

Ecotheology As Mission: What Has COVID-19 Taught The Salvation Army About the Missional Imperative to Safeguard Creation?

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Introduction

This paper intends to examine some of the work already taking place across The Salvation Army (TSA) in the UK and Ireland (UKI) to safeguard the environment and combat climate change, as well as current thinking on the possibility of developing an 'ecotheology'. This will be used as a launchpad to discuss how and why environmental safeguarding and an ecotheology should feature as a stronger part of TSA's understanding and articulation of mission.

Methodology

This paper was birthed from reflections on a piece of research that was done by TSA in the UKI from April - September 2020. The aim of this research was to answer the question: how are we doing/will we do/will we reimagine mission differently as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? As well as collecting quantitative data from almost 500 frontline leaders (church leaders and staff members working for contracted services such as homelessness services) working across TSA in the UKI, and outlining what their activities looked like during the pandemic's first lockdown, the research generated rich qualitative data shedding light on how frontline leaders saw, and continue to see mission, and what they felt God was saying to them about TSA's mission in the future. The research also highlighted how 'the environmental gains of lockdown have been very positive and there is an opportunity to change organisational behaviours to capitalise on these' (Knuckey, 2020). Nevertheless, out of almost 500 responses from frontline leaders on what mission meant to them at the time of the research, only two mentioned the environment. This prompted the authors of this paper to reflect on the role that environmental safeguarding is playing within frontline leaders' missional priorities, considering 'safeguarding creation' is one of the Anglican Communion's Five Marks of Mission - a description of mission with which TSA aligns itself (Anglican Communion, 2021).

In order to have a more in-depth understanding of the research findings, to explore the potential for environmental learning from COVID-19 and to reflect on the development of an ecotheology for TSA, a focus group was run with individuals from across TSA in the UKI. The TSA's Environmental Committee identified these individuals as being passionate about environmental safeguarding. The corps officers (pastors) of 'eco-churches' and 'eco-congregations' with Bronze

¹ Captain Helen Froud Assistant Director (Research) , The Salvation Army was consulted on a number of issues.

accreditation were also invited to take part.² In total, seven individuals, representing TSA's 'frontline', took part in the focus group, during which they reflected on the SA mission & COVID-19 research, particularly the absence of environmental safeguarding within frontline leaders' articulations of mission. They also outlined their own environmental work, including what had changed for them as a result of the pandemic, and articulated what they thought TSA could learn from the pandemic in order to build an organisational ecotheology.

This research adopted an inductive approach focussing on the thoughts and opinions of the seven focus group participants as representatives of TSA's frontline. Therefore, the following analysis is not underpinned by an existing ecotheological framework.

Findings

TSA's existing ecotheology and work on the environment

As advocates for safeguarding the environment and combatting climate change, many of the focus group participants were already working in ways they hoped would reduce their impact on the environment. For example, those in Hadleigh Farm in Essex were already trying to cut down their printing and had removed all single-use plastics from the site. They create 'eco-bricks' to construct the buildings their farm animals live in and established a 'delivery day' so that any deliveries coming from Amazon that week all came in one journey. However, these initiatives are not consistently adopted across TSA in UKI.

Therefore, it was perhaps unsurprising that all participants described their motivation for working on environmental issues as resulting from either a personal or professional passion (outside of the church). While there is work taking place on developing an environmental theology in TSA, this is still in its initial stages. The fact that none of the participants gave strong theological justifications for their commitment to safeguarding the environment and combatting climate change suggests that TSA in the UKI does not have a clear widely adopted theology around the environment. Therefore, there is potential for the findings from this focus group to feed into an ecotheology for TSA and to demonstrate to TSA's leadership in the UKI how integral environmental safeguarding is to mission.³

² Eco-churches are churches in England and Wales. Eco-congregations are those in Scotland. These are 'award schemes for churches who want to demonstrate that the gospel is good news for Gods earth.' See 'Eco Church: An A Rocha UK Project,' Available at: <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/> (Accessed on: 24 June 2021); 'Eco Congregations Scotland,' Available at: <https://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/> (Accessed on: 24 June 2021).

