that may mean.

A Scientific versus a Theological Approach

A large part of the problem is that both disciplines are engaged in a search for the truth. But Pontius Pilate’s famous question, “What is truth?” is still valid 2,000 years later, especially as one attempts to define the territory occupied by each discipline. Can there be such a thing as “scientific truth” as well as “Christian truth”? And if there is only one truth, how does one arrive at it? Humphries helpfully likens truth to a building, and states, “Truth is a unity – there is one building of truth. However, more than one drawing is necessary for a full description” (1991, p.111). Certainly it can be very easy to make assumptions that prove to be false. A number of possibilities present themselves.

One popular idea adopted by followers of both sides of the debate sets out to avoid any possibility of confrontation. Here, the possibility of conflict is avoided because the two
disciplines are regarded as having quite distinct and separate roles, and so are on non-intersecting paths. As Humphreys (1991) notes, this is the notion that faith and science occupy different spheres, that the former deals with the spiritual world, or the “why” questions, while the latter relates to the material world, or the “how” issues. This view is problematic not only because it virtually eliminates any possibility of dialogue between the two disciplines, but also because science and religion both ask “how” and “why” questions, not least in issues related to the environment.

A second non-confrontational model is based on accommodation, or what Polkinghorne (1998) describes as integration. This model begins with the premise that all truth is from God, and goes on to assume that “all advances and developments in a scientific understanding of the universe are to be welcomed, and accommodated within the Christian faith” (McGrath 1999, p.49). In this approach, the possibility of conflict is avoided by the one-way traffic of thought; and ultimately that will not be helpful either to science or faith.

A third model is based on confrontation. Thus, the fundamentalist Christian (or Jew or Muslim) may assume that the words of the Scripture represent “God’s word” and therefore “the truth”, and that anything else is clearly false. Such an approach ends any possibility of dialogue! At the same time, a type of scientific understanding can be just as uncompromising. At a popular level, it is the belief that “science has disproved religion”, and even some top-level scientific minds have succumbed to this simplistic idea. There is no better example of this problem than Richard Dawkins’ book, *The God Delusion* (2006); clearly, while Dawkins has a problem with religion *per se*, his prime target appears to be the dogmatic, un-thinking fundamentalism that is equally problematic for many Christians, who would not accept his definition of faith as something that “requires no justification and brooks no argument” because by definition it is “unthinking” (2006, p.308). Whether or not Dawkins’ rejection of the label “fundamentalist” for himself
(2006, pp.282-3) can be justified, it is clear that an uncompromising confrontational approach, whether it is based on a “holy book” or on “reason” alone, is unlikely to lead to truth in a holistic sense.

A more creative way of understanding the relationship between faith and science will be one that eschews both avoidance and unnecessary confrontation. It will be a process in which true dialogue is able to take place.

**How has Science Impacted on Theology?**

There can be no doubt that science has had a profound impact on all forms of theology, and it is right that it should. It has, for example, as MacKay (1991) argues, changed the way in which we read the Bible. The effect of that development was to force a re-think of our understanding of God, and of how God works in the world. Thus, it was not merely a question of whether or not there was a God, but how such a God may be understood. But while the existence of God can neither be proved nor disproved, for Houghton (2007), what science does is to provide perspective, which is a sense of awe and wonder that he believes many scientists feel as they contemplate the reality about us, and that is crucial in the care of creation.

**How does Theology Impact on Science?**

It may seem likely that a scientific outlook will have a greater impact on religious understanding than will the opposite. However, that does not mean that theology will be subservient to a dominant science. Treston identifies what I believe is an important element of this relationship. He refers to Francis Bacon’s view that “the earth is tortured until it yields up its secrets”, and suggests that the ensuing “process of reductionism, by which everything is reduced to its smallest parts in order that the part might be properly studied” means that “our grasp of the holistic nature of the world is limited” (1991, p.63). Such a scientific approach relates well with
a positivism that emphasises the reality of things that can be observed and measured. On the other hand, a religious or spiritual outlook has the capacity to complement scientific analysis with the capacity to see the whole, and enjoy nature as God’s creation.

Within the broad context of the eco-crisis, including matters of ethics and values generally, religion needs to extend a significant challenge to those rogue elements of science and technology that look to the disenchantment of nature, and it needs to question the value of some technology. If, as I have argued along with Moltmann and others, the “eco-crisis” relates to our whole way of life, any worthwhile response is bound to be a holistic one in which science, religion, and other disciplines work together.

**Science and Religion in the Eco-crisis**

Of the various areas in which science and theology may enjoy a fruitful dialogue, one of the most significant is surely the global ecological crisis. This possibility is reflected in the words of the botanist Sir Ghillean Prance. Writing out of a deep faith, Prance stated, “It is no longer enough for me merely to classify and describe the plant species of the Amazon forest; I must also use my research data to address issues of deforestation, pollution, starvation and other problems that surround us today. I am a much more concerned person because my faith helps to remove more selfish motives” (1991, p.63).

It may be argued that care for the Earth is closely linked to a doctrine of creation. In that regard, perhaps too many people have been too busy arguing over the pseudo-scientific question of origins in Genesis to note the purpose of creation, and as a result, creation care has suffered. Thus, Polkinghorne asserts that “the doctrine of creation is not concerned with temporal origin but with ontological origin” (1998, p.79), and that God is as much the Creator now as at the big bang. He goes on to say, as perhaps only he could, “there is no area in which the interaction of
science and theology is more bedevilled by theological ignorance on the part of scientists (and some religionists?) than in the discussion of the doctrine of creation” (1998, p.80).

But for some decades now, as I have noted, ecologists have been monitoring a whole range of scientific data, and have been issuing dire warnings to any who would listen; sadly, until recently, that was a minority. In recent decades an increasing volume of ecological theology has taken the scientific data seriously, and then proceeded to build, or perhaps rediscover, a true biblical theology within that context. It is a prime example of how science and religion may interact effectively, to foster increased awareness of and concern not only about climate change, but many other ecological issues as well, and thus it is a genuine practical theology carried forward in the public arena.

Towards Consonance

I have sought to show that any approach that seeks to keep science and theology apart is doomed, and that the two disciplines must at least be in a constructive dialogue with each other. But there is one further step, and it is suggested in Polkinghorne’s term “consonance” (1998, p.118); it is this, I believe, that offers the best possibility for interaction. In this model, each maintains its autonomy in its acknowledged domain, but “the statements they make must be capable of appropriate reconciliation with each other in overlap regions”; in other words, “the answers to ‘How?’ and to ‘Why?’ questions must fit together without strain” (1998, p.22). If Humphreys is right, as I suggested earlier in the chapter, and there is only one “building of truth”, then such an approach is essential.

In his analysis of the development of a theological doctrine of creation, Moltmann identifies three distinct phases of understanding. The first stage is that the biblical narrative and pre-scientific images of the universe were fused into “a religious cosmology” (1985, p.33). Second,
when science freed itself from this early view of cosmology, faith tended to retreat to a personal belief in creation. Now, Moltmann suggests, “theology and science have entered a third stage in their relationship” (1985, p.34). There are several major factors driving this new symbiotic relationship.

The first factor is nothing less than the maturing of both theological and scientific thought, and a realisation that some previously held positions were simply wrong. Such disciplines are never static, but are by definition fluid and evolving in their quest for truth. Moltmann identifies a second and related factor that adds weight and urgency to the first. Science and theology, he says, “have become companions in tribulation under the pressure of the ecological crisis and the search for the new direction which both must work for, if human beings and nature are to survive at all on this earth” (1985, p.34).

Moltmann therefore perceives science and theology as being in a new phase of partnership, which, in part, he expresses in these terms: “The sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show how nature is to be understood as God’s creation” (1985, p.38). Campolo (1992) makes a similar point, suggesting that Christianity and science can cooperate in a manner that will help us to be environmentally informed. A further expression of cooperation, as DeWitt (1998) notes, is the way in which some scientists with ethical concerns have joined with religious leaders to issue a statement designed to address problems in the environment, or as people of faith would prefer, with God’s creation.

**Methodology**

The hermeneutical-theological task will be expressed in terms of a two-pronged literature review. The first part will involve a review of a wide range of material, ranging from the philosophical approach of the Process School and eco-feminism to biblical and eco-theological
sources, and including both exploitative and “eco-friendly” approaches. This will provide the theological setting for my research. The second part, and one that is crucial to the methodology I will employ, is a consideration of a range of ecological responses such as stewardship, which will become a bridge between ecotheology and a theology of mission, especially eco-mission. It becomes clear that the theory-praxis rhythm of the hermeneutic spiral is inherent in this initial task. The reality encountered is measured in terms of the belief that this is God’s world, from which a number of implications are likely to follow.

In line with the bulk of practical theology research, my research will combine literary and empirical methodology. Given the nature of the subject of the thesis, the literary phase is most important. The ecotheological study provides the essential grounding for what is to follow, and reveals a range of positions to which an effective and valid praxis may relate. A theology of eco-mission is also important, and since that is not highly developed in the literature, it will be necessary to develop such a theological approach. But the theory still needs to be “earthed” in practical terms, and it is at that point that the empirical phase of the research becomes relevant. In Heitink’s words, “empirical” is “the term for an epistemological approach that attempts to show that all scientific knowledge is based on experience...” (1999, p.221), and it is this that will provide much of the shape of the practical aspect of my planned research.

I will largely be using a qualitative approach to methodology, which I believe will be more appropriate than a quantitative method for the particular empirical research I am planning. At the same time, I will employ some elements of a quantitative approach in order to provide a larger quantity of data than would otherwise be available; but it will be used as an aid to the primary qualitative analysis. There are clear differences between the quantitative and qualitative methods, although as Punch (2000, p.4) has stated, the difference can be overstated. The decision to employ one or the other, or a combination of both, is based solely on what is
appropriate for the research in question. In short, the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is in their focus on breadth or depth, numbers or words, objective or subjective perceptions. Quantitative research is hard, logical and sequential, and while it has the advantage of being able to consider a relatively large sample, it cannot cope with the subtleties of complex social questions.

A qualitative methodology on the other hand may be perceived as “soft”, and represents a particular way of thinking about social reality; and while it deals with a much smaller sample, which could be seen as a disadvantage, its focus on depth and detail makes it far more helpful in dealing with what Flick (2002, p.4) calls a “plurality of life worlds”. Research design methods can be open enough to cope with complex issues, subtleties, and shades of meaning. Quinn-Patton (1987) observes that there are no clear guidelines for determining the size of purposeful samples, and that it should be large enough to be credible but small enough to allow for depth and detail. This fits with the proposed methodology. Thus the methods used for data collection should provide both a sufficient volume and quality of data to ensure that there is a fair sample for analysis, and that is important in order that significant factors are able to emerge.

Thus, within the practical theology paradigm, the aim of the methodology is to move the debate beyond the theory of ecotheology and eco-mission theology through a better understanding of the current situation in some of the mainline Christian churches in Australia, in particular the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Uniting Churches. In selecting those particular branches of the Christian Church I have several things in mind. First, given the relationship between these churches, as for example in the Brisbane College of Theology, there ought to be a measure of cohesiveness as well as diversity about such a selection. Second, and very importantly, these are the churches who have generally demonstrated the strongest commitment to engagement in
social and political issues, and consequently they are the ones for whom eco-mission is at least showing up on their radar screens.

In order to achieve this goal, a grounded theory approach to qualitative research will be used. As Punch (1998) states, grounded theory involves both a research strategy and a method of analysis. As a research strategy, its prime purpose is “to generate theory from data” (Punch 1998, p.163). This is especially appropriate in a case such as the present study, in which very little research has been done. At the same time, grounded theory is also a method of qualitative research analysis that cannot be separated from the strategy itself.

The process of “earthing” the theology in practical terms, or activating the “hermeneutical spiral” of interaction between theory and praxis, means that information on current attitudes and practice, barriers and obstacles to eco-mission, and possibilities for a more positive eco-mission approach needed to be obtained. My aim was to try to see if obstacles to eco-mission are attitudinal in the small leadership group of the Church, in the perception of Church members generally, or if it is more a matter of shortage of funds, lack of people equipped to give a lead in this area, ageing congregations and the struggle to survive, or mainly a matter of priorities. I hope to gather empirical evidence indicating which factors actually form roadblocks to eco-mission, and which are most important.

Although the primary point of reference in the research is clearly the Australian context, in September-October 2007 I visited England, where eco-mission has been practiced, if not more widely, then perceptibly more publicly than it is in Australia. My goal was to gain a first-hand understanding of that situation, and to conduct 15 interviews with representatives of eco-congregations and peak eco-mission groups in England. This would provide a basis for contrast and dialogue that could be instructive.
However, in the process of undertaking the empirical research in Australia, I found that my approach to methodology in that different context needed to change. I began with the intention of conducting semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 people within Australia, selected from among denominational leaders, theological educators, mission consultants, and ecologically aware individuals, with the possibility that 3 or 4 of the interviews may involve focus groups. However, after 9 of the interviews had been completed, two factors necessitated a change in the planned methodology. First, I found that I was not obtaining the quality and kind of data that was needed, largely because the interviewees often were not significantly engaged with the issue. Second, I found my assumption that virtually no eco-mission was taking place in Australia was wrong, but that in fact a significant amount of interest and activity in the area of eco-mission was beginning to emerge in Australia. The Australian component of my research therefore changed accordingly.

Consequently, in addition to the 9 individual interviews previously indicated, I sent a detailed questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to approximately 80 congregations and individuals believed or known to have an ecological focus. In that case, the only criterion for selection was their perceived interest in ecological mission. A preliminary analysis of the data thus obtained revealed situations for appropriate follow-up, whether by email, telephone interview, or face-to-face visits. This in turn provided a significant body of information that could be analysed in detail to reveal the state of eco-mission in Australia and a possible eco-Church model for Australia.

Focus groups, otherwise known as group interviews, add a useful interactive dimension that would not otherwise be available. As Morgan states, “The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (1988, p. 12). Clearly the role of the researcher
changes in a group process, and needs to strike a balance between directly steering the group and moderating the flow of the conversation. Thus the researcher needs to ensure not only a comprehensive agenda and the careful handling of differences of opinion, but also that the quieter members of the group are given the chance to contribute. As with any method, there can be problems, such as in the recording of data. However, the added stimulus of the group dynamic is likely to lead to fresh insights, thus providing a significant addition to those obtained through the individual interview process. Once again the aim is to adopt a semi-structured approach to ensure that all essential points are covered, yet without stifling spontaneity.

The grounded theory approach requires that data gathering and analysis be held together, so that beginning with the initial data, collection and analysis will continue to inform each other until a clear separation is achieved. Once each piece of data has been gathered, it will initially be analysed by using a language analysis tool such as Leximancer as a way of identifying major themes and relationships revealed in the dialogue. The analysis aims to identify common themes, to begin a process of categorising various approaches, and to recognise “core” responses on which the more peripheral ones depend.

The selection of candidates for interview both in Australia and in the UK is important in order to achieve a balance within a range of categories, including denomination, role or position, and location. Marshall and Rossman would describe the planned interview approach as “elite”, observing that “valuable information can be gained from these respondents because of the positions they hold” (1989, p.94). Clearly this process of elite sampling has its limitations, mainly in terms of the size of the sample, but in addition to the information gained it will offer a starting point for further research. In this case I believe that the process is justified by the fact that these are likely to be the kind of leaders who have the capacity and opportunity either to enable or to hinder ecological mission. Marshall and Rossman warn that there are also some
disadvantages with this method; for example, the interviewees are likely to be busy people, or they may resent what could seem like probing. However, it is not likely to be a significant problem in this case, in that many of those selected will have a prior interest in the topic, and only one interview in each case is proposed.

The Australian context is also important, and certainly most of the interviewees are Australian. However, because the British Church seems far more pro-active and organised in terms of eco-mission than the Australian equivalent, some interviews in that context will provide not only an important contrast, but potentially some significant insights into the way forward for Australian eco-mission as well. Organizations such as EcoCongregation provide an important basis and impetus for congregational involvement in Britain, while others such as A Rocha and the John Ray Initiative also play a useful role. There appear to be no direct equivalents in Australia.

The debate concerning public theology becomes relevant here in that a study on “ecological mission in and through the Christian community” must at some point address a wider audience than the Church. Having stated that theology usually needs to relate to two “publics”, the church and the academy, Forrester goes on to assert that theology at its best is able to “show a proper combination of reverence and rigour” so that it is able to address both publics (2000, p.108). However, as Tracy (1981) argues, there is a third public, that of society as a whole. There is a tension here between the concern for meaningful dialogue on a wide public front, and a more confessional approach that fears the loss of authenticity in what appears to be a scramble for rational expression. But public theology must operate in that tension, striving both to be faithful to the biblical story and also to speak a meaningful word to its wider public. Browning’s term for this process, as discussed earlier, is the “critical correlation model”, which, he says, is not imposed on the Christian message, but rather “Christianity itself demands it” (1996, p.212). That mutually critical approach readily translates into a dialogue between the questions and answers
found in theology on the one hand, and other academic disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, or sociology on the other. Thus the environmental crisis becomes an ideal forum from which theology may contribute to the public debate and understanding, and to do so as an expression of faith and its divine mission.

The final phase involves an overall review and analysis of all the data gained from the various sources, with the results of the analysis outlining both the key inhibitors of and possibilities for eco-mission. Thus the material may be ordered in a manner conducive to the achievement of the final goal, and appropriate conclusions may then be drawn.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research presents few issues of an ethical nature. The literary phase of the work clearly requires integrity in its approach, both in terms of its academic rigor and its faithfulness to the basis of Christian theology. The empirical phase will require integrity of a different kind, and in the first instance will relate to the need to respect a variety of opinions that may be expressed, and to be faithful in recording and evaluating them. Beyond that, since the interviews will be conducted in their space, that fact also needs to be respected. It will also be important to seek their permission before proceeding to record the interview.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have considered some of the foundational principles on which my research is based. This began with a study of the formative issues of hermeneutics, which is essential for understanding and interpreting data. The notion of a hermeneutic of suspicion was shown to be especially relevant in terms of enabling an ecological reading of the Scriptures.
I have indicated that the research follows a practical theology paradigm as an approach to theology that covers the whole of human existence. In this regard I have also shown the relevance of context and locus in a practical theological approach, as well as the inter-active relationship of theory and praxis in a “hermeneutic spiral”. In sum, while method in practical theology will inevitably include some largely in-Church elements related to ministry, it must above all be focussed on the larger arena of God’s concern – the world itself. It must move beyond the pervasive dualism that shuns matter or the world as evil or irrelevant to spirituality, and grasp that it is the world God loves, and the Church is in the world for the sake of the world.

I have also set out my approach to methodology, beginning with a literature review and continuing to outline details of a qualitative research method. As part of that, I have considered the relationship between faith and science, and concluded that far from being in conflict, the disciplines of science and theology may operate in cooperation to provide a better understanding of the environment and its care. In sum, this work and the methods employed will involve a constant dialogue between the twin poles of theory and praxis in seeking an adequate response to God’s perceived purpose in the world.

In the next chapter I will consider the scope of the crisis confronting both human and other life.
CHAPTER THREE

THE SCOPE OF THE CRISIS

In the first chapter I referred to the seriousness of the ecological crisis, as in global warming and other disastrous outcomes that many believe we have brought upon ourselves. In this chapter I want to elaborate on that theme; but I want to go further than that to consider the wider contextual issue of how much may be included under the heading of the term “eco-crisis”. In short, what is the scope of the crisis?

At the outset it may appear that “eco-crisis” is an accurate enough description of an increasingly obvious global reality. On closer examination, however, it will appear to be a term that is seriously limiting in its grasp. As James Nash states, to talk of the “environmental problem” is rather like referring to a nuclear conflagration as a fire. Thus he asserts that it is not “a single, discrete problem, but rather a massive mosaic of intertwined problems” adversely affecting all life (1991, p.23). That assessment is demonstrably correct, as also is his perception that the issues involved are primarily of a moral nature. In a similar vein, Moltmann (1985) argues that “the natural environment of human beings cannot be understood apart from the social environment”, and asserts that “…the phrase ecological crisis is a feeble and inaccurate description of the real facts. This is really a crisis of the whole life system of the modern industrial world” (1985, p.23). The point not only for Moltmann but also for Nash and others is that humans have created the crisis we are now experiencing, and we are “going in more deeply”. Since powerful forces are at work in this process, the economic and social conditions of human life must be changed for the sake of our ecological future. I contend that this wider perspective of the crisis is helpful in understanding the current situation and how to respond to it.
Duchrow and Liedke (1987) point to an additional perspective in the way we approach the crisis. Our point of departure, they contend, can no longer be the goodness of creation, but rather it can only be the suffering of creation. They go on to observe that “the presupposition for the understanding of the ecological crisis as creation’s suffering is the suspension of the sharp division between human beings and nature” (1987, p.50). That of course raises other issues that will be considered later, such as Hart’s contention that justice for people and for the environment are inseparable, and that humans exist “in an interrelated and interdependent biosphere and universe” (2004, p.4). Thus, in this thesis, while the term “eco-crisis” may still be used, it will be as a kind of shorthand for the broader context I have outlined here.

There is one other introductory observation to be made, however, and that is the obvious point that this thesis is not a scientific study and there is a sense in which the clear scientific evidence has little bearing on my central argument, which is theologically based. Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness it is essential to include some indication of an emerging scientific consensus in a number of crucial environmental areas. This will obviously not be complete, since the subject is large and complex; rather, its purpose will largely be illustrative and indicative of a huge problem for planet Earth and for life as we know it. It certainly adds a sense of urgency to the moral, ethical, and theological challenge facing not only the Church, but also indeed all humankind in these days.

The Global Ecology

The scope of the crisis is revealed in the first instance through a study of the global ecological context. There are many ways in which that may be illustrated, but I will focus largely, although not exclusively, on the issue of climate change and global warming, which in itself introduces a whole range of significant implications, such as the possibility of mass extinctions and a loss of bio-diversity.
Global Warning and Scepticism

For some years now, scientists have been sounding a warning about the environment, as in the case of the famous “Doomsday Alert” presented to the United Nations General Assembly in 1992 by 1,575 scientists, including many Nobel Prize winners, indicating that the planet would be unable to sustain life within 40 years if humans did not end their threat to the environment. Scientists have clearly been exercising what could only be described as a prophetic role regarding the environment; and, just as in the days of the Hebrew prophets, there have been many who have not believed their message, although that situation has been changing.

But if “enviro-scepticism” has started to become the new heresy, some reservations remain in the minds of some people. Certainly there are scientists who are sceptical about the notion of human-induced climate change, but they are a minority. One prominent example of that minority view is Singer and Avery’s Unstoppable Climate Change (2008), which purports to show that global warming is a natural event that occurs every 1,500 years. On the other hand, however, as Dupont and Pearman suggest in their Lowy Institute Report (2006), scepticism has played an important role in that it has led to “better science and therefore greater certainty about the scope, magnitude and implications of climate change” (2006, p.25). But more than that, there is an increasing consensus in the scientific community about the weight of evidence.

Climate Change and its Implications

The Stern Report states, “The scientific evidence is now overwhelming: climate change presents very serious global risks, and it demands an urgent global response” (2006, p.1). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Summary Report dated February 2007 states that “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal”, and goes on to indicate that “Most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperature since the mid-20th century is very likely (>90% probability) due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas
concentrations” (Houghton, 2007 ii: unnumbered). Dupont and Pearman (Lowy Institute Report), take a similar view, and assert that the evidence implicating humans as the cause of the problem is now “irrefutable” (2006, p.10). Moreover, they go on to suggest that “while a great deal of the data is no longer in dispute, most people do not have a realistic sense of the magnitude of likely future climate change because scientists have largely failed to communicate the significance of their findings in a way that policy makers, the media, and the general public can easily understand” (2006, p.25).

In 2005, however, the Queensland Government issued a significant discussion paper on climate change which stated bluntly, “Queensland is getting hotter, and our temperatures are rising more rapidly than both the global and national averages”(2005, p.1). It goes on to note changes in the rainfall patterns, the increased intensity of storms, and likely shortages of water. Important though that was, it did not make many headlines. But public perception of environmental matters began to change noticeably during 2006, urged on by a number of factors. One was the publicity given to Al Gore’s film “An Inconvenient Truth”, and the Stern Report in Britain; the comprehensive Report by the Lowy Institute, Heating Up the Planet (Dupont and Pearman 2006), which sought to bring together the scientific consensus about global warming, appeared to make a relatively minor impact.

In a more immediate sense, by the end of that year it was increasingly obvious that something significant was happening to the climate. In many parts of Australia, a prolonged drought was causing grave concern, and it began to affect much more than the rural sector. Cities and towns accustomed to taking water for granted have suddenly faced a crisis. Thus, as I indicated in Chapter 1, dramatic newspaper headlines such as “We could run out of water”, or “Australia suffers worst drought in 1,000 years” began to appear. Severe water restrictions have had to be imposed, and some towns have even run out of water. Moreover, the devastating situation of the
huge Murray-Darling system has generated major concern. During the course of 2007, climate has become news on an almost daily basis, and formerly apathetic or sceptical politicians could not ignore it.

But before we can talk about the water crisis, it is necessary to look at the global warming that is almost certainly a major causal factor. If climatology is still “an inexact science”, as Nash (1991, p.34) suggests, it should be noted that it has progressed considerably in the years since 1991. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), chaired by Sir John Houghton for some years, issued a Report in 2006, called “Global Warming, Climate Change, and Sustainability”, which indicated that the global average temperature is predicted to rise by between 2 and 6 degrees Celsius from its pre-industrial level. But at least two factors must be kept in mind. First, these are average figures, so that there may be variation either up or down, and in addition there will of course be considerable regional variation. Second, to put the projection into some perspective, Nash states, “Since the peak of the last Ice Age, perhaps 18,000 years ago, the earth’s average temperature has warmed only about 5 degrees centigrade” (1991, p.33). The drastic nature of these forecasts is exacerbated by the short timeframe in which change is taking place. Speaking out of his background in climatology, Houghton states, “So, associated with likely warming in the 21st century will be a rate of change equivalent to say, half an ice age in less than 100 years – a larger rate of change than for at least 10,000 years. Adapting to this will be difficult for both humans and many ecosystems” (2007 i, p.4).

As I have already suggested, the implications of global warming have a considerable flow-on effect. Sea ice in both of the Polar Regions is melting at a rate that alarms many scientists. The IPCC Report indicates that “the last time the polar regions were significantly warmer than at present for an extended period (about 125,000 years ago), reductions in polar ice volumes led to 4 to 6 metres of sea level rise” (Houghton ii 2007). It will of course take some years for any
dramatic rises to become evident, but it should be noted that some low lying areas of the Pacific, for example, are already experiencing difficulties. Stern indicates that “more than a fifth of Bangladesh could be under water with a 1m rise in sea levels, which is a possibility by the end of the century” (2006, p.vii). The flow of fresh water into the ocean from melted ice in countries like Greenland is expected to have a devastating impact on the flow of the warm Gulf Stream; if the Gulf Stream were to slow down or to stop altogether, a British winter could ironically resemble a mini Ice Age. Gore (2006) discusses that possibility, and reflects serious scientific concern that such a phenomenon, which occurred about 10,000 years ago, could recur in the modern era. The melting of Himalayan ice could place perhaps one-sixth of the world’s population, who depend on the rivers sourced there, in jeopardy.

Dupont and Pearman (2006) point to four ways in which food production will be significantly impacted by global warming. First, seed sterility in some cereal, pasture, and tree species will increase. Agricultural research indicates that food production in Asia could decrease by up to 20% if rises are in the predicted range. Second, changing patterns of rainfall “could render previously productive land infertile, accelerating erosion, desertification, and reducing crop and livestock yields” (2006, pp.30-31). A loss of irrigation water could be devastating, especially in Australia and Asia. Third, as sea levels rise, some highly productive coastal land will become unusable. Fish species are already starting to migrate to other waters, while coral bleaching has led to concern about the future of the iconic Great Barrier Reef. Fourth, extreme weather events, such as cyclones, will increase, and as evidenced in North Queensland in 2006, will seriously disrupt agricultural production. There is evidence that extreme events have already begun. As Houghton (2007) indicates, 2005 was a record year for Atlantic hurricanes and typhoons, both in their number and intensity.
Climate change will have a serious impact on health globally. Dupont and Pearman (2006) warn that beyond global warming, the resulting extreme weather events, air pollution, water diseases, vector and rodent borne diseases, and food and water shortages will lead to illness and death. Stern points to an increased problem with diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, as well as heat stress, to which may be added, in some cases, problems with extreme cold.

Earlier, in 1992, the Scientists’ Warning to the United Nations spelled out the threat to life posed by stratospheric ozone depletion. Flannery (2005) traces the depletion of the ozone layer in the last half of the 20th century: “By 2000 the hole had become a chasm spanning 28 million square kilometres, and around it had spread a halo of thinned ozone covering most of the globe below 40 degrees South…. Even over the tropics, ozone concentration was reduced by around 7 per cent” (2005, p.215). He goes on to state that “without ozone’s very high sun-protection factor, ultraviolet radiation would kill you fast…” (2005, pp.215-6). Clearly, such a level of ozone depletion would have serious health and other implications not only for humankind, but also for many life forms. Moreover, before the ozone layer had formed early in the evolutionary process, life on earth was not possible; if it is destroyed through human stupidity and greed, life will again become impossible. It is a question of existence itself. The good news, however, is that there is some evidence that this process of destruction may be in the early stages of recovery, because of remedial actions that have been taken.

There is some evidence that natural disasters are increasing in line with the warming of the planet. As the Lowy Report suggests, there may be other factors at work also, but the insurance industry is of the view that there is a connection. The Report indicates that of the last 20 major insurance events in Australia, 19 have been weather related. That of course also has significant social and economic implications, and puts a much greater burden on aid and relief organizations, including Church-based groups.
To add to the burden, problems in such areas as food production, health issues, water shortages and flooding, the projected rise in sea levels as the century progresses could well lead to massive numbers of environmental refugees. Houghton states, “A careful estimate has suggested that, due to climate change, there could be more than 150 million extra refugees by 2050” (2007 i, p.5). From an Australian perspective, the most immediate threat relates to small, low lying Pacific nations such as Tuvalu or Kirribati, where the sea is already slowly starting to swallow the land, leading to a high degree of uncertainty and nervousness about the future. Thus, as Dupont and Pearman note in the Lowy Report (2006), security emerges as a significant focus for the climate future that is threatening. The dynamics of international relations could be affected in a dramatic and unpredictable way.

**Biodiversity**

There is more to it even than that, because the Earth consists of vast inter-locking eco-systems. Thus it is all life, and not just humanity, that is at risk here. In line with the 1992 Warning to the U.N., Stern indicates that a rise of only two degrees Celsius would lead to the extinction of between 15 and 40% of species. There is considerable evidence that climate change is one of the factors involved in a process of species loss is already taking place. In March 2006, ABC News Online cited a Report of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity: “In effect, we are currently responsible for the sixth major extinction event in the history of earth, and the greatest since the dinosaurs disappeared, 65 million years ago”; but more than that, this is the only one for which humans are primarily responsible, and the current pace of extinctions is estimated to be 1,000 times faster than historical rates. Such a loss of biodiversity of both plant and animal life is an ecological issue of considerable significance, even when viewed from a purely anthropocentric perspective. The comprehensive United Nations report known as GEO-4 (2007) contains an enormous amount of material that cannot be covered here; but the authors assert the fundamental role of biodiversity as “the basis for ecosystems and the services they provide,
upon which all people fundamentally depend” (2007, p.190). Such a dependency is spelled out in terms of health, future development options, agriculture, livelihood security, as well as cultural and spiritual identity. The loss of biodiversity due in large part to economically dominated policies is therefore far more than merely inconvenient; the effect on wildlife and on human life alike is profound, and inevitably in the human community it is the poor who pay the highest price.

Other Issues
I have taken time to describe some of the diverse implications of climate change and global warming, but there are many other ways of describing what is loosely called the eco-crisis. Data on a number of issues, such as energy use and waste, population growth, excessive consumption, pollution, and much more, has been accumulating for some years now. These need not be considered in any detail here, but two examples may suffice. First, in 1989, the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Group in the United States issued a Report that covered much of the ground comprehensively. One issue they raised was the problem of acidification. As examples of that, they reported that over 200 lakes in the Adirondack Mountains area are so acidified that they are devoid of fish, and that in Sweden 15,000 lakes cannot support sensitive marine life, while 1,800 lakes are completely lifeless. Second, more recently the GEO-4 Report indicated that 60,000 square kilometres of productive land is lost to desertification annually; in monetary terms that amounts to an estimated annual loss of US$42 billion, although the real cost is inestimable (2007, p324). But the examples are almost endless.

Emotive responses
It is almost inevitable, and perhaps even necessary, that responses to this crisis can at times have an emotive edge; two examples may be cited. In a draft paper for a conference on critical issues, Gerald Barney discusses many of the issues that have been canvassed above. In it he states, “in
short, I think we have reached a fork in the road to the future. Over the lifetime of our children, we humans will either achieve the one possible solution – a just, sustainable development for the whole earth – or we will lose everything.” He goes on to ask the leaders of all faith communities, “What Shall We Do?” (1991, p.35). Certainly it is not only the theologians who should heed the warning, for quite clearly the situation is becoming steadily more serious than it was in 1990.

The “emotive edge” is even starker in Fox’s impassioned plea: “Mother Earth is dying. Are we … our mother’s keeper? Is Mother Earth herself not the ultimate anawim, the most neglected of the suffering, voiceless ones today? And along with her, the soil, forests, species, birds, and waters are not being heard where legislators gather, where judges preside, and where believers gather to worship. Is the human race involved in a matricide that is also ecocide, geocide, suicide, and even deicide?” (Fox 1988, p.17). However, as I will argue, an emotive response will only be of value if it leads to actual changes in environmental behaviour.

**More than Ecology is Involved**

I have pointed to issues such as a looming environmental refugee crisis, loss of food production, implications for disease and security, together with additional pressure on power requirements as some of the consequences of climate change. At another level, however, even the brief ecological survey above is a clear demonstration that in most respects the crisis is a consequence of human activity, that a much wider agenda is also involved, and that consequently it is impossible to talk about ecological issues without taking into account the broader dimensions of human life and activity.

Proponents of several different but related schools of thought, including eco-justice and eco-feminist approaches, unite to affirm the broader context of the eco-crisis. A full exposition of
their approaches is not necessary here, but some basic points may be noted. The eco-justice school, for example, broadly speaking sits at the junction of ecology, justice, and theology. Not surprisingly, it may also include a political dimension, which in some cases is quite striking. A prime example is the Brazilian, Leonardo Boff, whose 1995 work, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, brings together both ecology and justice with spirituality and theology. Basic to his understanding is a definition of ecology as something that encompasses both nature and culture and society. Boff goes on to express a socialist outlook in his strong focus on the poor; he recognises the failings of state socialism, but is critical of capitalist systems for failing to provide adequate security, opportunity, or democracy for the poor. He calls on the Church to “find loudspeakers that will allow (the voice of the poor) to be heard effectively” (1995, p.108). I believe, however, that his primary motivation is revealed in his observation that “the dream is not of either a poor society or a rich one, but one of a just and sharing life for the whole of creation” (1995, p.108).

