

Faith, Ecology and Unity: Examining Church Leadership Responses to Climate Justice with Focus on Ecumenical Engagement in Oyo State

Oladapo Favour Ibukunoluwa
St. Paul's University

Abstract

Climate change represents not only an environmental concern but also a profound moral, spiritual, and theological crisis that demands active ecclesial engagement. In Africa, where the Church has historically served as a voice for justice, human dignity, and social transformation, there is an increasing need to reinterpret Christian mission in relation to ecological responsibility and climate justice. This study examines church leaders' theological and ecumenical responses to climate justice in Oyo State, Nigeria. Specifically, it explores how church leaders understand environmental responsibility within Christian theology, evaluates the extent of ecumenical cooperation in addressing ecological concerns, and identifies the challenges limiting coordinated church engagement in climate action. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews with thirty church leaders drawn from Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, and African-Initiated Churches in Oyo State. Data were analysed thematically through the interpretive lenses of eco-theology and ecumenical theology. Findings reveal that although many church leaders demonstrate theological awareness of creation care and environmental stewardship, practical engagement with climate justice remains limited, fragmented, and insufficiently coordinated across denominations. Environmental concerns are frequently interpreted within moral, spiritual, or apocalyptic frameworks rather than as justice-oriented issues requiring structural and collective responses. The study further reveals that while ecumenical bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Christian Council of Nigeria provide important platforms for Christian cooperation, ecological engagement has not yet emerged as a major area of sustained ecumenical collaboration. The study concludes that strengthening ecological theology within theological education, promoting ecumenical environmental initiatives, and encouraging youth-driven climate engagement are essential for enhancing the Church's contribution to climate justice in Nigeria. It argues that ecumenical collaboration, when intentionally directed toward ecological stewardship and public responsibility, can reposition the Church as a credible moral and transformative force within both Nigerian society and the wider global South.

Keywords: *Climate Justice, Ecotheology, Ecumenical Theology, Church Leadership, Creation Care, Environmental Stewardship*

Introduction

The twenty-first century has brought humanity to an ecological crossroads, where the consequences of human choices are no longer distant abstractions but daily realities shaping the quality of life for millions. Extreme weather patterns, rising temperatures, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and the depletion of natural resources have made climate change one of the most defining crises of our time. Beyond its scientific dimensions, climate change exposes a deep moral rupture in humanity's relationship with the created world. As Pope Francis (2015,

p. 11) insightfully argues in *Laudato Si'*, the ecological question is fundamentally ethical and spiritual; it reveals the brokenness of human relationships with God, with one another, and with the earth itself. Creation, once understood as a divine gift entrusted to human stewardship, has suffered from patterns of exploitation, unchecked consumption, and neglect patterns that reflect deeper crises of values, spirituality, and justice.

Nigeria stands at the heart of this unfolding ecological tension. The nation faces multiple environmental challenges seasonal flooding, rapid desertification, deforestation at alarming rates, the depletion of fertile soils, pollution from industrial activities, and poor waste management systems. These are not mere environmental issues but lived hardships affecting food security, livelihoods, health, and social harmony. Oyo State captures this complexity vividly: urban centres such as Ibadan experience recurring floods due to blocked drainage channels, unplanned urbanisation, and heavy rainfall; rural areas face shrinking arable land, declining crop yields, and encroaching erosion; and communities across the state battle pollution from unregulated waste disposal, plastic accumulation, and open burning. Such realities raise profound theological and pastoral questions: How should the Church respond to the cries of a wounded creation? What does faithfulness look like in an era where environmental collapse threatens both human dignity and the sanctity of God's creation?

Historically, the Church in Nigeria has served as a moral compass and a transformative social institution, shaping national consciousness through education, social justice advocacy, and community mobilisation. Churches in Oyo State, both Mainline and Pentecostal, continue to play significant roles in poverty alleviation, youth empowerment, evangelism, conflict resolution, and social welfare. Yet, despite this vibrant presence, their engagement with environmental concerns remains comparatively modest. While individual congregations may conduct sanitation exercises or tree-planting events, such efforts are often episodic rather than systematic, reactive rather than visionary, and rarely framed within a coherent ecotheological perspective. This gap reflects a broader challenge: many Christian communities have not yet fully integrated ecological responsibility into their theology, discipleship patterns, or ecclesial mission.