³ There is, however evidence of the expression of ecotheological debate and action within the TSA elsewhere in the world. For example, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, have had prominent discussions of climate change in the past decade (TSA, 2012). The Canadian SA has tied ecotheology explicitly to recycling and TSA's 'thrift' or charity shop movement (TSA, 2010; TSA, 2011). TSA in Kenya worked on community sand dams to conserve water (TSA, 2014).

Learning from COVID-19 to help TSA build a missional ecotheology

The focus group were asked to reflect on how COVID-19 had changed their behaviours, and what could be learnt from these changes which would benefit the environment. During the first UK COVID-19 lockdown, it was widely recognised that the call to 'stay at home' was contributing to improving the environment (such as improving air quality and lessening water and noise pollution) and people's awareness of how their behaviour affected the environment (Rume and Didar-Ul Islam, 2020).

'The general public are recognising that there has been the start of a green recovery, potentially. People are noticing more birds and animals and creatures in their gardens, in their neighbourhoods, even in the city. You hear more birds singing and you see more insects. There are more flowers, they're blooming better than they were.' Divisional Headquarters, Herts & Essex

Some of the changes experienced were imposed on participants by the pandemic restrictions, however others were changes they made themselves once they identified the lockdown as an opportunity for environmentally-beneficial change. The most common of these were: changes in behaviour towards travel, particularly in terms of accessing worship and attending meetings; changes in the focus and running of partnerships, especially in relation to food waste generated through food distribution partnerships; and changes in the locations deemed suitable for meetings and activities.

As churches closed, not being able to meet for physically gathered worship meant that many congregations shifted to online worship. Congregants stopped travelling to their corps (church) of choice. This was also the case with TSA meetings as offices closed and people moved to remote working. Participants recognised the huge benefits to the environment from less travel and were keen to keep these changed practices as the pandemic eased.

'For me the biggest change that we've seen is a diminution of distance. And I suspect much like our colleagues in Devon & Cornwall, and the Forest of Dean, people travel an enormously far distance to come to our corps. Sometimes people will travel twenty or thirty miles, and they'll drive past other churches in order to come to TSA. Inverness, North Scotland

Many of the partnerships either created or utilised throughout TSA during the pandemic's first lockdown were around food distribution. Many corps, such as those in Hadleigh Farm and Inverness, worked to shift to different models of food distribution which generated less food waste. The example from Inverness also showed how environmental considerations were made hand in hand with considerations around inclusion, making the changes doubly beneficial.

Additionally, the participants also identified many ways in which they made decisions and approached problems during the pandemic with an environmental 'lens', such as encouraging congregants to buy their newly-needed hand sanitizer

from local eco-friendly businesses in order to reduce their carbon footprint, offering reusable masks to those who accessed their buildings over disposable ones and using the enforced changes brought on by COVID-19 as an opportunity to educate congregants on the environmental impact of 'normal' life.

Discussion - Building an Ecotheology

As expressed by one of the participants, this is a good time to build on and strengthen an 'ecotheology', or indeed begin the work on creating one, as, due to COVID-19, 'the general public are recognising that there has been the start of a green recovery' (Divisional Headquarters, Herts & Essex). As described by Kerber (2020) in the World Council of Churches' reflections on COVID-19 and ecology, environmental voices are strong in calling for the 'new normal' not to simply be a replication of life pre-pandemic. This, and how much behaviour and practices have changed for all corps during this pandemic, regardless of their environmental awareness, is an opportunity for TSA to focus more efforts on 'safeguarding creation' as a priority within its mission.

Consequently, focus group participants were clear when describing what had changed for them during the pandemic that it was often necessary to strike a balance. As environmental gains were made in some areas of their work, such as changing behaviours around travel as worship services moved online, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity meant that some environmental losses were subsequently made, such as providing extensive paper copies of worship resources for those digitally excluded. This was a concern to participants and was reflected in wider discussions about efforts to achieve net zero carbon from a missional perspective.

'Really importantly out of that, how you can journey to net zero carbon but not affect the poorest people? Because there're some aspects of the journey to net zero carbon that have the capacity to be exclusionary for people, and that's not just about here, that's about overseas as well.' Inverness, North Scotland

It was clearly important to participants that any ecotheology formulated and adopted by TSA consider the balancing act needed to ensure that work on environmental safeguarding doesn't undermine other missional objectives, such as challenging injustices and meeting the needs of the most marginalised. In this vein, it was also important to participants that an ecotheology be global, recognising that 'we live in a globalised world [so] our goods and services impact the rest of the planet and the people in different places' (Divisional Headquarters, Herts & Essex).