Others, such as Sean McDonagh, are less overtly political. McDonagh served as a Catholic missionary to the T’boli people of the Philippines, and that has largely shaped his understanding. As Collins (1995) puts it, for McDonagh “the questions of culture, justice, and ecology are intimately connected” (p170). Thus, social justice issues are linked in a very practical way with ecology. McDonagh (1994) refers to Church documents such as *Populorum Progressio*, from which he cites the Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Roy, for example, and states: “These documents insist that the poverty which is affecting more and more of the world’s population is directly related to the misuse and squandering of natural and human resources in first-world, mostly traditional Christian countries” (1994, p.5). But he argues that countries in the developing world also are partly to blame, through incompetence, corruption, useless projects, and huge foreign debts. Thus, “We can no longer take the natural world for granted as if it will always be there unchanged” (1994, p.9).
But beyond the boundaries of a particular school of thought, it is now widely acknowledged that there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor, both within and across national borders (e.g. Duchrow and Liedke 1987, Nash 1991). This disparity is very serious and deeply lamentable, and shows that the rich end of the human spectrum consumes far more, and the poorer end far less, than their entitlement. But more than that, as the Stern Report states in relation to climate change, the impacts are not evenly distributed; “the poorest countries and people will suffer earliest and most” (2006, p.vii). The blunt fact is that the world could not even begin to sustain an overall consumption rate at the level of the wealthier nations; but there is only one Earth. In other words, we are not living in a way that is sustainable, and at risk of over-simplification, some are poor because others are rich; or as Duchrow and Liedke have stated, “Famine, the consequences of which cause the deaths of more than 40 million people per year, is not a question of resources but of distribution” (1987, p.24). That figure of 40 million would be well out of date now, but the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (website) estimated that in 2002-3, over 825 million people were undernourished, and that figure did not include countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Libya, South Africa, and the United States, among others. In any event, I would not want to be as absolute as Duchrow and Liedke that the problem is one of distribution and not one of resources.

The other approach I will mention here is eco-feminism, a term that dates to 1974. Whether or not it is apt, with Diamond and Orenstein, to celebrate it as “this tapestry of green” (cited in Fowler 1995, p.123), it is clear from a study of the literature that it cannot be reduced to a single ideology. At the same time eco-feminists tend to bring a particular perspective to this debate, including the perception that the male domination of women is inextricably linked with human domination of nature, and thus both issues must be addressed together.
It is noteworthy that the World Council of Churches’ important work in the environmental area is organised by the Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation Commission, otherwise known as JPIC. From that perspective, there are other issues that should be included in any discussion of the eco-crisis. Potentially that opens up some very large subjects that cannot be canvassed here. But, for example, at any one time there are numerous conflicts of one degree or another throughout the world, some of which have their roots in inter-religious tensions; and when those conflicts are added to the current situation, the wastage in human, non-human, and environmental terms is incalculable. Ultimately everything is connected, and has a bearing on God’s good creation and the sustainability of life within it.

Thus, it starts to become obvious that the current crisis does not exist independently of either national boundaries or the human community. In his report on the Stockholm Earth Summit, Granberg-Michaelson states that debate focussed on “the suspicion that environmental concerns are a luxury of affluent Northern societies” (1992, p.9). At the Rio Summit, however, there was the perception that this was more than just a regional or national matter. Whether it related to the use of CFC’s, the environmental impact of poverty, extreme weather events, or something else, “ecology has been seen in its global dimension” (1992, p.11). Granberg-Michaelson’s words may seem dramatic, but they are as true today as they were in 1992:

The point is that in the two decades between Stockholm and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, evidence became overwhelming that ecological damage is global in nature, binding North and South together towards an escalating common tragedy, or on new paths towards a common, sustainable future (1992, p.17).

In this thesis therefore I want to acknowledge fully both the great complexity and the wide scope of the crisis confronting all life on the planet. As I have argued, ecology cannot ultimately
be considered in isolation. However, because until recent times ecology has tended to be overlooked in theological deliberations and in public consideration of the issues, it is my intention to focus on that aspect.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to identify the main parameters of what may be called the eco-crisis, and have identified two broad areas of concern. In the first instance the considerable volume of concerning scientific data about global ecology represents not only a note of warning, but also a profound sense of urgency. The impact of climate change alone on all forms of life is most significant, but when taken together with the impact of a range of social justice and compassion issues on the lives of people and communities, it reaches a new and more complex level.

There is one last word, however, that may be both provocative and helpful. Ian Lowe cites Peter Ellyard, who pointed out that the Chinese word for “crisis” consists of two characters representing “danger” and “opportunity”. Thus, Lowe’s assessment is that “the situation is serious and demands our attention, but it is not hopeless” (2005, p.8). I have argued that the issues are wide ranging and certainly not limited to ecology. But the challenge is clear – to see the danger signals, and to rise to meet the opportunity they afford.
CHAPTER FOUR

HUMAN-CENTRED APPROACHES TO ECOTHEOLOGY

Within the context of the eco-crisis as outlined in the previous chapter, a range of approaches may be identified; from the perspective of the Christian community, that raises the debate that centres on ecotheology. Put another way, it could be argued that historically the eco-crisis has been compounded by what may be regarded as a theological crisis. There are some people who would have a problem with the very concept of ecological theology. Santmire, for example, is summarising the findings of his historical survey when he states, “According to a large number of contemporary theological writers … Christian theology never has had, nor should it have, a substantive ecological dimension” (1985, p.8). He goes on to describe the theological tradition of the West in terms of ambiguity, and in many ways the debate is located around that point.

Part of the problem may be the way in which theological and political issues can be confused with each other. Examples could doubtless be found across the whole range of Christian and religious traditions. Fowler (1995) however, sets out to analyse the response of Protestant Christians and of “Fundamentalists” in particular, and identifies four main attitudes – namely indifference, hostility, a degree of sympathy for ecological concern, and obsession with “end times.” Some dismiss the environmental movement as the prevailing cult of our time, while for others it has apocalyptic dimensions; for others again it represents the anti-Christ, working for world government. One could take issue with such notions, but that must be for another time and place.

For Santmire, the ambiguity at the heart of the theological tradition of the West “is neither ecologically bankrupt … nor replete with immediately accessible, albeit long forgotten,
ecological riches hidden everywhere in its deeper vaults” (1985, p.8). The ambiguity, he suggests, has been expressed in two quite different trends. One is the notion of the human spirit rising above the mundane level of life in order to commune with God, and the other is to envisage human life as much more embedded in the natural world, and finding God’s presence very much within the biosphere. Beyond that, until relatively recent times nature was not perceived as being at risk; the environment was “a given”, and ecology as a science was unknown.

It will be obvious from the outset that a review of ecotheological literature opens up an enormous field, and some limitations will be essential. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss a number of human-centred responses that in some cases become utilitarian and exploitative, and therefore offer little or no assistance in enabling positive ecological outcomes. Because these approaches are still relatively common within the Christian community, it is important that they be identified. The first issue that will be discussed is the very important one of whether or not the Hebrew Bible promotes human domination of the natural environment. However, in the review of ecotheological literature that follows in the next two chapters, I will discuss a range of views, and show that ecotheology is not only valid, but is indeed part of the mainstream of theology.

**Dominion or Domination?**

I will argue, along with many theologians and biblical scholars, that from a biblical point of view, the crisis of domination builds on a misunderstanding of Genesis 1:27, in which humankind, both male and female, is created in the image of God: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). More directly, the misunderstanding is based on a reading of Genesis 1:28, in which “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it;
and have dominion … over every living thing that moves upon the earth”. The historian Toynbee is not alone in what I will be arguing is a misunderstanding of the intention of the Genesis text, and thereby potentially turning dominion into an exploitative domination that would need to be repudiated by later texts.

So for example the great historian Toynbee (1976) could borrow Sir Thomas Browne’s description of human beings as amphibians, in the sense that we inhabit both the biosphere and the spiritual realm, which he clearly regards as antithetical. On the one hand he states, “The classical directive to Man (sic) to make himself master of the biosphere is given in verse 28 of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis…. This directive is clear and emphatic…. (1976, p.18); however, what he actually understands from it is not clear, except that he regards New Testament verses such as “Lead us not into temptation” or “Consider the lilies of the field” as like a direct reply to the Genesis directive, and “repudiations of the call to dedicate ourselves to the acquisition of power and wealth” (1976, p.19). Thus, Toynbee’s apparent understanding of the concept of dominion is at least subject to question. But beyond Toynbee, and as I hope to demonstrate, the Genesis text is not always understood by its critics. As McGrath suggests, there is a movement that holds human liberation and fulfilment as coming through the domination of nature, but it is not Christianity (2002, p.34).

Many ecofeminists also hold to what I take to be a fundamental misunderstanding of the intent of the Christian faith in relation to the natural environment. Spirituality is not an integral part of its philosophy, and even though some ecofeminists specifically identify as Christian, on the whole, spirituality is not often part of an ecofeminist approach, and as Fowler (1995) notes, some eco-feminists are quite critical of Christianity. Charlene Spretnak (1982), for example, along with many others in her collection of essays on spirituality and feminism, repudiates Christianity on the grounds that it fails to work with nature, and often stands over and against it;
she states her view that “Judeo-Christian spirituality is too relentlessly patriarchal … to be redeemed,” and the consequences for both humans and the Earth are “disastrous” (1982, p.xv). Susan Griffin, Carol Christ, and Elizabeth Grey also hold Christianity in contempt, believing it to be hostile to nature in general and to women in particular. As I will argue in some detail below, what they cite as evidence is in fact based on a failure to grasp the full range of Christian theological understanding, and therefore contributes to the general misunderstanding. The meaning behind some claims, such as women being “part of nature”, is not at all clear. In any event, from their perspective they argue that Christianity will have to change.

Lynn White’s watershed 1967 thesis, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”, is of major importance, and it is in response to this that significant themes will emerge. Once again his argument centres on Genesis 1:28, but, I would contend, in an exegetically simplistic manner. In his paper, White is quite clear that the Christian dogma of creation is largely to blame for the crisis; there is a huge amount of theological literature on White’s essay, much of it critical.

White begins with the debatable proposition that “successful technology is Western” (1967, p.1204), and goes on, for example, to talk about violent ploughing methods developed in Europe. It is an obvious enough point that our ecological understanding and response may be influenced by the religious beliefs we hold. According to White, Christianity “established a dualism of man and nature”, and it then insisted that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (1967, p.1205). Further, by adopting an objective approach to nature, Christianity opened the way for the rise of science. He goes on to speak of “orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature,” and to allege that “we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (1967, p.1207).
Edwards’ point is well made, that “it must be admitted that a distorted Christian theology has been used to support an exploitative approach to creation” (1992, p.9). But critics of Christianity, including White, have in fact completely misunderstood the nature and meaning of dominion, as the exegesis of Genesis 1:28 will show. This point is made by a number of biblical scholars. Fretheim states that “a study of the verb have dominion (Heb rada) reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the nonhuman creation as God relates to them” (1994:346). Claus Westermann (1984) similarly asserts that dominion is primarily about relationship. In his view it refers to the animal world, and he refutes the notion that that dominion should be understood as a mandate for exploitation. For Bradley, while dominion may seem to suggest a primacy of humans in the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, in fact the Hebrew nefesh hayya indicates that humans are bound together with other living things – animals, birds, fish, and insects. Thus, it is important that the dominion of Genesis 1 needs to be read in the context of God’s shalom, in the nature of God and the way in which humankind is intended to reflect God’s good purpose, rather than a modern industrial society. Moltmann adds an additional point, when in reference to Genesis 1:28, he asserts that “the biblical charge is a dietary commandment: human beings and animals alike are to live from the fruits which the earth brings forth in the form of plants and trees. A seizure of power over nature is not intended” (1985, p.29).

Calvin DeWitt also asserts, in opposition to White, that dominion does not mean domination, but rather that all people are charged with a God-given stewardship. He adds, “We have seen from Gen 1-11 what stewardship is not; from Genesis 2:15 we learn something of what it is” (DeWitt 1998, p.44). The American Presbyterian Eco Task Group Report (1989) focuses strongly on the Genesis 2:15 injunction “to till and keep” the garden. DeWitt and others point out that the Hebrew word for “tend” reflects a strong notion of service, and so he renders the phrase, “to serve and keep” the garden. The Hebrew “shamar” (keep) is an extremely rich word
with a deeply penetrating meaning that evokes “a loving, caring, sustaining keeping” (DeWitt 1998, p.44). Without that critical aspect of care, the concept of the image of God ceases to have any meaning. Indeed, DeWitt is surely correct in his assertion that “dominion as licence to do whatever meets one’s self-interest is a misappropriation of the image of God, and a failure to follow the example of Jesus Christ” (1998, p.46).

Perhaps enough has been said to project an accurate picture of the biblical understanding of “image” and “dominion”; there is a need to move beyond a belief in creation to an adequate understanding of it. We can at least be grateful to White for helping to spark interest in ecotheology; as Edwards (2006) argues, critical responses in the ecological theology of recent decades represent one positive outcome to emerge from White’s overstated thesis. Moreover, few people would deny that some Christian teaching has had a negative influence on the environment; but therein lies part of the danger posed by this well-known document. There is clearly some truth in it, even if his charge is too sweeping in its scope.

The other danger is that its thesis has been widely and uncritically accepted. Moltmann makes the point that for critics of Christianity, such as White, Genesis 1:28 lays “the intellectual foundation for today’s ecological crisis: unlimited reproduction, over-population of the earth, and the subjugation of nature” (1985, p.29). The problem, as stated by the scientist-theologian Alistair McGrath, is that “Many ecologists would no more criticise White’s article than fundamentalist Christians would criticise the Bible” (2005, p.xiv). Thus, some misinformation about the Christian Faith has been accepted in ecological and scientific circles.

I contend White has overstated Christianity’s impact on Western culture (cf. Cooper 1990); but it is more than just a failure to provide convincing evidence of a causal relationship. There is a range of other factors, including Cooper’s argument (1990), drawing on Granberg-Michaelson,
that the problem has often been the impact of Western culture on the Church, rather than the reverse. By its failure to deal adequately and critically with the complex inter-relationship of Church and culture, therefore, the Church has allowed itself to become complicit in the Western society’s abuse of the environment. In answering White’s charge, a number of exploitative approaches to ecology are revealed. Any approach that exploits nature, whether by intention or otherwise and whether promoted by Christians or others must be rejected.

**Nature Disenchanted**

Strong and Rosenfield (1981) assert the need for an environmental ethic, and in doing so refer to two ethical systems which they believe have contributed to the difficulties. One of those relates to the Judeo-Christian ethic, and here they summarise the response of some of White’s critics. For example, they refer to Wright, a biologist who argues that while Christianity nurtured science and technology in the early stages, it was nevertheless the scientists themselves, and not Christianity, who are responsible for the destruction that resulted from their activities. Similarly they note the view of Yi-Fu Tuan, a geographer, that similar destruction also took place in a non-Christian traditional China. My contention is that exploitation was by no means limited to the “Christian” West, and that Christian practice has varied widely. Nevertheless, the conclusion reached by Strong and Rosenfield is that “enlightened self-interest can form the basis for an effective, generally acceptable environmental ethic” (1981, p.13). I am arguing that such an approach on its own is not enough, and that an enlightened Christian faith has a large part to play in the development of an environmental ethic.

White is undoubtedly correct in his contention that human self-centredness is at the root of the eco crisis; his assertion that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen is another matter, and, I suggest, is at best is highly doubtful. In any event, the real issue relates to the origin of ecological exploitation. It is here that McGrath (2002) makes an important
contribution to the debate by tracing the history of this exploitation from its genesis in ancient Greece, where the dream of domination was expressed in Plato’s dialogues, in which Protagoras says “man is the measure of all things” (cited in McGrath 2002, p.55). McGrath goes on to indicate that the Greek idea was reversed to some extent in the Middle Ages with the Christian belief that there was some intrinsic ordering of nature, that it was something that was to be respected. Humanity was seen as part of a greater cosmic ordering, perhaps even at the apex, but with no right to alter the course or change the contours of nature.

But two points need to be noted. First, as I suggested earlier in the chapter, with Santmire, the history of Christian thought in this regard is ambiguous. The second point, which may seem to complicate the issue, is that there can be no neat division between scientists and Christians; as Watts asserts, prior to the 19th century “most Western scientists, like everyone else, were Christians of some kind or another” (1998, p.8); at the same time he quotes Huxley’s assertion that “extinguished theologies lie around the cradle of each new science” (Watts 1998, p.7).

Not surprisingly, the ancient classic ideas were again to the fore in the Renaissance period. But with McGrath, I contend that the root of the problem is the secular creed of 20th century Western culture rising out of the 18th century Enlightenment. This included a rejection of authority, including that of God, and invoked the supremacy of human reason. For some, religion was harmless; for others it was debasing, oppressive, and required forced elimination. There was a sense of freedom; the shackles were off. The implications of such an approach were expressed with stark clarity by Winwood Reade in his influential 1872 book, The Martyrdom of Man. Reade expressed the idea that “nature must be disenchanted, evacuated of any concept of spiritual or religious significance, before it can be harnessed to human progress and the advancement of civilization”. His words describe what was perceived to be “the triumph of human genius over the crudities of nature” (McGrath 2002, p.57).
But contrary to McGrath, Vogel is actually reflecting the views of Horkheimer and Adorno rather than his own with the assertion that the roots of ecological exploitation are to be found in the promotion of reason at the expense of religion; Vogel states, “The project of the Enlightenment aims above all at the domination of nature. Disenchanted and objectified nature, appearing now in the guise of meaningless matter, is seen by the Enlightenment simply as something to be overcome and mastered for human purposes, and not to be imitated, propitiated, or religiously celebrated” (1996, p.52). Behind that development is the idea that humanity is of central and defining importance. Vogel’s own view is a little more complex, but his essential conclusion may be expressed thus: “The responsibility we have for the world we inhabit is a practical responsibility; we produce that world through our practices and can change it only by changing those practices” (1996, p.172). Or, as McGrath suggests, when an anthropocentric worldview is “provided with the tools that enable it to achieve its goal of dominating nature … the environment is really in trouble” (2002, p.54).

This approach continued into the Victorian period, when social and technological advances rose out of that sustained human quest and went hand in hand with the advance of science. I have acknowledged the culpability of some theology, but I am arguing that the real problem lies in the fact that technology, and to a large extent modern industrialised nations, are still bound by the approach that originated in ancient Greece and which was dramatically renewed in the period of the Enlightenment. Sadly, we have become all too familiar with the destructive results and environmental degradation of unbridled development.

**The Econocentric Approach**

The heirs of such an approach are still clearly in evidence in the modern era. Econocentrism, for example, pins everything on short-term economic and political gain, as in President Clinton’s
famous line, “it’s the economy stupid”, and while not readily recognised in the literature, is common enough. Once again this is related to anthropocentrism. It should also be said that some of the opposition to any form of environmental concern is uninformed, and one would have to say somewhat hysterical and cynical, and does not rate serious consideration.

At a more serious level, in response to White, it may be argued that cultural, technological, and social forces are factors that have fostered exploitation. In that regard, a second system to which Strong and Rosenfield (1981) refer is expediency, that whatever provides the greatest benefit to the largest number of people at the lowest cost must necessarily be good; this relates to the notion that the modern ecological crisis, at least in part, results from the pursuit of short-term economic self-interest. Such an approach has some obvious difficulties, yet it may be witnessed on a regular basis, as governments and big business make decisions on that basis. It is arguable that the situation is changing, but historically there has often been a lack of capacity or political will to translate that vision into eco-friendly policies that will begin to make a difference.

Renê Doubos expressed the view that “the solution to the environmental crisis will not be found in a retreat from the Judeo-Christian tradition or from technological civilization”, but will be found in “a new definition of progress, based on a better knowledge of nature and on a willingness to change our ways accordingly” (2006, p.58). In a similar vein, Granberg-Michaelson refers to an address by Herman Daly, an economist, to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, in which he spoke of our failure to recognize that any economy is only a subsystem of the “larger, finite, non-growing and closed ecosystem on which it is fully dependent”; a consequence of that failure has been the human inclination to enrich the present at the expense of the future and of other species, an approach which he described as “sinful” (1992, p.5).
At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there are some occasional signs of hope, as business people band together to seek ecologically sustainable and economically viable outcomes. One example of that is the Australian Business Council for Sustainable Energy. In very recent times there have also been moves to spend the necessary funds to try to generate clean coal technology. But an econocentric approach that ignores ecological sustainability is nonsense, and must be rejected. Perhaps a more significant danger is that of businesses operating in an essentially non-sustainable way, but making only minimal environmental concessions in order to project a “green” image. The emphasis here is on “image” rather than on reality, in which case it represents deception. The Stern Review (2006) is primarily about the economics of climate change, and its conclusion is clear: “The evidence shows that ignoring climate change will eventually damage economic growth”; or in other words, “the benefits of strong, early action considerably outweigh the costs” (2006, p.ii). There are two issues in that. First, action to protect the environment will inevitably be costly in the short to medium term, but the failure to take action will result in even more serious economic consequences in the future. Second, evidence is starting to emerge that in some cases a genuinely environmentally friendly approach to industry may have some short term benefits as well. As someone has said, the economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment.

**Anthropocentrism**

Thomas Berry (1988, 1991) is one of a number of scholars who have a problem with anthropocentrism, certainly in the context of the environment, and he regards the movement from anthropocentrism to biocentrism as essential and basic. But anthropocentrism comes at three levels, and as the name suggests, it is an approach that places humankind at the centre of experienced reality; further, as I have noted, it is an integral part of any ecologically exploitative system. Yet it is also important to note as an issue in its own right. In its worst form it leads to damaging domination and devastation of the earth; at its best it provides an enlightened and
caring stewardship, although in reality that insight comes from elsewhere. The concern here will be with the former, and we need to explore a number of issues concerning anthropocentrism and the relationship of humans to the rest of creation.

At times the language used is rather less than subtle, as for example in the case of Cardinal O’Connor, who is reported to have declared at a public gathering in New York Central Park in 1990 that “The earth was made for man, not man for the earth” (Rasmussen 1996, p.229). Rasmussen goes on to illustrate what he regards as the utter anthropocentricity of official Catholic Church teaching. In 1995 Pope John Paul II declared, “Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him” (1995, pp.60-61); while placing humankind clearly at the centre, the Pope goes on to state that these things were entrusted to our responsible care. There are those who argue, however, as we will see in the next chapter, that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to combine in practice a thorough-going human-centred approach with a genuinely responsible stewardship of the earth.

The primary issue here is a theological belief that a biblically based Christian faith is not only concerned solely with human salvation, but also that nature is there for humankind’s benefit. This could almost be styled as anti-nature. Some examples of mainly historical interest may be considered briefly. Opinions differ concerning Calvin’s position and the environmental impact of his commentaries. According to Bradley, Calvin could say that the end of all things is for the benefit of man (1992, p.12), suggesting that humans have a God-given right to deal with nature more or less as they wish. At the same time, while it is true that Calvin tended to an anthropocentric view, and his work is a product of its time, there is also an element of moderation and care. In reference to Genesis 2:15, for example, Calvin states, “Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even
better cultivated” (1948, p.125). But as Northcott (1996) argues, his focus on care was counter-balanced by a notion of the depravity of nature, the rise of an instrumentalist view that did not regard the purposes of God, and also the anthropocentric emphasis of some later reformers. Thus, it may be argued, perhaps a little unfairly, that Calvin’s approach played a part in the encouragement of the increased domination of nature and the discarding of ethical limitations on its use, whether or not that was his intention.

An observation attributed to Professor Dickie in 1930, and cited by Northcott, is more clear-cut: “The world exists for our sakes and not for its own.” (1996, p.13). His reason is essentially that only personal beings can respond to Love, and therefore the world is only a means, and not an end. Perhaps even more shocking is a statement concerning animals attributed to John Henry Newman: “We may use them, we may destroy them at our pleasure … for our own ends, for our own benefit or satisfaction” (Bradley 1992, p.13). If that is a fair reflection of Newman’s position, it is anthropocentric through and through. At the same time, the good faith of people like Newman should not be doubted. The key issue here, as I will argue, is that the biblical message has been widely misunderstood throughout Christian history.

Derrick speaks of “the feeling of alienation, the sense of a sharp and sad discontinuity between mankind and the rest of nature” (1972, p.54); and that, he says, is based on Gnostic and Manichaean systems of thought. In fact the dualism base is wider than that, and it is clear that some theologies still carry undertones of a Gnostic or Neo-Platonic dualism. Derrick goes on to argue that these persistent tendencies “wear secular garments”, although churches “have not been immune from their infection” (1972, p.67). One outcome of that has been the tendency of humans to regard themselves as separate from and superior to other living beings and the rest of creation. They have taken to heart an anthropocentric version of Genesis 1:28 and the forecast of Genesis 9:2, that “the fear and dread of you” shall rest on all living creatures. I am arguing,
however, that “dominion” does not give a licence to despoil and pillage the earth, and that the text in context would lead away from that possibility.

There is a second form of anthropocentrism that is not directly detrimental to the environment, but I contend that it is not helpful either. Here Christian theology is seen as having no ecological agenda, either positive or negative, but the focus is on human salvation exclusively. Vogtle, Eduard Schweitzer, Bultmann, Karl Barth, and many others essentially belong in this category. The question is whether the Greek New Testament words παντος, κοσμος, and κτισις refer only to people, or whether, as Markus Barth (1982) suggests that more frequently they include all created things. Reumann (1982) makes it clear that he is only interested in the human aspect of creation. In any event, given the broader sweep of the biblical literature and a vastly different context today, it is probably somewhat irrelevant whether Paul had only humans in mind, or the wider creation. Kaufman (1972) is a further example of the same school of thought. His claim is that because humans are ontologically different from the natural world, and are therefore above the rest of the natural world; the outcome of such a position is a somewhat objectified view of nature, which is then more vulnerable to exploitation.

It is arguable that a third approach really belongs in the next chapter. This is the recognition of a significant ecological agenda, but from an anthropocentric point of view. A prime example of this school of thought is Thomas Derr, who has long argued for a human focus, but one that is devoid of human mastery. In his 1996 work in company with Nash and Neuhaus, Derr reiterates a view that he first propounded 25 years earlier; he states, “Actually I do not mind being called an anthropocentrist, though I would rather say simply (Christian) ‘humanist’, meaning that my priority in matters ecological is humankind” (1996, p.18). Derr’s argument is that this should lead to a theology of responsible stewardship of the earth. In this view, nature is seen as a complement to the primary drama of redemption that takes place in history. Such an approach is
a step in the right direction, but one may well wonder if an ecologically aware anthropocentrism is not close to a contradiction in terms. When due consideration is given to the meaning of the word “anthropocentric”, it could be argued that it is not an accurate descriptor of Derr’s position. In any case, this is an issue that will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have identified a number of approaches to the global ecological condition that I have identified as exploitative. That certainly is the case with the first three, relating to domination, the disenchantment of nature, and econocentrism, since the approach of each of these works to the detriment of the natural world. Even though there is room for some quite different responses to have potential as a basis for positive ecological action, such exploitative approaches almost by definition disqualify themselves, and they must therefore be rejected. The case of anthropocentrism however is more complex, and while the first form I identified is clearly exploitative and must therefore join the other approaches in rejection, it is equally clear that some forms of anthropocentrism may in fact lend themselves, at least to some extent, to some kind of ecological action. That must be stated with some caution however, and any anthropocentric philosophy, even one that claims a degree of biblical mandate, should be treated with suspicion.
CHAPTER FIVE

ECO-FRIENDLY APPROACHES TO ECOTHEOLOGY

It will be obvious that when a human-centred approach becomes environmentally exploitative, as outlined in the previous chapter, it will be of little use for the purposes of eco-mission. In this chapter, therefore, I will explore a number of eco-friendly approaches, beginning with an Aboriginal perspective on the natural environment and other forms of biocentrism. I will then focus on variations on a theocentric approach, and the way in which it may relate to biocentrism. Consequently, I will propose the term “theistic biocentrism”, which I will argue provides the most adequate theological foundation on which to construct an effective eco-mission praxis in a Christian context.

Biocentrism

In general terms, biocentrism is at the opposite extreme from anthropocentrism, and holds that all life has inherent value and is indissolubly connected. However, proponents of this view approach it with some differing perspectives and emphases, which makes the task of definition somewhat difficult. As a starting point, however, Birch’s attempt may be considered adequate for our present purposes. He proposes a Christian biocentric ethic as one that encompasses the whole of life, that “the recognition of intrinsic value in creatures besides ourselves makes an ethical claim upon us to recognise our obligation toward them” (1993, p.89). In an earlier work (1981), Birch extended the definition of “neighbour” to include all participants in life. For him, “the central principle of a biocentric ethic is that we deal with living organisms appropriately when we rightly balance their intrinsic value with their instrumental value” (1993, p.90). It should be noted, however, that many non-Christian proponents of biocentrism would share a similar ethic.
One of the fundamental tenets of all biocentrism is the notion that not only is all life significant, but also that there is an essential unity binding all life. That emerges clearly in a scientific approach, through which we face, in Moltmann’s terms, the ultimate choice of “one world or none” (1985, p.34). Thus, science has something to say about relationships. As Hart (2004) indicates, quantum physics, biology, and chemistry all suggest an intricate pattern of relationships among the entities they study. Similarly, through DNA sampling in recent years, scientific evidence points in the same direction; further, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists all indicate a similar outlook. As a result of these realities, Hart concludes that “people might rightly wonder about the appropriateness of regarding the universe as subordinate to human interests” (2004, p.125). Bradley agrees, and argues that quantum physics point to a universe that at its deepest level is “a single unified whole, indivisible and bound together by a simple yet powerful force” (1990, p.19). Such a biocentric outlook may also be traced through traditional Aboriginal spirituality, Process Philosophy, Ecofeminism, and Deep Ecology.

An Australian Aboriginal Understanding

The indigenous people of Australia have a particular worldview that is highly relevant in terms of the modern environmental crisis, and it is therefore important to begin to understand their perspective. At the outset it may be said that the whole of traditional Aboriginal life is spiritual in orientation; the dichotomy of sacred and secular finds no meaning for them, since all life is sacred.

This reveals one of the areas of fundamental difference between a traditional Western approach and a traditional Aboriginal spirituality. The potential for a cultural clash is implicit in Hume’s observation that “the sacredness of land to Aboriginal people is of paramount importance to traditional spirituality and is of increasing political importance in a country like Australia which
bases many of its economic assets on mining and other land exploitative industries" (1996, p. 372).

Notions of the dreaming, totemic systems and an understanding of the land as sacred are all involved. Thus as Hume (1996) points out, relationships are of prime importance, involving people with other people, the land, and totems. The inter-connectedness that is the essence of traditional Aboriginal identity is clearly biocentric in character.

“The Dreaming” is one of the central concepts of Aboriginal spirituality, and relates to a time when ancestral heroes roamed the Earth. And since those heroes did not simply create the landscape and move on, but rather became a living part of it in the present, the natural world takes on a new and sacred meaning. The Dreaming collapses past, present, and future into one reality. What that means for Aboriginal people is that the land is much more a spiritual landscape than an economic commodity, and is related to the ancestors who originated in the Dreaming.

The Dreaming, then, becomes the basis on which an Aborigine like Kneebone can see himself as part of the natural environment. In an interview with Catherine Hammond, he expressed his belief that after death, “the spirit will return to the Dreamtime from where it came, it will carry our memories to the Dreamtime and eventually it will return again through birth, either as a human or animal or even trees and rocks” (Hammond 1991, p. 89). It is possible that not all Aborigines would fully embrace this view; but equally, that sense of oneness with the natural order, and the sacredness of it, is a very common theme.

The sense of bonding with the land is further emphasised in the totemic belief of the people. In the traditional culture, an Aboriginal child is given a totem of birth, but will eventually belong to
several totemic groups. It is not necessary to examine totemism in any detail here. Stanner, however, sums up its essence by suggesting that totem in Aboriginal Australia is always “a mystical connection”; it is expressed by symbolic devices and maintained by rules (1979, p.127).

Totemism and Dreaming are part of the one reality for Aboriginal people. Stanner illustrates this very clearly in citing a typical situation of a father taking his young son to a particular special place, where he would say to him, “your Dreaming is there; you want to look after this place … it is from the first (totemist) man” (1979, p.135). He suggests the struggle to find words which may describe this mystical reality, stressing again that “Dreamings (totem entities) come from there; your spirit is there”; in other words, there is an unbroken connection "between man, totem, and spirit home" (1979, p.135).

The implications of such a belief system are clear. The Dreaming and all that it represents becomes the basis for an approach to the land as sacred; it provides a sense of connection between people and the land which means that land must be cared for. Hume states, "Aborigines speak of taking care of country; there is a notion of guardianship rather than ownership" (1996, p.372). Or as George Rosendale suggests, "When we talk about land, we say, this is our land. Actually it is not our land, we are caretakers of this land. Each family within that tribe has certain responsibilities in caring for the land" (1996, p.372). He goes on to associate that principle with Genesis 2:15, the divine call to tend the Earth and keep it.

As Kneebone and others might insist, non-Aborigines also have their Dreaming, their own sense of spiritual identity, and most Australians would have great difficulty in following the Aboriginal belief path very far. However, in the econocentric atmosphere that tends to prevail in these days, we might seek to learn from Aboriginal biocentric spirituality and care of the
natural environment. As Edwards states, I believe correctly, part of the answer to questions of the relationship between humankind and other life will come through “listening to and learning from Aboriginal voices” (1992, p.6).

Process Philosophy

Process Philosophy began with Alfred North Whitehead, who was an avowed non-Christian, but who is significant in this context for the manner in which he influenced Christian theologians such as Hartshorne and Cobb. Whitehead himself states at the outset that his work is “speculative” (1978, p.3); beyond that, as Fowler (1995) notes, it is certainly complex and technical in nature. It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to describe it in any detail or depth, but some basic points may be noted. Whitehead saw everything that comprised the “stuff of reality” as interactive and social; he stated that “each task of creation is a social effort, employing the whole universe” (1978, p.223). For him, everything in the universe is in a process of change, each moving towards its own goal; as he states, “self-realization is the ultimate fact of facts” (1978, p.222). He pictures the world as an incredible multiplicity of entities in a fluid state, creating and recreating. God is the ultimate point of that process, but God’s prime function for Whitehead is in being the element in everything that preserves its uniqueness and speeds it towards its combination and unity. The point of connection between Whitehead’s philosophy and environmental thinking is, as Collins (1995) suggests, in his emphasis on the inter-subjectivity of all reality; Whitehead states, “The physical world is bound together by a general type of relatedness which constitutes it into an extensive continuum” (1978, p.96). It follows that in a social universe where nothing exists in isolation, notions such as anthropocentrism and dualism could have little meaning.
Eco-feminism

In a similar way, ecofeminist philosophy may be regarded as biocentric through and through, and in general terms most ecofeminists would agree with the assertion that a hierarchical view of the world, with its assumed superiority and inferiority, is the main cause of the oppression of both women and nature. Ruether’s Christian eco-feminism, for example, brings together elements of ecology and feminism “in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures” (1992, p.2). Elements of eco-justice are also involved. The term eco-feminism, however, embraces a range of views, not all of which are Christian or even necessarily compatible with each other. Some versions of this philosophy not only lead right outside any form of mainstream religion, but also at times move beyond any form of religious expression at all. However, ecofeminists would be united in the twin goals of the liberation of women and of nature; even more, as Fowler states, “Ecofeminist literature is suffused with the exaltation of community as a goal” (1995, p.127). Thus, eco-feminists generally seek an end of dualisms and hierarchical structures, which can sometimes mean that for them the boundaries between people and nature begin to disappear (1995, p.125-6).

Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology is usually traced back to a Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, who in his famous 1973 essay sought to develop what he regarded as a “deeper, more spiritual approach to Nature” (Devall and Sessions 1985, p.65). Yet while deep ecology, like other philosophies, does not represent a single unified or coherent approach, several dominant themes emerge. Clearly, for Naess it represents not just a marginal reform of society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole approach to life and its values.
According to Naess, there are two ultimate and closely related norms or intuitions that do not derive from other intuitions, but result from the deep questioning that is such an important part of deep ecology. The first “ultimate norm”, as indicated by Devall and Sessions (1985, p.66), is self-realization. But this goes beyond the traditional Western sense of individualism to a much broader context. Their claim is that “deep ecology is emerging as a way of developing a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities, and all of Nature” (1985, p.7). Thus, our full maturing as persons takes place in the context of organic wholeness, in which we see ourselves alongside “whales, grizzly bears, whole rain forest ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on” (Devall & Sessions 1985, p.67).