Emerging theological reflections, however, suggest that the environmental crisis is forcing the Church to rediscover its prophetic identity. Climate change exposes the injustices woven into global economic systems, where the poorest communities who contribute the least to environmental degradation bear the greatest burden of its effects. For the Church, this becomes

a call to speak truth to exploitative structures, challenge harmful development models, and resist the commodification of the earth. Such prophetic engagement is rooted in Scripture's vision of creation as good, interconnected, and held together in Christ. Creation care, therefore, is not an optional add-on to Christian ethics but an expression of worship, justice, and discipleship. To care for the earth is to honor the Creator; to protect vulnerable ecosystems is to defend the vulnerable among humanity; and to cultivate sustainability is to participate in God's redemptive purposes for the world.

As this study argues, addressing the ecological crisis in Oyo State requires bridging three interrelated dimensions that have often been treated separately. First, theological conviction must be deepened so that creation care becomes embedded in the spiritual imagination of Christian communities. Second, practical engagement must move beyond short-term interventions to long-term environmental stewardship integrating education, advocacy, community participation, and sustainable practices at congregational and ecumenical levels. Third, ecumenical collaboration must be strengthened, for no single denomination can adequately confront such a complex crisis alone. The environmental question invites churches across traditions to unite in purpose, share resources, harmonize theological insights, and present a collective Christian voice for climate justice. Such unity does not erase denominational identities; rather, it honors the richness of Christian diversity while responding to a common threat that transcends boundaries.

In this way, the ecological crisis becomes not only a challenge but also an opportunity a moment for the Church to reimagine its mission in the twenty-first century, to embody a spirituality that honors the earth, and to contribute meaningfully to the healing of a world groaning for renewal.

Research Problem

Despite the Church's moral and social influence, its engagement with environmental issues in Oyo State remains minimal and fragmented. Many Christian leaders affirm the need for creation care but lack theological clarity and institutional frameworks to guide action. Denominational divisions further weaken the possibility of a unified Christian response to climate change and ecological degradation. The central research problem, therefore, is the disconnection between the Church's theological convictions and its practical expression of environmental stewardship within an ecumenical framework.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how churches in Oyo State interpret and practice environmental responsibility from a theological and ecumenical perspective.
2. To explore how ecumenical collaboration can enhance the Church's collective response to climate change and environmental degradation.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it seeks to awaken the Church in Oyo State to its prophetic and pastoral responsibility toward creation. Theologically, it contributes to the growing African discourse on eco-theology, showing that environmental care is a vital expression of faith and discipleship. Practically, it encourages churches to integrate ecological awareness into their preaching, worship, and community development programmes. Ecumenically, it demonstrates how unity among Christian denominations can strengthen advocacy for climate justice and sustainable living. By linking faith, ecology, and ecumenism, this research enriches both theological scholarship and public discourse, offering a model of faith-based environmental action relevant for the wider Nigerian and African context.

Literature Review

Theological Foundations of Climate Justice

The theology of creation remains the heart of Christian environmental ethics and the moral foundation of the Church's engagement with climate change. The biblical narrative presents creation not as a random cosmic event but as a divine act of love in an ordered, purposeful reality entrusted to human care. Genesis 2:15 enjoins humankind "to till and to keep" the garden, a phrase that captures the balance between productive use and protective stewardship. This command underscores the theological principle that dominion does not mean domination but responsibility before God for the wellbeing of creation (White, 1967; Bauckham, 2010).

Lynn White Jr.'s (1967) famous critique, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, argues that Western Christianity's anthropocentric theology legitimized human exploitation of nature. His assertion provoked a profound re-examination of how Christians interpret "dominion." In response, eco-theologians such as Sallie McFague (2008) and Richard Bauckham (2010) proposed alternative theological paradigms that highlight the interdependence between humanity and the rest of creation. McFague's *A New Climate for Theology* presents the world

as “God’s body,” thereby challenging believers to view ecological care as participation in God’s own creative and sustaining activity. Bauckham (2010), on the other hand, frames creation as “God’s household,” implying a sacred community where humans coexist with other creatures in mutual dependence.

