

Earth theology in context: Celebrating the power of the local

Introduction

It is a great privilege to be invited to give this lecture; and thank you all for attending. Thank you too for the warm introduction.

I respected Prof Gunther Wittenberg as a gentle and caring person and as a rigorous scholar who was unwavering in this commitment to what was real and important. The application of his critical skills to the area of ecotheology arose out of his interest in what was relevant and helpful – certainly he “read the signs of the times.” This is an area in which he and I shared common ground. [See, for example the last chapter in his book, “Plant and Animal Rights – an Absurd Idea or Ecological Necessity: Perspectives from the Hebrew Torah,” in *Resistance Theology in the Old Testament: Collected Essays* (Cluster Publications, 2007), pp157-171.]

I am inspired by Gunther as someone who lived out his faith and firm beliefs in his own life and community. Having known his sense of humanity – *ubuntu* – makes me feel I can share something from my own life and journey through the topic for this evening.

In this past week my book, *The Church and Ecological Justice*, has been published by Cluster Publications.

Having finished this book I said to myself, what more is there it say? I feel if I repeat what in in the book I would be doing Cluster Publications a disservice. I would not want people saying that they heard the lecture and so do not need to buy the book!

This is where I am going this evening:

Explain the background to the title; look at the role of human beings in relation the earth and the earth community; consider two examples of good earthkeeping; look at the benefits of a focus on the local; and end with a mention of the concept of eco-congregations.

The background to my title

So not wanting to cover what is contained in my book I decided to elaborate on one of its themes – the value of local action. I will a bit later read one section from the book and occasionally refer to it.

I approached Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu to write something for my book – I thought that would help sell it! I was told by his media person that as he was retired he could not be approached to write a Forward, but that he could get from him a “spontaneous comment,” which I could put on the back cover.

The comment I got after having sent him a copy of the manuscript was not “this is a fantastic book”, “a must read”, “suitable for everyone”, etc.

These are the words that appear on the back cover:

Who can stop the destruction of God's earth? We can: You and you and you and I. And it is not just that we can stop it, we have a responsibility to do so. It is a responsibility that begins in the genesis of humanity, with God commanding the first human inhabitants of the Garden of Eden, "to till and keep it".

"You, you, you and I." In essence, we can all make a difference, where we are.

When I refer to the local, I mean a particular area or issue. I am referring to the specific and the particular. I am referring to individuals or small groups or communities. In the phrase "think globally and act locally," I wish to concentrate on the local part.

Celebration

The "celebration" bit arises partly from a paper I presented at the Theological Society of Southern Africa (TSSA) in 2012 here at UKZN. In it I gave a list of theologies that I felt were needed to sustain us in this era of rapid climate change.

During the time of questions one of my clerical colleagues, Janet Trisk, who is here, as is Professor Sue Rakoczy, who was also present then, commented along the lines that this is all good and well - that I had focussed on the global picture- but that what about things like celebration. It struck a chord in me, it challenged my heavy approach.

It lead me, later, to think also about the role of mirth, of humour, laughter in my work.

My context

My work is in a local church. I am rector of St Pauls Anglican church, in the city centre of Durban, where I have been for the last 18 months. This context now shapes my thinking and action. The speaking I do these days is usually in the form of sermons, where I try to address a diverse range of people.

In my work in the church and environment I have concentrated on helping people among whom I have worked to see the bigger picture, understanding how the world works and to change it. Surely it is the whole system that we need to change so that the earth can flourish, I would argue. Nothing less than changing the way we run the world is required.

In working with churches much of my time has been spent trying to help people to see the forces that control the world, that consume and destroy it.

More recently I have realised that the reason for this has been that a number of the people with whom I have worked have had a narrow understanding of what constitutes the environment and secondly, when they do look at the bigger picture they so not want to change it – the status quo suits them.