If deep ecology stopped at that point, and left the argument with the affirmation that “everything is connected” (1985, p.8), the situation would change completely; after all, such a position would be shared by Process Philosophy, Eco-feminism, and as I will argue, with a biblical Christian position as well. But deep ecology moves on to what might be regarded as the most definitive feature of this philosophy, namely its belief in the notion of bioequality. This is the assertion, as Devall and Sessions state, that “all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own … self-realization within the larger Self-realization” (1985, p.67). Thus, humans are just one species in the biotic community, with no greater claim than any other. I will shortly discuss this claim further, especially in terms of ecofeminism.

Perhaps it comes as no great surprise to find what many would consider to be extraordinary claims at the extreme end of the biotic equality spectrum, but care needs to be taken in that regard. For example, Beisner cites Corbett to the effect that the lives of mice and guinea pigs are to be preferred to humans (1997, p.136); in point of fact, Corbett is arguing for respect of other life, the minimising of killing, and states as a most important principle “that we should give precedence to the relatively complex forms of life over the relatively simple” (Postscript in
Godlovitch S. & R. and Harris, J. 1971, p.234). Even more, Beisner himself was citing a second-hand source in which Graber was apparently prepared to state that since humans had become “a cancer”, “until such time as Homo Sapiens should decide to rejoin nature, some of us can only hope for the right virus to come along” (Beisner 1997, p.140), which is a position that many would find extreme. Naess however was realist enough to recognise that in practical terms complete biotic equality is unrealistic, since existence would not be possible on those terms. In one form or another, all life feeds on other life.

**Interim Conclusion**

The nature of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation is an important issue, and it is clear that in spite of differing emphases, the philosophies or spiritualities I have considered thus far would all agree that humankind is part of what may be called “the web of life”, and not above it. I am arguing, however, that there are difficulties with forms of biocentrism in which the fundamental unity of life is allowed to become an equality that virtually eliminates difference. Not only does that distort the relationship within “the web of life”, but also it is ecologically unhelpful, unrealistic, and may be difficult to reconcile with Christian theology. Once that extreme position is set aside, however, as I will show, there is strong theological support for the biocentric argument about the interdependence and unity of life. The notion that life exists in relationship thus becomes an important corrective to the domination theory. Within a wide context of known reality, Moltmann has suggested that “the scientists have shown us how to understand Creation as nature. Now theology must show science how nature is to be understood as God’s creation” (1985, p.38). It is with that thought that theology has something to contribute to an understanding of life and relationships in the natural world that I turn to theocentrism.
Theocentrism

It is clear, I believe, that in spite of the varied approaches, there is nevertheless a common or unifying thread running through them, leading to the conclusion that there are some valuable insights in a biocentric approach. I will argue, however, that in its pure form it is inadequate, especially in the context of trying to encourage ecological mission in and through the Christian community. It is my conviction that a properly understood theocentrism offers the best hope of a balanced understanding of a global ecosystem and our place in it. The assumption with which I will begin is that with God as Creator at the centre, everything can assume its rightful place; and while it is true that adherents of an anthropocentric position could also agree with that statement, I will be interpreting it in more biocentric terms. From an Orthodox perspective, Gregorios reminds us that the basic distinction in the Patristic literature is not between God and humanity, but between “He who truly is” and “the things that merely exist.” (1977, p.24) The essential unity of all life is recognised, with humans as part of creation; but the special role and responsibility of people made in the image of God is also recognised. Even so, there is nothing automatic about it.

It should be noted that a theocentric approach in and of itself is not enough. Probably most of those who focus the Christian message solely on the human condition would also believe that they are “theocentric”. But in Bouma-Prediger’s phrase (2001, p.103), what is required is a “creation-encompassing theocentrism”; the distinction is very important. Gnanakan (1999) also explicitly advocates this approach. At the risk of introducing a somewhat clumsy term, “theistic biocentrism” may be more precise than theocentrism, and communicate a more accurate picture of God’s relationship with the creation.
Diversity in the Theistic Biocentric Approach

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that theocentrism reflects a single unified position. Paul Santmire (2000, p.1300) has helpfully shown that there are three major schools of thought involved here, although it must be noted that there can be considerable variation even within those three schools. Reconstructionists, he says, begin with the assumption that the Christian faith offers few resources for dealing with the eco-crisis, and therefore believe that a complete overhaul of the classic kerygmatic tradition is necessary. In doing so they may even look to an eclectic range of “new” spiritualities, Eastern religions, and New Age concepts. Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Sallie McFague are identified as examples of this school. Their radical approach to Christianity is capable of ample illustration, not least in terms of their concept of God. Santmire summarises the results of this approach as “a conscious or unconscious rejection of the classical kerygmatic and dogmatic traditions of Christianity as the primary matrix of theological knowing” (2000, p1300). In short, there can be no doubt that reconstructionists are eco-friendly, but it is very doubtful if their approach would have more than a marginal impact upon the church at large, especially in areas where a conservative approach is dominant.

At the more conservative end of the spectrum are the apologists who are keen to stress Christianity’s green credentials, and consequently the need for good stewardship of the earth. There is therefore a form of eco-friendly anthropocentrism involved here, but as Derr would insist, it is legitimately there. The work of the World Council of Churches for a “just, participatory, and sustainable society” comes in this category. Apologists include Thomas Derr, Douglas John Hall, and others. The question whether the term “stewardship” is adequate to inspire a new generation of eco-awareness must be held over until the next chapter.
Santmire himself identifies with the third option, the revisionist school. “The revisionists work within the milieu of classical Christian thought as defined by the ecumenical creeds” (Santmire 2000, p.1301), and give high priority to biblical interpretation. Such a theology of nature, Santmire says, will be “biblical, christological, ecological, and ecclesiological” (2000, p.1302), but it will take on the more universal scope of Colossians 1:15-20 and reflected by Sittler. Moltmann is identified as revisionist, as are Sittler, James Nash, Fretheim, Edwards, McDonagh, Hallman, and Rasmussen.

Santmire’s categories, while helpful, should not be regarded as absolute, and Ruether is surely correct in stating that Christians can be “lured into ecological consciousness only if they see that it grows in some ways from the soil in which they are planted” (1992, p.207). It is for that reason, I believe, that while a viable eco-mission theology can be built on the foundation of any one of these three schools of thought, it is most likely to rise out of either the apologetic or revisionist approach.

**Theocentric Views of the Unity of life**

As in the case of the biocentric philosophies, theocentric views may also vary in their understanding. Nevertheless, there is a strong biblical tradition that holds the essential unity of all life, with humans recognised as part of creation. Clearly, the biblical references to heaven and earth, sun, moon, plants, trees, birds, fish, animals etc mean that God is concerned with all of these. In writing of the creation event, Westermann states, “The Bible is speaking of a definitive event which concerns not only humankind but the whole of creation” (1984, p.177). Humans, however, need both humility in their creaturehood, and also an acceptance of the responsibility of stewardship (McDonagh, 1986). As I will indicate below, Ruether (1992) develops this view, based on the concept of a covenant relationship.
This, however, raises issues related to the notion of biotic equality. Sallie McFague is one who draws attention to both similarity and difference among living things, and in doing so she differs markedly from deep ecologists and some other eco-feminists. If we go back far enough, she says, we inevitably come to a common ancestry, whether we are an oak tree or a human being. We are inexorably bound together with all other life in intricate and complex relationships. McFague is happy to acknowledge that deep ecology “at its best … helps us to enlarge our sense of self” (1993, p.126). It should also be noted that God’s covenant with Noah specifically included all life, and not just humankind (Gen 9:12). However, McFague’s difficulty with the deep ecology model is the notion that “things are so profoundly interrelated and inter-dependent that they are, in effect, one” (1993, p.127). This denial of both diversity and individuality, she believes, provides a weak basis for an environmental ethic.

However, she says, there is “one crucial difference that separates human beings from all other life forms, and it may be the difference that makes all the difference: we are, to our knowledge, the only creatures on the planet who know the common creation story, the only creatures who not only participate in it but know that they do” (1993, p.60). For McFague, it is the common creation story that provides the paradigm for responding to other life, and indeed for understanding their difference from us. Thus she affirms both unity and difference, and while acknowledging some value in deep ecology, asserts that “what is missing in deep ecology is a developed sense of difference” (1993, p.128). Birch (1993) would agree with that position. He argues, for example, that there is important distinction between those things that are sentient and those that are not. Similarly, he argues that “Grades of intrinsic value imply a diversity of rights of creatures” (1993, p.103), and concludes that “It is important to make the distinction between those things which have intrinsic value, such as living organisms which do not have intrinsic value, such as rocks and valleys. Otherwise our environmental ethic becomes confused and impractical” (1993, p.105-6).
I conclude that it is valid to argue for a profound unity or “web of life”, and to discern an enormous amount of inter-relationship among living things or beings, but also that it is important to sufficiently acknowledge the importance of difference between human and other life. Without moving to an anthropocentric position, it must be said that from a biblical and theological point of view, God’s concern for all life must be balanced by an understanding of the unique human place in the divine economy.

Like Ruether, McFague is biocentric in the sense that she affirms the unity of life in a non-hierarchical way, and that we as humans are of the earth. In reflecting on “the body of God”, she asserts that “we are … made of the same stuff as all other life forms on our planet” (1993, p.17), and such a position is in keeping with the biblical story. In the second creation account in Genesis 2, God draws Adam, or man, (Heb \textit{adam}) from the dust (Heb \textit{adamah}); and the animals also are drawn from the same dust. But she also moves beyond biocentrism to what I am calling theistic biocentrism, and looks for an inclusive and caring approach. McFague is also quite personal about her own situation, defining herself as “a Christian theologian” who is “paid for thinking about God” (1993, p.13). This is spelled out further in the biblical paradigm of “covenant”.

\textbf{Covenant}

One of the foremost ways the Bible has of expressing the idea of a divine-human relationship is through the concept of a covenant. As Snaith (1944) indicates, the Hebrew word underlying this is \textit{chesed}, or the covenant love of God, which builds upon \textit{‘ahabah}, which is God’s unconditional love for Israel. It is because of this unconditional love for Israel, and thus for all people, that the concept of covenant emerged. At a human level, a covenant carried some of the connotations of a contract between two parties; in this biblical sense, however, it became much more than that, and was required to carry a much greater weight of significance. It is, after all, describing a relationship.
In using the term in this way however, it is important to note that the two parties bound by the covenant are not necessarily equal in status. That is true both at a human level, as for example in the case of a treaty between rival rulers, and in terms of our relationship with God. Almost by definition, the lack of equality between Creator and creature is fundamental to the relationship.

The first time the word “covenant” is used in the Bible relates to Abram in Genesis 6:18, and it has been customary to regard this as the initial covenant which was reaffirmed in later periods. However, Buhlmann (1982) contends that the primary covenant is in fact what he calls the Covenant of Creation. He suggests that for too long we have overemphasized the covenant with Abraham, as if it was only then that God became involved in human affairs. Thus, Buhlmann argues that “without the creation account it would be unclear just who is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ, the God of all humankind” (1982, p.11). At the same time, Buhlmann is quick to point out the limitations of the term “covenant”, in that humankind, as a party to the covenant, came into being through the covenant itself. Yet it is also true that this is part of a universal human experience through the very fact of birth.

At another level we might consider the story of Adam and Eve in the paradise of Eden, in which they were told not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden. They disregarded that of course, and so found themselves expelled from their paradise. As Fretheim puts it, “To be separated from the tree of life represents the broken nature of the relationship, with death being inevitable”; he goes on to suggest that “it may be that death (and life) has a comprehensive meaning in this story (as in the Hebrew Scriptures generally) associated with a breakdown in relationships to God, to each other, and to the created order” (1994, p.352). That seems to me to be a highly significant observation. In other words what was at stake was not so much that they disobeyed God’s law, but rather that they damaged the relationship of trust between God and themselves.
It should not be imagined, however, that redemption was a divine afterthought. Rather, the biblical story is one in which creation and redemption are inexorably related, since redemption in all its dimensions takes place within a world, indeed a universe, that was brought into being through God’s grace. Care is needed lest we limit God’s purpose too much, either to human concerns exclusively, or to Israel exclusively. Thus, Fretheim observes that “God’s purpose in redemption does not, finally, centre on Israel. God as Creator has a purpose that spans the world…. Israel’s election furthers God’s mission on behalf of the entire universe” (1994, p.355). Thus creation and redemption are both expressions of the one essential reality, which is God’s desire for a meaningful relationship with the whole creation, and not least with the human community.

The other significant covenant to be noted here is with Noah in Genesis 9:8-17, when after the flood the promise of God was reaffirmed. As Murray indicates, it was “a sovereign dispensing of grace on God’s part…. It is God’s covenant, and he establishes it” (1962, p.264). This rather one-sided arrangement is therefore in keeping with the divine initiative of creation itself. But the important point here is that God affirmed a covenant not only with people, but also with “all living creatures”. Indeed it would not be too strong to say that the earth itself was included. “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you…. ” Hosea 2:18 reaffirms that inclusive covenant, and specifically indicates that it is between God and all living beings.

We humans have always had a tendency to think of ourselves as somehow above the rest of creation, and that beyond our human relationships nothing really is important. But important though that is, it is even more important to put ourselves in context, in the sense that we are part of God’s creation, and the divine concern is for the whole of creation. Fretheim’s observation is an important one: “The covenant has significant ecological implications because God has established
it with ‘all flesh’, with birds and animals and the earth itself, even though they are now alienated from human beings” (1994, p.401).

One of the covenantal implications of humankind’s creation in the image of God is that we are thereby called to follow God’s lead in caring about all life. One clear lesson we have had to learn from ecology is that species cannot be treated in isolation. More and more we are discovering that different forms of life are inter-connected, and that ecosystems are more complex than we thought. Thus, I contend that the ancient story of a covenant relationship between God and all life relates directly with that inter-connection. Green theologians remind us of the important fact that implicit in the covenant is an acceptance of responsibility, and of an involvement in God’s will and work in the world. As humans we share in the unity of all creation, but at the same time the special role and responsibility of people made in the image of God is also recognised. But the line between biocentrism and theocentrism is often fuzzy, and that is especially evident in the writing of McFague and Reuther, both of whom identify as eco-feminists and Christian theologians.

Ruether and Covenant

Rosemary RadfordRuether’s theology is far-reaching, and it is easy to distort through brevity. However, her holistic approach to the environment is clear in her understanding of the covenant, “which includes both norms of harmony with the earth and justice in society” (Bouma-Prediger 1995, p.43). A number of implications emerge from that. First, as I have argued in chapter 3, the wider issue of justice must be an integral part of any eco-theological agenda. Second, Reuther contends that a hierarchical view of the world, with its assumed superiority and inferiority in patterns of domination, is the main cause of oppression, and thus a shift from hierarchy to equality is essential. But the sense of community she proposes does not mean a smothering of all difference. Ruether states: “A covenantal vision of the relation of humans to other life forms
acknowledges the special place of humans in this relationship as caretakers, caretakers who did not create and do not absolutely own the rest of life, but who are ultimately accountable for its welfare to the true source of life, God” (1992, p.227). Third, as Bouma-Prediger indicates, it should be clear that Reuther’s approach “leads ultimately to the conclusion that some radical theological reconstruction is needed”, not least in the way God is conceptualised (1995, p.50). A significant question with ecological implications is not merely whether one believes in God, but what sort of God one believes in, and therefore in the next section I will consider some images of God.

Images of God

A number of disparate approaches are either forthright in their advocacy of biocentrism, or tend in this direction, and in many cases their views are significantly influenced by their concepts of God. But equally there are ways of imaging God that have tended to hinder a full appreciation of the place of humankind in the global eco-system, and that have been a significant hindrance in a wider acceptance of a positive ecotheology. It therefore becomes important to consider ways of imaging God that may help or hinder understanding. One issue that becomes very clear – whether or not Moltmann is necessarily correct in his assertion that “an ecological doctrine of Creation implies a new kind of thinking about God” (1985, p.13) – is that the image we have of God is important.

God as Triune

One important element that must be noted here is the argument that an ecological doctrine of creation relates to the doctrine of the Trinity. This approach is developed strongly by Moltmann. Likewise Peter Scott (2003) claims that the modern separation of humanity from nature can be traced to the displacement of the triune God. The current eco-crisis can be located there, Scott asserts, and so can be healed only from within theology, by a revival of a trinitarian doctrine of
creation interlocking with a political philosophy of ecology. In doing this he draws on moderate deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social and socialist ecologies. The movement of the Holy Spirit, he believes, may be viewed as a renewal of fellowship between humanity and nature through ecological democracy.

Bouma-Prediger also believes that theocentrism, or what I prefer to call theistic biocentrism, requires the doctrine of the Trinity. “If the good news is truly good, then we must affirm a view of God that properly emphasizes the community of love that God is: three distinct but inseparable persons indwelling each other in a perfect communion of love” (2001, p.120). In a footnote he acknowledges that to speak of three persons is not to speak of three individuals as we understand it today, although one suspects that for many ordinary people it may require more than a footnote to remove the implication of tritheism, and for that reason while the tri-unity of God is basic Christian doctrine with sound ecological implications, great care needs to be taken in the way it is presented.

At the same time, Bouma-Prediger goes on to introduce the important notion of relationship, to assert that “person necessarily implies relationship” (2001, p.203n). Edwards (2006, p.72) contributes the idea of “being-in-one-another” as a way of speaking about the Trinity, arguing that “it preserves the diversity and uniqueness of the Three against the tendency to collapse the Trinity into an undifferentiated unity …. or to see God as three separate individuals, as three gods (tritheism)” (2006, p.72). Thus, the concept of diversity in unity and the insight that “God’s being is a communion of mutual love” (2006, p.76) serves to emphasise what Moltmann (1985), Borg (2003) and others also stress, namely the fundamental value of relationship; or as Edwards states, “the very being of things in our universe is relational being” (2006, p.76). Such an understanding of God and reality as essentially relational cannot coexist with attitudes of
exploitation and domination, whether in the human community, in regard to animal life, or indeed the Earth itself.

Thus, Moltmann rejects a mechanistic approach in which things are primary, and argues that relationships are just as primal – that “to be alive means existing in relationship with other people and things” (1985, p.3). Such a view may readily be developed and sustained biblically, and has implications for an understanding of God. In this regard it is important to understand that from a biblical perspective, the God of Creation is also the God of Redemption.

**God and Gendered Language**

A number of points begin to emerge very clearly. First, the language we use about God is both problematic and important. The question of gender language and God is important in the context of ecotheology. For many people, the common use of male language for God is not intended to say that God is in fact male, yet even by default that becomes the perception. The question is how we may have a form of language that does justice not only to the biblical record, but also to issues of intimacy and relationship, and at the same time is inclusive yet manageable in common use.

Elizabeth Achtemeier (1993) acknowledges that women have a legitimate cause for concern on the grounds of discrimination, but she sees a big difference between “feminism as fairness and feminism as ideology”; for Achtemeier, the latter is seen in attempts to feminise the names of God. Thus, she asserts that a basic principle is involved, in that “The Bible uses masculine language for God because that is the language with which God has revealed himself” (1993, p.19); apart from several examples of simile, God is not defined in feminine terms. Rather, God is defined as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But that is not to suggest that God is
male; rather, for Achtemeier, “the God of the Bible has no sexuality” (1993, p.18). It is clear though that Achtemeier’s main problem is with those whom she regards as “radical feminists”.

Somewhat in contrast to Achtemeier, Paul R. Smith’s book (1993), from the unlikely background of the Southern Baptist tradition in the United States, asks “Is it Okay to Call God ‘Mother’? : Considering the Feminine Face of God.” His verdict is decisive. God is not incarnate in either gender or language, but in Jesus Christ; but he goes on to state his thesis: “Calling God ‘Father’ and never ‘Mother’ says something in our day that Jesus never intended, namely, that God is exclusively male or masculine” (1993, p.3). As he develops his argument, he makes the point that “we cannot avoid male and female words because the sense of what is personal for humans only comes in those two forms” (1993, p.99).

Gail O’Day also makes an important contribution to this debate about gender and God in her introduction to a commentary on John’s gospel. In it she notes that the use of male images for God is difficult for many women because of the implications of patriarchy. Many eco-feminists would agree with O’Day that “an exclusive use of father language for God both flattens the richness of biblical images for God that sends disturbing messages about systems of power and authority” (1995, p. 496). Yet, O’Day argues, we may not remove the Father/Son language of John without seriously distorting his whole theological vision: “The Church’s task is to move beyond the assumption that Father is a generic synonym for ‘God’ … John does not use Father/Son language to reinforce the claims of patriarchy. Rather, he uses it to highlight the theological possibilities of intimacy and love that rest at the heart of God” (1995, p.496).

**Beyond a Monarchical God**

Second, McFague is undoubtedly correct in her observation that “the monarchical model, the relation of God and the world in which the divine, all-powerful king controls his subjects and
they in turn offer him loyal obedience, is the oldest and still the most prevalent one” (1993, p.138), and that this model has political implications. I am sure that many would agree with that perception of God as the monarchical male ruler of people. Marcus Borg (1997) joins McFague and others in rejecting this model, and in doing so points to a number of implications of this approach. It implies a “radical separation” of God from nature, and that separation of the world from the sacred results in a downgrading of nature. Further, it reinforces notions of dominion and anthropocentrism, leading to the conclusion that “nature has instrumental value, not intrinsic value” (1997, p.68). Borg goes on to assert that such a monarchical concept of God goes hand in hand with an oppressive political system to which it gives legitimacy. Such a correlation of a monarchical view of God and societal structures has inevitable implications for gender issues in a male dominated society.

After considering a monarchical view, Borg helpfully proposes what he calls a “Spirit model” of God (1997, p.71-79), which gives a radically different and more holistic meaning to some traditional concepts. In this understanding, primacy is given to “relationship, intimacy and belonging” (1997, p.71). Drawing on the Bible itself, Borg projects images of God as Mother, Intimate Father, Lover, and Journey Companion, in addition to a number of non-anthropomorphic metaphors.

**A Panentheistic God**

Third, there is broad agreement in the literature that the biblical God is panentheistic, a word that literally means “everything in God”. A traditional view of God would be that of a theism of radical transcendence, in which God is pictured as “wholly other”, totally beyond humankind and the mundane, or a God who was “out there”. But the image of God as transcendent is only part of the story. As Borg suggests, panentheism also perceives God as “the encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is. The universe is not separate from God, but in God” (2003, p.66).
McFague projects a very similar image, which she believes “makes sense” in terms of an incarnational understanding of Christianity and an organic interpretation of modern science (1993, p.150). Moreover, she develops that approach in terms of “the body of God”. In *Models of God* (1987), for example, McFague tries to re-conceptualise God as Lover, Friend, and Mother, in ways that may transform Christian assumptions and prejudices. Ecological implications are evident in her view of “the world as God’s body, which God – and we – mother, love, and befriend. God is incarnated or embodied in our world, in both cosmological and anthropological ways” (1987, p.184).

Thus, the biblical God is both transcendent and immanent; or as Borg puts it, the terms reflect the “moreness” and the “presence” of God (2003, p.66). Similarly, McFague talks of “thinking of God’s transcendence in an immanental way” (1993, p.vii). A biblical example would be Isaiah 6:1, in which the prophet begins to describe his call. In his vision, he sees the Lord “sitting on a throne, high and lofty”, yet “the hem of his robe filled the temple. The wonder of the natural world and our sense of God are closely linked.

**The Heart of Creation**

Part of the eco-theology debate centres around the question of what constitutes the crown of creation. The anthropocentric answer is of course humankind, or in some cases even *mankind*! Moltmann (1985) and others, however, argue that it is in fact the Sabbath. Deane-Drummond is reflecting Moltmann when she states, “I suggest that living from the Sabbath leads to transformation, a transformation of encounter, a renewal of covenant, which we can rightly name as a *cosmic covenant*…” (2004, p.11). But von Rad (1963) makes the additional point that the Sabbath introduces an eschatological element. History, he argues, situates in the sixth day, while the Sabbath represents the future. In any event, the Sabbath concept includes the reaffirmation of a sense of covenant between God, humanity, and creation; and for Deane-
Drummond (2004) it implies a sense of dependence, of wonder, and of deep joy in creation in all its variety. Deane-Drummond also urges that we learn to love creation as a gift of God’s love, and that when faith is able to glimpse the glory of God, it leads to a context of love, wonder, humility, and wisdom in which environmental decision-making becomes truly possible. Thus it is essential to find ways to balance the sense of creation as gift with the competing demands of ecological justice. Such a view leads easily and naturally to a creation spirituality, and appreciation of God in the natural world that quickly becomes an approach to creation care.

**Creation Spirituality**

It is clear that if theology is going to connect with mission in a practical sense, the development of a nature or creation spirituality will be quite essential. A number of strands converge at this point, and potentially it opens up a large subject. But a beginning point may be for humankind to heed the call of the late Pope John Paul II to emulate the example of Francis of Assisi, and “make peace with all of creation (1990).

But a form of creation spirituality in fact reaches far back into Church history. Here the name of Matthew Fox comes readily to mind, drawing as he does on Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and other medieval theologians and mystics. It is very clear that there is a profound mysticism at the heart of Fox’s approach. There is much that could be said here, but clearly a panentheistic perspective is basic; from that point, many other issues emerge, from experience to a positive view of faith and science, and from compassion to an appreciation of the natural world. One may disagree with Fox on some theological issues; but to perceive with him that “the mystic in us is the one moved to radical amazement by the awe of things” (1988, p.51) is to realise that such an approach has significant implications not only for human relationships with God, but also for creation care.
McFague, for whom God is “sacramentally embodied”, is one who makes a similar connection: “The world is our meeting place with God … as the body of God, it is wondrously, awesomely, divinely mysterious” (1993, p.vii). However, she critically evaluates the work of Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox. In doing so, she states, “creation spirituality has given the planetary agenda a number of key insights necessary for cosmic health” (1993, p.70). At its best, she says, it provides “a mystique of the earth”; or in the words of Berry, “the universe, by definition, is a single gorgeous celebratory event” (Berry 1988, p.5). Thus, McFague is happy to affirm the positives that she perceives in creation spirituality. It evokes a sense of deep appreciation of and connection with the Earth, which influences the way we act.

However, she takes Berry and Fox to task for their failure to acknowledge the negative side as well. For McFague, they lack “a sense of the awful oppression that is part and parcel of the awesome mystery and splendour” (1993, p.72). Thus, their approach contains an unfounded optimism. In more precise terms, for example, she is critical of Fox for his omission of repentance and his neglect of North-South social justice issues. Nevertheless, for McFague, creation spirituality is “a utopian, eschatological vision and ought to be allowed to function in that way” (1993, p.72). Certainly it does not project reality as it is, but in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive sense, it has an important contribution to make to the planetary care agenda.

Perhaps enough has been said to highlight the enormous significance of spirituality for any praxis of creation care. McFague expresses that link clearly when she states that “piety and praxis go together”, (1997, p.11); but for both Ruether and McFague, as indeed for others such as Deane-Drummond, there is a strong link between human attitudes to nature and consequences, so that creation spirituality involves a committed love of nature as a central driving force. Ruether expressed that clearly when she stated, “What we need is neither optimism nor pessimism but committed love (1992, p.273). But McFague deals with the kind of
understanding that must underlie such a love. For her, this love begins by seeing nature as subject rather than as object: “Christians should not only be natural, understanding ourselves as in and of the earth, but also super, natural, understanding ourselves as excessively, superlatively concerned with nature and its well-being” (1997, p.6). She goes on to point out that loving nature, which is what is required, depends on careful attention to it, “because we cannot love what we do not know” (1997, p. 29). McFague’s use of italics emphasises the importance of the point. Ruether’s summing up of the implications is helpful: it means that “we remain committed to a vision and to concrete communities of life, no matter what the ‘trends’ may be. After all, it is for our children and for generations of living beings to come” (1992, p.273).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined a range of biocentric options, beginning with an Australian indigenous approach with its strong sense of kinship between human life, other life, and the land, which leads to an attitude of care. I have also briefly considered process philosophy, eco feminism, and deep ecology; while indicating difficulties with some of those positions, I have suggested that a biocentric approach correctly locates humankind in the context of what may be termed the “web of life”. I have discussed elements of theocentric approaches to the natural world, including the significant biblical image of covenant and what that says about the place of human life and responsibility. I have considered some of the ways in which God is understood, including the significance of a Trinitarian understanding, the issue of gendered language, and leading on beyond a remote monarchical God to a panentheistic view which I have suggested is both true to the biblical record and also helpful in terms of ecotheology. I have argued that a theocentric approach shares some elements of biocentrism together with a number of qualifications and implications, and have proposed that a theistic biocentrism is the most appropriate response. I have taken Moltmann’s point that the heart of creation is the image of “Sabbath”, with its inherent implications of transformation and renewal, and extended that to
consider the importance of creation spirituality in which piety and praxis are shown to belong together. The significance of that link and of the issues raised in this chapter will be shown to be fundamentally important in terms of the ecological responses and theology of eco-mission that will be developed in the next two chapters.
CHAPTER SIX

ECOLOGICAL RESPONSES

Like any form of theology, ecotheology or a theology of creation comes in a variety of forms ranging from a position close to deep ecology to a stance that is quite anthropocentric. Similarly it will not be surprising to find that in terms of mission, a Christian response to the natural environment also draws a variety of different expressions; nor should that be considered a problem. But at the outset it is clear that a Christian response is bound to emerge directly from the primary theology that shapes it. If exploitative approaches are set aside, a valid praxis can emerge out of a range of theologies.

The best known response is stewardship, but it is not the only one, and it is not without its critics. Other responses are captured by rubrics such as partnership, Earth community, sacrament, covenant, celebration, and even pastoral care. Thus the purpose of this chapter is to consider these responses and how they might relate to one another; the question of whether the differences are real, or more a matter of semantics, will be explored. One issue that will emerge quite quickly is that there is a considerable amount of overlap between them, and thus I will be arguing for a new composite model or response.

There are, however, a number of primary theological questions in behind the various possible eco-mission models. For example, how is “dominion” to be defined? What is the status or relationship of humankind with the natural world? I have considered these questions in chapters 4 and 5; but differences at the mission level rise out of legitimately different answers to those primary questions, or differing assumptions about or even outright misunderstanding of the meaning of key words. At the same time there can also be some false leads, as illustrated in the first model, which is dominion.
**Dominion**

Rasmussen (1996) begins with what he calls the dominion model, which he clearly regards as out of place today, although it is doubtful if this is valid as a stand-alone approach. For dominion, as Rasmussen defines it, is not the Genesis text-in-context version, but rather the distortion better described as domination. He asserts that “commerce masquerading as human liberation is not the only surviving form of dominion theology, but it is the most prominent one” (1996, p.229). As I indicated earlier, he goes on to cite Cardinal O’Connor and Pope John Paul II in similar domination terms in a way that may distort at least the late Pope’s position.

I do not intend to revisit the issue at any length here, but I contend that in real terms dominion has little to do with human mastery and control, and that dominion understood as domination has little that is positive to say to the current eco-crisis. But a dominion theology understood in terms of its serving nature, or as a reflection of the spirit of Christ is another matter, and will be part of at least some of the responses that follow. As Fowler observes, dominion understood in that sense “does not deny stewardship but requires it” (1995, p.81).

**Stewardship**

For some people, stewardship emerges as the most obvious descriptor of the human relationship with the natural world. Thus Hart (2004) is not obviously aware of the debate surrounding the term “stewardship”, which he appears to regard as uncontentious, and consequently he does not argue the case for it. In his writing and in citing the declarations of Councils of Catholic Bishops Hart clearly regards stewardship as the normative term to describe our human place and role in creation.
Compared with the other responses, however, there is a great deal of literature concerning stewardship, with scholars lined up on both sides of the debate. Thus, at the outset it is important to note Fowler’s observation that stewardship comes in many versions, even though there may be some common themes such as the image of God as “the sacred Creator” and nature as God’s creation (1995, p.76-7). What becomes clear in the debate is that one’s final position tends to depend to a large extent on the prior assumptions or understandings one brings to it; as I will demonstrate, the approach that the critics of stewardship reject often does not correspond with the approach that its proponents affirm.

On the one hand, for the Au Sable Institute and Calvin DeWitt, stewardship clearly means the bringing of healing and wholeness not only to the biosphere but indeed to the whole of Creation. DeWitt asserts that stewardship “addresses the problems at their roots”, and thus “is not crisis management but a way of life” (1998, p.47). Similarly, a Report commissioned by the Anglican Church’s Mission and Public Affairs Council asserts that “the biblical term for humanity’s relationship with creation is ‘steward’”, understood in terms of a dominion “under God” and exercised on God’s behalf, and of accountability to God for “tilling and keeping” (2005, p.26). And from a rather different orientation, Berry cites a UK Government White Paper in 1990 which asserts that “the ethical imperative of stewardship … must underlie all (government) environmental policies” (2003, p.183). The Paper goes on to define stewardship as the “duty to look after our world prudently and conscientiously” (p.183) The fact that the term “stewardship” is contained in a Government White Paper may serve at least as a question mark over Scott’s concern (2003) that the term is too entrenched in ecclesial imagery to communicate effectively in the public arena beyond the Church.

On the other hand, much of the opposition to the notion of stewardship rises out of a fundamentally different definition, and centres on several related perceptions. From a
philosophical orientation, for example, Passmore (1974) is sceptical not only about the stewardship tradition, which he regards as relatively weak, but also about the role of Christianity in general. Passmore’s qualifications for making informing comment on theological issues may be questioned, since mysticism and Christianity are among the “rubbish” that must be “cleared away” so that “the joint efforts of scientists, technologists, economists, statesmen, (and) administrators” can solve ecological problems (1974, p.173). Such a position could well be regarded as problematic.

A second area of opposition is based on historical considerations. Roderick Nash (1990) not only rejects stewardship, but also the assertion that it has had an honoured place in Christian history. For him, there is scant historical evidence to support a positive assessment. As Nash sees it, stewardship was totally absent for 1,000 years after Benedict in the 6th century, and only re-appeared in relatively recent times. He clearly brings a type of deep ecological understanding as expressed in an implied sympathy for the smallpox virus.

The most significant focus of opposition is the perception that stewardship is based on human supremacy and exploitation. Hallman, for example, who is committed to creation care, believes that the current trend in ecotheology is away from a theology of stewardship, and his reason is clear. He believes that stewardship is based on the notion of human supremacy, and adds, “even if now we talk more in terms of human responsibility than dominion, our approach is still a management model in which we humans think we know best” (italics mine) (1994, p.6). There are several problems with this. It certainly recalls the debate about “dominion” (chapter 4), and it is doubtful if it is a fair reflection of the care that underlies the thinking of those who support stewardship. In any event one could ask if we could do anything other than what we believe is best.
Primavesi and Northcott take the argument further when they introduce a profit motive. Thus, for Primavesi, stewardship remains “exploitative and uneccological, since the stewards seek to optimise profits for themselves or their bosses” (1991, p.107). This is related to her objection to what she perceives as “hierarchical thinking”, or the idea that humans are somehow “above” or “in charge of” the ecosystem, an issue that was canvassed in chapter 5, and thus, that stewardship is about the ultimate benefit to humankind. Northcott likewise regards stewardship as “a highly problematic notion” (1996, p.129), and the reason, in part, is that he sees it as based strongly on anthropocentrism, and seems unconvinced by the argument that “dominion” does not involve “a purely instrumentalist vision of nature which legitimates ecological plunder” (1996, p.129). I would argue that Northcott exaggerates the human factor in the stewardship model in his perception that it infers an ordering of other life to meet the needs of human life. Further, he has a problem with what he perceives as a “master-servant” relationship that in his view is unlikely to lead to a desired state of care, especially when combined with “the implication that humans are effectively in control of nature, its managers … or its guardians” (1996, p.129). My contention is that Northcott has not really understood what many proponents of stewardship are advocating, as I will now endeavour to show.

The most immediate and obvious response to such criticisms is that it all depends on how the stewards’ job description is written. Certainly it is not difficult to find examples of poor stewardship; but the perception of stewardship as essentially exploitative is not supported in the writing of those who advocate stewardship.