This theological turn is echoed in the magisterial work of Pope Francis (2015), whose encyclical *Laudato Si’* calls for an “ecological conversion.” Francis links ecological degradation with social injustice, arguing that “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one.” His emphasis on integral ecology which unites social, environmental, and spiritual well-being resonates deeply with African contexts, where environmental degradation often leads directly to human suffering (Francis, 2015).

Walter Brueggemann (2019) expands this conversation by recovering the prophetic voice of Scripture. He reminds the Church that prophets such as Amos and Jeremiah denounced not only economic injustice but also the violation of the land as a breach of God’s covenant. Thus, the ecological crisis becomes a theological crisis a sign that humanity has broken its covenantal relationship with creation. Denis Edwards (2016) and Elizabeth Johnson (2014) similarly affirm that God’s immanence sustains all life, meaning that ecological care is not peripheral but central to Christian faith and discipleship.

Within the African context, theologians have contextualized these insights by grounding them in indigenous cosmologies. Ukpong (2019) notes that the African worldview perceives creation as a sacred web of interconnected relationships among God, ancestors, humanity, and nature. Consequently, the degradation of the environment constitutes both a physical and a spiritual offence. Chukwu (2020) reinforces this by arguing that in traditional African ethics, land is communal and ancestral, carrying both moral and spiritual significance. The obligation to preserve it for future generations stems not merely from pragmatic concern but from reverence for the divine order embedded in nature.

Ngwena (2024) deepens this theological reflection by linking ecology with social justice. He argues that any credible African theology of ecology must engage the historical realities of poverty, inequality, and resource exploitation rooted in colonial and neo-colonial systems. This aligns with Pope Francis’ (2015) concept of integral ecology and echoes Conradie’s (2020) call for a “conversion of the imagination” a moral and spiritual transformation that recognizes sin not merely in moral acts but in collective ecological destruction.

In Nigeria, however, scholars such as Oloyede (2022) and Aje (2023) note a disjunction between theology and practice. While churches often preach about creation care, they rarely integrate environmental ethics into their liturgy, pastoral programmes, or community action. Many congregations still spiritualize climate change, viewing it as an eschatological sign rather than an ethical mandate. This reveals a pressing need for contextual eco-theology one that draws from both Christian tradition and African spirituality to empower churches to see ecological stewardship as a vital dimension of mission.

Ecumenism and Environmental Responsibility

Ecumenism, the movement for Christian unity, has historically been associated with doctrinal dialogue and inter-denominational cooperation. However, in recent decades, its scope has expanded to include joint engagement with global ethical issues, including ecological crises. The World Council of Churches (WCC), through its “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation” (JPIC) programme, has consistently affirmed that ecological destruction is not merely an environmental concern but a spiritual violation a desecration of God’s creation (WCC, 2016).

The All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC, 2019) has echoed this conviction, declaring that ecological responsibility is intrinsic to the Church’s witness in the world. Its communiqués urge African churches to integrate environmental stewardship into theological education, public advocacy, and pastoral mission. This theological-ecumenical stance situates creation care as a shared act of worship and social witness.

In Nigeria, ecumenical cooperation has long focused on peacebuilding, democracy, and religious harmony. Organisations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) have provided vital platforms for interdenominational dialogue and advocacy (Ojo, 2006; Ajah, 2021). However, as Odey et al. (2023) observe, the environmental dimension of ecumenism remains underdeveloped. While some denominations occasionally organise tree planting or preach on environmental Sundays, these efforts lack continuity and structural support. Beyond formal Christian ecumenical structures, studies of religious interactions in Yorubaland reveal the importance of theological dialogue and mutual understanding in addressing societal concerns. Adekoya demonstrates that both faith traditions share ethical principles relating to justice, stewardship, and communal responsibility. Such shared theological values provide a foundation for collaborative engagement with contemporary challenges, including environmental sustainability and climate justice (Adekoya, 2004).