This has made me think: what is the earth, what constitutes the environment? The words of Jacklyn Cock, a former sociologist at Wits University helped put this in perspective for me. She contributed a chapter entitled "Going Green at the Grassroots: The Environment as a Political Issue," in *Going Green: People, Politics and the Environment in South Africa* (Edited by Jacklyn Cock and Eddie Koch, 1991, Cape Town: Oxford University Press), 1-17

Reflecting on changing attitudes to the environment she writes, in 1991, in an introductory article the following:

Until very recently the dominant understanding of environmental issues in South Africa was an authoritarian conservation perspective. This focused exclusively on the preservation of wilderness areas and particular species of plants and animals. Within this perspective 'overpopulation' was often identified as the main environmental problem....

Only very recently has an alternative progressive perspective begun to emerge. This perspective views environmental issues as deeply political in the sense that they are embedded in access to power and resources in society.It draws on the ideology of 'green politics' to emphasize the importance of linking the struggle against social injustice and the exploitation of people with the struggle against the abuse of the environment.

The legacy of the authoritarian conservation perspective is that many South Africans view environmental issues with suspicion. (p1)

I am not sure how far these newer perspectives have filtered through to our communities of faith.

Section from the book

When engaging in local actions we certainly need to keep in mind the structural injustice in the world.

In my book I emphasise the need to confront and engage with the bigger picture. I read a few paragraphs from the chapter, "The Earth is Not for Sale":

The problem is that among those with political and economic power some are claiming the world for themselves. They are trying to control it for their own benefit. More than that, they are trying to own the earth, and to exploit its resources to profit themselves only, and not make them available for the common good. As a consequence we have seen the increasing privatization of the "commons", those life-giving ecological resources and services that should be for the benefit of all - water, rivers, wetlands, biological diversity and the air itself.

One could say that nature is being commodified and a "market value" is being attached to natural resources. There is a growing sense in which everything is up for sale.

The current obsession with consumerism, coupled with materialism, leads to a misplaced valuing of things above people and relationships. The problem can also be seen on a global level. There is a strong conviction among those of the global South that the North owes them an "ecological debt." Through the process of colonization, on-going neo-colonization and globalization a great injustice has been done in that ecological resources are taken from the South to the North with insufficient compensation.

These practices are clearly unjust and are leading to the destruction of the earth....

I then go on to discuss what I call “The problem of economics”:

The problem lies with our understanding and practice of economics. Those with resources and power tend to set the rules on how goods and services are produced as well as how they are distributed. And those who have less have little control over how the system functions. Generally, the dominant market system, rather than the common good and ecological limits, determines our economics.

The way the economy runs is reflected in these destructive patterns, and tends to further entrench them. With countries being drawn closer together through the lowering of trade barriers and with the improvement in communications we live in an age of globalisation. However, this growing trend towards globalisation, supported by “neo-liberal” thinking, worsens the impact of the capitalist system. It increases greed, hoarding, exploitation and ecological destruction, and leads to extremes of wealth and poverty. It is based on the myth of unlimited growth, which in turn is based on the false assumption that there is an unlimited supply of raw materials for production and consumption.

As a consequence of the economic systems we have devised, the ecosystems of the planet that provide for all life on earth are being destroyed. This results in the loss of biodiversity, including the extinction of species, air and water pollution, deforestation, desertification and soil erosion. Commercial and industrial practices like mining can lead to the production of hazardous waste. While mining has been an important part of the South African economy, it has taken its toll both on the environment as well as on the health of workers.

Another fundamental problem is that we have come to believe that there is no alternative to this economic system. In establishing an economic system, should we not first be asking how we can ensure that all life can thrive and flourish? What system should we be working towards? What should characterise our economic systems? (p18-20)

I then go on to describe what I regard as a life-giving economy; which would be one that is centred on generosity, sharing and caring, that enables all to share in the fruits of God’s good earth; one that meets people’s needs and does not promote greed and hoarding.

Our Role as human beings

So where does the local start - with ourselves!

I want to start with looking at our role as human beings, our relationship to the earth, and the earth community. One of the areas that Gunter grappled with was the metaphor that describes our relationship to the earth, especially that of Genesis 1:28. He made suggestions to try to rehabilitate this metaphor.