Thomas Derr presents a credible response to the criticisms of Northcott, Hallman, and others. Derr has problems with biocentrism, and frankly embraces the term anthropocentrism as a reflection of the *imago Dei*; thus, Derr’s position is similar to DeWitt’s, and in the mould of Calvin, when he states, “I would stress again … that we are made to cultivate and manage the
earth, not passively accept whatever nature brings”. The term he uses is “managerial stewardship” (1998, p.82). The key for Derr is Genesis 2:15 and the divine call to “tend the earth and keep it”; or more literally, “to serve the earth and preserve it.” De Witt (1998) adds to that: “Shamar” (‘keep’ or ‘preserve’) is an extremely rich word with a deeply penetrating meaning that evokes a loving, caring, sustaining keeping.” He also states that “dominion as licence to do whatever meets one’s self-interest is a misappropriation of the image of God, and a failure to follow the example of Jesus Christ” (1998, p.46).

Attfield asserts that there has been a strong tradition, originating in Judaeo-Christian thought, that “people are the stewards of the earth, and responsible for its conservation, for its lasting improvement, and also for the care of our fellow creatures, its non-human inhabitants” (1983, p.45). Attfield’s definition of stewardship stands in some contrast to the beliefs of some of its critics; he describes it as “the belief … that human beings hold the planetary biosphere as a trust, and are both responsible and answerable for its care, whether to God or to the community of moral agents” (2003, p.200). He goes on to refer to an essay by Peter Harrison, who argues that the problem lies not in what the original writers meant, but in how their writings were received historically. Further, he enlists Harrison’s support for his contention that stewardship is an appropriate term in the context of a God who is concerned for the whole of nature or creation (2003). Thus, Attfield describes stewardship as “the most coherent available interpretation” not only for Christians, but also for Jews and possibly Muslims as well” (2003, p.36).

D.J. Hall (2006) was one of the first to advocate stewardship as a particularly appropriate metaphor for a Christian response to creation, but this is a position that can only be reached after it has taken seriously the criticism levelled against the ecological legacy of the Christian faith. Hall rejects the view that humanity is “above nature” as if possessed of some innate superior endowments, and in reaching that view he considers the concept of *imago Dei*. “But if the
image of God does not refer to a quality that we possess (making us superior to other creatures), but to a relationship in which we stand vis-a-vis our Creator, and a vocation to which we are called within the creation, a very different conception of the humankind-otherkind relation follows (2006, p.137), and he locates the image of steward in such a context. Further, he scornfully rejects the notion of humanity “in nature” as a naïve position. The key for Hall is the notion of humanity “with nature”, considered against the background of what it means to “have dominion”. Thus, to “have dominion” requires that “we should be servants, keepers and priests in relation to the others” (2006, p.142), and we can only fulfil that representative role if we are not only different from “otherkind”, but also in some sense the same as they are. The significance of such an understanding is that contrary to the understanding of critics of the term, stewardship implies accountability to God and a special responsibility to care for the earth and other creatures. Thus, for Hall it becomes an apt symbol and basis for an ecological ethic. But as Macquarrie cautions, “Man is tempted to move from being guardian of the world to becoming its exploiter, from use to reckless abuse. He forgets that he is also a creature and must have respect for nature’s laws” (1977, p.232).

The 1994 *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* (R.J. Berry 2000, p.18-22) is a deeply spiritual and caring document based on the stewardship model. It acknowledges that our stewardship is flawed, and urges Christians and Churches to be “centres of creation’s care and renewal” (Berry 2000, p.21). Berry’s edited volume focussing on the Declaration is interesting in that it includes articles that are mildly critical of it. A case in point is Bauckham’s essay, “Stewardship and Relationship” (2000:99), in which he acknowledges the intention of the Declaration to interpret dominion in terms of a caring stewardship, and that it therefore has a “biblical ring” to it. He is bound to note, however, that historically the term “dominion” implied that “the rest of creation exists for human benefit” (2000, p.100). It may be noted here that this is not Bauckham’s own view, but rather his *perception* of the way in which others have
understood dominion. Bauckham notes, as does Harrison (2006), that the understanding of dominion as stewardship emerged in the 17th century in response to the excesses of the Baconian view of technological progress, although it must be noted that Harrison regards Bacon’s utilitarianism as subtle and nuanced. Then with the eco-crisis of more recent decades, and the 1967 essay by Lynn White, the term found a new acceptance. But this time, as Bauckham says, “stewards” were intended to protect and preserve nature rather than presume to improve it (2000, p.102).

Bauckham’s conclusion is to wonder if images such as stewardship or garden are entirely adequate for the use to which they are put in the Declaration, and if stewardship “does not come to us still too freighted with the baggage of the modern project of technological domination of nature” (2000, p.103). More than that, he identifies at least part of the problem with stewardship as being the image it projects of a purely ‘vertical’ relationship with the natural world, with humans set above the rest of creation. The ‘horizontal’ relationship, he suggests, is also important. Given his perception of what stewardship implies, and the potential for abuse, Bauckham avers that “the concept of stewardship itself certainly cannot do all the work of radically reorientating our attitudes to the rest of creation that urgently needs to be done” (2000, p.105). The question remains as to whether or not he is correct, and whether any concept alone is able to bear that weight.

A great deal therefore depends on how key words are understood and applied, and thus the lack of an agreed definition is central to the differences in outlook regarding stewardship. But the areas of divergence are critically important, and the variation in understanding needs to be taken into account in attempting to define stewardship. More than that, it is out of this divergence that most of the difficulties emerge.
Partnership

Rightly or wrongly, there is a perception that the stewardship model is anthropocentric and hierarchical in character. By contrast the partnership approach perceives humankind much more as part of creation. Nevertheless, it is still best understood as a variation on the more common stewardship model.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Bradley is one of a number of writers to focus on the foundational unity of creation, that “at its deepest level the universe is a single unified whole, indivisible, and bound together by a simple yet powerful force” (1992, p.19). Thus it is possible to trace the link between humans and other life through the biblical images, such as *adam* (man) and *adama* (ground), and in other passages. Bradley’s point is that this position steers a middle course between human domination of nature on the one hand, and the opposite extreme that humans are inferior to nature.

But as Hill points out, partnership does not negate the concept of human uniqueness, but rather relocates humans in relationship with the rest of creation. “Humankind is partner to otherkind as, in Stephen Jay Gould’s phrase, ‘the stewards of life’s continuity on Earth’” (1996, p.236). As some biocentrists and deep ecologists would assert more forcefully, other life also has a claim to moral consideration. Rasmussen asserts that it is important to recognise human power in the midst of creation; nevertheless, “the recentered human partner recognises that, whatever power we wield as a species, we do not legislate the laws of an encompassing nature” (1996, p.237).

It may be argued that in pointing to continuity between humankind and otherkind, rather than a radical discontinuity, the partnership model is on solid ground both biblically and scientifically.
**Covenant**

The covenant approach has its origin in Genesis 9:11-13, in which God establishes a covenant not just with Noah, but also with “every living creature” and the earth itself. “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Gen 9:13). The repetition of key words and phrases emphasises both the divine promise itself and its inclusive nature. Again, as noted earlier, Fretheim is surely correct in his assertion that “the covenant has significant ecological implications because God has established it with ‘all flesh’”, which means that because God cares for non-human life, “human beings should follow the divine lead” (1994, p.401). It is noteworthy that the covenant theme is picked up again in Hosea 2:18, which introduces a prophetic theme.

In his summary of options, Rasmussen links ”covenant” with “prophet”, and notes that those who take this approach tend to be much more interested in a prophetic call for change to save a threatened planet than in metaphysics. The World Council of Churches Program for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation was based strongly on a covenant theme, and indeed became part of the title of the final document. The document stated that “the integrity of creation has a social aspect which we recognize as peace with justice, and an ecological aspect which we recognise in the self-renewing, sustainable character of natural eco-systems” (Niles 1992, p.174). Northcott is clearly one who believes the covenant model has more to offer than stewardship, for example. This is due in part to his understanding that stewardship generally relates to instrumentalist and exploitative attitudes to the natural world, but also the perception that “covenant” is more inclusive in character: “The covenant is not simply between humans and God, as anthropocentric exegetes have traditionally held, but is rather a ‘cosmic covenant’ involving all the orders of creation and linking them with the rituals, ethics and society of humans” (1996, p.168). It is clear however that this concept of covenant crosses the usual theological and ecclesiological boundaries.
A number of points emerge from this. First, it is impossible to read the covenant text and assert that humans are “above” the rest of creation. In company with other life, we belong to the earth. There is an important proviso, however. While affirming that fundamental principle, it is entirely possible and appropriate to argue that within that created order of which we are part, there is room for a special relationship between God and humans. I would argue that this is not anthropocentrism, nor does it support a notion of human mastery; it represents a unique relationship and responsibility while remaining part of that “web of life” that God has created. McFague is particularly successful in establishing that balance. As I indicated in the previous chapter, she affirms both unity and diversity, and acknowledges the inclusive nature of the covenant with Noah. She argues, correctly in my view, that the crucial difference between humans and other life is an awareness of the common creation story; it is that which provides the basis of a strong environmental ethic, and the paradigm that is needed for responding to other life.

Second, it becomes clear that the covenant/prophet model does not necessarily stand alone, but is incorporated as part of other approaches. McDonagh (1994), for example, clearly projects the stewardship model; but having elaborated briefly on a biblical view of dominion and the Genesis 9 covenant, goes on to assert that an inclusive covenant is at the heart of stewardship. Similarly, the Anglican document *Sharing God’s Planet* openly assumes a stewardship paradigm. We are “stewards of creation”, a heading declares (2005, p.16). But in asking how this stewardship might be exercised, the Report proposes four theological principles, the first of which is the covenant with creation. In my view the Report expresses very well both the interconnectedness of life and the place of humans within that creation. “The covenant with creation is the acknowledgment of the total interdependence and connectedness of every part of the creation, brought forth from the one God. Humanity stands apart from the rest of creation in this
respect: it can understand this relationship, and can express it and renew it in the form of love” (2005, p.19).

**Sacrament**

The sacrament paradigm is another model with support in sections of the Church, and not least in the Orthodox tradition. But it may be expressed in a number of different ways. McFague, for example, discusses Christian sacramentalism under the heading “Nature and the Cosmic Christ”, and declares “the world in our model is the sacrament of God, the visible, physical, bodily presence of God” (1993, p.182). This is not dissimilar from Fox’s position, and it is one with which some Christians may be uneasy, in that they may feel it is stretching the meaning of “sacrament” too much. It is of note however that in the 16th century Bruno advocated the notion of “a dynamic universe akin to that envisioned by the process philosophers of today” (Gregorios 1978, p.32). This extended to the concept of the earth, along with other astronomical bodies, being regarded as a living being. Thus, there are some common elements in Bruno, McFague’s “body of God”, and the concept of Gaia.

Louw, however, sees this approach as helpful, and notes with approval McFague’s description of her “body of God” imagery as panentheism (2005, p.10). Rasmussen similarly regards panentheism as an alternate term for sacramentalism (1996:239). McFague herself cautions that her concept should not be read literally, but rather as analogy and metaphor, and that in adopting a panentheistic stance she is projecting both the transcendence and the immanence of God. At the same time it must be noted that panentheism is almost a universally held position in ecotheology, and so it is potentially quite misleading to link it exclusively with a sacramental approach.
A sacramental approach does not emerge strongly in Gregorios’ “Orthodox view of Nature”; much of it is historical and descriptive in character. But he does offer a significant observation: “Humanity has a special vocation as the priest of creation, as the mediator through whom God manifests himself to creation and redeems it. But this does not make humanity totally discontinuous with creation, since a priest has to be an integral part of the people he represents” (1978, p.85). For Sherrard, the significance of the priestly metaphor is that, as mediator, humankind is intended to offer the world to God in praise and worship; but because of the Fall, alienation from the Christ “manifests itself in a particularly dehumanising and ecologically destructive form in the culture of modern science” (Sherrard 1987, cited in Northcott 1996, p.131). Northcott himself, like Gregorios, is much more aware of the positive aspects of science and technology. The metaphor of “priest of creation” is therefore somewhat ambiguous in character. Perhaps the key is in Gregorios’ reference to Christ’s self-denying love, and humankind’s need to offer ourselves and the universe to God in love. As he suggests, “the mastery of nature must be held within the mystery of worship. Otherwise we lose both mastery and mystery” (1977, p.89).

**Analysis: A Composite Model**

How then does one begin to pull together the strands of these various models? I contend that the various models are in fact not as different as the labels suggest, that no single word or concept can carry the weight required of it, and that a composite model is not only possible but is indeed essential. As was amply illustrated in the opposing views of stewardship, a great deal depends on how a word is defined, or what content is ascribed to a particular model.

If there is debate about the public, non-Church acceptability of a term like stewardship, the difficulty is exacerbated in the other possibilities. The primary problem with partnership, covenant, sacrament, and pastoral care is not at the content level, but in the fact that these are
very much “in-house”, ecclesial terms and thus are ill equipped for general use. In terms of a practical theology it may be argued that it probably does not matter very much what label we use, provided we are sure about the substance behind the label. Further, we might ask to what extent we can afford the luxury of the sometimes-excessive semantics of academic debate!

In spite of legitimate reservations about stewardship as the vehicle for creation care, my proposal is for a composite model based on the term “stewardship”, but that incorporates the following essential factors, noting that these are not alternatives inviting us to pick and choose.

1. It will reflect a dominion (as distinct from domination) theology based on the *imago Dei* and the servant spirit of Christ.

2. It will express ecological stewardship in terms of partnership; that is, with humankind seen as part of creation rather than above it and recognising fully the value of other life for its own sake, yet recognising also a special relationship with God and ecological responsibility under God.

3. It will express “the biblical language of ‘cultivating and caring for’” creation (Edwards 2006, p.25).

4. It will clearly be based on the inclusive covenant of God as expressed to Noah.

5. A panentheistic view of God that sees God as both transcendent and immanent will issue in a sacramental element, but without resorting to the extreme of pantheism.

6. It will recognise the validity of ecological care as an extension of holistic pastoral care.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that the various models projected in the literature can not legitimately be viewed as in competition with each other, and that a composite model is required. Further, it is doubtful if any one word can be sufficient, and so there needs to be greater emphasis on content, and perhaps a little more charity as well! At the same time, while noting the difficulties, a “flagship”
word is required that can to some degree express, for both the Christian community and a wider public, the ecological commitment that is increasingly essential. In that regard, the dominant concept of stewardship, understood in composite terms, is probably the most adequate of the existing possibilities, and its use in a UK Government White Paper provides a hint of a possible wider acceptance. If it can be received without “baggage”, it may be possible to infuse into it the various ingredients of a new holistic composite model of eco-mission.

James Nash may have the final word: “Yet, perhaps the bottom line is this: the strict constructionists and sectarians who yearn for ideological and verbal purity in the environmental movement do well to pay less attention to words and more to values and commitments. They might find a fair number of allies, including among those ‘unregenerates’ who are content with conservation, stewardship, or even dominion” (1991, p.107).
I have argued, along with Moltmann and others, that the term eco-crisis is not altogether adequate to describe the environmental disaster unfolding in modern times, in that ecological impacts are intertwined with the wider issue of social justice. Further, I have outlined a number of theological approaches to ecology and the natural world, and have proposed a theistic biocentrism as the approach that most clearly reflects the biblical understanding. The eco-theology we espouse, however, evokes a number of possible responses and carries some obvious implications. Thus, I have proposed a revised, composite approach to stewardship. It is necessary now to examine the literature relating to a theology of mission to see how that might relate to ecological concern and theology.

Defining Mission

It would be helpful if at the outset it were possible to establish an adequate and agreed definition of mission, but the difficulty of achieving that is reflected in the literature. More than that, in his classic work *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch cautions that mission is ultimately undefinable, and that we should never take it upon ourselves to “delineate mission too sharply and too self-confidently”. The most we can hope for, Bosch argues, is “some approximations of what mission is all about” (1991, p.9). I contend that Bosch is essentially correct in his assessment that definitions are generally problematic, and that in large part an understanding of what mission is will emerge in the discussion.

In his public lecture entitled “The Third Mission of the Church” (1998), Norman Habel suggested that there have been three phases in the history of Christian mission, and this will be a useful structural tool in the discussion that follows.
The First Mission: “Saving Souls”

Habel’s first mission of the Church represents an approach to mission that is largely confined to evangelism. In what may be regarded in some circles as a traditional approach to mission, and even more of the plural “missions”, there is a strong focus on the human aspect, and some books on mission are almost totally human-focussed. But the issue involved is not only the human focus, but also and in particular that mission is perceived as little more than “the saving of souls” regardless of the circumstances in which people are living.

A typical example of the problem of definition is reflected in Dickson (2003), who defines mission narrowly, so that it becomes virtually synonymous with personal evangelism. Certainly it has a strong human focus: for him it is “the range of activities by which members of a religious community desirous of the conversion of outsiders seek to promote their religion to non-adherents” (2003, p.10). But the problem of defining Christian mission as no more than a strategy for the conversion of people extends to a critical approach to other points of view.

Dickson goes on to recognise that other views exist, and thus a footnote refers to a work by Senior and Stuhlmeuller, who, he says, “are keen to distance the term ‘mission’ from what they see as the narrow and outmoded notion of ‘propaganda’.” For them, “it is a complex and holistic attempt ‘to fulfil the divine mandate given to the church that humanity reflect God’s own life as one people drawn together in respect and love’” (2003, p.7). The classic work of David Bosch is limited to four lines in the footnote. Dickson’s limited and anthropocentric approach is a clear example of what is arguably a relatively widespread problem.

But Edward Schnabel takes the issue a little further in his Early Christian Mission (2004), a massive 2-volume work of nearly 2,000 pages. In it he writes somewhat disparagingly of what he regards as some rather vague concepts of mission, as employed for example by the World
Council of Churches, and used to include comprehensively all aims and activities of the Church, including care for creation, but (according to him) excluding “proselytism”. Schnabel’s view is obviously human-centred, and focussed on the communication of a message “to people of different faiths a new interpretation of reality” – of God, humanity, and salvation, and to win them over to this faith (2004, p.11). Clearly, any form of social or eco-justice is not on his radar.

In his *Mission of the New Testament*, Hahn (1965) appears to take the issue forward by referring to the kingdom of God, but the appearance is an illusion. Like Dickson and others, he explores mission in some of the major sectors of the New Testament, but again there is almost no recognition of mission beyond what might be termed evangelisation. But two points might be made. First, he states that “Matthew particularly points out the content of the gospel – it is a matter of preaching ‘the gospel of the kingdom’” (1965, p.122). The question is, ‘what is the gospel of the kingdom’? Hahn does not really help us. The implication appears to be that the task easily translates into missionary activity, or seeking converts to Christianity. Second, Hahn defines mission as “the Church’s service, made possible by the coming of Christ and the eschatological event of salvation, and founded in Jesus’ commission” (1965, p.173). But what does that mean? I contend that such a definition does not help us very much in understanding mission beyond the direct scope of evangelisation, as traditionally understood in individualistic or personal terms.

Habel’s charge is that the “first mission” people are guilty of an unsophisticated reading of “the Great Commission” of Matthew 28:19, the call to “make disciples of all nations.” In many denominations, that translated into an emphasis on personal salvation and related issues. In practice, as Habel acknowledges, it meant more than that, in that the call of Jesus was to “make disciples”, which is not quite the same as making converts, but nevertheless the emphasis was on “spiritual” dimensions, narrowly understood.
It is clear that evangelism is widely regarded as an essential element, indeed a priority, of a mission approach. However, there is also a popular perception that evangelism relates solely to a concern for individuals and their ultimate destiny, to “saving” what might be regarded as “disembodied souls”; such a perspective is reflected in a number of works cited below. I have no argument with the proposition that evangelisation must be one of the priorities of Christian mission, that its task is to urge people to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and thus to discover a personal faith in and relationship with God. My contention here is that it is more than that.

The anthropocentricity of writers such as Dickson, Hahn, and Schnabel is duplicated in a great many other texts on mission; and even if a wider dimension is acknowledged, it is rarely extended in any practical sense. Furthermore, the majority of “how to” books focus almost exclusively on “winning people”, or building up the Church. Having said that, it is important to add that no one is arguing against a human focus per se. Far from being a problem, the gospel is rightly understood as “good news” for people, and a significant part of the Church’s work is inevitably bound up in “people issues”. The problem resides, rather, in an exclusively human focus and the lack of attention to the prophetic element, in many cases, as I have suggested, to its total exclusion. The latter point at least is picked up in the “second mission”.

The Second Mission: the Whole Human Being

Like the “first mission”, the “second mission” is also human-centred; but for Habel it extends the personal “spiritual” focus “to include rescuing the whole human being as part of a community” (1998, p.32), which is certainly an advance. Here the foundational text is Luke 4:18-19, or Jesus’ synagogue sermon in which he quoted from Isaiah in order to express the kind of ministry he would exercise. Thus, the spiritual implications are extended to the total human situation in all its physical, social, and even political aspects.
Loren Mead (1991) argues that the Church is living through a time of paradigm shift, and that it virtually needs to reinvent itself. There is a new mission frontier, and the old ways and structures will not be adequate. But certainly, Mead argues, Christians need to be turned outward towards the world. A “holy club” mentality that “responds to the mission frontier of the individual, but not of the community” (1991, p.41) must be rejected. In a subsequent work Mead (1994) picks up the New Testament concept of koinonia, in which the Christian lives in a tension between his or her Church heritage and the public arena. Thus, Christians live within the tension of a number of polarities, and notably what Mead describes as “servanthood vs. conversion” (1991, p.46). The latter obviously relates to calling people into a faith relationship with God and the life of the Church; that is important, but it can become religious “scalp hunting”. The former is based on the out-going servanthood of Jesus, but it can degenerate into sheer activism if it loses its depth and grounding. Mead concludes, “The local religious community of the future will have to move beyond the simplistic either/or we experience today. Servanthood vs conversion is not a choice to be made; it is a polarity that must be built into the structures we create for the Church” (1991, p.47).

But the history of the Church in the last 100 years or so demonstrates that it is often not easy to embrace both the personal and social aspects of Christian mission. This is reflected in the work of Paul Avis. He defines mission as “the whole church bringing the whole Christ to the whole world”, a definition he regards as holistic; certainly it includes “bringing prophetic critique to bear on unjust structures” (2005, p.1). At first that sounds more promising than the very human focus of previous definitions. Yet even here, it is clear that the primary focus is on the unchurched and the non-Christians. Avis acknowledges that non-human life is not “outside of God’s care and our human response”, yet because they are not “hearers and doers of the word”, they are by implication of lesser importance. He concludes, in my view somewhat simplistically,，“
that “it is persons, created in the image of the personal God, who are on the receiving end of mission” (2005, p.4).

A fundamental contradiction appears at the heart of Avis’ approach. At one level he projects a wider concern, asserting that mission is the cutting edge of the church and cannot be reduced to evangelism. He cites Moltmann in terms of the goal of mission as being the consummation of all creation in God. But finally he comes back to the personal approach as the priority. However, an earlier (2003) book by Avis reflects much more clearly the broader aspects of mission. There he writes of “two mission agendas – the public, cultural, and social aspect … and the pastoral, local, and personal aspect”, and adds that they “are not alternate strategies, but stand or fall together” (2003, p.5). Thus he asserts that the mission of the Church extends beyond the traditional pastoral mode. “The healing of the nations requires a mission that is carried forward on a broader front. Mission is not a discreet activity of the Church, but the cutting edge of the Church’s life” (2003, p.13).

Perhaps the struggle Avis appears to express in some of his work is similar to that of some of the twentieth century Evangelical Councils that tried, not altogether successfully, to balance the personal and social dimensions of mission. This is reflected in his reference to the final position of the International Missionary Council at Tambaran in 1938: “Tambaran by no means overlooks the missionary challenge of social transformation and the imperative to work for justice, freedom, and peace. But the dominant theme is the Church’s calling ‘so to exalt and proclaim’ Jesus Christ that people are won to repentance, faith, and participation in the Church” (Avis 2005, p.18).

Against such a background, it is appropriate to consider an approach to evangelism that relates well within that wider understanding of Christian mission, and it is one that is affirmed across a
broad spectrum. It is expressed very clearly by the Australian evangelist, Alan Walker, who called for “a new, saner, larger evangelism” that will “draw together the personal and the social elements of the gospel, seeking at the same time the conversion of men and women and the building of a society fit for people to live in” (1977, p.7). Walker exemplified that approach in practical terms as few others have done.

Without needing to debate this issue at length, it should be noted that Walker is by no means alone in the stance he adopted during his life. A clear implication of the type of approach adopted by Walker and many others is that evangelism involved releasing the power of the gospel into the total context of the human situation. Thus, it involves more than simply winning individuals to the Christian way of life. If it is to be effective, then the conditions under which people live and to which they react, often with bitterness and even violence, must also feel the redeeming touch of the Church’s life. In other words, it is not simply a matter of how many converts are needed in order to change the world; it is a question of how much the world must be changed in order to win converts.

From a Southern Baptist perspective in the United States, Findley Edge (1971) made a similar point about the relationship between the personal and social dimensions of the Church’s life and message, suggesting that both are essential elements of the one gospel, and we should give ourselves enthusiastically to both. He goes on to cite John Bright, who identifies that gospel as the gospel of the Kingdom of God, which of course includes a prophetic element.

Thus, when evangelism is released from the shackles of an excessive individualism and is placed in the more holistic context of the New Testament, it becomes clear that mission and evangelism cease to be discreet entities, and tend to merge into one another. Nevertheless, such an understanding is in keeping with some broader definitions of mission encompassed by
Habel’s “second mission”, and begins to relate to the emphasis Jesus placed on “the kingdom of God”. Shenk (1999) and Kirk (1999) both pick up the wider implications of such a model.

Shenk defines mission as “the effort to effect the passage over the boundary between faith in Jesus Christ and its absence” (1999, p.xi), and goes on to indicate that it is prior to the Church and speaks of movement and purpose. When read at a superficial level it could be taken anthropocentrically. He writes of “God’s redemptive mission” (1999, p.9), a notion that is often assumed to have a human focus. However, Shenk goes on to emphasise the centrality of the reign of God as a mystery we don’t fully grasp, and so a larger vision begins to emerge. For Shenk, the good news of the gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God, and “the animating centre of mission and of theology” (1999, p.10). Thus “mission is the means by which God’s reign is being realized in the world” (1999, p.15). He points to five different ways in which the Bible understands “world”, and one of those is as the object of God’s mission. It is at this point that eco-mission becomes not only possible, but also indeed inevitable.

Kirk also picks up the theme of the kingdom of God, and suggests that it is only in such a context that the missio Dei can be understood (1999, p.29). Thus for Kirk, mission becomes the defining reality of the Church; “the Church … intentionally bears witness to the meaning and relevance of the kingdom, while not itself being identical with that kingdom” (1999, p.36). The ecological implications of such a position are not lost on Kirk.

Mead (1996) takes this matter further, arguing that what is essential is God’s mission, not the mission of the Church. Although it is clear that Christians and the Church have a role to play, he asserts that the mission of God is greater than that of the Church in its organizations. Thus Mead (1996) argues that God is at work in major movements outside the Church, including the environmental movement. “Current Church efforts to establish task forces on environmental
issues may be worthwhile, but probably will have little impact. The task of the Church is to call people and send them into those places in which God’s mission is already being done” (1996, p.76). Edge has perhaps summed up the approach of the third mission rather well in suggesting that evangelism and social engagement are not in any sense competing options, but are equally important elements of the whole Christian gospel. “With joyful abandon we are to go the limit with both emphases… (1971, p.103).

The Third Mission: the Whole Earth

A vision of mission that is wider and deeper than a human-centred conversion approach becomes apparent in the affirmation that the Church is called to announce the reign of God, aiming for wholeness, inclusion, and service rather than domination. Thus, as the second mission included the concerns of the first mission, so the third mission of the Church for Habel moves beyond the earlier approaches to encompass the earth itself. “The task of this mission may be variously understood as saving, redeeming, restoring, liberating, or healing the earth (1998, p.33). The theme of reconciliation may also be relevant. It is not necessary here to debate the relative importance of the personal and social dimensions of mission; clearly both are important. Thus, eco-mission becomes part of a broader mission perspective.

Bevans and Schroeder make the point that while it is generally recognised that ecology, justice and peace belong together, “there has not been much reflection on how the preservation of the integrity of creation is linked to the church’s mission. There is no question, however, that it is” (2005, p.375). It may be argued that such a position is changing; in any event, in a look forward to Christian mission of the 21st century, Bosch was prepared to be quite specific: “A missiology of Western culture must include an ecological dimension. The time is long past that we can afford to exclude the environment from our missionary agenda” (1995, p.55).
But the process of moving forward with that agenda involves at least the identification of a number of negative images from past belief and practice. As Fowler (1995) and Habel (1998) both point out, this has much to do with some traditional theological expressions that in turn relate strongly to ancient dualisms, in which “spirit” is good and “matter” is evil. Thus, earth and heaven are compared and contrasted, to the definite disadvantage of the earth. Habel states that, as an example, in some Assemblies of God missions in the Kimberley region, there is strong opposition to land rights. “Your land rights are in heaven”, is the cry. “Seeking land rights on earth is a temptation of the devil” (1998, p.34). When contrasted with the notion of a prosperity gospel, rife in some circles, such an approach may be viewed as an attempt to keep indigenous people in a depressed state.

A more common negative image may be that “the earth is temporal, transient and destined for disposal” (Habel, 1998, p.35), and thus the state of the earth is considered to be of little consequence. When faith’s basic question is “where will you spend eternity?” the earth becomes no more than a staging post on the way to that more important goal. If, however, as this thesis asserts, it was God who created our earthly home and called it “good”, then a new dimension is added to our understanding and mission.

In chapter 3 I attempted to indicate something of the scope of the crisis facing humankind and the earth, and that does not need to be restated here. However, three points made by Bosch (1995), and which, arguably, are almost beyond dispute, may serve to summarise the situation. First, the exploitation of the natural world and the resulting ecological damage began in the West. Second, the earth cannot survive if all peoples were to live in the manner of the Western countries; in other words, our lifestyle is not sustainable. And third, ecological exploitation in the developing world may be linked to a global economic structure that is determined by the West. Thus, it is appropriate to refer, as I did in chapter 3, to “the suffering of creation”; in view
of the fact that “people and their environment are mutually interdependent” (Bosch, 1991, p.189), and that humans have an enormous capacity to heal or to harm the earth and each other, eco-mission emerges as one of the essential aspects of a holistic mission response in these days.

On a more positive note, it may be helpful to recall that in recent decades the Church has been encouraged to understand “salvation” as extending beyond the human level to include the creation itself. Thus, with Habel (1998), the gospel may be viewed as “good news” for the earth in three ways. These have largely been developed earlier in this thesis, but may be mentioned briefly. First, God has not abandoned the earth, and the divine covenant with the earth remains. Second, God suffers with the earth. Duchrow and Liedke (1987) also pick up this theme; for them, the suffering of God is seen in the cross of Jesus. Habel makes the connection with the earth strongly:

Do you want to see Christ suffering? … First look at the cross. Then look at hundreds of stations of the cross scattered around the earth. At every station God suffers. To name just a few: Maralinga in Australia, Ok Tedi in Papua New Guinea, the Amazon Rain Forest, the saline farmlands of Western Australia, the Gulag of Siberia, or the lost soil from the Darling Downs. God en-soiled in this desecrated earth suffers (1998, p.40).

But third, God’s suffering with humanity extended beyond the cross; “God was in Christ, reconciling the world (cosmos) to himself” (2nd Cor. 5:19a). Life therefore rises out of death, as “with this rainbow covenant (Gen. 9:10) God began the long way of salvation for the cosmos, which reached its decisive stage with the reconciliation of the world in the cross of Jesus” (1987, p.53). Thus, as Bevans and Schroeder put it, spiritual wholeness through the gospel “reflects the love of a God who expresses the divine identity in total solidarity with creation” (2005, p.377).
As a practical expression of such an approach, one of the more significant mission statements of recent times, in my view, has been the Anglican document known as *MISSIO 2000* (Johnson and Clark 2000). In line with authors cited above, the document asserts that while the Church is marked by the sins of humankind, it similarly reflects its solidarity with the suffering of the world, and it is at just this point that it is possible to see the emergence of an eco-mission theology. In the years 1984 to 1990 the Anglican Consultative Council formulated “Five Marks of Mission” – a list of quite specific basic principles of mission – which the Report (2000, pp.19-20) notes have won “wide acceptance” among Anglicans around the world:

- To proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.
- To teach, baptise, and nurture new believers.
- To respond to human need by loving service.
- To seek to transform the unjust structures of society.
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Thus, what was previously implicit was now made quite explicit, especially in the fourth and fifth points. The first three points might suggest a traditional approach to mission, and there is no problem with that. Likewise the transformation of unjust structures in society is not new. It is the final point that is of particular interest in that it clearly identifies the basis of a valid eco-mission. The Report includes a definition of mission adapted from a Statement of the Commission for Mission of the NCCA:

> Mission is the creating, reconciling and transforming action of God, flowing from the community of love found in the Trinity, made known to all humanity in the person of Jesus, and entrusted to the faithful action and witness of the people of God who, in the power of the Spirit, are a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the reign of God (2000, p.21).
The “Five Marks” were subsequently revisited for the sake of clarification and elaboration. Thus the various facets of the mission of the Church, which is the mission of Christ (2000, p.20), and includes eco-mission, may be seen as an expression of the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God. More than that, it is contextual, is expressed as celebration and thanksgiving, and as God-in-action as this mission goes out from God.

Mead (1996) asserts, correctly I believe, that the primary mission is God’s, and that the role of the Church is not to try to control mission but to celebrate it, to participate in it, and to bring a faith heritage to bear on issues such as the eco-crisis. But his downbeat assessment of Church based ecological groups would be hotly disputed by significant groups such as Au Sable in the USA or EcoCongregation in Britain. As an organization based in Britain, EcoCongregation is very active in encouraging local congregations to develop a significant environmental mission agenda, and the role of such organizations will be developed in some depth in a subsequent chapter.

But while the Church does not necessarily need to establish its own parallel structures to replicate what secular organizations are already doing effectively, it is nevertheless essential that a specifically Christian voice needs to be heard within that wider forum. Even if a secular humanist may not necessarily be convinced of that need, there are nevertheless still several reasons why that should be so. I contend that it is important for the Church itself, for the integrity of the gospel it proclaims, and for the environmental contribution it is able to make alongside other people of goodwill, even if some are not people of faith. Any perception in environmental circles or the wider community that Christianity has nothing positive to say in the eco-crisis, as implied, for example, in the criticism made by Lynn White (1967), needs to be challenged. Christians themselves need to be educated, and to that end some structural organization may be required to facilitate participation.
An Eco-Mission Theology

An eco-mission theology will rise out of a sound ecological theology, and, I am arguing, will be expressed in terms of a composite stewardship model. When applied in real and practical terms in the life of a Church, a number of elements operating at different levels would need to be included. The creation of appropriate policies and goals will of course be most important. However, realistically there is a prior step, and that involves education.

First, the existence of environmental policy statements at both an ecumenical level and at a National-State denominational level, reflecting a sound eco-mission theology, potentially provides a fundamental direction and a sense of cohesion in this matter. The operative word here is “potentially”, since it becomes clear that such statements do not always filter through to the local level. In 1992, for example, in the context of the Rio Earth Summit, World Council of Churches delegates and observers issued a letter to the Churches. It said in part, “we write with a sense of urgency. The earth is in peril…. We are at the precipice of self-destruction” (Granberg-Michaelson 1992, pp.70-73). In an earlier chapter I referred to a number of ecumenical declarations. In 1994 the Evangelical Environmental Network published “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” (Berry 2000, pp.17-22). This includes a number of affirmations and proposed responses, and is clearly intended to stimulate action. In 2005 the National Council of Churches in America issued a similar statement entitled God’s Earth is Sacred. At this level the degree of cross-confessional agreement is impressive. The National Council of Churches in Australia has also issued a policy document.

