

# CREATURES



RADICAL ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AFTER LAUDATO SI'  
Discovering the intrinsic Value of all Creatures, Human & Non-human

## The Community of Creation in the Local Church

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### **Summary:**

The research presented at the conference “*Creatures: Radical Ecological Conversion after Laudato Si’*” was based on the research undertaken for my PhD. This was a study of environmental engagement by Christian churches in Edinburgh, Scotland, with the aim of answering the question ‘what explains environmental engagement by faith communities?’

*This is a short summary of the presentation given at the above conference. To receive a draft copy of an academic paper currently in development from this research, please contact me at [alice.hague\[at\] gmail.com](mailto:alice.hague@gmail.com).*

### **Research Method:**

The research for this presentation was based on an ethnographic research methodology, including over twelve months of participant observation with three church communities (two Protestant; one Catholic) to investigate how these churches engage with environmental issues in word and deed. Participating on an ongoing basis was important for getting a sense of what has been called ‘everyday religion’ or ‘religion on the ground’ – to see how churches practice environmental engagement as part of their everyday existence. The partner organisation for this research is an organisation called “EcoCongregation Scotland”, an ecumenical organisation that exists to support Christian churches in their environmental activity.

The three churches are: i) a small, stable church (approx. 60 weekly attendees) belonging to the United Reformed Church (URC) denomination. The demographic of this church is relatively elderly. They have a new church building, and took the decision to invest in solar panels on their church roof in 2011. This meets their electricity needs and provides a small ongoing income to the church in light of the electricity they are able to ‘feed in’ to the UK electricity grid. ii) A much larger, more diverse church (approx. 250 people attend the main Sunday mass), with a city centre location and a more transient population. This is a Catholic church, and was actively undertaking environmental activity prior to the release of Laudato

Si', which was published during the research for this study. This church, in central Edinburgh, has a small Jesuit community attached. Iii) A Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) church, with an average weekly attendance of 150 people. This is the 'traditional' church in Scotland, and the church in this study was in a relatively wealthy and family-friendly neighbourhood. This is another church with a long history of environmental engagement, and had received some funding from the Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund for Communities to support the cost of energy-saving renovations and community activities during the period of research.

### **Motivations for engagement:**

Environmental engagement in the church communities took different forms. There was a strong sense of what is commonly known as 'creation spirituality', the sense that congregations are worshipping God with and through creation, and understanding humans as part of creation. This maintains a theocentric approach, often drawing on the Psalms, for example, to emphasise the awe and wonder experienced in God's creation. This sense of creation spirituality presented in worship services in particular is sometimes then translated into a sense of 'caring for creation' by individuals and congregations, emphasising the responsibility on Christians to 'do something' about the damage being done to the environment. It is worth mentioning that there was a slight hesitancy to use the word 'creation' however, both for being fear of being seen outside of church communities as being a creationist (one who believes in a literal 7-day creation) and from within church communities of worshipping creation, rather than worshipping God.

More emphatically, and particularly in the Catholic church studied, a key driver of environmental engagement was justice. This was particularly based on recognising the impacts that environmental degradation has on those who have the least, and was shown by how churches included environmental engagement within the work of their 'Justice and Peace' (Catholic) or 'Church and World' (Church of Scotland) groups. Understanding environmental engagement as part of their justice work was particularly important for those who weren't the 'environmental leaders' in the congregations. My research also importantly emphasises the language of justice and not environmental justice, ecojustice, climate justice – phrases often used by academics and campaigning organisations. Participants were hesitant to label anything with an 'eco' prefix for fear of it becoming only of interest to 'greenies' – those who are already engaged in environmental issues. These are not new descriptions – they have been widely described in studies of religious environmentalism (see e.g. Kearns, 1996, 2011).

### **Contextual factors:**

In addition to these theological drivers of engagement, contextual factors are also important. This includes in particular finances and resources, and the importance of leadership. At the **local level**, the support and **leadership** of a parish priest or minister was crucial – they lead from the front, and can integrate environmental action into the worship practices of the church, such as in the selection of hymns and in the bidding prayers/prayers of intercession. Important also is the role of **high level leadership**, particularly in the Catholic church, where the release of the Papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* invigorated the church members who had been undertaking environmental activities for a number of years: it gave them a sense of purpose and commitment, and of being part of the wider church. The publication of *Laudato Si'* certainly stimulated engagement in the short-term – a number of additional events were organised for churchgoers to read and engage with the encyclical, and a day-long Lenten Retreat was organised by the in which a much broader number of people participated than in

the ongoing activities of the ‘green group’ in the church – which was frequently only a small group of people who would e.g. participate in Saturday morning gardening events etc.

There was a sense among participants however that the ‘middle level’ leadership was missing: the highest level of the Catholic church was engaging, and everyday churchgoers were participating in small, local level activities. But participants expressed concern about whether engagement would be sustained – would the content of the encyclical and its call for radical ecological conversion filter down through the structures of the Catholic church, and are priests-in-training also learning how to integrate the teachings contained in *Laudato Si’* in their ministries, for example.

### **Community as a motivation for engagement:**

An additional and unexpected finding from my research was the importance of community as a driver for engagement, as an opportunity for engagement, and as an outcome of engagement in environmental issues within the church community. This is an aspect which is often overlooked or assumed in studies of faith-based activism more broadly – ‘community’ is a normative aspect of congregational life, yet we fail to see its importance in other issues, such as in motivating engagement in environmental activism. The importance of community is mentioned more widely – authors such as Alastair McIntosh for example emphasise the importance of community for supporting and sustaining activism. And community is important theologically and practically. Time and time again, the data from my research indicated the importance of a sense of community and of working together for the common good, for participating and engaging in environmental action. The community was also a space and place for engagement – churches led the organisation of ‘open gardens’ exhibitions in the local neighbourhood, including many non-churchgoers in the activity. Churches also led the development of a wildflower patch in the local park, which has since grown to a community-garden, again, beyond the walls of the church. Yet the importance of the social aspects of community was also clear: it’s much more fun to be gardening on a Saturday morning or Tuesday afternoon if there are others who engage with you. And through these activities, people get to know each other better, and social connections in the community become stronger. It’s important to remember that community doesn’t just ‘happen’ – it takes commitment. Yet similarly, without community, there is no environmental engagement.

In summary, the dominant theological understanding of environmental issues was justice: a sense that churches need to address justice in a more holistic, or integral, manner, bringing environmental concerns into their understanding of justice, and not separating them as ‘green’ concerns. More importantly however, the social aspects of engagement are important for environmental action: people come together through participating in environmental activities and get to know each other. A sense of being part of a wider community that also cares about and engages with environmental issues helps to sustain engagement; and the local community provides a space for engagement, taking activities beyond the walls of the church. Building environmental engagement into wider aspects of church life was important for that sense of community. And in summary, as one participant said: “That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Bringing people together; people getting to know each other...”