I have come to like the term earthkeeper – it has a sense of reciprocity about it, similar to the term creation care – as human beings we cherish the earth and it will in turn express care towards us.

A project that has essentially been completed but continues to challenge and inspire much thinking around our interpretation of scripture is the Earth Bible Project.

The project resulted in a series of publications on particularly books of the Bible or genres. It is a project that Professor Gerald West was involved in too as a consultant for Africa and which Prof Gunther Wittenberg was engaged closely in too, contributing a chapter.

This was their understanding: in the same way that feminist biblical scholars have interpreted the scriptures from the perspective of women, conscious of the patriarchal bias of the texts, and liberation theologians have attempted to read the Bible from the perspective of oppressed people generally, aware of the systemic structures which ensure this oppression is continued, so too those writing as ecotheologians have interpreted the text from the perspective of the earth, aware of much of its human centred nature.

We would want to say that all forms of oppression are actually related and connected.

The initiator of the project, Norman Habel, an Australian Lutheran minister, with others, developed a set of guidelines in dialogue with ecologists, and others over a number of years to help readers approach the text 'from the perspective of Earth.' This led initially to the articulation of a set of aims for the project, of which I mention four out of the eight and also a set of six principles of which I mention two. As I said, for me they help restore the balance, the power dynamic between human beings and the earth. I like the sense of agency they ascribe to the earth. I merely list them without discussion.

Among the aims were the following:

- to acknowledge, before reading the biblical text, that as Western interpreters [not everyone is a Western interpreter] we are heirs of a long anthropocentric, patriarchal and androcentric approach to reading the text that has devalued the Earth and that continues to influence the way we read the text;
- to declare, before reading the text, that we are members of a human community that has exploited, oppressed and endangered the existence of the Earth community;
- to take up the cause of justice for Earth to ascertain whether Earth and the Earth community are oppressed, silenced or liberated in the text;
- to develop techniques of reading the text to discern and retrieve alternative traditions where the voice of Earth and Earth community has been suppressed.

And two of the principles:

The principle of voice: Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.

The principle of resistance: Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.

Application: Two Examples

These examples are instances in which faith communities have engaged with others in working for justice, as good earthkeepers.

The first is about Princess Vlei in the Cape, which deals with a particular local issue and the second about the Court case on nuclear energy, which, while a national campaign, dealt with a specific issue.

I have chosen these cases for three reasons: Firstly, I am familiar to some extent with each of them; secondly, in both instances faith communities have played a significant role; and thirdly they are both stories to celebrate.

Princess Vlei

Princess Vlei is the remaining part of a wetland in the southern areas of Cape Town and a place of great natural, cultural and spiritual significance that has been under threat of so-called development.

In 1998, a bid was made to build a shopping mall on the banks of Princess Vlei and the acceptance of this bid by the City authorities in 2008, led to widespread resistance from the community. Although the mall project was later shelved, in 2012 the idea was reinstated. In response, various community forums, organisations and individuals resolved to form an organization which could co-ordinate the protest action against the mall – called the Princess Vlei Forum, which has included religious groups among its members.

Those not familiar with the remaining lakes may wonder what the great interest in the area is. Princess Vlei was originally part of a massive wetland system that would have been about 20 square kilometres in size. While much of it has been drained or built on over the years, it still provides a habitat for endemic and endangered species, and helps sustain the biodiversity in that region.

There is evidence that the original Khoi and San inhabitants of Cape Town lived around the vlei as long as 10 000 years ago. There are various legends that have been orally passed down about the vlei. One of these is that there was a Khoi Princess living in a cave in the mountains above the vlei, who was abducted by Portuguese sailors while she was bathing in its waters – some say her tears formed Princess Vlei, and which explains how it got its name. The Vlei remains an important site for celebrating and remembering the Khoisan heritage of this area.