In denominational terms, reference has already been made to the document Green by Grace, prepared for the Anglican General Synod in 2004. But individual dioceses also have prepared position papers and established a committee structure intended to guide action in this area. At both a National Assembly and Synod level, the Uniting Church in Australia has also passed
environmental resolutions. There is an ever-present danger that such policy statements, generated with the best of intention, will have little effect. A much greater intentionality is imperative if their potential and purpose is to be realised.

Second, ownership of an ecological mission policy at a congregation or Parish level is also of critical importance. Without that, finely worded environmental statements tend to dissipate or simply gather dust in ecclesiastical archives – and that has happened often enough! Such an “ownership” of eco-mission may be applied at two levels. At a basic level, the congregation needs to affirm a general policy, a modus operandi that is built upon sustainable and Earth-friendly values. This may be regarded as a statement of fundamental principles upon which specific goals will be based. Second, it will clearly be important for the local church to establish clear and specific eco-mission goals at periodic intervals. In keeping with the development of a mission strategy in other areas, eco-mission goals will need to be what is sometimes captured by the acronym SMARTER; that is, they will need to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timed, evaluated, and revised. A local eco-mission group does not have to be large in order to be effective, but such a group needs to take the lead in identifying clear eco-mission goals, and thus in encouraging their congregation to become involved. Such an approach is used quite consistently in Britain, where congregations associated with the EcoCongregation organization have succeeded in achieving a wide range of environmental outcomes, with of course a greatly enhanced awareness on the part of congregation members.

Third, there are several crucial areas of contextuality (I made reference to this in a general sense earlier). As Bevans states, “There is no such thing as theology; there is only contextual theology” (2005, p.3). But in the more specific terms of eco-mission, context is again important, and several aspects may be identified here.
At a fundamental level, eco-mission must take account of the fact that Western society is overwhelmingly postmodern in orientation, and that brings with it both challenge and opportunity. Three aspects in particular offer a real point of connection between the eco-aware Church and the population at large. The first of these is the rapidly increasing environmental awareness and concern in the community, focussed for example in issues of climate change, global warming, or even the price of fuel. Until relatively recent times, many have believed that the Church has nothing meaningful to say on this subject. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has tended to be the perception of many in the environmental movement, and that has not been helped by the nature-denying strand of Christian thinking, the ambiguity to which Santmire (1985) referred, or White’s charge (1967) that Christianity and dominion theory is largely to blame for the crisis. Against such a background, an ecologically-aware Christian community could make a significant mission impact. Second, there is a re-sacralising of nature that often expresses itself in environmentalism or even a revived paganism. The sacred element in nature has been recovered, but at the cost of a distinction between God and nature. If the Church can recover the immanent side of a panentheistic God, and present such a message, there is a possibility of connecting with people at that level. The emphasis here is on the word “possibility”; there can be no guarantee that a secularist ecologist will be convinced, but the notion of immanence at least increases the possibility of people grasping a legitimate Christian position. A third aspect, rising out of the second, may be the importance of relationships for the postmodern generation. As Corney suggests, “Presenting the gospel in relational terms, and in the context of relationships, will be helpful” (1995, p.2). If people tend to see relationship as much more important than dogma, it may be that they will also see their relationships with other life and nature generally as important, and that this will therefore provide an important point of connection for Christian mission. This of course raises much wider issues, but it is nonetheless consistent with an eco-mission approach.
Postmodernism also presents a real problem. As Bosch states, “It is a permissive society, without norms, models, and traditions, an immediate society, without past and often without future… and thus many people live on the basis that ‘we’ll see about tomorrow if and when we get there’” (1995, p.3). In addition to that, as Bosch points out, there is a vast amount of new information and an increasing multiplicity of choices and challenges leading to a breakdown of established worldviews and a loss of certainty in many cases. But there are many aspects involved here, including ways in which harmful as well as helpful new information may be accessed, an array of new technologies and ways of communicating, the confusion between reality and virtual reality, not to mention substance abuse and resultant crime problems or HIV-AIDS. Bosch is not alone in perceiving the gap between vision and reality as something that presents a crisis in worldview for individuals and communities alike. It is not difficult to see how this worldview crisis might shape an approach to the future in ways that are almost impossible to predict, not least in terms of eco-mission.

But there is another quite different sense in which context is important. The ultimate context in which Christian eco-mission is set is of course global. It is increasingly apparent that the global biosphere knows nothing about national or even continental boundaries, and that whatever we do, or fail to do, has global implications. However, there is also a more immediate context in which eco-mission is exercised and to which it must relate. Thus, an eco-mission group in the Daintree area of North Queensland would have a rather different local agenda from a group in the Murray-Darling basin, or even the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. A locally identified agenda within an overall global framework will provide the best possibility of relevance and effectiveness.

Fourth, because of the long silence on this subject over the years, the church will need to consider programs of environmental and eco-theological education. Once again, this will need to
be conceived and applied at a number of levels. State and national jurisdictions will have a role to play. In a sense they will need to build on fundamental policy statements in specific ways to ensure that eco-theological or eco-mission issues remain an essential part of the church's awareness. This would be applied, for example, in the work of mission consultants, in public statements, group studies, and in other ways.

Theological educators have a particular role in this process as they prepare men and women for ordination. Unless the basic elements of eco-theology and eco-mission are included in the curriculum, an essentially anthropocentric approach to mission will continue to dominate. More than that, in keeping with other aspects of Christian mission, a constantly changing social context will require a measure of in-service training or continuing education for existing clergy if they are to be able to assist their congregations to become change agents in a matter that grows more acute on an almost daily basis. Finally, it need hardly be said that the process of eco-theological education needs to filter through to the level of the local congregation, to those who in fact become the “foot soldiers” of the churches’ eco-mission.

Fifth, an eco-theological awareness will need to extend to the worship life and spirituality of the church. In a sense it may almost be argued that this is already the case, at least in some cases. It is clear that there is a plethora of environmental worship resources available; a web search for “worship resources environment” inevitably results in a great many listings from various parts of the world! Even though some of the material may need to be adapted for the Australian context, busy Parish clergy have access to a great deal of fine material, thus enabling them to construct helpful liturgies. However, it is arguable that in many instances ecologically-based worship remains largely a fringe activity, and that worship reflecting an Earth-awareness is not common at the local level. Harvest festivals, loved so dearly by a former generation, and the
World Environment Sabbath each June, are examples of two annual occasions when such worship would be particularly appropriate.

Finally, eco-theological implications for Christian mission must resonate with a personal and corporate lifestyle that is consistent with those principles. A good deal of readily accessible material has been produced on this subject, loosely based on the maxim “reduce, reuse, recycle”. Thus, a whole range of practical measures are included, ranging from the use of solar hot water, the installation of a rainwater tank, a more eco-friendly motor vehicle, and a great deal more. At one level this may not seem very significant, but very importantly it represents a personal commitment, and if multiplied across the population it is no small matter. I will consider practical responses in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9.

**Conclusion**

It may be observed that for much of the Church’s history the theological consensus has been at best ambivalent about ecological matters, an ambiguity that was clearly identified by Paul Santmire (1985). However, as I identified in the previous chapter, in recent decades the balance has shifted, and an enormous volume of ecotheological literature has emerged. In the Church at large the problem has been that there has tended to be a disconnection between theory and praxis. A central argument of this thesis is that in terms of a practical theology, those two components need to be brought together.

A further observation may be that with some notable exceptions, a great deal of the theology of Christian mission has been human oriented. More than that, many of the more popular “how to” books and articles in recent decades have focussed largely on how to “win people” or grow larger churches. In many cases, the wider dimension that is identified is still human focussed, in terms of Habel’s “second mission” of the Church.
I have argued that biblical theology requires an ecotheology in terms of what I have described as “theistic biocentrism”. From that standpoint I have drawn out a number of implications or responses that are required, in terms of the “third mission” of the Church that encompasses the Earth as a whole. Thus I have argued for a composite model based on a revised notion of stewardship.

A theology of ecological mission will therefore have its roots in ecotheology, in the biblical mandate for mission rather than in pragmatism. In a primary sense this will be expressed globally, in general principles that will hold firm regardless of any particular circumstances. But a theology of eco-mission will ultimately need to be worked through and expressed in a myriad of different and particular situations by local congregations.
CHAPTER EIGHT
ECO MISSION IN BRITAIN

In the previous chapter I offered a theological analysis of eco-mission, based on a sound ecotheology. But for such a theology to have any meaning, it must find its expression in a genuine and practical way. It is at this point that Forrester’s “hermeneutic spiral” (chapter 2) becomes poignant: “engagement and understanding interact with one another to seek a strengthening of commitment, a reform of the Church, and a more just and caring social order, which will reflect the coming reign of God” (2000, p30). It would be difficult to find a more precise expression of the basic issue.

The central question may be posed in a variety of ways. At a very basic level it may be: How, precisely, does theology relate to the practical issues of eco-mission? At another level, that translates into a range of subsequent questions, which opens up an enormous field. For example, what is the role of context in eco-mission? What does an Australian eco-congregation look like? How does one balance local and global aspects of ecotheology and eco-mission?

I began with the understanding that there was very little eco-mission taking place in Australian congregations, and I would therefore need to look elsewhere to find some successful models of eco-mission and the essential practical data. That had several immediate implications, the first of which was a decision to look overseas. There are certainly a number of different places I could have chosen to visit, including some locations in the United States of America and in Europe. However, I decided to visit Britain, on the basis that there was known eco-mission in that country, with a variety of Churches that would describe themselves as “eco congregations”, together with a well-established supporting structure at a peak level. A second factor was that I had lived and worked in the UK for a year, and I considered that my relative familiarity with the
country and its Churches would enable research to be more productive. Having said that, overseas research was only ever intended for the sake of comparison; the main focus of my work was always going to be the Australian context.

My trip to England was undertaken in September-October of 2007. It began in London, and continued through Oxford, Bristol, Cheltenham, Coventry, Leicester, Derby, Nottingham, Skipton, Harrogate, and Leeds. One of my goals was to identify and to gain an understanding of what I am calling the peak Christian eco-mission groups, in terms of their role, their own self-understanding, and their interaction with each other as well as with the Church at a local level. Other goals related to the role of denominational hierarchies, ecumenical bodies, and of course the practice of eco-mission in local congregations. In the time available I was able to meet with quite a wide range of people, from denominational and peak group leaders to local clergy and eco group members, and thus I was able to gain a significant understanding of both the motivation and practice of eco-mission in its context.

Clearly, as Bevans (2005) and others have pointed out, context is a vital theological dimension; and the British context is in many respects quite different from its Australian counterpart. This is a very obvious point that does not need to be laboured here, but one could cite some of the more obvious examples. At a basic level, Britain has a small land mass, with a relatively large population, which means that communities are generally more compact, and the capacity to maintain support services is thereby enhanced. The climate is also obviously very different from Australia, which means that heating in winter becomes a substantial issue. In terms of eco-mission possibilities, there are several less obvious factors. Recycling is conducted in a rather different way to Australia, and it may seem that it becomes a more complex operation in Britain. Many British churches also have quite extensive grounds, including community cemeteries that must be maintained by the Church. When that fact is taken into account alongside other factors,
it becomes clear that the praxis of eco-mission must be worked out in a particular context, and cannot simply be transferred from one situation to another.

**Peak Organisations in Britain**

At least some of the more prominent peak groups may quickly be identified by reference to the Environmental Issues Network, or EIN. As Rathbone (2007) indicates, this was formed in 1999 by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland as a result of work done by the Arthur Rank organisation, and brings together representatives of various groups and Churches working for the environment.

The membership of the EIN includes such groups as A Rocha, Eco-Congregation, the John Ray Initiative (JRI), Christian Ecology Link, Operation Noah, the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, the Salvation Army, Tear Fund, Christian Aid, and representatives of other Churches and groups. Its main purpose is to share information and to provide coordination so as to try to prevent overlap. Such a plethora of groups invariably raises a number of questions. These are identified and discussed below.

**Are there too many groups?**

First, are there too many peak groups, resulting in excessive overlap? Such a question is more complex than it seems; the possibility is that it cannot be definitively answered, and it certainly cannot be done without reference to context. I have not found a great deal of evidence to suggest that it is perceived to be a problem in the UK, although that in itself does not mean that a problem does not exist, and it does not address the possible Australian context. The issue at stake is that if there are too many peak groups in Britain, it is important that the same mistake should not be repeated here.
In attempting an answer, I will be referring only to several of the more prominent groups, since space precludes the inclusion of all groups in the analysis. EcoCongregation’s Rathbone (2007) reflected that “each organisation has a particular niche”, while A Rocha’s Bookless (2007) stated his hypothesis as “there is a sense of market economics about it, and with any new or growth area” such as environment in Christian circles, “you get all sorts of groups starting up”, although not all will survive. Bookless added that “if we are wasting resources” or “wasting our time competing with each other rather than getting change where it’s needed, then that would worry me.” For him, the key is that the groups are talking and working together in a complementary fashion.

While there may be an element of self-interest or rationalisation in such responses, to some extent a defence of the British peak groups may nevertheless be justified, in that they tend to reflect different bases and goals. The JRI, for example, has its roots in the Evangelical stream of Christianity. It was founded in 1997 by a group of eminent like-minded scientists, including Sir John Houghton, a former head of the IPCC and a committed Baptist, and had the basic aim of bringing together scientific and Christian understandings of the environment, in terms of the promotion of sustainable development and environmental stewardship. According to JRI’s basic brochure, “They saw two needs: to wake up people to the facts, and to show that technology is only part of the solution. The problem, at heart, is religious, a matter of how we choose to live”. Thus, “JRI was founded to promote sound theology and practical theology as the basis for urgent action.” It is clear, however, that while some of JRI’s courses touch a wider range of people, its prime area of influence is at an elite level, extending even to the highest levels of industry, and indirectly even to government.

A Rocha began in the UK in 2001. The title “A Rocha” means “a rock” in the Portuguese language, and that reflects its origin as a Christian practical project-based conservation group in
Portugal. But like JRI, with which it has an increasingly close relationship, A Rocha also comes out of an Evangelical background. While it is still essentially project-based, its work in the UK is evolving, and it sets out to provide a range of support systems for use in eco-mission at a congregational level.

A third significant organisation is EcoCongregation, which rose out of the Environmental Issues Network and reports to it. Pickering, as one of the founders of EcoCongregation, states that their aim was that the organisation should be “mainstream”; “it had to appeal to every Church, every theology ….. so you won’t find anything incredibly radical in EcoCongregation, and that was deliberate” (2007). However, it is worth noting that while it appears as an independent group offering significant basic resources for congregations, in fact it is now under the A Rocha umbrella.

There are many other groups and programs, such as Christian Ecology Link (CEL), an ecumenical group dating back to 1981, and which as Pickering states, “was more on a leading edge” (2007). Thus, it is more broadly based than JRI or A Rocha, and operates more at an individual level in seeking to care for creation. Operation Noah relates specifically to issues of climate change; this group has been a project of CEL, but now in 2007 it is in the process of separating itself. The reason for this is that it needs to be able to campaign more openly, to “make more noise” about climate issues in the political arena. There is a question about how the churches will relate to this development; they may join now or later, but the hope is that they will join at the outset and help to shape what emerges. Thus it is expected that the structure will include representatives of major denominations. It is intended to be broadly-based and multi-denominational, and therefore to be a Church-based campaigning organisation. To that list must be added programs such as the Church of England’s “Shrinking the Footprint” or Christian Aid’s “Cut the Carbon”.
The primary purpose of these groups is often very similar, namely to support and encourage eco-mission within the Church at large, and in some cases to engage the wider community with the need for change in the way we regard the natural environment. At that level, in the provision of resources for congregations, there is clearly some overlap, and therefore a case to answer. Such a perception is compounded when the role of some denominations is included. One academic referred to what he described as “a major overlap”; in lauding the Eco-Congregation program, he asserted off the record that “none of the denominations have really got behind it”, and in some cases they have set up other schemes fulfilling a similar function. “They (the Church of England) would have been better to get in behind Eco-Congregation and putting money into that rather than setting up their own”.

But when the peak groups are considered in closer detail in terms of their particular goals and fields of operation, a number of differences emerge. Some groups are difficult to categorise, but broadly they can be divided into four main groupings. First, JRI probably stands alone in that it serves a particular function at an elite academic level, although it touches a wider audience through its conferences. Second, there are groups that relate to congregations, most notably EcoCongregation, but also A Rocha, the “Church Times” Green Church Award, and the Conservation Foundation. Third, there are groups that tend to operate at a more individual or program level, such as Christian Ecology Link, Operation Noah, or Shrinking the Footprint. Fourth, there are Aid groups such as Christian Aid or the Tear Fund, with a significant ecological edge to their work.

A number of crucial questions emerge from an analysis of the peak groups, and each question is applicable in its original British context. The fact remains, however, that the potential or actual eco-congregation in Britain has a range of support systems and resources readily available to it. In stark contrast with that, the equivalent Australian congregation is largely on its own, so that it
may be argued, legitimately I believe, that the Australian Church needs a peak group support system of some kind. It is as one attempts to define such an outcome within an Australian context that the questions asked of peak groups in Britain come into a much sharper focus.

**Confessional issues**

I have argued that the peak groups may be divided into possibly four categories according to their perceived role. But several quite different groupings emerge when they are considered in terms of their confessional basis. Thus, a second question emerges out of the first, and relates to the extent to which the confessional basis of some of the peak groups may be an advantage or a disadvantage.

As I have previously noted, two of the more significant peak groups, JRI and A Rocha, are clearly at the Evangelical end of the spectrum. The Tear Fund would also belong in that area. EcoCongregation is in a grey area, in that while it is attached to A Rocha, its theological emphasis is a mainstream one more in keeping with other groups such as CEL, Operation Noah, and Christian Aid.

It would be easy to assert that this is not a problem, in that there is no clear evidence to suggest that British Christians are troubled by such the confessional alignment of some groups. Conway, for example, as a leader in an Anglo-Catholic congregation, was not troubled by the Evangelical emphasis of JRI and A Rocha, stating that “it just proves that the recognition of God the Creator and his intentions of love in creation and for creation are actually very central to Christian belief…” (2007). However, further probing of the issue is essential.

When considered at a broad level there is no obvious difficulty, in that the materials and issues covered are very basic and relate specifically to the natural environment. For example, A
Rocha’s sub-text is “Caring for God’s World Together”; its Spring 2007 magazine features the challenge of climate change, while leaflets ask “Are you concerned about God’s world?” JRI similarly deals with the major scientific elements of the environment, and while relating that to faith and theology, it does not do so in a noticeably partisan way. In the broad mainstream of ecotheology, once the more extreme positions such as deep ecology are excluded, there is an enormous area of consensus, even if there are some minor differences of emphasis or expression. Further, there is no clear evidence of a confessional exclusivism at the point of contact with churches. There certainly could be no question about the quality of the work produced by JRI or A Rocha, but the fact remains that they have their origins and roots in Evangelicalism. Moreover, as I have stated, EcoCongregation is now also part of the A Rocha network.

However, the dilemma is highlighted in Bookless’ observation that while A Rocha “has never been a conservative Evangelical organisation”, and has never said “we won’t work with you unless you sign on the dotted line”, nevertheless “it has got a dotted line that it asks its trustees and its senior staff to sign up to” (2007). It is good that no one is turned away on the basis of their beliefs, but as Bookless clearly indicates, there is a dotted line. He has stated that they try not to make it an exclusivist basis, and he believes it to be biblical. On the positive side, as Reed notes, “A Rocha has a high degree of credibility in the Evangelical world, and the Evangelicals have not necessarily been early adopters as far as the environment is concerned” (2007).

The problem for me then becomes rather personal, in that having read the confessional basis I could not put my name to it with any integrity. Put another way, given that I consider myself to be in the mainstream of theology, while a person with theological views like mine would be able to participate in the work of A Rocha, they would be excluded from taking a central role. The same would apply in the case of JRI; one person observed that some speakers at JRI conferences
tried to push a strong Evangelical confessional approach. The problem is compounded by the fact that JRI and A Rocha are without doubt two of the most significant groups in Britain.

I contend therefore that this sets up a real dilemma, not only for the “liberal” or “progressive” Christian, but also for the integrity of the eco-mission program in general at a peak level. If the unique role of the various peak groups is to be regarded as valid, then some people, albeit a minority, are left with three choices. First, they could set up their own parallel organisation with a different confessional basis. Second, they could content themselves with a secondary role in the existing Evangelical groups, or third, they could limit themselves to involvement in the more broadly-based groups like CEL or Operation Noah. None of those options seem entirely satisfactory, in that while adherents of different theological emphases do not always find it easy to work together, in this case, as I have argued, in most respects there is a broad consensus within the ecotheological mainstream. Further, the issues involved are invariably practical in nature.

Other Questions

There are other questions that emerge; one that must at least be identified at this stage relates to the effectiveness of peak groups in “selling” eco-mission to British congregations. As Hodson (2007) noted, the fact is that eco congregations are a small minority of the whole. There are of course multiple reasons why it is not easy to encourage congregations to take the first step, but it raises the possibility that a greater awareness of perceived blocks could lead to other potentially more effective strategies.

The Role of Denominational Hierarchies

Although I have previously referred to some aspects of the role of Christian denominations, most notably the Church of England, it is necessary for me to add some comments by way of
summary. In the light of the above, it is reasonable to suggest that the Church’s role has been mixed. Some probably valid criticism has indicated that the Church has tended to act on its own rather than support existing cross-denominational programs. On the other hand, there are some significant initiatives, some of which are unambiguously positive, and that may be illustrated in a number of ways.

First, the Church of England is able to boast that it now has an Environmental Advisor in every Diocese in England, and some of them are highly qualified in that field; and if, as appears to be the case, local congregations do not always feel supported by the denomination, it should be pointed out that the Advisors are invariably operating on a very part time basis.

Second, many Dioceses in England have held an educational eco day as part of the denomination’s environmental effort. I had the opportunity to attend one such event for the Kensington Diocesan area in London; several hundred people were in attendance for the day, many of them clergy, and the line-up of speakers was very good. It would have provided plenty of “food for thought” for those who had previously not had much exposure to eco-theological and mission issues. Ironically, however, tea and coffee was served in disposable polystyrene cups!

Third, “Shrinking the Footprint” is another significant program of the Church of England. The stated aim of this program’s first challenge is “to make a difference in the future through a growing series of strategic initiatives and partnerships which will change Church activities, structures, and processes, producing sustainable reductions in the Church of England’s carbon emissions to 40% of current levels by 2050 – ‘the 40% Church’.” (www.shrinkingthefootprint.cofe.anglican.org) Moreover, the Shrinking the Footprint Path sets out some simple steps to make a difference.
A fourth area is the development of an environmental policy, as formulated, for example, by the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds. This affirms its commitment to the 5th Mark of the Mission of the Church”, to which I referred in chapter 7, and which calls the Church “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.” The Policy itself is comprehensive, and covers awareness, energy, water, waste, travel, materials and resources, and buildings and the natural environment. It goes on to address implementation, monitoring, and review, and includes a summary of useful resources.

Other denominations in Britain do not seem to be as well organised. The Roman Catholic Church does not appear to have any significant eco-mission infrastructure in place, although some leading individuals are working to change that. The Methodist Church is of course a much smaller denomination, but is nevertheless relatively active environmentally. It claims that in the year 2000 it became the first denomination to produce an Environmental Policy, a document that covered theology briefly and practical implications more extensively. As the Church’s principal environmental advocate, Hucklesby also indicated that the Methodist Church was the first to switch its headquarters to green electricity, and together with the United Reformed Church was the primary source of funding for EcoCongregation.

There is a danger though that at a hierarchical level, organisational arrangements could lead to a separation of eco-mission and what may be considered more “mainstream” mission, in that the environment comes under the portfolio of the International Affairs Consultant, an arrangement that is not unlike the Uniting Church in Australia. Hucklesby stated that “the issue of the environment and climate change crosses the remits of at least 4 coordinating secretaries, so it’s not just a question of the mission department or social affairs” (2000, p.3). Barrett also defended the arrangement with the assertion that at a regional or local level “people pay lip service to how they structure the (Methodist) Conference, but elsewhere they just get on with it” (2007, p.4);
that may have some credibility, but my concern about the separation of eco-mission and mission remains. Theologically they belong together as an expression of the divine charter for God’s people, and practically a separation runs a very great risk of a downgrading of ecological mission to a secondary role at best.

Eco Mission Programs in British Churches

In its approach to the Eco Award system, EcoCongregation has adopted a three-fold approach to assessment, namely worship, work, and witness. In broad terms at least, with the addition of a special section for children, that division appears to be a reasonable basis for this summary of the major themes of eco-mission in British congregations. However, as I will indicate, those categories are not entirely discreet, and some overlap occurs in the data.

Given that the British data is primarily for comparative purposes, my aim is to draw out the major themes and items of particular interest, so that the emphases will be clear, and any strengths and weaknesses can be revealed. Some possible implications for the Australian Church may also be drawn. As I indicated above, my visit to Britain took place in September-October 2007, and included contact with 12 congregations. These varied in size from approximately 35 worshippers to about 150 per week, and thus it represented no more than a representative sample of British congregations. It did not take into account any eco-mission activity in Scotland, Wales, or Ireland, except that in addition to the congregations I visited, I have had access to a summary of the eco activities of many other congregations. It is important to note, however, that congregations with an eco-mission agenda still represent a small minority of British Churches, even if that situation may be improving gradually.
General Issues

Before considering eco-mission themes in more detail, there are three issues of a general nature that should be noted. These relate to motivation, and the respective roles of local “Green Teams” and of the clergy, although it may become apparent that these themes are inter-related.

The motivation for commencing an eco-mission program in a congregation almost invariably has its genesis in the passion of a particular individual. In some cases that person was a member of the clergy. In the case of Holy Trinity Skipton, the clear perception is that it was the regional Bishop whose drive and commitment led to the formation of a group; speaking of eco-activity in the Diocese, the group affirmed that “he drives it, yes” (2007, p.4). Holy Trinity at Cleeve traces the beginning to the Vicar, who was impressed by a book she read at the age of 13. In acknowledging that the initiative rose out of her own history, the Vicar Cathy said she knew there were several other people in the congregation “who were equally passionate about the environment, so I knew it wasn’t just going to be ‘a Vicar thing’” (2007, p2). Somewhat similar stories could be told of Derby and Leicester.

The Rector of the Church of the Ascension at Ealing traced the point of beginning to Gillian Harrison, a member of the congregation, who “was very strong on saying we need to pick up this environment agenda and do something with it”. He continued, “I had by a different route come to a conviction that this also was important, so it was a mixing of minds I suppose at the right point…(2007, p.1). The story of Bethesda Methodist in Cheltenham was different again. The Minister, Mark Barrett, indicated that “one of the things that brought it (the environmental issue) to bear in our own Church was the action in China to dam up the rivers and alter the course of major rivers for industrialisation purposes” (2007, p. 1). This led to the thought that humans could change, perhaps adversely, what God had created.
The essential point here is that in terms of making a start in eco-mission, the power and passion of one is of great importance. The evidence points to the conclusion that in many cases, all it takes is for one person, or at most a very small core of people, to have the vision and drive to say “this is important, and we should do this.”

Once an eco-mission agenda has been established, a small “green team” almost invariably becomes the “nerve centre”, motivator, and enabler of eco-mission in the congregation. The EcoCongregation organisation, with which all the congregations I visited are associated, requires the appointment of someone they call the “Green Apostle”, and that person obviously becomes the local group convenor; some of those people are particularly gifted and active beyond the local congregation as well. I had the opportunity to meet with a number of those groups. Some were small but effective, such as at Skipton; others were larger, such as at St Chad’s in Leeds or St Leonard’s in Nottingham. Even at St Leonard’s, where I met with perhaps 18 interested people, the driving force may still be traced to a small inner core group.

Rightly or wrongly, the role of the clergy is also perceived to be important. In some cases, such as the smaller congregation at Derby, the role of the Rector, Canon Donald Macdonald, and his wife, as the key drivers or enablers of the eco-mission is significant. This is strengthened by Macdonald’s Diocesan role. Similarly in the Church at Ealing, the combination of a strong lay leader and a committed clergyperson is obviously powerful and effective. In many of the effective eco-congregations though, the model is one of an active lay group working with the full encouragement and support of the clergy, but it is not clergy-driven. Skipton is a good example of that; a group member said, “… we wouldn’t have set up the group here if Adrian (the Rector) hadn’t been supportive” (2007, p.4). St Leonard’s in Nottingham is another example of effective lay-clergy cooperation; I personally attended an environmentally-focussed
worship service at St Leonard’s, in which the Rector emphatically declared, “We are an eco-congregation”.

In other cases, however, such as at Harrogate or Leeds, where eco-mission does not necessarily have the full and active support of the clergyperson, the work of the core group is just that much harder, and probably less effective than it might be. The mission of a congregation does not have to be clergy-driven, but the active support and appropriate leadership of the clergy is clearly a real bonus and a strong encouragement for the congregation as a whole to become involved in the eco-mission agenda. This is reflected both in perceptions of morale and the degree of congregational support.

**Worship**

In addition to a variety of adult study programs, something of a pattern appears to be developing across many congregations, involving the development of 4 or 5 special services each year, as well as some references in the liturgy on other occasions. Simon Reed at Ealing argued a case for eco-worship to be related to the seasons of the year, but others focussed more on special events or Sundays, such as Harvest Festival, Rogation, or World Environment Day. Many congregations reported regular preaching on appropriate eco themes, while other initiatives include approaches to Celtic spirituality and Prayer Walks.

The Bramford Road Methodist Church reported an innovative approach to worship in the following terms:

*Church members in Ipswich were shocked when they arrived for worship. It was as if a waste bin had been emptied and its contents strewn around the church. Inspired by the large Cornish attraction, the all-age service had the theme of ‘The Eden Project’. During the service, the world was described as the garden of God and we have been placed in the garden to look after*
it. To the relief of worried worshippers, our young people then tidied up the church and collected all the rubbish. Of course, the rubbish was not collected to be thrown away, but bagged for recycling.

A practical approach to worship was also adopted by Wanstead URC with a “worship in wellies” service. People were invited to come to worship in their best gardening attire; after the service and a picnic lunch they set to work on cleaning up the Church grounds. Many congregations reported such activities as a “Walk to Church” Sunday, the provision of eco resources, a display on water use, and information on recycling.

**Children**

In some ways and in some congregations in particular, this is an area of strength. St Leonards Nottingham is one example of some quite extensive and creative children’s work. Beyond the obvious lessons with an environmental theme, some of the teaching is taken outdoors in summer. The 4 to 6 year-olds had a “sad earth, happy earth” session, and even at that age were introduced to trade justice and poverty issues. Older children were involved in a “living water” session and a “helping hands map of Africa”, while the 11 to 16 years age group worked on a drama on care of creation, were involved in “creation” services, and prepared a youth service with drama on the life of St Francis.

Some of the teaching of course involved activity, such as the use of water aid materials, the making of posters, gardens, involvement in recycling, the selling of Fairtrade products, and using recycled materials. St John’s at Swansea had a creative Noah’s Ark project, while Leicester Methodists took their young people to the well-equipped community-based Environment Education Centre. St Mary the Virgin Church in Durham enabled the children to build a dolls house size eco-house from cardboard; this formed part of a display, “and was
hailed as a model of good practice”. Some fun approaches to learning about the environment have also been developed; for example, Northallerton United Reformed Church used Operation Noah in that way, while Torphichen Church in Scotland has developed a fun approach to learning with eco-bingo and an environmental version of snakes and ladders. In addition, they stated “We visit Edinburgh Zoo annually to learn about breeding programs for endangered species and we now sponsor the Asiatic lions. We made our own t-shirts with the words ‘Going, Going, Gone’ depicting two endangered species on the front (‘Going’) and an extinct one on the back (‘Gone’), which apparently made quite an impression at the Zoo.

**Work**

I need to preface this section on the work category with two brief observations. First, the material that is offered by congregations as example of eco-mission includes an amount of what I would regard as “padding”, for which the primary motivation is most likely to be an anxiety to try to make the list of eco-mission activity as impressive as possible. During my visit to Britain I recorded the following observation, which I still believe is relevant: “It should be noted that some elements listed in the EcoCongregation material, while good in themselves, are not really relevant to an eco-mission strategy; e.g., provision of disabled toilets and baby-changing facilities, the blessing of seats and notice boards, or keeping hedges trimmed.” Similarly, the provision of a hearing loop, large print literature, and wheelchair access is commendable, but hardly qualifies as eco-mission. Second, to a large extent the material is focussed on a relatively small range of issues, especially recycling and property.

Recycling, which tends to be more complex in Britain than in many parts of Australia, presents as one of the major recurring themes of British eco-mission. Churches commonly have recycling points on the premises, and tend to use it as a teaching point as well.
The second major category centres on buildings and property, and has at least four dimensions. Energy features as an issue for many congregations, usually in terms of monitoring its use, turning off unnecessary lights, installing low energy bulbs, and having an efficient heating system. In some cases that extended to the use of green power, such as Ecotricity, or even the consideration of installing solar PV cells. Bethesda Methodist is one example of a Church that is considering installing solar panels, which of course is a big expense, especially with a grade 2 listed building. What that means, in brief, is that there are many government-imposed restrictions involved, and it is therefore quite difficult to make changes that in any way alter the appearance of the building.

The Church grounds also tend to feature prominently in the eco-mission list, with many congregations committing to cleaning up their graveyard in particular. It need hardly be said that in this regard there is a major difference between Britain and Australia! This work extends to the provision of wildlife nesting boxes and the making of compost; but it is worth pausing on this issue before moving on. One quite extensive churchyard area that is still a work in progress is at St Chad’s Church in Leeds. Dalton, as leader of the Green Team, said “We started off really getting involved with the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, and their ‘living churchyard’. But as soon as we thought that we could get involved in that, we started looking at EcoCongregation as a whole” (2007, p.2)

One particularly prominent example of a Church graveyard project is at Saints Mary and John Church at Oxford; the driving force behind this project, which was even featured on the BBC, is Ruth Conway. The grounds are approximately one hectare in size, and as Ruth Conway explained, had become not just a jungle, but “a jungle that was being used for people to hide away, and take drugs and so on” (2007, p.1). The goal, which has largely been accomplished, was to transform a forbidding place of criminal activity into “a welcoming, open, quiet green
place” (2007, p.1). Its easily accessible location is also an advantage. Such a major undertaking gained the cooperation of local community residents, the Council, and Police. More than that, Conway’s motivation was not merely to clean up a dangerous area, but it was primarily “to be a way of alerting the congregation to their whole relationship with nature, and with God’s good intentions” (2007, p.1). This was therefore one of the beginning points for eco-mission in the congregation, and it had implications for worship, spirituality, and outreach to the community.

A variation on the churchyard theme is the example of St Mary the Virgin Church at Nunthorpe, which transformed a “scruffy verge” into a “community wildlife haven”. In her report of the project, Jennie Adams brings together a number of significant and inter-related factors:

*The transformation from the scruffy grass verge, which was littered with fast food packaging and dog mess, to a wildlife garden was miraculous. It all started at a meeting of the green group (the parish ecology group) where we were organising a litter pick for the car park and verge. Feeling that this was not the answer I suggested that we should make a long-term change to the car park as it was an eyesore and also repellent to wildlife.*

*To combat the problems we decided to plant a garden to encourage birds and insects. A parishioner who was taking a garden design course drew up a fantastic plan and a collection of people armed with spades gathered to put the plan into action by initially removing the litter and turf. The project escalated as, due to its content, we had to remove the top layer of soil. Many supported the project with time, plants and money, including Christian Ecology Link who provided a small grant. The planting took two days, aided for one day by pupils from Nunthorpe Primary School. Once the garden was finished signs were made asking people not to walk across it or let their dog foul it.*
The garden is a tremendous success; not only has it provided a valuable habitat for wildlife but has brought the community together and spread the message that God’s environment is important for a younger generation.

Eco-mission initiatives also focussed on water, mainly in terms of small and basic items such as monitoring its use, ensuring that leaking taps were fixed, and installing dual flush toilets. Several congregations reported that they used building materials from sustainable forests. Another prominent category related to the purchase of eco-friendly cleaning products, recycled pater, and the like.