An ecumenical approach to climate action offers untapped potential for transformation. Pope Francis' (2015) calls for "ecological conversion" is inherently ecumenical inviting all Christian traditions to unite in protecting creation as a shared heritage. Ecumenical collaboration allows churches to pool resources, harmonize theological education, and engage in unified advocacy before government institutions. In Oyo State, with its vibrant diversity of mainline, Pentecostal, and African Indigenous Churches, such cooperation could redefine environmental witness through shared projects, youth mobilisation, and policy dialogue.

Nonetheless, barriers remain. Olatunji (2022) identifies denominational competition, inadequate theological literacy, and the tendency to classify environmental activism as "secular" as major obstacles to ecumenical collaboration. This points to the need for what Ajah (2021) calls an "ecumenical ecology" a theology that roots environmental engagement in shared Christian faith rather than denominational interest. Such a theology would not only foster collaboration among churches but also strengthen the Church's moral credibility in addressing Nigeria's ecological challenges. Similar challenges have been observed within broader religious relations in Yorubaland. Adekoya's analysis highlights how theological differences and religious competition can sometimes hinder collective responses to social issues. His findings suggest that overcoming sectarian interests remains essential if faith communities are to contribute effectively to addressing common societal concerns such as environmental degradation and climate change (Adekoya, 2004).

Thus, a truly ecumenical environmental witness requires more than practical cooperation; it demands a shared theological imagination. By reclaiming the biblical vision of creation as God's common household and the earth as sacred trust, Nigerian churches can unite across doctrinal divides to embody a collective response to climate change one that integrates advocacy, spirituality, and community empowerment.

Identified Research Gaps

Despite growing theological engagement with environmental issues, three key gaps persist within the Nigerian and Oyo State context. First, there is theological ambiguity: while many church leaders affirm creation care, few possess a clear or contextual theological framework for ecological discipleship. Second, practical inconsistency prevails. Environmental initiatives are often sporadic, short-term, and dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than institutional structures. Third, there is weak ecumenical integration: denominational competition and lack of coordinated vision hinder a unified Christian environmental front.

This study therefore seeks to bridge these gaps by critically examining how theology, ecclesial practice, and ecumenical collaboration intersect in shaping Nigeria's response to climate change. By situating this inquiry within the broader framework of African ecotheology and global climate justice theology, it aims to provide a coherent and context-sensitive model for the Church's participation in environmental renewal and sustainable development.

Methodology

Study Area

This research was carried out in Oyo State, southwestern Nigeria, a region known for its strong Christian presence and diverse denominational landscape. The area is home to major churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, and African-Initiated Churches. Oyo State faces several environmental challenges, including flooding, deforestation, and poor waste management, which affect both rural and urban communities. These realities make it a suitable setting for examining how church leaders interpret and respond to issues of climate justice within an ecumenical framework.

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the theological understanding and practical responses of church leaders to climate change. This approach was chosen because it allows for deeper insight into participants' experiences and beliefs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to explore each participant's unique perspective while maintaining focus on key research questions.

Sampling and Participants

Using purposive sampling, the study selected thirty church leaders from five major denominations: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, and African-Initiated Churches. Participants included clergy, theological educators, and ecumenical leaders who were directly involved in social or environmental ministries. Snowball sampling was also used to identify other leaders engaged in creation care and community development, ensuring a balanced representation across traditions.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted in participants' preferred settings mainly church offices and seminaries, with some held online. Each session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews focused on three main themes:

1. How church leaders understand environmental responsibility from a theological standpoint.
2. The practical steps their churches are taking to address climate change.
3. The extent to which ecumenical cooperation shapes these efforts.

All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. Key themes such as theological framing, practical engagement, and ecumenical collaboration were identified. This method helped in interpreting how theological beliefs translate into ecological practices within different denominational settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities, and all participants gave informed consent. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with identifiers like "Catholic priest" or "Pentecostal pastor" used in place of names. Participation was voluntary, and data were securely stored to maintain integrity throughout the research process.