In the 1960's the Group Areas Act moved many people from central Cape Town to areas like the Cape Flats, which were often areas without trees, parks or other amenities. The Vlei was one of the few natural places people could come to relax and enjoy picnics with their families, appreciating its beauty and tranquillity. For those denied access to Cape Town's beaches, Princess Vlei became known as "Claremont beach." The area is strategically placed where people can enjoy the natural surroundings together, building a sense of community and helping overcome the historical divisions caused by apartheid geography.

Long seen as a place "to come close to God," Princess Vlei has also long been a site for full immersion baptism. On Sunday churches come from all areas of the Cape to baptise their members and at Easter churches come from as far afield as Gauteng. Known as the River Jordan of Cape Town, Joseph Dai of the Holiness Church of God, Nyanga, said of this sacred place, "We come here to baptise because the Holy Spirit is in these waters. If they build a

mall here, they will anger God.” There has been a “stay of execution” – let us hope the struggle is over.

Throughout the struggle the religious leaders spoke at public meetings about the need to protect the place, lobbied politicians, preached sermons, joined with others in public streets protests, got their hands dirty by planting trees in the area and encouraged their members to do the same.

The nuclear court case

A campaign that a number of you may be familiar with is the one against the expansion of nuclear energy in South Africa.

In October 2015, the Southern African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute (SAFCEI) and the Johannesburg branch of Earthlife Africa, an environmental justice organisation, launched a court action against the Minister of Energy and the President of South Africa for its energy procurement plans for nuclear energy. And in February 2017 these organisations finally had their days in court. In April 2017, the judgement was announced and they won on each count.

While these two organisations are strongly opposed to the use of nuclear power and strongly support the renewable energy route, the actual case itself has been more about the need for ethical governance – for openness and transparency. The Right2Know campaign was involved too. The motivation was that good governance means that all of us, as part of civil society, should be able to participate in decision-making processes, and that government should ultimately make decisions that are in the public interest, and in the interest of future generations.

The court action had been preceded by a campaign in which SAFCEI and other organisations challenged the government’s “secret nuclear deal” estimated at R1 trillion. An important part of this campaign has been the staging of a silent two hour anti-nuclear vigil outside Parliament early every Wednesday morning by people of different faiths. This has been sustained for two and a half years and has certainly helped keep the issue alive in the eyes of the public, parliamentarians and the media.

Under the apartheid regime, the nuclear industry had its roots in the development of the nuclear bomb programme. And so with the birth of democracy the energy policy was that renewable energy should be favoured over nuclear energy. The nuclear lobby has clearly fought hard to be included in the energy mix the country is planning for.

So in the ruling handed down in the Western Cape High Court on the morning of 26 April, the judges ruled that (i) the secret tabling of the Intergovernmental Agreements (IGA) with Russia, USA and Korean are unconstitutional and unlawful and that they be set aside.

(ii) They also ruled that the decisions made to procure nuclear power in the first place are unlawful and unconstitutional and that they too be set aside. The government and Eskom’s proposed procurement of nuclear energy was also ruled unlawful and unconstitutional and was set aside, and any existing requests for proposals from nuclear energy providers have also been set aside, meaning they are made null and void.

In future the Minister and/or the National Energy Regulator (NERSA) would be required to conduct public participation processes before making any new decisions. The constitution clearly calls for public participation and a debate in parliament on major decisions affecting its citizens.

There was much celebrating outside the court after the ruling was given.

The government's response was to accept the ruling but to say that they are still intending to proceed with nuclear energy, but now there will need to be meaningful engagement with the people of South Africa.

Having given these two examples of local and specific action I want to reflect more generally on the value of these forms of actions.

The Value of a focus on the local

I offer seven suggestions.

1. We all have the power to act and can each do something to make a difference

We can start with our bodies – what we think, what we eat. We all have *some* choices and need to take responsibility for them. Even if we feel we cannot do much to change what is around us we can at least work on changing ourselves. It is empowering to be able to do *something*.

In this we can allow difference and respect for difference – there is no need for a “one size fits all” approach, or to toe the party line.