Fairtrade or Traidcraft featured quite prominently in congregations, even among some with no specific eco-mission agenda. An example of the latter is the Chapel Street Methodist Church in Penzance. In some cases, such as the Christchurch Baptist-Methodist Church in Leicester, the Fairtrade stall is not only very prominently placed in the building, but also could be deemed to be successful in two ways. First, in terms of turnover, Alan Stett, a local lay leader, indicated that over the past 16 years of the program’s operation, Fairtrade had grossed £100,000, while it now exceeds £10,000 per year. It should be said that this is one of the larger examples of its kind. One further qualification is that Fairtrade goods also feature quite prominently in many local supermarkets in Britain. Second, and importantly, such a program in a local congregation serves as a constant educational tool. Bethesda Methodist at Cheltenham is a further example of this. Every Sunday there is a prominent Traidgreen stall at the Church, so that this becomes a constant reminder of the inter-related issues involved, as well as providing the opportunity for people to buy a range of goods consistent with the eco approach. Light bulbs are also sold.

A more fundamental eco-mission program is being undertaken by the Stirling Methodist Church. This congregation is close to the heart of a campaign to make the Riverside area of Stirling the first carbon neutral community in Scotland. The area has a population of
approximately 1,500 people, but they plan to attack climate change by lowering their carbon footprint. A Carbon Footprint Survey is being issued with the assistance of Strathclyde University, with the aim of measuring average carbon emissions and proposing measures for reducing them. The initiative now has widespread support in the community, but it began as an initiative of Church members who were committed to being an “eco congregation”. Their hope is that others will be encouraged to take up the initiative.

**Witness**

“Witness” in this section refers to a congregation’s environmental impact on the community both within and beyond its own life. As I have noted previously, there is a considerable amount of overlap between this category and the one designated as “work”. More than that, many of the items listed here are relatively minor in nature, although that observation is not intended to denigrate them or to minimise their collective importance. And again, the examples I will cite are illustrative rather than comprehensive.

Media publicity is one area; Ss Mary and John at Oxford have had articles in the local press, while Evesham Methodist had “good coverage in the local press and in national Christian media” after their Eco Award. Eco congregations also frequently report the regular publication of ecologically relevant material in their magazines. One pertinent example is St Chad’s at Leeds. In reporting that environmental material is regularly included in the Parish paper, Dalton indicated that the magazine frequently finds its way into the community. She stated, “A lot of people read it who don’t go to Church. It has been found in the local laundrette, and read by Asians who are Muslims. I fairly frequently get phone calls from people wanting to know how they can reuse something rather than just landfill it, so I consider that almost as outreach work” (2007, p.2).
Contact with the wider community takes a number of forms. For example, Holy Trinity Cleeve works together with the local school to operate a successful “walking bus” to the school. Holy Trinity Skipton has prepared a “Green Pages” directory of local businesses that support environmentally friendly practice; this resource, which includes paid advertising, is made available in the community, and is useful in highlighting both the importance of the eco theme, and the role of the Church in that matter. Lutterworth Methodist reported an Eco Fair, which included stalls and information, and involved the District Council, a library service, and local traders. Outside groups using Church facilities are drawn into the eco circle in several ways, for example through recycling as at Evesham, or through an extension of the Fairtrade stall in the case of Endcliffe Methodist Church. Effective use has also been made of Church Notice boards.

St John the Evangelist Church at Hurst Green adopted a more direct educational approach through a “Church and Community Environment Day” aimed at raising awareness in and beyond the local Church community. With the help of a Green Partnership Award, the local Energy Efficiency Advice Centre and the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, the Church arranged speakers on energy efficiency, green funerals, greening the Church, spiritual responsibility in today’s world, and wildlife conservation in churchyards. Such an exercise, within its unique context, is significant as a model in several ways. It establishes a helpful eco-partnership between the Church and local groups, declares that the Church has a relevant eco agenda, and it educated both the Church and the wider community. It is not surprising that feedback included comments such as “this initiative has provided inspiration for the church and community – it has helped me to gather information to take back to my work at school.”

**Analysis of Themes**

I have summarised what I found to be the main eco-mission themes of a sample of British congregations; it now becomes possible to attempt a preliminary analysis of that material. An
observation I recorded at the time of my visit was that “I have a strong impression early on that there are levels of eco activity, and much of what I am seeing is of a fairly low grade.” That may not be completely fair, but what I meant by that was that while most of the programs effectively touched some of the easier and more accessible aspects of an undoubtedly large complex of inter-related issues, many appeared to be aimed primarily at improving the local community, albeit while leaning into a type of creation spirituality.

Thus, once items of “padding” are set aside, some basic themes emerge. The program material that has been available to me can, I believe, be grouped in the following manner: Worship and spirituality, Education, Local issues (such as recycling and cleaning up Churchyards), and Social Justice Issues. There are some notable examples of very effective worship and learning activity, although in many other situations more could probably be done, as would be the case in most mission activity. Local activity such as recycling is commonplace, while Churchyard or Church cemetery maintenance is also relatively common. There is a considerable amount of activity at the level of Fairtrade or Traidcraft, with its focus on social justice, both in local Churches and in the broader community as well, and that is often well done, in the sense that the stalls are often significant in size, prominently placed, well-stocked, and include an educational component. There is also some focus on engagement with the community, including eco groups. I found few examples of eco-mission goals that have been spelled out as a kind of mission statement; one notable exception was Holy Trinity Skipton.

My criticism is not that congregations are engaged in local eco-mission activity, and certainly not that they are involved with their communities; that in itself is good, and indeed such an emphasis may to some extent be inevitable. Rather, my concern is that global issues such as climate change, with all its associated issues and implications, do not appear to feature prominently. However, that is not to say that they are absent, and in any event this issue
becomes a constant challenge. A holistic approach to eco-mission will, I believe, include elements of all the sectors – worship and education, local community issues, and global issues. Put another way, the planet will not be saved by changing light bulbs, recycling, and cleaning up the Church grounds; but there is hope when such “near edge” items become the means by which people begin to engage more deeply with the core environmental issues.

At this point it may be appropriate to refer to some broader community responses in which Christian people also frequently participate. Several samples may be cited. In October 2007, for example, the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management, along with some commercial businesses, held a conference in London on the theme of “The Global Environment”. Many aspects of the issue were covered, including faith and culture, arts and the environment, the Olympic Games, urbanisation, communication, the transition to a low carbon economy, flood risk management and a sustainable water supply. I would argue that this is a good example of a diverse group taking hold of everyday issues of concern, but relating them to the global situation. The Institute’s May 2007 magazine moves even more to the global end of the spectrum, with articles on the Antarctic, rising sea levels, or “getting tooled-up for climate change”; but it is this capacity to identify issues that are, or should be, a concern to ordinary people, and then moving them forward in their awareness of those issues through appropriate information, that is crucial here.

Other examples could be cited from the area of local government. The Nottingham and Derbyshire Local Authority, for example, has a brochure called “Everybody’s pledging to make a difference”, which relates to little things that could make a big difference in tackling climate change. But my key point here is that in beginning to respond in small ways and local issues where we can, it is nevertheless important to relate those issues to the global perspective. “Act locally” and “think globally” are two sides of the one coin.
EcoCongregation and Eco Awards

I referred earlier to the peak organisation EcoCongregation”, and it is necessary now to acknowledge its very important role in encouraging eco-mission at a local level, both through the resources it provides and the incentive offered by the Eco Award. Although it now operates with only one part time staff person in England, its impact is rather greater than such a statistic would suggest. When the group was first formed, funding was available for a fulltime position; that person was the Rev Dr David Pickering, who prior to ordination had gained a PhD in environmental chemistry. Pickering set up the system of eco awards, and prepared a comprehensive resource base of 12 modules, both of which are still in operation. The resources began with a “Church Check Up”, but covered a wide range of relevant material and ideas to which congregations could refer.

What that meant was that a congregation intent on setting out to do eco-mission was not alone. Jane, as a member of the St Leonard’s Nottingham group, picked up that point in her observation that “you can email Jo (Rathbone) and ask questions or if there’s something you’re struggling with you can ask advice; you can ask about material or books to tap into, so I think it is really useful” (2007, p.10). There was a resource, a person to contact, and a clear challenge.

I found that congregations were generally appreciative of this facility and resource. When asked if EcoCongregation was important, Barrett, Methodist Minister at Cheltenham, was unequivocal in his response: “As the minister, and as me, yes” (2007, p.6). Horder, Vicar of Holy Trinity Cleeve, stated, “I liked the way it was structured. The fact that there were modules to help us, modules we could use and yet at the same time could really ‘do our own thing’ if we preferred to. I found that immensely helpful; and I thought the idea that it was an award scheme could be an incentive” (2007, p.2). Dalton at Leeds affirmed that “it has made a tremendous difference because people in the congregation are thinking in environmental terms whereas previously they
didn’t” (2007, p.2). Linford, from the Skipton group, added a dimension of “feel”; “EcoCongregation is nice because it somehow links the two bits – EcoCongregation – it feels very wholesome somehow; it links the Church and ecology. It brings them together and puts them into one whole that feels very healthy” (2007, p.5).

An Eco Award is applicable for a three year period, which means that a congregation is encouraged to take further steps in eco-mission in order to reapply. The Bethesda Methodist Church in Cheltenham is illustrative of what that can mean. Barrett stated, “A few people, maybe even half at the beginning, weren’t that aware of the award but thought that working for the environment was something we should be doing. Once we got the award people became very proud – pleased that they had done it, pleased they had got it, and said ‘That’s a mark of what we’ve done’. And Mark Barrett would say, ‘yes, but what next?’ And the thought of not achieving the eco award would upset a lot of people” (2007, p.6). Thus, for them it became a sign of something they had done, steps they had taken, and it led to that congregation encouraging other congregations in the area to take steps in the same direction.

I found that congregations employed different methods in displaying their award. St Chad’s, for example, set the plaque into the ground in its natural churchyard area. Others were displayed in a more visible setting. One notable example is Christchurch Baptist-Methodist Church in Leicester, which has two Eco Awards prominently displayed at the Church entrance. One cannot get so far as the porch of the building without being made aware that this is an eco congregation. A further somewhat similar example is the case of Bethesda Methodist at Cheltenham, where in addition to the Award display, there are strategically placed signs on the top of bins or items in the kitchen, reminding people that this is an eco congregation, and therefore the people should respond in certain ways. There is evidence that eco considerations are in play in every facet of
their congregational life, and that their eco-mission activity has led to a number of people coming into the life of the Church as it has engaged with the community.

**Blocks to Eco-Mission in the British context**

Before concluding this chapter, I want to identify a number of eco-mission inhibitors in the British context. At a global level, as I have suggested in chapter 4, it may be argued that some theological ideas represent a significant barrier to eco-mission. When, through a focus on the notion of “rapture” or “end times” the Earth is perceived as of no consequence, the resulting human-centred focus of mission will be obvious enough. The validity of such a theology may be argued, but it is not likely to be a productive endeavour at least in the short term. Thus, having noted the issue, I will refer to a number of inhibitors of eco-mission that in some cases may become actual blocks to it.

First, the fact that many congregations are small in size and aged in composition is significant. When a congregation is finding it a struggle just to survive, it is exceedingly difficult to summon the energy, or indeed the vision, to deal with an issue that seems so remote and removed from the immediate concern. But while that difficulty is recognised, it may also be pointed out that by focussing on the environment as a mission issue, it is at least possible that it could be the issue that connects with the community and helps the congregation to revive itself.

Second, and often as a corollary of the first issue, a lack of the necessary leadership or personnel capable of enabling a local eco-mission program is a significant problem. In the case of a number of smaller congregations I encountered, such as at Derby and at Cleeve, the role of leadership has been taken very effectively by the clergyperson, who has sometimes then been able to draw several others into active involvement. However, a major concern remains when that clergyperson is removed from the situation; clearly, there is no easy answer to this problem.
Third, even in situations where leadership should not be overly problematic, as I have suggested in chapter 7, eco-mission is simply not part of their consciousness. Because Christian mission has for so long had primarily, if not solely, a human focus, it does not occur to them that there is an issue here. Thus, a lack of vision in local leadership must be recognised as one of the inhibitors of eco-mission.

Fourth, a lack of funds for what might be appropriate environmental responses is a real and valid issue. The Church of the Ascension at Ealing is a case in point. This church was one of the first to trial EcoCongregation’s Eco Award program, and it has undertaken a range of eco-mission activity, including regular eco-worship and an environmental audit; the members know what needs to be done. The Rector indicated that they are a small congregation on a “very tight budget”. They do what they can; they use energy-efficient light bulbs, and they don’t use disposable paper cups. This difficulty is effectively summarised in Reed’s observation: “We’re not at the moment with a green energy supply for the simple reason that every time we’ve looked into it, it would cost us money, and we just can’t afford to do that. And similarly we can’t afford to have a more energy-efficient heating system; we just don’t have the 5-figure sum to upgrade that at the moment” (2007, p.2). Again, there is no obvious solution to this dilemma, but it is an important inhibitor of eco-mission locally.

A fifth issue, while not in itself a block to eco-mission, is not especially helpful to it either. My observation is that many congregations with an eco-mission program do not appear to have a written mission statement beyond the most elementary level. St. Chad’s Church in Leeds is a case in point; in response to a question, Dalton stated, “When the Church was writing a Mission Statement recently, I wanted to include some sort of environmental aspect, which I suggested, but unfortunately it wasn’t included” (2007, p.1). She agreed that it was something they could look at. Holy Trinity at Skipton, on the other hand, has a concise but helpful eco-mission
statement, in which such things as basic goals and lines of responsibility are identified. This gives eco-mission some valuable legitimacy in that congregation, and aids a spirit of intentionality in that mission.

A sixth concern, namely the need for a more comprehensive ecotheological and eco-mission education of leaders and clergy, needs to be expressed with some caution, in that it would require specific research that is beyond the scope of this present work. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the theological education of prospective clergy is often not strong in this area. Redcliffe College in Gloucester offers a comprehensive post-graduate course on “the greening of mission”, which is a good start, but it remains in the categories of elective and post-graduate.

Several other, and perhaps less significant, inhibitors might be mentioned. One is a sense of isolation in dealing with eco-mission, although “isolation” is certainly a relative term. The other side of isolation in the British context is of course the presence of a range of peak groups ready to offer support, and the idea that it would be relatively simple to develop a series of regional eco-mission networks in many parts of Britain. Another possible issue here is the perception of a lack of denominational support for eco-mission, although that may not always be entirely fair, especially in the case of the Church of England. In spite of the undoubted inadequacies of its system, that Church has at least attempted to appoint an appropriate Advisor in every Diocese in Britain.

**Conclusion**

There is always the danger of a gap developing between official statements and specific action either at a local or any other level; and of course a great deal more that could be said about eco-mission in the British context. What I have outlined in this chapter is a sketch rather than a
detailed drawing. As I acknowledged at the outset, the British context is rather different from the Australian setting, and will therefore require different strategies. There are of course some common elements, such as worship, or global issues, but the primary purpose of the chapter is for the sake of comparison, or to consider some examples of what has been done in that context.

I have considered the nature and significant role of what I am calling peak groups; I have asked the question whether there may be too many such groups, and have raised concerns about the possible influence of confessional issues. Further, I have considered the role of denominational hierarchies, which can have an important bearing on eco-mission programs in local congregations. In discussing congregational programs I have used the structure of the EcoCongregation Eco Award scheme, namely worship, work, and witness. In my analysis of eco-mission themes I have expressed some concern about a possible lack of balance between local and global issues. I have commented favourably on the Eco Award scheme, and considered some inhibitors of eco-mission in the British context.

One of the questions I will address in the next chapter is what the Australian Church might learn from this, as it begins to develop its own response to the global ecological crisis and the imperative to care for creation at the heart of the Christian Faith.
CHAPTER NINE
ECO-MISSION IN AUSTRALIA

I have raised the question as to what the Australian Church might learn from the British experience as it begins to develop its own response to the global ecological crisis and the imperative to care for creation. At the outset the obvious point may be made that in some quite important respects the British and Australian contexts are significantly different. At the same time, anecdotal evidence might suggest that while a general concern about the environment is relatively high and probably increasing, the actual percentage of congregations actually engaging the issue as part of their mission is quite small. It may be, however, that change is starting to emerge in the Australian situation.

The difficulties that I have identified with eco-mission in Britain are further exacerbated when an attempt is made to set the issue within an Australian context. As I have stated, the British context is obviously quite different from that of Australia in some important respects. One example of that fact relates to recycling, which tends to be treated rather differently in Australia. The British climate is of course a more dramatic example of the difference; issues such as the British winter, the impacts of climate change, and also the seasonal variation generally, pose a completely different set of issues and indeed possibilities for the ecologically-aware Church. However, while that may be noted here, it is relatively unimportant in terms of the current issue.

Geographic and demographic considerations are more significant, in that while Britain has a small land mass with a relatively high population, Australia has a large land mass with a relatively low population, and with vast distances to be covered. The economic and strategic implications of trying to set up and maintain a peak group in Australia, for example, are thus completely different. If one or more peak groups are needed in Australia, and I will argue that
this is the case, then something new will need to be attempted. The possibility of simply transposing the British groups into the Australian situation is not an option.

Structural factors, such as the role of the Church of England as “the established Church” can also have profound implications that cannot be transferred to the Australian context. Establishment means, among other things, that some Bishops have a seat in the House of Lords, and therefore have the opportunity, which some have taken, to raise environmental issues in that forum of government.

There are other aspects too that do not readily transfer into Australian terms, at least in terms of the experience of recent years. Over recent years there has been some significant cooperation between the Church and government departments in Britain, such as DEFRA, and community groups. A significant group like the Conservation Foundation, while officially non-religious, nevertheless has strong links to the Church of England.

It would be wise therefore to approach any comparisons with a degree of caution, while at the same time acknowledging that any cross-cultural contact carries the potential for learning and the enrichment of ideas and practice. Consequently, as I consider the profile of eco-mission in the Australian Church, it is my intention to hold open the possibility that one context may inform the other. My original intention was to interview Australian Church leaders in a variety of categories, in order to determine the “roadblocks” to eco-mission, and possible ways and means of promoting eco-mission in Australian congregations. That was based on the assumption that very little was happening in eco-mission in Australia. However, those interviews proved to be somewhat limited in terms of the data they produced. At the same time, an increasing number of active individuals and congregations began to emerge, so that it became possible to look in that direction for informed responses, and I therefore adapted the methodology accordingly. But
responses come from a number of different levels within the Christian community, and I propose to deal with them in turn.

**International and Ecumenical Responses**

Statements have been made and actions determined at the broadest level of national and international affairs, where *oikoumene* is understood in terms of its original meaning of “the whole inhabited earth”, and while these may not impact greatly on actions at a local level, they do form an essential context in which further action is possible. In that regard, it is worthy of note that commitment to an ecological mission agenda covers a wide spectrum of what might be called the religious community. Conversely it is also true that opposition to an ecological agenda may cross otherwise disparate groups. Several examples of significant agreement could be cited.

In 2000, the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published a volume called *Earth and Faith*, in which the environmental insights of many of the world’s religions were summarised. The clear outcome of this exercise is that while those various religions may have major differences in other areas of belief and practice, in this regard they have a very similar approach, and the care of the planet, or in Christian terms creation, may be a rich area not only for fruitful dialogue, but also for common action. The Director of the UNEP Adrian Amin wrote that it was part of an effort to maintain a dialogue between the scientific and religious communities. “We … view the convergence of spiritual values and their respect for the environment as an inspiration for environmental actions today so that our succeeding generations may all be beneficiaries of a healthy planet and a development that is sustainable” (2000, p.4).

A second example was cited in an ABC telecast in December 2006, in which reporter Sarah Clarke observed that religious groups “have joined with scientists, big business and conservation
groups to put the fight against global warming at the top of the political agenda” (www.abc.net.au/lateline, 2006). In this segment, a Muslim and an evangelical Christian were in clear agreement along with representatives from the CSIRO and energy interests. It is probable that many people would be quite unaware of such a significant convergence of thought, but it is arguable that with greater awareness there could be a better chance of encouraging local action.

The World Council of Churches has had a significant role through its unit, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, and has contributed to the debate through a range of books and publications. But one example may serve to highlight both the possibilities and limitations of action at this level. The WCC participated in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and later in that year published *Redeeming the Creation*. Clearly the book contains useful reflections on the Summit and other valuable insights, including a Letter to the Churches. Council delegates wrote, as they said, “with a sense of urgency”. Their words are stark: “The earth is in peril. Our only home is in plain jeopardy. We are at the precipice of self-destruction. For the very first time in the history of creation, certain life support systems of the planet are being destroyed by human actions” (Granberg-Michaelson 1992, p.70). Later in the letter they stated, “You will understand why our hearts are heavy and why it is extremely urgent that we as churches make strong and permanent spiritual, moral and material commitments to the emergence of new models of society, based in deepest gratitude to God for the gift of life and in respect for the whole of God’s creation” (2000, p.71).

The impact of such a considered and impassioned plea should have reverberated around churches all over the world, but it is doubtful if many even knew of the Letter’s existence, and still less, read it and acted upon it. But a similar call to action from within the same ecumenical family came from the United States, where the National Council of Churches convened a conference in 2005. This resulted in an Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States,
entitled *God’s Earth is Sacred*. Again, it is a considered statement, and contains crucial insights relating to ecological theology and mission. The “Call to Action” is based on a strong foundation that I would contend has implications for eco-mission in and through the Church generally. It begins with the confession that for too long Christians have pushed the care of the Earth to the periphery of their agenda. It continues:

This is not a competing ‘program alternative’, one ‘issue’ among many. In this most critical moment in Earth’s history, we are convinced that the *central moral imperative* of our time is care for Earth as God’s creation…. We believe that caring for creation must undergird, and be entwined with, all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries. We are convinced that it is no longer acceptable to claim to be ‘church’ while continuing to perpetuate, or even permit, the abuse of Earth as God’s creation” (U.S. National Council of Churches, 2005).

It is noteworthy that the Statement was signed by some of the most prominent ecotheologians of recent times, including Nash, Rasmussen, Santmire, Cobb, McFague, and others. Thus, while it is directed to American Christians, its significance is in reality universal, and could well be one of the foundational pillars of regional and local eco-mission. However, this raises a dilemma and a frustration that many jurisdictions experience, in that it is almost impossible to gauge the impact of official statements and resolutions of international or even national bodies, however strong and well-written they may be.

An “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” (Berry 2000, p.18) was formulated in 1994 by the Evangelical Environmental Network in the United States, and while it reflects a different theological orientation, its content is broadly similar to other such statements. This Declaration acknowledges the degradation of creation, and lists land degradation, deforestation,
species extinction, water degradation, global toxification, the alteration of atmosphere, and human and cultural degradation as particular issues. It then sets out four spiritual responses involving both attitudes and actions. “The earthly result of human sin,” it declares, “has been a perverted stewardship, a patchwork of garden and wasteland in which the waste is increasing…” (2000, p.20). The call to action includes the following: “We call upon Christians to listen to and work with all those who are concerned about the healing of creation, with an eagerness both to learn from them and also to share with them our conviction that the God whom all people sense in creation (Acts 17:27) is known fully only in the Word made flesh in Christ the living God who made and sustains all things” (2000, p.21-22).

There are other such documents and websites of course, such as the American-based Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods (LENS), and while some may want to change the occasional word, phrase, or even emphasis, the most significant point to emerge is the degree of unanimity from across the theological spectrum. As I have argued in previous chapters, the need to care for creation is acknowledged by Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals, ecumenists, mainline Protestants and others. Such a consensus at a world level provides a significant backdrop for national declarations in Australia. An important addition here is that LENS provides both resources and encouragement for local congregations to become involved in eco-mission.

**National Responses in Australia**

In 2006 the National Council of Churches in Australia issued a statement entitled “Sustaining Creation” that was addressed to the governments in Australia. This raised a number of basic issues that need not be revisited here, and noted that they were political and economic issues, as well as being moral and spiritual in nature. The strength of the Statement is in its recognition of the importance of environmental issues; its weakness lies in the fact that while it acknowledges that “we will do all in our power through the Churches” to act in ways that will assist in the
achievement of its listed environmental goals, it is primarily a Statement about what
governments should do.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that churches necessarily speak with one voice on
this issue, or any issue for that matter. That is well illustrated in the case of the Roman Catholic
Church in Australia. By and large, Catholic Churches are not well represented in the ranks of
emerging eco-congregations, but in 2002 the Australia Catholic Bishops’ Conference formed
Catholic Earthcare Australia (CEA), which is headed by Bishop Toohey of the Wilcannia-
Forbes Diocese. This body’s mandate is to advise the Bishops on ecological matters, to develop
national networks, undertake initiatives, and provide educational resources. Its website provides
examples of resources and encouragement to engage in eco-mission in pursuit of the vision of
ecological conversion enunciated by Pope John Paul II.

Toohey told a Vatican-sponsored conference on climate change in 2007 that climate change
provided an opportunity to reconcile religion and science, an issue that for many people was
resolved long ago. However, the Sydney Morning Herald (22nd May 2007) reported that
Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, told the
conference that “the Vatican was not interested in debates that would limit population growth to
save the environment”, and warned of “modern forms of idolatry that lose sight of man” (2007).
I have argued elsewhere in this thesis against the notion that the needs of humanity can
somehow be set up against the needs of the planet. Others at the conference apparently
perceived the environmental movement as negative, “blaming humanity for the destruction of
the planet”. The report concludes with Toohey’s acknowledgment of internal opposition to the
Church’s involvement in the climate change issue; “the issue was considered either too political
or the province of science and ‘greenies’ and not the work of the church, whose job was to
preach and celebrate the sacraments” (2007). Such a divided voice invariably weakens the efforts of the Church as a whole.

In denominational terms, a more unequivocal response appears to have come from the Anglican and Uniting Churches, at least through their appointed leaders and official statements; however, we have no reliable information concerning the views of lay Christians, although one should not imagine that dissenting voices are entirely absent from those branches of the Church.

I made reference in chapter 7 to the Anglican Church’s “5th Mark of Mission”, “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”, and that clearly informs the approach of that Church at a national level. A Report entitled “Green by Grace” was prepared for the 2004 General Synod, and consciously built on the Anglican Communion’s “Five Marks of Mission”. This short but thoughtful paper includes the following: “Recognising that God sustains and saves all creation, and appoints people as stewards, we can honour God only if we act with care and respect not only for other people but for all the earth”. However, the list of “practical responses” is somewhat less comprehensive.

The Australian Anglican Environmental Network website states hopefully, and I believe correctly, that “increasingly the Church is embracing the care of the environment and creation as an essential part of Christian faith, mission and outreach.” Such a claim is given substance by the “Protection of the Environment Canon 2007” passed by the General Synod in October 2007. In brief, the Canon aims at reducing the environmental footprint of a Diocese and increasing environmental sustainability, giving leadership in care of the environment, as well as undertaking an educative role in the responsible care of God’s creation. Importantly, once individual dioceses have adopted the Canon, they are thereby committed to report to the General Synod on targets and progress.
At its inaugural national Assembly in June 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia declared that “we are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth’s resources for their use and enjoyment.” While the precise wording of that resolution may require updating, it does at least reflect an on-going commitment to the care of creation. Indeed, an environmental concern is enshrined in the Basis of Union itself.

Moreover, the sixth Assembly in 1991 passed what amounts to a Bill of Rights – namely, “The Rights of Nature and the Rights of Future Generations”. This is a significant document that is set within the context of the divine covenant. It affirms “the inalienable dignity of all humans”, and therefore calls for a guarantee of human rights, but extends that to a responsibility for future generations as well as for nature as God’s creation. “We call upon the churches to make room for God’s covenant with creation within the realm of law by committing themselves at all levels to recognition of the following ‘Rights of Future Generations’ and ‘Rights of Nature’” (Sixth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1991).

The 2006 Assembly adopted a statement entitled “For the Sake of the Planet and all its People” relating to climate change. In brief, this was a call for Church members and congregations to minimise greenhouse emissions and to advocate for governments “to implement policies that significantly reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and increase our use of non-nuclear renewable energy sources.” The paper itself covers a range of material that has already been canvassed in this thesis; however, the cornerstone of its approach is arguably the following affirmation: “The Uniting Church’s commitment to the environment arises out of the Christian belief that God, as the Creator of the universe, calls us into a special relationship with the creation – a relationship of mutuality and interdependence which seeks the reconciliation of all creation with God” (Eleventh Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia, 2006).
More than that, the Uniting Church has never been shy about engagement with the political processes in pursuit of what it believes. Thus, as part of the preparation for the 2004 and 2007 Federal elections, the Church issued guidelines and key issues for Church members and others to consider in determining how they should vote. Not surprisingly, that included issues related to the environment.

**State-level and Regional Responses**

It is clear that at a national level, the Anglican, Uniting, and Roman Catholic Churches have for the most part expressed an unambiguous commitment to care of the environment as God’s creation. In some cases, environmental resolutions pre-dated current popular perceptions by a large margin. Such affirmations at a national level form a solid foundation for other levels of the Church in this area of concern, but the determination of practical action is generally made at a more regional level.

Within the Anglican Church of Australia, a number of Dioceses have a Commission for the Environment broadly in order to encourage eco-mission within its boundaries. Several examples may serve to illustrate what is being done at this level. One leader in the field has been the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese. Its Commission reflects a wide diversity of skills and life experience, and aims to encourage the care of creation both within the Church and in the wider community; to that end it seeks to support people in the Diocese, to provide information, and to act in an advocacy role. The work of the Commission is divided into sub-programs covering such things as liturgy, facilitation of group discussions, energy, education, environmental audits water, and public advocacy. Its website provides links to significant other groups in the UK, the US, Canada and South Africa.
The Grafton Diocese has also been very active in this area. One initiative has been the production of a booklet called *Building a Better Relationship with our World: A Green Guide for People in Parishes*. Another initiative is the Riverbank Rainforest Restoration Project, relating to the Clarence River upstream from Susan Island, with implications for Aboriginal people and for biodiversity. This project was originally established by the 1st International Philosophy, Science and Theology Festival, with the aim of focussing on the whole of life rather than on the individual parts; members of the Grafton Ngerri Local Aboriginal Land Council, representing the traditional owners, cooperate in the Project. Other projects relate to Fairtrade, and the placement of photovoltaic cells on the roof of the General Manager’s house as a way to showcase environmental actions in an average home.

A third example is the Diocese of Brisbane Environmental group called AngliGreen, which offers a good and effective model of positive action in which both Church members and clergy, currently about 30 in all, can be drawn together from various Parishes for support and shared action. Through a spokesperson, Miriam Nyrene, the group stated, “We felt strongly that we needed to have a body at diocesan level to promote the need for all Christians to care for God’s Creation and to try to halt and, if possible, heal some of the damage that we humans have done to the earth over many years. We aim to make ourselves available to help parishes with sustainability and practical initiatives they might wish to engage in” (Personal communication, 2008). AngliGreen has a concise Vision Statement and clear Mission Goals, and is demonstrably reaching into what might be termed the “grassroots” of Church and community life.

The Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church has passed a series of environmental resolutions over a period of years starting in 1989. Many of these were relatively inconsequential, although the potential they contained rarely seemed to materialise. But resolutions of the 2007 Synod were more substantial and covered a number of aspects. At one level it called on congregations
and Church members to conduct an energy audit with a view to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and to change to “Green Power”. But the Synod went further than that. It determined that a Working Group should be set up, to include all significant groups and commissions related to the Synod, in order to “collate and promote the work currently being done to reduce the production of greenhouse gas emissions, to explore ways of further reducing those emissions, and to report progress to the Council of Synod within 6 months. Moreover, action was to be taken in three other ways; an environmental audit was to be conducted on the Uniting Church Centre, training on climate change, energy auditing and efficiency was to be provided, and a report on recommended future action was to go to the following Synod. Given that it is not easy to determine meaningful action at this level, these resolutions and the reporting mechanism put in place suggest a Church that is serious about trying to deal with environmental issues.

Other Synods have also taken steps in a similar direction, but at times that has resulted from a local initiative. In the case of the New South Wales Synod, the initiative of the Maroubra Junction congregation was crucial in developing a green profile in the Synod, while the initiative of the Northbridge and Castlecrag congregation led to what became a Presbytery-based Earth Ministry project.

Earth Ministry began in 2002 with funding from the Synod for a part-time coordinator in the person of Professor Barry Leal, and for 3 years operated in the North Sydney area from its base in Northbridge-Castlecrag. Then in 2005 it became a project of the Sydney North Presbytery. A number of factors, including finance, may be blamed for its lapse only two years later. But for the duration of its life, Professor Leal played a significant educative role in that area of Sydney, even though his efforts were not always rewarded in the congregations.
An experiment of a different kind is being attempted in the Mid North Coast Presbytery, which in 2008 began funding a Minister to work specifically in eco-mission on a half-time basis in the region. The appointee is Jason John, who has a PhD in a related area, and has a detailed Job Description based on a Victorian model. It remains to be seen what results might ensue from that venture. Nevertheless, he faces some ambiguity in terms of expectations. As the part-time Minister of the Bellingen congregation, he is aware of many people who are not necessarily drawn to eco-mission. On the other hand, as a part-time consultant in the Presbytery, he has their expectations to try to meet. John’s approach includes working with appropriate community groups, such as the Bellingen Institute, together with the encouragement of eco-faith communities and the greening of ordinary congregations.

The Development of Networks

In addition to the examples previously listed, a series of networks relating to eco-mission in a Christian (or sometimes multi-faith) context have begun to emerge, and some examples may be cited. An independent group called The Climate Institute discovered from a review of hits on its website that there was considerable interest in a religious or spiritual response to the environment, and so appointed a person to relate to that aspect. This has links to a Muslim educational group in addition to the dominant Christian emphasis. "Unitingearthweb" is a website created by Earth Ministry in North Sydney and "Project Green Church" at Maroubra, and is designed to link rural and urban areas in New South Wales in creation care. Another network that has commenced recently is the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, or ARRCC, and here again a Muslim person is involved. Unconfirmed reports also suggest that attempts are being made to commence “A Rocha” in Australia.

It is impossible to predict the outcome of any significant increase in the number of religious eco-networks. In a positive sense it could have the effect of increasing the exposure of people to the
message of creation care, in that people tend to move in particular circles, and may not be open
to influence from sources they do not know or necessarily trust. Evangelicals, for example, may
be more influenced by a group like A Rocha, or by a visiting Evangelical from the United States
than by a website like the Climate Institute. The danger is that the efforts and limited resources
of people and groups may be spread too thinly and thus dissipated. To the best of my
knowledge, there is currently no high profile, truly effective peak group operating in Australia to
promote Christian eco-mission. Moreover, there is strong anecdotal evidence that while some
groups are certainly aware of others, and cross-referencing takes place on websites, there is a
significant lack of networking nationally. I contend that there are two essential points here. First,
it is important that Australia can learn from overseas experience, and not repeat their mistakes.
Second, at the very least it is imperative that something akin to the British Environmental Issues
Network be established in order to enhance communication, to reduce overlapping, and to
enhance overall effectiveness.

**Eco-Mission at Congregational Level**

**Attitudes**

Given their interest in ecotheology and mission, it is hardly surprising that virtually all the
respondents in my research expressed basic attitudes that were consistent with the stance
adopted by national and ecumenical Church bodies. Similarly, it is to be expected that they
would reflect community concerns as well.

All respondents stated their belief, even their strong belief, that the global environmental
situation is serious, and further, that the crisis is becoming increasingly evident in Australia. One
would expect that to be a significant motivating factor for Christian environmental activists; but
it may be noted that of the Church leaders I interviewed, many of whom have no involvement in
eco-mission, all stated similar views strongly. It is self-evident that such a unanimous position
does not necessarily translate into support for the proposition from ordinary Church members, but the degree of concern evident in the community as a whole would suggest that any problem with Christian eco-mission resides elsewhere.