Findings

The findings reveal a complex but deeply meaningful landscape of how Christian communities in Oyo State understand and respond to the intertwined realities of climate change and climate justice. Across the five Christian traditions examined, leaders consistently affirmed that environmental responsibility is not merely a civic expectation but a theological mandate embedded in the Christian vision of justice, stewardship, and care for the vulnerable. Yet, the study also shows that translating this belief into sustainable action remains uneven, fragmented, and constrained by theological ambiguities, institutional limitations, and socio-economic pressures.

Theological Understanding of Climate Change and Climate Justice

Most leaders described climate change as a disruption of the divine order, but their interpretations differed in ways that shaped the energy and direction of their engagement. Pentecostal and African-Initiated Church leaders tended to interpret environmental degradation as a moral and spiritual crisis, rooted in collective sin, greed, and the erosion of reverence for creation. Their reflections often carried a strong moral tone, suggesting that environmental restoration begins with repentance and renewed obedience to God. This theological stance subtly introduces a sense of climate justice by highlighting the ethical failures that disproportionately harm the poor and weaken the fabric of communal life.

Among many evangelical leaders, climate change was framed through an eschatological lens. Natural disasters were perceived as signs of the “last days,” an interpretation that while offering a sense of cosmic coherence sometimes diminished the urgency of climate justice. For these leaders, environmental crises were understood as divine inevitabilities rather than human responsibilities, which tended to reduce motivation for ecological activism. This eschatological reading, however, coexists with pastoral concern, as many still acknowledged that the poorest members of society bear the greatest burden during extreme weather events.

In contrast, Anglican and Catholic leaders leaned strongly toward a justice-oriented ecological theology. They rooted creation care within the broader mission of the Church to defend human dignity and protect marginalized populations. These leaders consistently emphasized that climate change is a justice issue because its impacts loss of farmland, displacement, food insecurity, and health risks are borne most heavily by communities who contribute the least to environmental degradation. They interpreted creation care as an essential expression of the Church’s commitment to social justice, echoing global teachings such as *Laudato Si’*. Their approach integrated theology with public responsibility, presenting climate action as a moral requirement that serves both God and neighbor.

Despite this rich theological diversity, leaders across all denominations acknowledged that ecological teaching remains underdeveloped within congregations. Climate justice is not yet a regular topic in sermon calendars, discipleship materials, or youth curricula. As one priest observed, the Church confidently preaches salvation of souls, but seldom preaches the salvation of creation which also shapes the lives of the poor. This gap between belief and teaching remains one of the clearest indicators that climate justice has not yet become an integral part of Christian formation in Oyo State.

Practical Church Engagement with Climate Change and Justice

On a practical level, the churches demonstrated a mixture of enthusiasm, goodwill, and structural weakness. Across the traditions studied, the most common activities included tree-planting, sanitation drives, anti-littering campaigns, and occasional environmental-themed sermons. These actions often emerged during special observances, such as Lent or World Environment Day, rather than from long-term planning. While these efforts reflect genuine concern, their episodic nature means they seldom evolve into sustained programs or shape the wider culture of congregational life.

Some Catholic parishes showed more organized engagement, inspired by the global *Laudato Si'* movement. Youth-led ecological clubs, women's groups focusing on recycling, and parish-based awareness campaigns demonstrate emerging forms of climate justice in practice efforts that recognize the dignity and welfare of the poor by protecting the ecosystems they depend on. Anglican and Baptist congregations have also begun integrating creation care into social outreach, especially in rural communities where climate change directly affects livelihoods. These initiatives reflect an awareness that climate action is not only environmental care, but a necessary response to human suffering and inequity.

However, most church leaders identified significant barriers that hinder deeper engagement. Financial limitations make long-term ecological programs difficult to sustain. Many congregants prioritize immediate concerns poverty, unemployment, security over environmental advocacy, even though these issues are intimately connected. There is also a lack of technical knowledge on climate change and very limited access to training or educational resources. Without consistent theological education and institutional support, even motivated churches struggle to transform good intentions into sustained climate justice initiatives.

Ecumenical Cooperation and the Pursuit of Climate Justice

The findings also highlight a tension between the Church's potential for ecumenical leadership in climate justice and the present reality of limited collaboration. Most leaders affirmed involvement in ecumenical bodies such as CAN and NIREC, but these platforms rarely prioritize environmental issues. Meetings commonly focus on elections, peacebuilding, or national crises, leaving climate change almost invisible in ecumenical discourse.