2. Working for change is about changing about relationships

We live in a world of domination – men over women, abled bodied over those with disabilities, human beings over the rest of creation etc. These social relations need to be challenged and changed – we can start to do this at a local level, overcoming the hierarchies that oppress us, working towards overcoming the domination system.

Our concern and care for the natural environment is a product of our social relations.

3. Focussing on the local helps strengthen our understanding of an environmental justice perspective

A popular definition, coming from the environmental justice movement, is that “the environment is local, damaged and of immediate importance. It is where we live and work, play, learn and pray.” This is in contrast to much of mainstream environmentalism where the environment is to be found in untouched natural setting. It is at the local level that we engage with the earth as the water we drink the air we breathe – and it may be polluted.

Also this environmental justice approach, which looks at people in relation to their natural environment, enables those who are marginalized in our society to feel that they are included too – they too can have a say, even though they feel they have fewer resources.

4. It is at the local level that we can more easily embody what we want to see in society, and in the world

A localised focus enables us to more easily implement that which may not be possible on a broader level.

We may not be able to change the economic systems but we set up an alternative local economy, in our neighbourhood – characterised by sharing, self-sustainability, etc, drawing on local knowledge

Take Trump's America. Since the US's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord a number of cities have continued to keep targets for themselves, such as improving public transport and moving to renewable energy.

5. We can more easily organise celebrations around local issues, which we need to encourage and sustain us

Looking at our world today may cause us to lose hope: climate scientists are telling us that we are at the tipping point as far as climate change goes; we are entering what is called the Sixth Extinction, which, like climate change, is also caused by human beings and which will include us. Then there is the threat of nuclear war that is becoming a bit more of a possibility. We cannot wait to hold our celebrations only after the end of patriarchy and capitalism and the other powers and principalities that have captured the earth.

We need to celebrate in the midst of struggle.

6. There is much scope for working with people of other faiths in a particular local area

Last year the Durban eThekweni Metro announced and adopted its vision of the future of the Inner City by 2030- they plan to create a vibrant, liveable, walkable, greener inner city. Sounds wonderful. In order to support them, and I am sure in the future to challenge them as well as to organise among people of faith, some of us from the churches in the area, from the large mosque and some interested Hindus helped launch the Durban Inner City faith-based conservancy.

In terms of the city's commitment to renewable energy and the reuse of grey water we have committed ourselves to what we can with our own properties.

One of our first activities was to undertake a walking tour of the inner city. Over three hours we visited some of the roof gardens, looked what where veggie gardens once existed....

7. There are some channels to have our voice heard – of one person.

Within South African environmental legislation there is extensive scope for the voice of the individual to be heard. We may complain about the lack of enforcement of certain laws but we should celebrate the inclusion of provisions for public participation. Comments may be

made on any development as part of the Environmental Impact Assessment that is undertaken and individuals can register as Interested and Affected Parties, to be informed of any significant processes that are undertaken in a proposed development.

What is important, though, is that at a local level we can relook at the use of power, redefine it. About 10 days ago there was a meeting held at St Pauls at which there was a nuclear activist from the US and one from Russia – the Russian was Vladimir Sliviyak, who was responsible for pointing out to us the deal that South Africa had supposedly signed with Russia.

Both had worked for decades in anti-nuclear activity and spoke about their experiences: the nuclear accidents, the cover ups, the secrecy of the nuclear industry. They both said that “nuclear energy is the most expensive way of producing electricity.” This is mostly because of the problem of nuclear waste, which for 10’s of 1000’s of year remains highly toxic and needs to be stored and carefully monitored.

Vladimir said that as South Africans we must decide, the power is in our hands. And he said “our kind of power prevails.”

We can feel the local is trivial

There may be problems with local action: we can feel it is trivial.

Earlier this month in our local church our environment group met. At a local level like this people like to talk about recycling, and litter clean ups – they are good. I was surprised when the person leading said she was going to talk about Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, who she had met in Tanzania, during a teaching spell in Swaziland. Most of those in the group were young people who had not heard of Wangari.