While theology didn't explicitly feature in the motivations described by participants for working on environmental issues, a couple of focus group participants reflected more theologically when asked what they thought TSA could learn from COVID-19 in order to build an ecotheology. One of these reflections was linked to Genesis and verses that are typically interpreted as God giving human beings dominion over the Earth, and the second of these reflections was linked to changes COVID-19 has brought about to the idea of 'gathering'.

The debate about how Genesis (particularly Genesis 1:26, 28) should be interpreted and its impact on how Christians approach environmental safeguarding is long-standing. Nick Mayhew-Smith uses a Celtic approach to suggest that humanity has failed to appreciate the work of the divine through nature. And therefore, humanity's sin and disobedience in part, contributes to the disruption and distraction of the environment. He refers to dominion over creation which was given to mankind in Genesis arguing that humans have compromised this dominion which has subsequently caused disharmony in creation dating back to the fall. Therefore, he suggests the drive for Christians should be to work towards the re-establishment of that harmony (Nick Mayhew-Smith, 2018,45). The focus group participant from Forest of Dean reflected on Genesis stating,

'From an ecotheology point of view I would encourage you to look more closely at the Genesis account and the moments where God gives dominion over this creation. And I think a lot of misconceptions have been brought to the church through the word 'dominion', and what does that exactly mean. That it is not control, it comes from the basis of servanthood, it comes from the basis of being God's nature and God's provision and God's care, rather than dominating. I think that is an issue.' Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire

This idea of servanthood ties neatly into the call for mission during COVID-19 to focus on loving and serving each other more sacrificially (Quinn-Graham, 2020), perhaps extending 'each other' to include the environment. How do our actions love and serve the natural environment we live within (an environment that serves us and our needs) as well as each other?

The second theological point raised was a direct result of the changes brought about by COVID-19 in relation to travel. For the participant from Inverness, developing an ecotheology was tightly tied to developing a different theology of 'gathering'.

'It's about finding a new theology of how we gather and not meet. Because there is that bit about people driving past three or four other churches in order to get to corps in rural areas. Why can't we gather together with other Christians who're thinking the same thing as we're thinking?' Inverness, North Scotland

Interestingly, this reflection links strongly with calls in the SA mission & COVID-19 research to focus mission on the local community wherever an individual Christian exists, (Quinn-Graham, 2020). Rethinking concepts such as 'community', 'local' and what it means for Christians to live out missional priorities in their immediate spheres of influence is therefore an opportunity to think differently, theologically, about what it means to 'gather' in a world experiencing an environmental crisis.

Conclusion

It is clear from the thoughts shared during the focus group that environmental safeguarding could, and should, fit easily into TSA's missional priorities. This was

demonstrated through changes the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to TSA. As well as highlighting the intrinsic value of working to safeguard the environment and combatting climate change, as reflected in the TSA-endorsed Five Marks of Mission, participants gave examples of how their environmental work has supported, or could support, the achievement of other, more commonly articulated, missional goals, such as connecting with the 'unchurched' (to 'save souls') or 'serving suffering humanity'. These instrumental arguments for safeguarding the environment could be utilised as a starting point for conversations with missionally-focused church leaders who perhaps aren't yet convinced of the intrinsic value of working to combat climate change and live more sustainably. However, these instrumental arguments should be explored alongside the acknowledgement of the environment's inherent value, as supported by a reinterpretation of the Genesis account that emphasises humanity's role as servant to nature, rather than as one who dominates and controls.

One of the biggest challenges facing TSA may be the complexities involved in developing a theology that is global in its understanding of how climate change disproportionately affects certain communities, while also being local in its focus on networks, community action, the rejection of a 'one size fits all' approach and positioning as a missional priority.

Focus Group Participant Locations

Hadleigh Estate, Hadleigh

Inverness Corps, Scotland

Redruth Corps, Cornwall

Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire

DHQ Herts and Essex.

Hadleigh Temple, Hadleigh

Stornoway Corps, Scotland

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