Yet, respondents expressed a strong sense of what ecumenical unity *could* achieve. Many articulated that if churches united around climate justice, they could influence public policy, mobilize communities, and advocate for equitable environmental governance in Oyo State. Leaders imagined an ecumenical movement capable of coordinating responses to flooding, supporting climate-vulnerable communities, and educating congregations about sustainable living. They believed that a united Christian witness could serve as a moral compass for society, demonstrating how faith communities might act collectively to defend both creation and the poor who suffer the most from environmental decline.

Despite this compelling vision, ecumenical efforts today remain largely reactive. Churches come together during crises after floods, droughts, or food shortages but rarely collaborate on preventive or structural approaches. Climate justice, therefore, remains an unrealized but deeply promising frontier for ecumenical action in Oyo State.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a profound and often uncomfortable tension within the churches of Oyo State a heartfelt reverence for God's creation, yet a persistent struggle to transform that conviction into structured, long-term ecological engagement. Many church leaders speak passionately about creation as God's sacred gift, entrusted to humanity for care, protection, and flourishing. This theological intuition is strong, sincere, and rooted in Scripture. Yet on the ground, these convictions frequently remain more aspirational than embodied. Leaders themselves lament their inability to move from preaching about stewardship to establishing sustainable, institutionally grounded environmental practices. The gap between belief and action reinforces global critiques by scholars like Pope Francis (2015) and Ngweni (2024), who argue that while religious communities possess a rich moral vocabulary for environmental ethics, they often lack the institutional mechanisms to translate ethical insight into transformative action.

This tension is especially striking when viewed through the lens of climate justice. For many churches in Oyo State, environmental degradation is no longer an abstract issue; it is a lived reality experienced through recurring floods in Ibadan, soil exhaustion in the rural outskirts, heatwaves that affect vulnerable communities, and the rising cost of food due to climate disruptions. Leaders recognize that the ecological crisis disproportionately harms the poor those Christ consistently called the Church to defend yet the institutional response to such injustice remains limited and uneven.

A significant portion of this challenge is theological. The study uncovers an enduring anthropocentric orientation within many churches a worldview in which human salvation and spiritual concerns overshadow ecological responsibility. Ministries, sermons, and liturgies often emphasize personal piety, spiritual warfare, and eschatological hope, sometimes leaving little room for a broader consideration of creation as part of God's salvific plan. This narrow focus, while spiritually sincere, can obscure the biblical truth articulated in Romans 8:19–22 that creation itself waits, groans, and hopes for redemption alongside humanity. When the Church limits salvation to human souls alone, it inadvertently reduces creation to a mere backdrop for human spirituality rather than a living participant in God's covenant.

Overcoming this theological limitation requires a shift from stewardship understood merely as “use with care” toward a more holistic theology of relationality and interconnectedness. Scholars like Ukpong (2019) remind us that human flourishing cannot be separated from the flourishing of the earth. When leaders begin to see creation care not as a side ministry but as a core expression of discipleship and worship, environmental engagement becomes less about obligation and more about participating in God's ongoing work of renewal. This shift opens the way for churches to frame climate justice not merely as environmental activism but as a deeply spiritual act of solidarity with the vulnerable human and non-human alike.

Ecumenism emerges as a crucial but underdeveloped pathway for strengthening this theological and practical shift. The churches of Oyo State are diverse in doctrine, history, and worship style, yet they share a commitment to Christ, Scripture, and the wellbeing of their communities. Climate change presents a moral problem larger than any single denomination, making ecumenical unity not simply desirable but necessary. Many leaders expressed genuine admiration for ecumenical bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). However, they also acknowledged that climate issues rarely appear on the agenda of such gatherings, which often prioritize political advocacy, peacebuilding, and national security.