A wide range of particular issues were identified as concerns within the Australian context. The most common concern related to water, which also extended to the Murray-Darling system. Other concerns included the on-going use of coal-fired power stations, the shortage of funds for the development of renewable energy, an obsession with petrol prices combined with an increase in road traffic and the lack of public transport. However, as I have suggested, respondents also raised numerous other issues, which demonstrates not only that Christian people are thinking about these matters, but also they are reflecting local as well as global concerns. There were fewer indications of hope regarding the overall environmental situation, but perceptibly there is a rise in the level of interest and awareness among the population at large.

One point that was noteworthy was the strong support for the notion that environmental action, or the care of creation, should be part of the Church’s mission. The Questionnaire included the statement, “From a theological perspective, creation care should be part of the Church’s mission”; from a total of 49 responses, 40 agreed strongly, 5 agreed, and several did not answer. In addition, all 33 people contacted in the course of interviews agreed. Such an affirmation on the part of those who are attempting to engage in eco-mission is hardly surprising. However, the point of interest is the fact that even some of those who are not currently engaged in or promoting eco-mission believe that this is a valid expression of Christian mission, and is by no means an optional extra. I contend that herein exists one of the central problems confronting eco-mission in Australia. There is a significant inconsistency involved, a disconnection between accepted theory and actual practice. The challenge is to reduce or eliminate such a gap.
How Eco-mission Begins

It is clear that eco-mission does not have a long history in Australia, but nevertheless it is necessary to ask how it begins in a local or congregational setting. In answer to that, a study of some initiatives will be instructive. As I will demonstrate, it will require a catalyst of some kind, either in the form of an event which is created, or an event that takes place and requires a response or interpretation. In order to illustrate that point, I will relate briefly the stories of five congregations, each of which in its own way informs the progress of eco-mission in Australia. Those congregations are at Caloundra and Stafford in Queensland, Northmead and Maroubra Junction in New South Wales, and Scots Church in South Australia.

One congregation that I know reasonably well, and that is just embarking on an eco-mission agenda, is the Caloundra Uniting Church on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland; and since I have been part of that development, it provides a good case study. The congregation is what some would style as a “program church”, in that it has a worshipping congregation of about 150, and consequently a variety of groups. One significant feature is that a Social Justice group has been operating there for a number of years, and in recent times that has included active support for a non-Christian refugee family. Such a combination of circumstances was therefore conducive to an environmental concern.

The catalyst or beginning point was the moment when the Chair of the Social Justice group suggested to me that we might do something in this area of concern. I agreed, and we quickly reached a decision that I would present an eco-seminar at the Church. The initial plan was to invite members of the community as well, but subsequently it was decided (wisely, I believe) that for this first attempt the seminar should be limited to the people of the Church. Thus, the various congregations in the region were invited. The seminar was held in October 2007, with about 24 in attendance; the ground covered included the nature of the problem, eco-theology, a
theology of eco-mission, my findings from a visit to the UK, and a discussion of what further steps could be taken as Churches in this locality.

The response to the seminar was positive, and led to several outcomes. Most notably it provided a platform for the Social Justice group to discuss a future eco-mission program for the Caloundra Church. Ideas were discussed in the meetings that were held over succeeding months, so that a core group of approximately 10 committed people emerged.

Another “light on the hill” is St Clements-on-the-Hill Anglican Church at Stafford in Brisbane. Their eco journey began in 2004 with the arrival of a new Rector, the Rev Mary Florence. She had made it clear prior to the confirmation of her appointment that this was a key issue for her. At the same time, there was a small group of concerned people who were ready to engage this issue along with the Rector.

The story of the Northmead congregation began in about 1998 when a number of people, including the Minister, noticed that an area adjacent to the Church, including a creek and bushland, was in need of regeneration. They decided to adopt one section of it, and worked on it on a monthly basis, a process that involved cooperation with the local Council and assistance with plants. A walking track was created to a children’s park. The congregation regarded this work as part of their Christian witness, and interestingly the work of the Uniting Church was publicly acknowledged. From that initial awareness some forms of ecotheological and eco-mission awareness have emerged, including the employment of a part-time ministry worker whose brief includes the encouragement of bush walking and creation spirituality.

Maroubra Junction has become a congregation of strategic importance in the development of eco-mission within the Uniting Church in New South Wales. Its genesis was a conversation
between Geoff Callaghan and a friend after worship one Sunday morning. They agreed that care of the environment should be part of the Church’s mission. A phone call was made to the local Council, and from that beginning Maroubra’s eco-mission has grown.

In 2005 an eco-faith community began in Adelaide in association with Scots Uniting Church in the city. The Rev Dr Jason John was initially appointed as a Consultant to Scots Church for 6 months, with the aim of exploring possible links between the Church and the nearby University. However, that led to John proposing that the Church should relate to the whole eco agenda; at the time he was proposing to return to New South Wales, but when a number of people expressed interest, he was appointed for a trial period of two years. John saw his eco-ministry being shaped around six issues – justice, spirituality, companioning or pastoral care, theology, embryonic permaculture communities, and worship or contemplation.

But the catalyst that provides a point of beginning can also be a seemingly small everyday event. For several people in the Anglican Church at Wacol it was twofold. First, an unconfined Church cat killed a native bird in full view of the worshipping congregation, and second, a very weedy Church property and a priest who was apparently defensive of the serious weeds. At Holland Park Uniting Church it was the changing of light bulbs; the message there, to borrow a British phrase, is “don’t stop at the lights!”

**Eco Groups**

Stories of the beginning of eco-mission in congregations could be multiplied, but from what I have related, and reflecting on both the Australian and the British experience, a number of factors start to become apparent. The first and arguably most important factor is the presence of one or two key people who are committed to an eco-mission goal, or who are prepared to make an issue of the environment, and consequently to begin to exert some leadership. That in turn
almost invariably leads to the development of a small group with an on-going life as the focus of eco-mission in the congregation. Thus, since it is clear that an eco-mission initiative invariably involves a core group of some kind, often combined with one or more key individuals, it is worth considering the role of such groups, and asking what it is that makes a group work. A number of factors appear to emerge from the stories related above.

As I have indicated, such a process has been evident in a number of locations, including Caloundra, Stafford, and Maroubra Junction. Second, it is helpful if at least one of the emerging eco leaders has some expertise or initiative in the field. At Caloundra, for example, there were several people apart from me who had a strong ecological commitment, which in one case combined with professional expertise in the process of environmental audits, while another member of the group had a postgraduate qualification in theology. This provided a depth of background that was extremely helpful in developing a workable approach, and it suggests that the availability of local expertise could be especially important in the many situations where feelings of isolation seriously inhibit the possibility of effective work.

The size of the core group obviously varies, and at times it can be very small. Coordination at the Maroubra Junction Uniting Church is in the hands of three people, although a dozen become involved. On the other hand, Northmead Uniting has a core group of about 20 people, Caloundra has 12, and the Anglican Church at Logan has 25 people. The size of the group at Mt Gravatt Anglican Parish varies. However, if the British experience is any guide, it will be important for the larger groups especially to have a small coordinating group, or even a particular person charged with the responsibility of enabling the direction of the group as a whole.

The perceived level of support from the congregation as a whole varies considerably. In some cases, such as Northmead and Logan, the support level was high. In other cases, such as
Stafford, the support was only moderate, while in other situations such as Mt Gravatt, Grafton, or Maroubra it was poor. In some of those situations the eco-mission in the congregation may be largely or even solely confined to the small group, as in the case of Denistone East Uniting Church, where the core group consists of 7 people. In other cases the congregation may offer little more than moral support, as in the case of the Clarence Uniting Church in Tasmania, where the Minister is another doctoral candidate in an eco-related field. However, the hope is always that the core group will become the means by which eco-mission is able to operate in the congregation as a whole.

Morale is something that is not easy to measure or quantify, and one must differentiate between the feelings of the core group and their satisfaction rating so far as the congregation is concerned. Morale in the core group is often very high, but frequently that does not translate into satisfaction about achievements in the congregation.

In summary, while there are no universal principles involved, a number of factors generally accompany the commencement of an eco-mission approach in a congregation. First, I have noted the significance of one or several key people who are willing and able to take the initiative and give the necessary early leadership. Second, that initiative is often associated with the formation of a small core group that will effectively enable goals to be set and achieved. A further point, building on the previous two, is that some kind of catalyst may be needed in order to create a basis for beginning.

Beyond that, it is helpful if the congregation has developed a social conscience that can be extended beyond the human dimension. And finally, it is also helpful if the congregation is of a sufficient size to have a variety of groups operating, so that it is more likely to have leaders available to undertake a role in eco-mission. However, that is not to say that a small
congregation is unable to participate; a case in point is the small Palmwoods Uniting Church in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, which has a worshipping group of about 12, but is planning an eco planting project.

**Mission Statements**

As in the British context, it is noteworthy that very often congregations do not perceive the importance of a specific Mission Statement related to the care of creation. The existence of such a Statement obviously does not guarantee effective eco-mission, but on the other hand the absence of such a document inherent in an *ad hoc* approach significantly increases the probability that the congregation or group involved has not thought through the vision and goals that underlie their endeavours. Others import a statement from elsewhere. Thus, Anglican congregations associated with AngliGreen in Brisbane tended to refer to the Mission Statement of that group, while Uniting Church congregations in the Sydney North area tended to refer to the Earth Ministry Statement. Such an approach is not necessarily illegitimate; the vision and aims of eco-mission will to a large extent reflect the general theological under-pinning of such an endeavour, while the goals that emerge from that will tend to vary according to the particular context in which it is set. But I contend that what is of crucial importance is for the Statement to be truly “owned” by the congregation. One way in which that may be encouraged is for a group to work through any proposed Mission Statement, and even more by presenting the Statement to the congregation for their response. As an example, the fact that the Caloundra congregation voted to accept the Mission Statement clearly has on-going implications for ownership and accountability.

It is of interest that one of the initial outcomes of the seminar and the consequent discussion within the Social Justice group at Caloundra was a request that a Mission Statement be prepared.
That was interesting in a two-fold sense; first, it was not my initiative, and second, as also is the case in England, such statements are far from common in eco-congregations.

The Statement recognises a threefold Vision, followed by three objectives, and is based on the recognition of the natural environment as God’s Creation. The Vision affirms that:

- “Christians are called to safeguard the integrity of Creation, and to exercise their mission in such a way that the life of the earth is sustained and renewed.
- Alongside other valid expressions of Christian mission, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God includes working for justice, peace, and a proper stewardship of the earth.
- The well-being of people is inter-woven with the well-being of the planet itself.”

In response to that vision, the ecological aims of the Church are:

- “To raise environmental awareness in the congregation and throughout the community.
- To engage in practical measures on behalf of the environment.
- To encourage a form of spirituality that includes an appreciation and care for Creation.”

Clearly, specific goals will rise out of the Vision and Objectives. To facilitate and implement the objectives and goals, and to assist the congregation in caring for creation, a core group of interested persons may be established as a sub-group of the Social Justice Group. Decisions that affect the congregation will be made on a shared basis under the authority of the Church Council, and will be in keeping with Synod policies.

Obviously it is still early in the life of this emerging group of “eco warriors”; but approximately twelve of these people are actively interested in the development of eco-mission in the congregation. It is also worth noting that the group is not dependent on my presence, but has demonstrated its capacity to act on its own behalf. Further, apart from a series of ideas that have been noted, an Environmental Audit has been completed as a first step.
The Power of One

Another significant aspect that is worth noting from some of the data and stories of eco-mission initiatives indicated above is what could be called “the power of one”, or the capacity of one individual, or perhaps a very small group, to begin a chain reaction involving other people, thereby making a substantial difference. In addition to some individuals noted in those stories, some other notable examples may be cited briefly. Dr Jason John’s initiative led to an eco-congregation in Adelaide, and that in turn contributed to his ground-breaking appointment as an Eco-Minister in a New South Wales Presbytery. Also in New South Wales, a very small group led to an association with Professor Barry Leal in what became the Earth Ministry and the WaterLines project in North Sydney. What can one person do? The brief answer is, quite a lot, especially if that person has some expertise in the area.

A second demonstration of “the power of one” is in terms of what one congregation is able to achieve. Thus, one positive outcome from the eco seminar at Caloundra has been the possibility of eco-mission emerging in some neighbouring congregations. It is too early to be definitive about that, but approximately four congregations could be involved at this stage.

Emerging Themes

The matter of what can be achieved is illustrated in the stories that may be told. However, as I indicated in the previous chapter, eco congregations in Britain generally have quite well established programs, even though it is arguable that their scope tends to be somewhat limited. Comparatively, eco-mission in Australia appears to be at an earlier stage of development, and consequently the number of eco-projects is limited, which means that any conclusions must be tentative. Nevertheless, while it is not yet clear what a mature outcome might be, and a degree of caution is appropriate, it is arguable that some patterns are beginning to emerge. I believe that
six significant themes may be identified at this stage. Some of these reflect a similar pattern to that in Britain, although there are differences.

The inclusion of ecology in worship is predictably and appropriately one of the more common themes, and there is no shortage of resources available on the internet in particular. Some of those are from overseas sources, and therefore they may need to be adapted. The other significant drawback is that busy clergy may not always stop to seek out the material, and would be helped by encouragement from a central source, in terms of a reminder of an appropriate occasion, such as World Environment Day, and by something that is placed in their hands.

Some Churches, and Anglicans especially, have referred to the “Season of Creation” material as a resource they have used; this initiative traces back to Norman Habel, a South Australia Lutheran, although the scope of the material is obviously ecumenical in character. Briefly, Churches are encouraged to use four Sundays in September leading up to St Francis of Assisi Day in order to celebrate the natural world, or God’s creation. The website contains a significant and valuable volume of resource material, including lectionary readings, liturgies, stories, theology, sermons, and much more. Such a concentration of eco-worship in one month of the year, by contrast with a more seasonal approach in Britain, has its advantages and disadvantages. Congregations and clergy will make up their own minds; but it may be argued that a seasonal approach is generally less appropriate in Australia. On the other hand, a concentrated approach may miss taking advantage of an event such as World Environment Day unless an effort was made to include creation issues in the liturgy from time to time during the year.

Spirituality is a related area that is still in the process of development; Tasmania offers several examples. Paul Chalson in Hobart runs a project he calls Earth Pilgrimage”; in his words,
“Essentially it is a journey through and into a place which involves times of becoming attentively aware both of the place within which we journey and God present in and through this place,” so that it is in effect “a mixture of a bushwalk, a worship service and a spiritual retreat.” But significantly this approach includes a monthly eco-worship service led jointly with the pastor of an indigenous congregation, and an educational dimension.

Margy Dockray in Launceston works largely on her own in encouraging creation or eco-spirituality. However, she has an ambitious plan involving 400 acres of “stunning wet native forest”, some of it over 300 years old, and with numerous other natural features including a virtual botanic garden. She has a plan to link these features with walking and riding trails, and to incorporate a “memorial forest” where people can bury the ashes of deceased loved ones in a natural setting. Dockray states, “Ultimately I would like the land to be a place of healing, by developing a retreat centre, community garden and dedicated worship space, with inter-faith links. I believe this could be a way to reach the great unchurched majority of the population.”

Spirituality is also emerging as a significant issue in a number of Anglican Churches. St Clement’s Church at Stafford has converted a grassy slope into a native vegetation area in order to make a statement about the God of creation. Nearby is a community garden, complete with poultry, which it must be acknowledged is rare in a Church. St Phillip’s Church at Annerley has also created a green space where people can wander and meditate; Biblical and spiritual prompts are strategically located at various points of the garden. Initiatives such as these are a powerful reminder of the way in which people may be encouraged to relate life and faith to the natural world.

The planting of trees and gardens, or the creation of natural vegetation areas represented a third significant, and again related, aspect. Don Gibson from St Phillip’s Church indicated that the
Church was located close to a major motor retailer that boasted attractive gardens, and he used this in part as an incentive for the Church to make a statement about its God of creation through the medium of a Church garden. Bush regeneration was one of the significant dimensions of Northmead’s eco program, and in that regard they work in cooperation with the local Council. The WaterLines project in Sydney, associated with Earth Ministry when it was operational, encouraged congregations in its area to “adopt a creek”, and that approach came with ecotheological educational material.

Education programs and workshops were also mentioned consistently, although such programs are not common or widespread. I have previously mentioned the Eco Workshop I conducted at Caloundra, and I have presented similar material at an Anglican workshop in Brisbane. In addition there is clearly an educational component in informed preaching that picks up the perspective of Earth. There is considerable scope for the expansion of this theme.

A fifth area might be labelled as policy issues. An environmental audit features strongly here, and can produce some surprising results, but always with the potential to improve the Church’s environmental performance. The framing of eco-mission policy is also important, together with seeking of grants for environmental projects and other possibilities. One outstanding example of an attempt to create a sustainable Church environment is St James’ Anglican Church in Toowoomba, where they have installed 10 solar panels each generating 215 watts of power. Government rebates for this also make it an attractive economic option for some churches. Other congregations have also taken or are exploring initiatives relating to water use and collection.

The sixth area moves from corporate lifestyle integrity to personal lifestyle issues, and not least the challenge for individual Church members to adopt an eco-friendly personal lifestyle. In my own case, my wife and I have a significant native garden on a 777m² suburban block of land,
including flowering trees and shrubs that attract native birdlife. We have installed a water tank, while green waste that we are not able to compost ourselves is recycled through the Regional Council, and other waste is also recycled, so that our normal weekly landfill waste is reduced to two small bags. In addition we have insulated our home, installed a solar hot water system, photovoltaic cells to generate 1.5 kilowatts of electricity, and we drive a small car, so that in all possible ways we have taken steps to reduce our carbon footprint. We would not claim that our response is unique, but rather that it is illustrative of what is possible in a suburban context.

There is another question that must be asked of the emerging eco-mission themes, and that is to what extent they find a balance between local and global issues. I argued in the previous chapter that British congregations tended to focus quite strongly on local issues without any obvious reference to the global context. It is probably too early to determine decisively whether Australian eco-congregations are showing signs of recognising a more global focus. The problem is not in engagement with local issues in a particular community; indeed, such an approach will be inevitable if there is to be meaningful engagement with environmental issues. The global situation involving climate change and other major issues is so large that the best one can hope to do is to grasp “the near edge” of it. Thus, my contention is that eco-mission invariably reflects several contexts simultaneously; if it begins locally, it must also take account of regional, national, and certainly of the global situation.

**When Eco Initiatives Fail**

An important question that needs to be asked is why an eco-mission initiative might fail, or fail to take root, even with the availability of the best leadership or potential. Three cases in point may be considered.
First, the Denistone East Uniting Church in Sydney has been involved in the Earth Ministry and Waterlines project under the auspices of the Sydney North Presbytery. The Minister at the time, David Reichardt, was completing a PhD candidate in ecotheology, and was trained by Al Gore to present the complex issues of climate change. He told Insights magazine, “My passion is talking to people in and outside the Church. Ecotheology … has afforded me endless opportunity to do more work around outreach” (NSW Synod website). In spite of all that, Reichardt has stated, “My congregation doesn't want to know about either mission or ecotheology, sadly.” It may be that there is more going on here than a mere allergy to the environment, and one of those factors may well be the average age of the congregation; however, it is a reminder that there is nothing automatic about well-equipped leadership leading to effective programs.

Along with the Northbridge-Castlecrag Uniting Church congregation, Denistone East is also significant in terms of being host to the Sydney North Earth Ministry initiative for several years. At least part of the reason for the congregation being associated with the project was its proximity to Macquarie University. That initiative has stalled for the time being, although there are hopes that it will be revived. There appear to be two main reasons for the difficulty. The first is that after five years of operation, an ambitious request for funding to take the project statewide was unsuccessful. In short, the failure (at least at this time) is based on a lack of funding and the absence of any alternate methodology. A second reason is that according to several members of the core group, part of the initial enthusiasm for the project was based on a false hope that it would lead to new people being added to the congregation. Eco-mission was not appreciated as essential mission in its own right, but merely as a means to an end.

Second, and again surprisingly, the Anglican Cathedral at Grafton must also be considered. I have indicated above that the Grafton Diocese has played a leading role in eco-mission, and its
leadership in this field is strong. Yet Rosie Catt, one of the leaders, reported the group’s perception that the congregation “is not supportive or couldn’t care”, and the lack of success in practical terms means that these leaders are re-visiting their approach. A subsequent conversation was a little more positive than that. However, she went on to cite an occurrence at the Church in Maclean, where a very fine eco project was devised and approved by the congregation. But one leading member of the congregation had not participated in the process, and he managed to override the will of the congregation and effectively “kill” the project.

It would not be entirely accurate to include the eco-faith community initially associated with Scots Uniting Church in Adelaide as a failed initiative, but there were some issues that rendered the position difficult, and consequently I will deal with this situation under another heading. It may be noted, however, that the group leader, Jason John, is a PhD graduate in ecotheology.

In all three cases the leadership and support available should have ensured a successful eco-program. Why did that fail, and what lessons can be learned from those experiences? Such a question raises some very big issues, and is ultimately beyond the scope of this thesis. At the same time, leadership is obviously a crucial issue. On one hand, I have shown that while there is no guarantee that an informed and committed leadership will produce the desired outcome, on the other hand it is equally clear that a strong “gatekeeper” can sometimes negate the wishes of a majority. Another factor relates to the availability of funding. But beyond that, a number of eco-mission inhibitors may be identified.

**Eco-Mission Inhibitors in Australia**

The other side of a positive practical theology of eco-mission is the identification of eco-mission inhibitors or blocks. I propose to deal with these under three main categories, viz. basic theology and approach to mission, perceptions and feelings, and practical issues.
Basic Theology and Approach to Mission

I noted in chapter 4 that some people, especially at the conservative or “fundamentalist” end of the theological spectrum, reject the idea that Christian mission and theology should have an ecological dimension. Without any doubt there are those who believe that the Earth is about to be destroyed in a massive eschatological event, and God will create a new heaven and a new earth. Further, there are those who believe that the Earth is of no consequence, since all that is important is saving the souls of people. I would argue that such views exist largely at an extreme, and that such a militant opposition to ecotheology and eco-mission is probably not a major factor in the “mainstream” denominations that are focussed in this thesis.

The more significant issue is undoubtedly one of a lack of theological awareness or sophistication. In the same vein, and without moving to a theological extreme, it may also be argued that a large part of the problem is that the Church is the inheritor of the overwhelmingly anthropocentric theology and mission practices of centuries. This was reflected in Habel’s description of the first and second mission of the Church (chapter 7). In such a context, “nature” was a “given”, and the notion of creation care simply did not arise. It is now clear to most people, regardless of their religious orientation, that nature can no longer be taken for granted.

Another basic inhibitor is a residual reservation, especially in conservative or fundamentalist circles, about the role of science vis-á-vis religious faith, resulting in a demonising of the scientific approach and contribution. But the issue is further clouded by the claims of a minority of scientists who, like Singer and Avery (2007), seek to persuade the general public that global warming is a natural phenomenon, and the notion of human-induced climate change is false. The fact that Singer and Avery’s book *Unstoppable Climate Change* is lauded as a best seller is a concern, and clearly indicates that such a view, however mistaken, cannot be ignored. For
more reasons than one, people who do not want to believe the science will quickly find refuge and solace in their prophecy of comfort.

Several other issues may be raised here. A residual Neoplatonic influence in some Christian theology leads to an aversion to anything of a material nature, and therefore to what I would argue is a limited view of what is spiritual. At a more mundane level, a common approach is the simplistic understanding that the environment is outside the scope of the Church’s mission. A variation on the above responses is the perception that inertia is often caused by the fact that people are simply not convinced (Jones 2007), that they don’t understand what is taking place environmentally (Johnson 2007), that they don’t know what to think or don’t know what to do.

**Perceptions and Feelings**

In many respects it may be said that whether or not they reflect reality, feelings are facts. Perceptions and feelings, therefore, even when they are essentially irrational, act as powerful motivators or inhibitors. A range of factors has been identified by my respondents. Because this matter has historically not been strong in the Church’s thought and action, and because the environment also is a significant political issue, some people have a real fear of what they regard as green extremism, or the perception that any recognition of the importance of nature must be “new age”. This is a fear that Campolo (1992) identified quite clearly. Other perceptions and fears include the thought that there is nothing that the Church or individuals can do, or that anything that might be attempted would inevitably cost a significant amount of money, both of which I would contend are demonstrably baseless. At a different level is the fear that any action that might be taken would mean changing one’s lifestyle; Singer and Avery’s work (2007) plays on that fear significantly. Here it has to be said that if such a perception is a fear, then it is well founded, in the sense that one of the fundamental messages emerging from the current eco-crisis
is that there will be a price to pay if there is to be a future, and as a people we must be prepared to change and to live more simply.

**Practical Issues**

But beyond that, a number of practical problems and perceptions emerge from the research as inhibitors of eco-mission. The Adelaide Eco-faith community represents a particular case study. In real terms it should be regarded as an experiment. Dr Jason John left after two years, although his statement to me was that it could have worked if there was a will to do so. Since then the group has continued under its own management, although there is a possibility of a minister being appointed on a part-time basis. A number of factors have contributed to the difficulties. Interpersonal conflicts and ministry team issues were significant; part of that agenda was different attitudes to management. A second issue was that there was some ambiguity about the eco community’s relationship with the main congregation; in some respects it was peripheral, although John’s perception is that there was good support in the congregation, but not among the management. A third inhibitor was the need to find funding for the project, so that the financial viability of the group was always insecure. A fourth difficulty was the lack of a strong core group.

In more general terms, and at a very practical level, one issue that has emerged strongly is the fact that many congregations are struggling to survive, and some have a very high average age, so that there is little energy available for what is perceived to be just one problem they cannot face. One case in point is the Denistone East congregation, which as I have already noted has had an ecologically-aware leadership. As an extension of that, a lack of funds must be acknowledged as a serious inhibiting factor, in that some eco-mission responses do cost money, such as a decision to purchase green power or to install solar PV cells; if funds are short, even with the best intention, the green option may not be open. A second prominent inhibitor is the
pressure of other priorities, creating a situation in which there is simply not the time or energy to devote to an aspect of mission that would require fresh thinking. It is easy to be critical of such a position, but from my own experience I have to say that I can understand the problem only too well. A third and related practical issue is a lack of leadership in the eco-mission area; practitioners have not had a ready source of expertise, materials, and workable ideas, so that any potential eco-mission is deferred as simply too hard and inaccessible. I would have to add one further issue as a result of conversations with a number of people involved in this field, and that is a real sense of isolation. The truth is that there are pockets of eco-mission activity all over the country, but many of them are operating in isolation from the others, and the resulting feeling of being virtually alone is not conducive to strong and confident activity.

Analysis

Other factors could undoubtedly be added to the list of eco-mission inhibitors indicated above; the list is indicative rather than comprehensive. It is interesting though to compare perceived inhibitors in the Australian situation with perceived blocks in a very different British context. Any sense of isolation is much reduced in Britain because of its population relative to the size of the country, together with a situation in which more resources are available. The conclusion that must be drawn is that the inhibitors are remarkably similar, in spite of the differences in context.

This issue is important in that any advance in the field of eco-mission will be against the background of the fears, perceptions, beliefs, and practical problems of many people who are either not currently engaged, or are inadequately engaged in eco-mission, and it must take account of that context. It may be obvious that in many cases there are no quick and easy solutions; but the question that must be asked is how the identified blocks relate to actual eco-mission programs. What are the gaps, and what strategies might help to bridge those gaps in a more positive way?
I would argue that when the inhibitors I have identified are set down beside common eco-
mission programs that are practised in many eco congregations, the gaps largely disappear. The
programs that relate specifically to inhibitors may be grouped in several ways. First, a
comprehensive program of education will address issues of the background science, together
with issues of ecotheology and eco-mission theology, even though educational workshops and
seminars cannot on their own deal with attitudes of apathy or closed minds. Second, worship
and preaching with an ecological focus will address some of the feelings and perceptions some
people may have. Third, encouragement of a creation spirituality in the context of green space
and native gardens has the possibility of communicating with people at a deep level. Fourth, an
expanding network of expertise and support, together with the provision of a range of program
ideas will gradually address the difficulty of Churches not knowing what to do. The main area of
blockage that is not easily addressed by a corresponding program is the shortage of funds, for
example to carry out some building-related projects; nor can any program add more hours to the
day or roll back the tide of time. But in spite of problems, I contend that people who are seized
by an ideal and a vision will find some ways, within their capacity, to begin to be part of the
answer rather than part of the problem.

One final aspect may be mentioned. In chapter 8, I referred to my perception that the lack of a
locally-owned Eco-mission Statement was a problem in many cases in the UK; my research
suggests that the same is true in many cases in Australia. I contend that it is important for
Church groups and congregations to work through and adopt such a vision and aims mission
statement, even though they may draw on previously existing statements. A clearly enunciated
vision and specific goals, adopted and owned, will be a strong positive way to the future.
An Ecumenical Approach?

I have argued in this thesis that humankind is part of “the web of life”; that is, we are part of creation, not above and beyond it. In a similar way, it may be argued that Church members are not only part of their particular branch of the Christian Church, but members also of the Church as a whole, and of the wider community beyond the Church. Thus, I found that there was overwhelming support for eco-mission to be exercised on an ecumenical basis. Lowry’s response was typical of many: “Ecumenical eco-projects will make a stronger impact on the wider community, and give a broader base on which to work and witness….” Other responses argued that it would offer a more consistent response, provide a better flow of ideas, and that it would provide “a wonderful inclusivity in dealing with a global crisis.” (Neil). But in several cases there was a degree of caution, with respondents thinking that it would be easier to avoid the issue, that an ecumenical approach may result in more talk than action, or that ecumenism takes time.

However, a number of points need to be made. First, it is clear from a range of statements cited earlier that there is already a strong ecumenical approach at work at the highest level of Church administration, as in the case of Councils of Churches or world confessional bodies, and I would contend that this can only be helpful. At the local level, as I have shown, effective eco-mission is almost bound to have its roots in a particular congregation; but that does not mean that it must remain there. My argument is therefore that eco-mission may be both specific and ecumenical at the same time. Second, it is clear from the British experience that the ecumenical approach is strongest and most effective at the level just beyond the congregation, as in the case of EcoCongregation, the A Rocha organisation, and others.

At a wider level, another area in which there was close to unanimity was support for the idea of engaging the political processes on behalf of the environment. Some respondents qualified their
affirmation with observations such as any comment should be informed, the Church should be the conscience of the nation, and any views expressed must be balanced. Dawn Wilson’s approach was that “saying things are political and none of our business is a ‘cop-out’ – an excuse for continuing ‘as is’ while blaming the government.” Dr Chris Walker (2008) stated that such engagement with the political process “affirms God’s concern for the world and not just humans… The Church needs to speak with its own voice and perspective and avoid being seen as an ill informed lobby group.”

Role of Eco-Schools

One area that could have a significant environmental impact as an extension of congregational eco-mission initiatives is that of educational establishments, most notably schools. Clearly this is potentially a very large issue, and therefore it is not possible to pursue it here, or to determine what impact the educational system might have in a wider setting. However, it is worth noting that Catholic Education in Queensland has a well-developed environmental education program with a strong theological and educational underpinning. A report in 2008 indicated that over 32 schools were active environmentally. One example of the broader potential of children to lead the way may suffice. Liza Neil is an environmental architect who has a commitment to Our Lady of the Rosary School, which is a Parish school in Caloundra; her comment was that the school “is now possibly driving the Parish rather than the other way round”. The program is obviously still in the early stages of development; nevertheless, Neil states “We’ve just had a ‘Green’ Community Fun Run. We’ve saved 1.5 tonnes of CO2 through car-free challenges and the kids are becoming eco-activists and teaching us all”. She adds, “I love it when the Grade 3 activists tell the Grade 7’s not to litter.”

It is apparent that at this point of time the “eco-activism” of the school has had little impact on the associated congregation. However, when anecdotal evidence is added to the zeal of younger
students, it at least gives rise to hope. Moreover, if other state, church, and independent schools had a comparable program, the results in time could be significant.

The Possibilities of International Dialogue

It is quite clear that the context for eco-mission varies considerably from one region to another, and even more from one continent to another. Nevertheless I contend that there are a number of ways in which Churches at all levels can help and encourage one another in this important endeavour. At a very basic level, inter-continental dialogue is a reminder that the issues involved are of a global nature, and we are all in it together. Response strategies may vary, but because matters such as climate change and biodiversity have broad implications, it is possible that programs can be developed at the same global level. But in addition, any feeling of isolation on the part of Australian congregations could be reduced dramatically by awareness of a group such as Interfaith Power and Light in the United States, which is an eco-faith network involving some 4,000 congregations in 26 states – and that is just one group in one country. Eco-mission is still at an early stage of its evolution in Australia, and so while it is premature to speculate on the contribution Australia could make to the world church, the uniqueness of our context and environment should ensure that Australian voices will have a contribution to make.

I am arguing, however, that it is quite impossible simply to transpose a British or American modus operandi into an Australian context, and that it is neither feasible nor desirable to try to replicate every British peak group in Australia. At the same time I contend that there are several ways in which the Australian Church can learn from the British approach and experience.

In the first instance that will involve returning to a similar point of beginning, namely issues of need and context. But this is a theological and not just a pragmatic issue. The vital connection is in Browning’s claim that “Christian theology should be seen as practical through and through
and at its very heart” (1996, p7); further, as Bevans (2005) argues, all theology is contextual. Against that background, I have argued that the geographic, demographic, and social context in Australia is very different from Britain. It follows therefore that the number and type of groups that may be formed should emerge from the context in which they are set. Such an approach may have a higher degree of theological integrity than may otherwise be the case; it does not need to ignore the British experience, but it may involve grappling with crucial questions emerging from that experience, and an openness to learn from British mistakes by choosing not to replicate them in Australia. Indeed, some structures for the encouragement of eco-mission may in fact be adapted legitimately from the British model.

Further, by analysing the groups into categories it is possible to clarify the position. The first category I indicated above, namely the area of elite operation, is both important and needed in Australia. At the same time, I would argue that because of the degree of consensus on ecological issues not only across the usual Christian divisions, but also across the broader religious divisions, a narrowly defined confessional basis is problematic. The fourth category, relating to Aid groups, does not constitute a major problem, since to a large extent they are merely adding a dimension to what they are already doing.

It is the second and third categories, relating to local congregations and individuals, that represent the main “grey area”, and it is there that the most careful consideration will be required. It may be that Bookless is correct, and a degree of market economics applies here. But the most effective outcome, I contend, will result from a careful consideration of what support or encouragement systems are needed in the diverse Australian context, and that will involve looking primarily at the larger good than at our own preferred theological emphasis. Thus, my contention is that something as fundamental as the future of life on the planet will require a high
degree of cooperation between Christian denominations, other world religions, and community and government agencies, for the good of all.

**Structural issues**

It is a common practice to locate environmental issues in the Social Justice section of denominational structure, or even (as in the case of the British Methodist Church) under the heading of International Mission, and it must be acknowledged that there is a certain logic involved in the link with social justice in particular. As I have argued in this thesis, there is a strong relationship between justice for people and justice for the planet. However, in spite of the assertion that personnel in the different sections of the hierarchy are in regular communication, I contend that the danger of an excessive compartmentalising of issues is very real, and that it becomes evident in a tendency to separate social justice from day-to-day mission in congregations.

In citing the Uniting Church in Queensland as an example of this problem, a cautious approach is essential in that the situation is very fluid. Church representatives argue that there is no problem, in that the various consultants are in constant conversation, which may be true. But the fact remains that while the Church has expressed itself strongly on behalf of the environment, and set in place a number of decisions with implications for mission, it is not part of the Mission Consultant’s brief to raise the possibility of an eco-mission agenda in the congregations with which he meets. The disconnection is made more emphatic by the fact that the Consultant concerned readily acknowledges the seriousness of environmental issues, and agreed strongly with Bosch that 21st century mission must have an ecological dimension.