Wangari knew the value of local action. She protected forests – and in her autobiography we read of her being beaten unconscious for this. Wangari knew the value of planting trees – to hold the soil, to empower the community

It is not always easy

Local action is not always easy. Organising at a local level has its challenges. I mention another story from my context.

In 1989 the Orthodox Church declared 1 September as a Day of Prayer for Creation. The present Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, and the Orthodox church as a whole has continued support for this day of prayer. Then in August 2015, in what has been regarded as an ecumenical gesture of global significance, Pope Francis announced that the Roman Catholic Church will also recognize September 1 as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. The Anglican Archbishop Canterbury, other protestant church leaders and ecumenical organisations, such as the WCC, followed.

Ecclesiastical history reminds us that in 1054 there was a split between the East and the West in the church, resulting in, amongst other things, our churches celebrating Easter and Christmas at different times.

This call for a World Day of Prayer for Creation struck me as possibly the first time since this major split that the church throughout the world was being called to prayer for one thing, a very important thing, on the same day.

So last year, in 2016 I arranged an ecumenical service at St Pauls to take up this call to prayer. As well as visiting the local churches I started calling the local Orthodox Church priest, to ask for his involvement in the service. He said that he needed permission from superiors. I explained that it was primarily in response to the Orthodox leader himself that we were praying. They were unfortunately not able to participate.

In addition to our church choir we had 20 people who attended – two Roman Catholics, a few other Anglicans and the rest from St Pauls.

This year I was determined to increase the number who attended. So in early June I wrote to the heads of churches who have responsibility for the area that covers Durban asking them to bring this service to the attention of their members. I also wrote the Orthodox Archbishop's office which is in Cape Town asking for Orthodox participation.

In addition to our choir, we had about 12 people attending, all from St Pauls. The struggle continues.

I was imagining that we could build up the momentum for 2019 when 1 September would be a Sunday and we would have to arrange massive venues to accommodate people.

So on 1 September next year, at St Pauls, you are welcome to join us – from whatever church background you are from. Or better still, don't increase your carbon foot print by travelling all the way to Durban – arrange a service in your local area to pray.

Eco-congregations

Aware that some of you are preparing for work in a local church, I mention briefly the concept of eco-congregations. An eco-congregation is a local faith community that commits itself to become more environmentally sensitive and active in its management of its property, education and in other activities. While we are thinking here primarily in terms of churches it is a term and concept that is easily to other faith groups.

The term "eco" is derived from the Greek *oiko*, a term from which we derive the terms "ecumenical", "economic" and "ecological". While it is usually on this latter term that eco-congregations focus, the other meanings should be kept in mind too.

There are a number of eco-congregation schemes around the world, and they go under different names. SAFCEI is an accrediting organisation. Whether one is formerly registered or not the important thing is the concept.

A good place to start is with an audit. In the book I describe an energy and water audit I was involved in while I worked at the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity here in Pietermaritzburg. It was fun – we went around counting lights, toilets, geysers and air conditioners and finding out how often they were used. An audit is a helpful tool, it is non-judgmental. It is a self-assessment.

In my experience churches often stop at the management of their grounds – they indigenise their grounds, save water etc. As important is what goes on in the services, in Sunday school classes, baptism preparation courses etc. There is much scope for creativity in a local church context.

Take liturgy. Some of the sacraments use natural elements. Their link with the earth could be emphasised, for example, in baptism and the eucharist.

Eco-congregations provide an idea local context to analyse and address issues. They can become models of simplicity, in which materialism and consumerism are shunned in favour of solidarity and celebration. They can become communities of celebration, of resistance and hope.

Start with greening your own academic institutions. Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary got off to a good start with its green design.

Conclusion

We need to celebrate the goodness of the earth, the beauty and diversity of its people and all creation.

The intention is not that local action is done in isolation from others – local efforts all add up.

We must always keep the big picture in mind – certainly we want to change the way the world is run.

Remember that great changes are often started and effected by one person or a group of people.

And let us never forget to celebrate along the way.

Thank you.