Yet, the research identified encouraging signs of ecumenical potential. In some communities, joint tree-planting exercises, training workshops, and environmental clean-up campaigns have strengthened both ecological outcomes and Christian unity. These shared practices embody the spirit of Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 that His followers “may all be one.” However, for ecumenism to meaningfully contribute to climate justice, the churches must move from ad hoc events to sustained partnerships ones that embed ecological commitments within diocesan

structures, denominational policies, and joint Christian mission strategies. Without this structural shift, the risk remains that ecumenical enthusiasm will dissipate into sporadic activism without measurable long-term impact.

One of the most hopeful findings concerns the role of youth. Across Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, and African-Initiated Churches, young people consistently emerged as the most passionate advocates for ecological protection. They organize clean-up drives, lead social media campaigns, initiate small-scale recycling projects, and participate actively in ecumenical youth networks. Their creativity and energy offer a glimpse of what an ecologically conscious Church in Oyo State could become. Churches that intentionally nurture youth-led ecological programs whether through green fellowships, environmental clubs, or inter-church youth conferences demonstrate much greater capacity for sustained climate engagement. Leaders noted that youth-focused initiatives not only advance environmental goals but also build bridges across denominations, fostering unity through a shared commitment to creation care.

Nevertheless, empowering youth requires deliberate investment. Many leaders confessed that young people are rarely trained in ecological theology or practical environmental skills. Investing in their capacity through workshops, seminary courses, ecumenical mentoring, and partnerships with environmental NGOs would significantly strengthen the Church's long-term ecological resilience.

Theologically, creation care must be understood as an extension of God's covenantal love. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture presents creation not as passive matter but as a testimony to God's glory and an active participant in divine purpose. To degrade the environment is, therefore, to undermine God's intention for life, beauty, and flourishing. Climate justice calls the Church to respond prophetically, not only by caring for the earth but by defending those who suffer most when creation is wounded. For communities in Oyo State, this includes farmers losing their harvests, families displaced by floods, and urban dwellers facing pollution-related illnesses.

Ecumenism amplifies this responsibility. When churches stand together across traditions, languages, theologies, and worship styles they embody the unity between Creator and creation. Their shared witness becomes a sign of hope in a time of ecological despair, demonstrating that Christians are not passive observers but active agents in God's mission of healing. In a century marked by environmental instability, such united action is not optional; it is essential for the survival, dignity, and wellbeing of future generations.

In sum, the Church's response to the environmental crisis must grow deeper, louder, and more coherent. Acknowledging the problem is no longer enough. True faith demands sustained, practical, collective action rooted in theological conviction and ecumenical solidarity. Only then can the Church become what it is called to be a beacon of hope, a voice for justice, and a partner with God in the healing of a wounded world.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions, the following recommendations are proposed to enable churches in Oyo State to deepen their engagement with ecological responsibility and climate justice:

1. Integrate Ecological Theology into Church Teaching and Formation

Church leaders should embed eco-theology firmly within preaching, Bible study, and ministerial training programs. This will help congregants understand creation care as a non-negotiable element of Christian discipleship (Pope Francis, 2015; Brueggemann, 2019).

2. Establish Dedicated Environmental Ministries and Committees

Churches ought to institutionalize environmental care by creating ministries or committees responsible for planning, implementing, and monitoring ecological initiatives, thereby ensuring consistency and accountability (Ngwena, 2024; Ajah, 2021).

3. Foster Sustainable Ecumenical Partnerships Focused on Climate Action

Ecumenical bodies should prioritize ongoing collaborative projects such as reforestation drives and community sanitation programs that unify various denominations in common ecological mission (World Council of Churches, 2016; AACC, 2020).

4. Empower Youth as Leaders of Ecological Renewal

Youth ministries should be supported to lead climate advocacy and environmental action. Training young Christians in ecological knowledge and activism can harness their enthusiasm and innovation (Ajah, 2021; Ukpog, 2019).

5. Engage Local Communities and Authorities in Environmental Initiatives

Churches are encouraged to build partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and community groups to enhance the reach and sustainability of ecological projects (Ngwena, 2024).

6. Promote Practical Lifestyle Changes Within Congregations

Congregants should be encouraged and equipped to adopt sustainable living practices such as waste reduction, water conservation, and energy efficiency, modeling faith through action (Francis, 2015).