I am not seeking here to point a finger of blame at any individual, but rather to point towards the limitations of some of our administrative systems. My contention is that the theology that
nurtures a social justice conscience and a concern for our environment must also inform the mission of the Church, not just at a national or state level, but locally; and local leaders must be helped to confront and deal with the issues involved. Perhaps a British experience may once again provide at least food for thought. In 2007, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland was overhauling its committee structure. As the General Secretary explained it to me, rather than having a committee for the environment, this was to become part of the brief of every committee. There are dangers there as well because of the human element; my point is that the connections need to be made, and reinforced by appropriate systems of administration.

Such an approach in Britain reflects Conradie’s stance (2005) that an ecological ethic or ethos carries implications that reach into virtually every aspect of life. Thus, against the background of a widespread perception that eco-mission represents just one more issue the Church is called upon to deal with, Conradie’s assertion is important. “There is … no need to add environmental concerns to an already over-crowded and overwhelming agenda of local churches and ecumenical bodies. Instead, the entire life and praxis of the church should include an ecological dimension and vision” (2005, p.282). It follows that what is required is a fundamentally different mindset from that which often prevails in the Church, especially at state and local levels.

**Eco-Mission Support System**

One issue of some importance, not least in the diverse Australian context, is the way in which the problem of isolation can be managed and congregations supported in their effort to embrace eco-mission. There are at least two issues here. The first relates to the personal care of people involved in eco-mission, against the background that they are perceptively often operating near the edge of accepted Christian mission, and in many circles their cause is not yet widely accepted. When disappointment is added to feelings of isolation, an energy-sapping
despondency may result. In the context of the largely-lapsed Earth Ministry initiative in Sydney, I found myself asking, “Who cares for the carers?” There is no easy answer to this, but the question of the personal and pastoral care of eco-mission practitioners must at least be on the table.

At another level, one possibility that is being explored by the Grafton Diocese, and which is an established aspect of the British eco-mission scene, is an Eco Award scheme operated by the organisation Eco-Congregation. Many of my respondents were wary of such an idea, which to them appeared like a reward for action taken on behalf of the environment. Another observation was that one does not engage in eco-mission for the sake of an award, which of course is obvious enough. However, there are two factors in particular that need to be considered. As I indicated in the previous chapter, the first is that a fundamental part of the Award approach is the provision of resources that a congregation is able to work through. This material will contain different ideas and questions together with information that people are encouraged to address in a way that leads to action.

When a congregation believes it has fulfilled the requirements for the Award, an application is made to EcoCongregation. Several independent assessors then visit the congregation, and depending on their judgment, the Award may be given, and that is current for three years. Thus, the Award structure provides a resource for learning and development in eco-mission, and since it is for a period of three years, it becomes a tool of encouragement to continue on a journey. The key here is accountability and the encouragement to work through the material. The other aspect to be considered is that it enables a congregation to indicate publicly that it is an eco congregation, and has been judged to be thus by an independent panel. I have cited some examples of that in the previous chapter.
My contention is that while some may choose not to go down this path, it nevertheless remains a significant possibility in the movement towards effective eco-mission. Moreover, while a denominational award scheme would represent a start, I believe that if the scheme is to have real credibility, it is almost imperative that it should be operated ecumenically.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to show something of the shape and context of eco-mission in Australian churches. As I have previously indicated, this is indicative and illustrative rather than comprehensive. It begins within an international and ecumenical background which is shaped to some extent by pronouncements and resolutions at a national level. But the essential practical outcomes invariably emerge at a local level, with some direction and support from state and regional jurisdictions. Thus, in this chapter I have considered a range of factors that might either encourage or inhibit effective eco-mission. This has included matters regarding underlying attitudes, ways in which eco-mission begins, the place of mission statements, and a number of general themes by which eco-mission programs might be summarised. Other important dimensions that have not been fully explored here relate to the need for adequate support systems, including some structural issues, and the potential for productive international dialogue.

In the final chapter I will summarise the conclusions and contribution of this thesis, and seek to give an indication of what an Australian eco church might look like.
I have previously cited Moltmann to the effect that the “ecological crisis” is in reality “a crisis of the whole life system of the modern industrial world” (1985, p.23). Conradie would agree, arguing that the crisis is primarily cultural rather than ecological. He suggests that “what is required is a fundamental change of orientation, a *metanoia*” (2005, p.285). That is true both for the Church as a whole and for the individuals who are part of it.

What I have sought to do in this thesis is to argue from a theological and biblical perspective for the inclusion of ecological mission as one important aspect of the mission of the Church. As such, I am arguing that it is not a side issue or an optional extra, but part of the mainstream of that mission. In doing this, my aim has been to establish a connection between theology in general, a theology of Christian mission, and the exercise of that mission in practical terms; thus, each chapter has built upon the previous one. I contend that it is imperative for the practitioner at all levels to grasp such a connection as integral to the Christian faith itself.

A number of points may be made briefly. First, the practice of Christian mission needs to be far more than a mere pragmatic response to the circumstances in which Church communities find themselves; even though that existential context will obviously be important, the mission itself must emerge out of a theological context. Second, in following a practical theology paradigm, I take it as a methodological “given” that theory and praxis will interact in terms of the “hermeneutic spiral” to which I made reference in chapter 2, rather than the praxis being the mere outworking of a predetermined theory.
Thus, within the context of both a global and an Australian eco-crisis, I have sought to argue the case for a credible ecotheology; however, I have argued that such a practical theology is not reactive in nature and does not need a physical crisis to justify a response, since in Christian biblical and theological terms it is rooted in the call of God to care for creation. Once the validity of what I have termed an eco-friendly approach to theology is acknowledged, it is possible to explore the more practical aspects of that theology. I have therefore examined the British approach to eco-mission as the basis for a consideration of what is emerging in Australia. As a consequence, I contend that a model for an eco-church in Australia starts to take shape.

Theological Implications

There are several principal and related implications of the research for Christian theology and ecclesiastical practice. In the background there may be the recognition that quite frequently there has been a theological crisis alongside the environmental one, at least at a grassroots level. Thus, when a theology of Christian mission is added to a theology of creation, or ecotheology, what emerges is a second aspect of a crisis, but this time it is spiritual and theological in nature, expressed in the widespread failure of the Church to grasp the significance of the natural environment, or God’s creation, in its approach to mission. Put another way, this would be the confession that for a very long time Christians and Churches have generally failed to grasp the environmental or creation-care theological implications that in one form or another have always been present.

What this suggests is that in the first instance there is a need to re-think biblical hermeneutics. The dominant hermeneutical assumption has been, and in many respects remains, human-focussed. But Habel’s (2000) advocacy of a hermeneutic of suspicion, to which I made reference in chapter 2, is, in my view, pertinent. When the hermeneutical perspective shifts from
a human to an earth focus, new understandings become possible. Habel’s “Earth Bible” series is an example of that; Leal’s (2006) treatment of some parables of Jesus is another.

Second, it suggests the need to recognise the validity and implications of a theology of creation as it relates to ecological issues. Santmire’s (1985) categorisation of the Church’s historic approach to the place of ecology in the history of theology as ambiguous (chapter 4) may be acknowledged readily; and while that means an anthropocentric theology goes back to the beginning of the Christian faith, it indicates equally that a nature-inclusive approach also has its roots in that same period. But beyond that, I contend that the biblical exegesis and theological reflection on the care of creation has validity in its own right, that it is part of the theological mainstream, and therefore ought not to be overlooked by practitioners but recognised in the Church at large.

**Implications for Theory and Ecclesial Practice**

Once the theological implications have been established, a range of theoretical implications inevitably ensue. The following list is not necessarily complete, but is indicative of some of the more significant aspects.

First, it is clearly not enough for Churches to make pronouncements about environmental issues, or to simply state what they believe governments should be doing, although that is an important element, and it is right that they should do so. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that at a national level at least, the focus will be in that area. However, the Christian community also has an obligation, even a divine calling, to set its own house in order, and to engage in practical eco-mission along with other groups with a related vision. I have suggested a number of ways in which that can happen. The widespread community recognition of an eco-crisis presents a
powerful opportunity for a practical public theology, or for what might be termed “mission in the public square”.

Second, I contend that there are implications for theological education, in the training of clergy and lay leaders. The overwhelming perception of respondents in my research, both in Britain and in Australia, is that ecotheology and its implications is not a high priority. It will be obvious of course that there are a great many pressures on the curricula of theological colleges, and it may not be possible to cover all the ground that may be desirable. It should also be acknowledged that specialised courses such as “the Greening of Mission” at Redcliffe College in England, or ecotheology at the United Theological Faculty in New South Wales may occasionally be found, although they are not common. Further, a course in mission conducted through the Brisbane College of Theology now includes an ecological reference. Nevertheless, even with those acknowledgments, ecotheology and the corresponding mission is still in most cases on the periphery rather than acknowledged as part of the mainstream. I contend that it is not necessary to consume vast amounts of limited time in order to include an eco theme, but rather that the rudiments at least should be included in the core teaching. Thus, for example, it should be acknowledged that a credible approach to teaching a doctrine of God in creation must include an element of caring for creation.

At a more local level, many leaders and congregation members can be reached through workshops and seminars that may take no more than several hours. This has been demonstrated in a number of places including south-east Queensland.

Third, and as an extension of the previous point, programs of continuing education for ministry could very easily add ecotheology and eco-mission as options, especially at a time in which
environmental issues are becoming more prominent, more open to change, and in which people with appropriate expertise are becoming available.

Fourth, there are ecotheological implications for denominational structures. As I have suggested in the previous two chapters, while eco-mission is clearly related to the area of social justice, it is equally clearly related as a core component of mission. It may be that in the eyes of many, advocating social justice is not fully recognised as authentic and essential core mission, in which case eco-mission has an even harder task in being recognised. Structures, and therefore boundaries, are both important and inevitable, but I contend that it is also important that structures do not unnecessarily impede the possibilities of eco-mission.

Fifth, it has become apparent from my research that a pervasive sense of eco-mission trying to happen in isolation presents a significant obstacle to effective action, especially when that is combined with significant distances. Against that background, the British Anglican practice of appointing honorary consultants in every diocese or regional area has much to commend it. While it may not be possible to create such a support network overnight, one clear implication of my research is that churches, perhaps acting ecumenically, need to address the need to reduce the perception of isolation and to increase the availability of resources and personal support in this mission. A corollary of that is the need to identify appropriately qualified people, regardless of denomination, so that they may be available as needed and according to their availability.

Sixth, the need for appropriate political engagement was almost unanimously supported by my respondents in Australia. This can happen at all levels, from national denominational or ecumenical press statements, to the writing of letters to members of parliament, right through to my own face-to-face engagement with my state member of parliament.
Seventh, the need to find the right balance between local and global is implicit in the research. At a local level it is inevitable and appropriate that local issues will dominate; but from what I have said above, it is also imperative that local action and insight is ultimately understood in a global context.

Other implications of the research may also be drawn, and will certainly emerge from time to time in the light of further reflection and practice.

**An Eco-Church Model for Australia?**

There are several concluding questions that may reasonably be asked. For example, are there reasonable grounds for hope that the Christian Church will enhance its effectiveness in eco-mission in the near term, and in cooperation with other concerned agencies and groups? One cannot predict the future, but certainly there is some ground for hope. Walker (2008) for one, in reflecting an awareness of the wider mission scene in Australia, is certain that a change in mindset is coming. That would appear to be supported by the steady increase in the number of congregations taking the first tentative steps, not only in the direction of a more sustainable future, but also towards a more holistic response to the requirements of Christian mission in the 21st century. A second and related question might be to ask if it is possible to create a picture of an eco-church model for Australia. The answer must be both yes and no. As eco congregations begin to emerge all over the country, they do so in a great variety of different local contexts, and therefore are to some extent shaped by those factors. Thus, eco congregations are bound to differ to some extent. At the same time, there are many common elements, even across national and hemispherical differences. It may therefore be possible to develop a type of eco-mission template that is sufficiently basic but also cognisant of practical detail in such a way that it may be adapted and adopted by churches existing in radically different circumstances. It is not my purpose here to attempt to construct such a template, but in addition to the implications noted...
above, and by way of summary, the following is an example of what such a template may include.

First, I propose that a good starting point for eco-mission may be the identification of some appropriate resources and resource people. This will help to overcome isolation, and ensure that new groups will be able to build on the endeavours of previous groups, and to learn from their mistakes, without the unnecessary need to “reinvent the wheel.” A further aspect of that will be the identification of a small core group that will be essential for encouraging the congregation as a whole to become involved in this endeavour.

Second, the pronouncements of global and national ecumenical and denominational bodies will form a significant backdrop and means of intellectual and spiritual support for local practitioners setting out on an eco-mission venture. As I have noted previously, many of those statements and resolutions are strong, and reflect a global Christian consensus on this matter. Local groups may be well advised not to deprive themselves of this means of support. This will also help to ensure that local responses are offered within the context of a global crisis.

Third, the use of educational workshops and other teaching opportunities, including sermons, will help to ensure that any practical activity is soundly based in at least two ways. First, it will encourage a response that is theologically based and not merely the outworking of pragmatism. Second, it will also be important to help people understand what is happening to the global environment, while at the same time bearing in mind that the situation is a developing one, and fresh information is constantly coming to hand. In that regard, a resource such as Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” has often proved to be a useful teaching tool.
Fourth, I believe that it is essential that the wider Church create a resource pack such as that prepared by David Pickering for use by the EcoCongregation organisation in Britain. This would provide emerging local groups with a means of determining where they are currently situated environmentally, and also a package of basic resources with a series of issues they can work through. I am also favourably disposed to the idea of relating this material to an award system as in the UK, on the basis that this provides a structure and a public recognition of stages that have been achieved, and may be used as a further publicity and educative tool.

Fifth, I would assert that it is highly desirable that one of the first steps to be taken in establishing eco-mission locally should be the working through and adoption of an eco-mission statement (such as the example in Appendix 1) that sets out the primary vision and aims of the mission. This serves to clarify what the group hopes to achieve, and therefore to be the immediate foundation on which specific goals might be based.

Sixth, a local eco-mission church would need to establish its own priorities and goals, but the template may include a series of project or program options, which while not exhaustive, may nevertheless be a list from which selections may be made; it may also stimulate fresh thinking based on local circumstances or perceptions of the global situation. In the previous chapter I illustrated programs under six headings, although that number is not especially significant. The following summary is an example of what the list might include.

**Worship and spirituality**

(a) Special worship services (up to 4 per year), with more frequent references in the liturgy.

(b) Children’s learning and fun activity related to God’s creation.

(c) Encouragement of a form of spirituality that includes the natural world.

**Educational programs**

(a) Periodical small group studies in the congregation.
Workshops and seminars based on ecotheology.

**Eco Planting**

(a) Planting of natural vegetation – a green eco area at the Church, with a guide to encourage creation spirituality and appreciation of natural beauty.

(b) Rehabilitating a run-down area.

**Building and Policy issues**

(a) An environmental audit.
(b) Use of “green” power, such as solar.
(c) Storage and use of roof water; possible use of grey water.
(d) Recycling.
(e) Consciously relating to appropriate community groups.

**Prophetic role**

(a) Action on behalf of climate issues; e.g., education, political lobbying, personal example.

**Personal lifestyle**

(a) Adoption of a personal sustainable lifestyle.

**Limitations**

In part the question of limitations is answered by the following section on options for further research. However, while it may be said that ecotheology and the related theology of eco-mission opens up a very large subject area with the potential to explore numerous aspects at greater depth, I am confident that the basic theology involved is sound, and therefore that an anthropocentric approach cannot be sustained. But the scope of the fundamental issue is especially apparent when it is applied in terms of a practical theology. Thus, the research involved in this thesis is necessarily limited to particular aspects of the whole. The research methodology is necessarily incomplete, if only because the picture is changing on a daily basis. What I have done therefore is to clarify the basic theology involved, and to take a snapshot as it were of practical eco-mission at a particular point in time. It is therefore indicative rather than comprehensive.
Other limitations stem from the fact that out of necessity the research has not covered the full range of Christian traditions or denominations. However, in that the focus has been on the main areas of activity, such a limitation is unlikely to be problematic. In addition there are many potential contextual variations around Australia, and while it is important that such a fact should be recognised, it is not possible to explore those variations in any detail. The fact that some people will not be open to a theological argument for Christian eco-mission should at least be noted.

**Further Research**

The implications of ecotheology for Christian mission can readily be extended to a number of additional areas of research. First, people living in rural communities, and either directly or indirectly deriving their livelihood from the land, face particular issues that deserve attention. Many people on the land are involved in various forms of land care, often in very difficult circumstances. They might be regarded as being on the “front line”, with prolonged drought caused by climate change adding a sense of urgency and difficulty to the need to try to survive.

Second, an ecotheological perspective on the place of the economy and technology would be useful. A popular myth has been that one must choose between the environment and economic progress, but many positive models have begun to emerge. Further research could help to establish an approach to the future that is both affordable and sustainable.

Third, there are the possibilities of inter-faith cooperation, an example of which is the Faith Ecology Network in Australia. This has many positive possible implications. I have previously indicated that there is substantial inter-faith agreement concerning the care of the environment, so that a focus on preserving the planet could go a long way towards bridging the gap between followers of major world religions.
Fourth, eco-mission may be viewed as an extension of pastoral care. Graham (1992) uses the notion of shalom as a way of exploring lovelessness and injustice, and writes of “harmonizing contention through a ministry of care” (1992, p.159). For him, shalom is intended to generate love justice and harmony both within and between people, but also with the natural order. He notes that “the ministry of care does not normally directly promote ecological partnership”, and that there are ways in which it has a certain “add-on quality” (1992, p.175). Thus, Graham believes that a ministry of care must extend to the earth itself, and that “the pastoral caretaker has a responsibility to help persons and families examine their life-style in terms of its ecological consequences, as well as its possibilities for increasing neighbour-love and promoting justice” (1992, p.176). Given the fact that pastoral care is rightly perceived as basic to a Church’s mission, Graham’s holistic approach that effectively extends care beyond people to include the earth is one that could offer some positive possibilities. But relatively little work has been done in this area, and so it may offer an interesting field of further research.

Fifth, there are without doubt many inherent contradictions in modern living. There are some rare individuals who seem able to be able to create a sustainable lifestyle, to reduce waste and their carbon footprint to an almost negligible level. But for most people, even those who are environmentally aware, simply living in the modern world can have a high price tag, both economically and in other ways. Thus, in order to advance my research in eco-mission, I needed to fly to the UK, and while an additional payment for carbon credits may appease one’s conscience, it does not necessarily pay the environmental cost. How does an individual or a community strike a balance? Is such a balance possible, and what might it look like? This is a further area of possible research.

Sixth, one aspect of an environmental awakening in recent years has been some significant work being done by dedicated people in schools. One prime example is the Australian Sustainable
Schools Initiative, which is promoted by the Federal Government in partnership with the States and Territories. A second example is the work being done through Catholic Education in Queensland. As initiatives such as these tend to increase, what impact might that have, not only on the students as future responsible citizens, but also in a more immediate sense on parents and the wider community? Anecdotal evidence would suggest that children have the capacity to influence their parents, to share their own environmental education with them. But further research is needed into the role and significance of educational establishments in helping to generate a sustainable future.

Seventh, in the previous chapter I identified a number of inhibitors of eco-mission, and indicated that congregations do not always respond to the committed and able leadership that is offered, resulting in a significant disconnection between the two. However, there is scope for a more thorough examination of why this happens. What factors or dynamics are at work in the disconnection between good leadership and a refusal to respond to the challenge of eco-mission?

**Concluding Note**

It may well be argued that a range of additional resources is needed if eco-mission is to be as widespread and effective as it needs to be. In speaking with Dr David Pitman, Moderator of the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church, I raised the question of finding adequate resources to mount an effective program. His response was that “within what presently exists there is absolutely nothing to prevent a focus on this issue” (2007). I have argued however that some appropriate structures and resources are needed; even so, I believe that it demonstrates the truth of Conradie’s proposal that what is needed is “a fundamental change of heart, a metanoia” (2005, p.285-6). As my research has also demonstrated, the change that is most needed is one of perception and attitude.
My hope is that while this thesis cannot of itself create that needed change, it may at least be able to provide sound information to support the change, and encourage an effective approach to Christian ecological mission within the Australian context.
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Appendix 1

Caloundra Congregation
Uniting Church in Australia
ECO-MISSION STATEMENT

Vision
The Caloundra Uniting Church, in recognising the natural environment as God’s Creation, believes that:

- Christians are called to safeguard the integrity of Creation, and to exercise their mission in such a way that the life of the earth is sustained and renewed.
- Alongside other valid expressions of Christian mission, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God includes working for justice, peace, and a proper stewardship of the earth.
- The well-being of people is inter-woven with the well-being of the planet itself.

Objectives
In response to that vision, the ecological aims of the Caloundra Uniting Church will be:

- To raise environmental awareness in the congregation and throughout the community.
- To engage in practical measures on behalf of the environment.
- To encourage a form of spirituality that includes an appreciation and care for Creation.

Facilitation of the Mission
To facilitate and implement these objectives, and to assist the congregation in caring for creation, an Eco group of interested persons will be established as a sub-group of the Social Justice Group. The Eco group shall undertake activities that are consistent with the Vision and Objectives agreed by the Caloundra Uniting Church and in accordance with Synod policies.

Decisions that affect the congregation will be made on a shared basis under the authority of the Church Council. Activities involving finance will be subject to the approval of the Church Council.

Explanatory Notes
Definitions
The term “eco-mission” is a shorthand way of speaking about the values reflected in the Vision and Objectives indicated in the “Eco-mission Statement.” It reflects the belief that as Christians, when we talk about the environment, nature, or ecology, we are in fact talking about God’s
Creation. Another way of understanding it is in terms of the Anglican Church’s goal “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”

**Some examples of eco-mission**

Eco-mission has implications at various levels – global, national, regional, and local. The reality is that few congregations will be able to cover all of that, but best practice would suggest that whatever is attempted would at least be in the context of an overall vision of the issues. Thus, bearing in mind that local issues will vary from place to place, the following are some examples from various parts of the world:

(d) Special worship services (up to 4 per year).
(e) Children’s activities.
(f) Planting of natural vegetation – a green eco area at the Church.
(g) Recycling
(h) Rehabilitating a run-down area.
(i) An environmental audit.
(j) Use of “green” power, such as solar.
(k) Storage and use of roof water.
(l) Action on behalf of climate issues.
(m) Adoption of a personal sustainable lifestyle.
(n) Studies and teaching activities.
(o) Encouragement of an appropriate form of spirituality.

This list is not intended to be comprehensive, but illustrative of the kind of programs that have been adopted by congregations around the world.
Appendix 2

Interviews Conducted 2007

Australia

Beattie, Graham, Mission Consultant, Uniting Church Queensland.
Jones, Douglas, General Secretary, Uniting Church Queensland.
Johnson, Andrew, Social Justice Consultant, Uniting Church Queensland.
Kerr, Tom, Young Adult Ministry Consultant, Uniting Church Queensland.
Kuchler, Alan, former Moderator, Uniting Church Queensland.
Macleod, Duncan, Vision for Mission Consultant, Uniting Church Queensland.
Pitman, David, Moderator, Uniting Church Queensland.
Sims, Neil, Lecturer, Trinity Theological College.

England

Barrett, Mark, Methodist Church, Cheltenham.
Bookless, David, A Rocha.
Cassidy, Mike, and Stett, Alan, Baptist-Methodist Church, Leicester.
Conway, Ruth, Anglican Church, Oxford.
Dalton, Suzanne, Anglican Church, Far Headingly, Leeds.
Hodson, Martin, Anglican Church, Oxford; John Ray Initiative; lecturer.
Horder, Cathy, with Perrott, Carol and Clive, Anglican Church, Cleeve.
Hucklesby, Steven, International Mission Consultant, Methodist Church.
Lepine, Jerry, with Lewis, Rae, and Blackburn, Jane, Anglican Church, Nottingham.
Linford, Diana, with Warren, Isobel, and Botwright, Anna, Anglican Church, Skipton.
Macdonald, Donald, Anglican Church, Derby.
Pickering, David, United Reformed Church, formerly EcoCongregation.
Rathbone, Jo, EcoCongregation.
Reed, Simon, Redcliffe College.
Steer, Simon, Anglican Church, Ealing.

2008

Australia

Catt, Rosie, Anglican Church, Grafton Diocese; Aust. Anglican Environmental Network.
John, Jason, Eco Minister, Uniting Church, Mid North Coast Presbytery.
Nyreane, Miriam, Coordinator, AngliGreen, Brisbane.
Pepper, Miriam, Maroubra Junction Uniting Church; Climate Institute.
Questionnaire Responses
2008

Australia
Arndt, Peter, Exec. Officer, Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, Brisbane.
Booth, Tim, Hon. Deacon, St Clements Anglican Church, Stafford.
Catt, Rosie, Anglican Church, Grafton Diocese; Aust. Anglican Environmental Network.
Chalson, Paul, Minister, Uniting Church, Clarence, Tasmania.
Court, John, Denistone East Uniting Church; Earth Ministry and WaterLines.
Dalgleish, Ken, Anglican Church, Stafford; AngliGreen member.
Daniels, Lucy, Anglican Church, Park Ridge (Logan).
Dittmar-McCollim, Ann, Archdeacon, Anglican Church, Logan.
Ellis, Ann, All Saints Anglican Church, Grovely.
Finlay, Grant, Pastor, Uniting Church (UAICC), Glenarchy, Tasmania.
Gilbert, Brian, Minister, Uniting Church, Caloundra.
Griffin, Heather, Minister, Uniting Church, Sherwood.
Guard, Frances, Uniting Church, Blackall Range.
Hacquoil, Geoff, Uniting Church, Caloundra.
Hamer, Kevin, Pastor of Baptist Church, Nambour.
Harch, Gary, Rector, St James Anglican Church, Toowoomba.
Holland, Kevin, Salvation Army, Caloundra.
Hunt, Rex, Uniting Church, Canberra.
James, Kath, Environment Project Officer, Uniting Church, Victoria.
John, Jason, Eco Minister, Uniting Church, Mid North Coast Presbytery.
King, Darren, Minister, Uniting Church, Nambour.
Landbeck, Margaret, Uniting Church, Caloundra.
Lowry, David, Uniting Church, Caloundra.
McFadyen, Rachel, Anglican Church, Kenmore-Brookfield.
McIntyre, John, Bishop Gippsland Diocese, Anglican Church.
Manoharan, Amos, Minister, Uniting Church Holland park.
Neil, Liza, Our Lady of the Rosary School, Caloundra.
Pepper, Miriam, Maroubra Junction Uniting Church, Climate Institute.
Philpot, Robert, Uniting Church, Blackall Range.
Redman, Bill, Minister, Anglican Church, Ipswich North.
Reichardt, David, Minister, Uniting Church, Denistone East; Earth Ministry; WaterLines.
Reid, Jan, Minister, Uniting Church, Caloundra.
Richardson, Barry, Comm. for the Environment, Canberra-Goulburn Dio., Anglican Church.
Rigby, Geoff, Diocesan Environment Commission, Newcastle Diocese, Anglican Church.
Rose, Sr. and Sr. Mary-Ann, Diocesan Comm. For Environ. Awareness, Catholic Ch., Emu Pk.
Seymour, Judy, Anglican Church, Redcliffe.
Shields, Tricia, Catholic Church, Boonah.
Suddick, Ken, Archdeacon, St Bartholomew’s Anglican Church, Mt Gravatt.
Tulip, James, Uniting Church, Leura.
Tymms, Jenny, Consultant, Uniting Church Queensland.
Tynan, Sr Kathleen, Social Action Office, Catholic Church, Brisbane.
Van Graan, Ian, Uniting Church, Northbridge-Castlecrag; Earth Ministry.
Walker, Christopher, Uniting Church, Parramatta-Nepean Presb., Northmead Church.
Warne, Graham, Uniting Church, Nambour.
Whittall, Chris, Dean, St Paul’s Cathedral, Rockhampton.
Williams, John, Uniting Church Canberra; Water Commissioner, NSW.
Wilson, Dawn, Catholic Church, Caloundra.
Wiskar, Gloria, Anglican Church, Wacol; member of AngliGreen.
Ecology and Christian Mission Questionnaire

An Invitation

I would really value your response to the following questionnaire, which is intended to examine attitudes to the relationship between ecological or environmental concerns and Christian mission. This survey is not intended to be anonymous; I am inviting you to put your name to it so that I may be able to follow up any points as may be necessary, either by email or telephone, or even on a face-to-face basis.

As you will see, the survey comes in a number of parts, not all of which may be applicable to you; please respond to the relevant sections, and feel free to attach any material that you believe may be of interest, or to offer any comments that you think may be helpful. Some of the questions are in a multiple choice format, and require a single response, but many others call for a different type of written response.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. When you have completed the questionnaire, please return it in the postage-paid envelope provided to the address below. If you have received this as an email attachment, or would like it in that format, you may return the completed form to:

cliveandgail@westnet.com.au

Your response by Friday 13th June 2008 will be appreciated.

Clive W. Ayre
Postgraduate Student
School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics
The University of Queensland
Brisbane Qld 4072

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Basic approach

For each of the following questions or statements, please mark the ONE response that best reflects your position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The global environmental situation is very serious.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>An environmental crisis is becoming increasingly evident in Australia.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Environmental action, or care of Creation, is primarily a moral and spiritual issue.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>From a theological perspective, creation care should be part of the Church’s mission.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Encouraging congregations to engage with environmental issues should be part of a Mission Consultant’s role.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Eco-mission is a useful avenue of Christian outreach.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>“For the Church of the 21st century, good ecology is not an optional extra but …is… central to what it means to be a Christian.” (Archbishop Williams).</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>“It would be helpful if the Church’s ecological mission were to be exercised ecumenically”.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are there any aspects of the environmental situation in Australia that cause you particular concern?

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In what way/s does the situation in Australia give you cause for hope or despair?

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Should the Church be prepared to engage the political process on behalf of the environment?

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Any other comments?

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From a Denominational/Ecumenical (Synod, Diocesan or similar) Perspective

The Anglican Church’s “5th Mark of Mission” is “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”; To what extent would that describe your approach?

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Do you have a Mission Statement that is applicable to ecological mission? (If ‘yes’, a copy would be appreciated)

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Are there any other ways you would describe your charter for eco-theology or mission?

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What strategies do you adopt in seeking to fulfil that charter?

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In what ways do you seek to motivate and resource congregations for eco-mission?

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How successful do you think you have been in that undertaking?

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How would you rate the level of morale within your organisation in terms of eco-mission?

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To what extent does your Church include eco-theology/eco-mission in its training or continuing education of clergy?

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What additional resources would be needed to upgrade eco-theology/mission education?

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In some jurisdictions, ecological/environmental issues are managed as part of “social justice”; do you see any problem with that? Are there any strategies required to ensure that ecological issues are also a part of mission and education?

If a congregation wanted to generate an eco-mission agenda, would they be able to turn to you for advice? What issues are involved from your perspective?

In what ways might the Church (or your particular group) be able to improve its effectiveness in eco-mission?

What impact might an ecumenical approach have?

Any other observations?

The response of congregations

To what extent has your congregation been exposed to ecotheology?

How did that happen?

Does your congregation have an eco-mission program? If not, has it had one in the past?

Is there anyone available to provide eco-mission advice or resources?

Any other observations?
If your congregation has an eco-mission program or agenda:

What was your primary motivation at the outset? Was it theological? Pragmatic? A combination of both? A direct response to the experienced environmental situation?

How did you get started?

What are your aims in that mission?

What programs or strategies are included?

How many people are actively involved?

To what extent is the congregation supportive of these efforts?

To what extent do you as a congregation feel supported or alone in your eco-mission?

Does your eco-mission extend to other denominations or Faiths? Would you consider that?

Does your group relate with secular environmental groups? Is it something you would consider?

How do you (or your group) feel about what you have been able to achieve? (e.g., satisfied, frustrated, proud, etc)

Any other comments?
If your eco-mission has stalled, or never really got started:

Why do you think that has happened? .................................................................
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Any thoughts about how that situation might be changed? .................................
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What do you think might prevent eco-mission in congregations/regions that you know?

- Don’t believe in it
- Don’t know where to start
- Other priorities
- Comfortable lifestyle
- Fear that it may seem “new age”
- Fear of “green extremists”
- Lack of energy
- Lack of leadership
- Haven’t thought about it
- It has never been part of our Church’s agenda
- Don’t know what to think about it
- Lack of education

Other (Please specify).......................................................................................  
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How might you respond to an Eco Award system (as in the UK), providing resources to work through in order to attain the Award?

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What kind of additional support or resources would you find helpful for a truly effective eco-mission program?

- Finance
- More ideas
- Consultancy
- Checklist/Guidelines
- An organisation for reference
- Worship and study resources
- Seminars
- Education
- An eco award system

Other ideas (please specify)...............................................................................  
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What would need to change in order for congregations to become involved, or more involved in eco-mission?

- Different attitudes
- More financial resources
- Availability of Consultant
- More information/ideas
- Eco education for leaders

Other (please specify)……………………………………………………………………………………………
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What issues do you think should be included in an Australian eco-mission agenda?

- Worship with an environmental theme
- Church-based Studies
- Climate change campaign
- Environmental audit of Church
- Creation spirituality
- Use of green power
- Relate to community environmental groups
- Care for Church grounds
- Encourage environmental audit of homes
- Political lobbying
- Use of solar power

Other ideas (please specify)…………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Given that local issues will always be part of any eco-mission agenda, to what extent do you think a local congregation can respond to the global ecology?

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Do clergy and other Christian leaders need to become better equipped to give leadership in eco-mission? If so, how can that happen?

- Eco-theological education-seminary
- Continuing education programs
- Stronger lead from the Church as a whole

Other (please specify)…………………………………………………………………………………………
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Any other comments you care to make, or stories that may help others.
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Thank you once again!

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About you

Would you be open to the possibility of a follow-up email or conversation by telephone or personal visit if it was felt to be helpful to the research project? Yes/No

Name........................................................................................................Title.................................

Name of Church, congregation, or organisation.................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................

Address.............................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................

Phone ............................................. Email:........................................................................

From Clive W Ayre
Ph 07 5499 6025. Email: cliveandgail@westnet.com.au
Appendix 4

Interview Questions

There will be some variation in the questions posed, depending on the role of the interviewee. But a sample is as follows:

1. It would seem that global warming and the environment generally has become a major issue in Australia in recent times. How do you see that?
2. How serious do you think the problem has become?
3. Clearly governments have some responsibility in this matter; but beyond that, who should be responsible?
4. Where does the Church fit in this? Is it, or should it be, a part of the mission of the Church?
5. I believe that your Church at Synod/General Synod/Assembly level has passed resolutions about the environment; is that right?
6. It is always difficult to determine what impact those resolutions might have made; but have you any idea of the extent to which they might have filtered through to the congregational level?
7. Does your Church actively encourage care of the environment as a mission focus, and if so, how?
8. This is a very broad question, but in recent decades quite a large volume of eco-theological literature has been produced, and it reflects a whole range of positions, from evangelical through moderate to quite radical. The interesting thing is that one can find many common threads running through the different theological stances. I’m wondering if you have had a chance to read much of that material, and if you have any observation or response that you would like to make, for example about its significance?
9. What would you see as the most significant roadblocks to local congregations taking up care of the environment as a central missional concern?
10. Is this something the Church could consider at other levels, perhaps ecumenically, or as a way of reaching into the wider community?

11. What about when Consultants conduct local Church seminars to consider mission directions and goals? Do you know if eco-mission is raised as a possibility, or is mission more people-centred? I'm wondering about the extent to which the average congregational minister is aware of ecological issues.

12. In your contact with congregational ministers, can you recall occasions when the issue of the Church and care of the environment was identified as important?

13. Do you know if ecotheology is part of their theological education?

14. Are there any plans to develop ecotheological education, or to advance it through CEM?

15. If the Church were to be active in eco-mission, what impact do you think that might have in other mission areas, for example in outreach to the community? What do you think would need to happen for eco-mission to become significant at the local level?

16. In the UK they have an organization called EcoCongregation that encourages eco-mission and presents awards. Could that be a good idea for Australia?

17. What additional resources may be needed to bring about effective eco-mission?

18. Anything else you would like to say?