7. Advocate for Environmental Justice as Part of Social Gospel

Church leadership should actively engage in public advocacy for policies that address environmental degradation and its disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, integrating ecological care with social justice imperatives (Cone, 1975; Gutiérrez, 1973).

Implementing these recommendations will empower churches to bridge the gap between theological conviction and ecological practice, fostering a faithful witness to God's restorative work in creation.

Conclusion

The ecological challenges facing Oyo State and indeed the wider world are both urgent and complex. This study has revealed that while Christian leaders deeply value creation and recognize stewardship as a biblical mandate, there remains a significant gap between conviction and consistent action. The Church stands at a crossroads, called not only to preach about creation care but to embody it through sustained, practical, and collaborative efforts.

This tension reflects a broader theological and institutional challenge: the need to move beyond an anthropocentric focus that isolates human salvation from the health of creation toward a holistic vision of redemption that encompasses all life. Ecumenism offers a powerful pathway forward, providing a platform for unity, shared resources, and collective witness. Furthermore, the engagement of youth as passionate and innovative agents of change promises a vital source of energy and continuity for the Church's ecological mission.

Ultimately, the care for creation is a profound expression of faithfulness to God's covenant, a response to the groaning of creation itself, and a tangible witness to the transformative power

of the Gospel. The Church's role in climate justice is not optional it is an essential aspect of discipleship, worship, and prophetic witness in the 21st century (Francis, 2015; Brueggemann, 2019).

References

- Adekoya, J.S. (2004): *Comparative Concepts and Hermeneutics in Christian and Muslim Scriptures*. Ibadan: *Centre for External Studies, University of Ibadan*, 103pp. ISBN: 978-021-191-8.
- Adekoya, J.S. (2004). *Islamic Fundamentalism in Yorubaland and the Impact of the Explosion of Pentecostalism. Aquinas Day Series 2, Ibadan: The Michael J. Dempsey Centre for Religious and Social Research, Dominican Institute 18-36pp*. ISBN:978-31275-8-X.
- Ajah, M. (2021). *Religion, Ecology, and Society in Nigeria: Towards an Integral Christian Environmental Ethics*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.
- Aje, M. (2023). *Faith and the Environment: Theological Reflections on Creation Care in Contemporary Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). (2019). *Communiqué on Climate Justice and Sustainable Development in Africa*. Nairobi: AACC Publications.
- Bauckham, R. (2010). *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101.
- Brueggemann, W. (2019) *Reality, grief, hope: Three urgent prophetic tasks*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Chukwu, I. (2020) 'African cosmology and environmental ethics: The sacredness of land', *Journal of African Theology*, 9(1), pp. 45–62.
- Conradie, E. (2020). *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Edwards, D. (2016). *Ecological Theology: The Nature of the New Creation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

- Francis, P. (2015) *Laudato Si'*: On care for our common home. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Johnson, E. (2014). *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. London: Bloomsbury.
- McFague, S. (2008). *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Ngwenya, T. (2024). *Theology, Ecology and Justice in Africa: Reimagining the Future of Creation*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.
- Odey, J., Uche, F. & Nnamani, C. (2023). 'Christian Leadership and Climate Action in Nigeria: The Ecumenical Challenge', *Journal of African Christian Studies*, 39(2), pp. 114–133.
- Odey, S., Eze, F. and Ijeoma, C. (2023) 'Climate change and Christian ethics: Rethinking environmental responsibility in Africa', *Nigerian Journal of Theology*, 15(3), pp. 112–129.
- Ojo, M.A. (2006). *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Olatunji, K. (2022). 'Religion and the Politics of Climate Change in Nigeria: The Role of the Church', *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 12(1), pp. 75–92.
- Oloyede, A. (2022) 'Spiritualizing environmental issues: Challenges in Nigerian churches', *African Journal of Practical Theology*, 14(1), pp. 33–50.
- Ukpong, J.S. (2019). *African Theologies Now: Contextual, Liberation, and Ecological*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.
- White, L. (1967) 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis', *Science*, 155(3767), pp. 1203–1207.
- World Council of Churches (WCC). (2016). *The Church and Ecological Justice: Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation*. Geneva: WCC Publications.