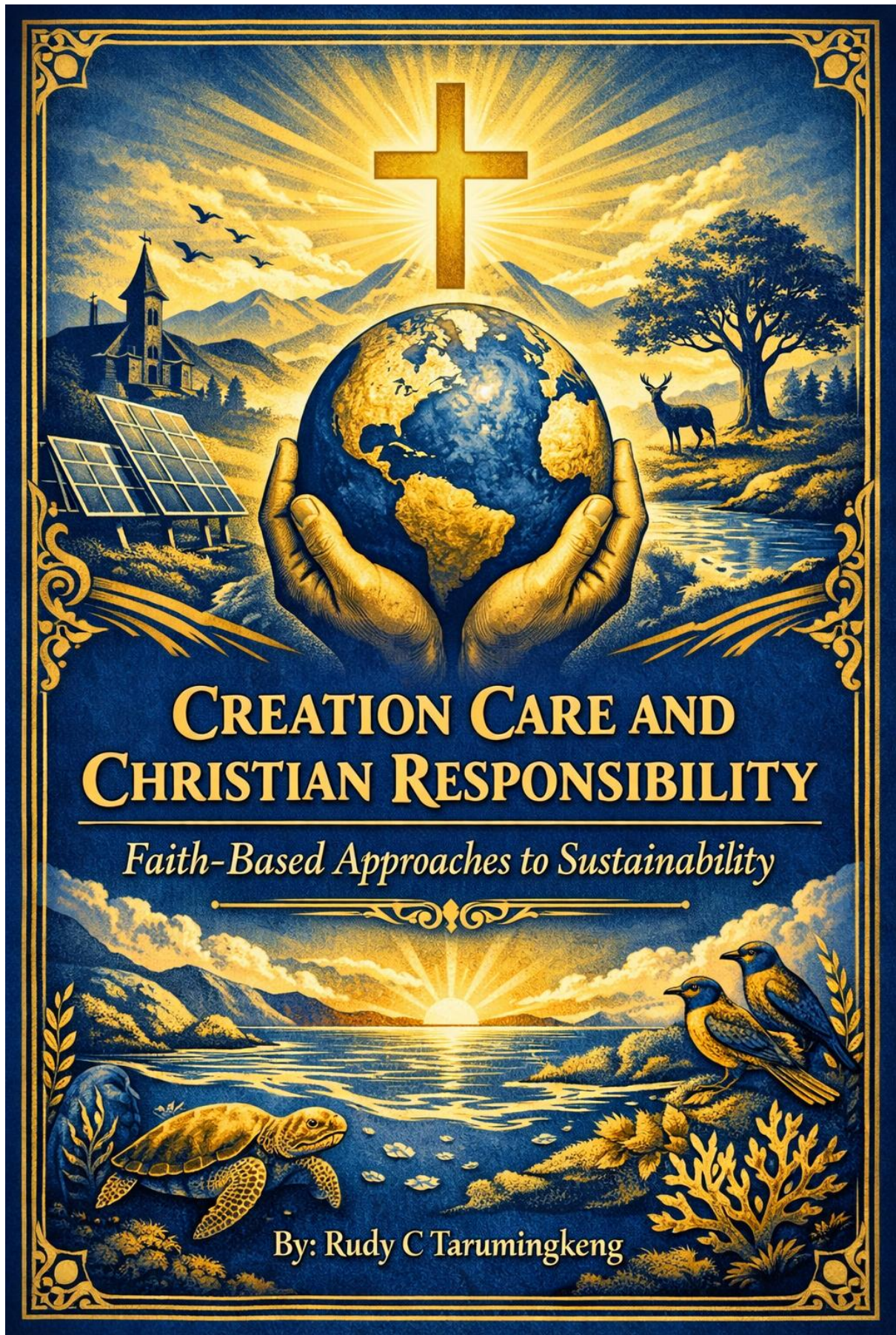




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CREATION CARE AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY: FAITH-BASED APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABILITY

Abstract

This paper examines the theological, ethical, and practical relationship between Christian faith and sustainability under the theme of creation care. It argues that environmental responsibility is not an optional supplement to Christian discipleship, but a constitutive dimension of obedience to God the Creator, love of neighbor, and public witness in a time of ecological crisis. Contemporary sustainability debates increasingly recognize the interdependence of climate stability, biodiversity protection, social justice, and economic resilience. In parallel, major Christian traditions and institutions have deepened their articulation of environmental responsibility through the language of stewardship, integral ecology, climate justice, and the renewal of creation. Official Christian bodies such as the Vatican, the Lausanne Movement, the World Council of Churches, the Anglican Communion, A Rocha, and the ecumenical Season of Creation initiative present care for the earth as inseparable from worship, justice, mission, and hope. At the same time, global policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the IPCC's climate-resilient development perspective provide a useful public vocabulary through which faith communities can translate moral conviction into practical institutional

action. This paper develops a biblically grounded and theologically informed framework for Christian sustainability, explores the role of churches and Christian organizations in education, advocacy, ecological restoration, and community resilience, and offers illustrative pathways for implementation at congregational and institutional levels. It concludes that Christian responsibility in the Anthropocene requires spiritual formation, moral courage, institutional reform, and collaborative action so that faith-based communities may become sanctuaries of hope, resilience, and restorative stewardship in a wounded world.

[\(Vatican\)](#)

Keywords: *creation care, Christian responsibility, sustainability, stewardship, integral ecology, climate justice, faith-based action, ecological discipleship*

Creation Care and Christian Responsibility: Faith-Based Approaches to Sustainability

1. Introduction

The contemporary ecological crisis has forced nearly every major institution to reconsider its moral assumptions, developmental priorities, and long-term responsibilities. Climate disruption, biodiversity loss, and pollution are no longer isolated technical issues; they are civilizational tests that expose how societies imagine prosperity, power, and human purpose. The United Nations continues to frame sustainable development as a shared global project for “people and the planet,” while UNEP describes the current predicament as a “triple planetary crisis” composed of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and

pollution and waste. The IPCC likewise emphasizes that climate action and development cannot be separated, and that decisions made in this decade will shape human and ecological wellbeing for generations. ([Sustainable Development Goals](#))

For Christian theology, this crisis is not merely environmental. It is spiritual, moral, and social. It raises questions about sin, consumption, injustice, dominion, vocation, and hope. If the earth belongs to God, if human beings are called to “till and keep” the garden, and if love of neighbor includes responsibility toward the vulnerable, then ecological degradation must be interpreted as a matter of discipleship as well as policy. That is why contemporary Christian bodies increasingly reject the idea that environmental concern is a secular agenda external to the gospel. The Lausanne Movement calls creation care “a clear biblical command,” the Anglican Communion includes safeguarding creation among its formal marks of mission, and the World Council of Churches places care for creation and justice at the center of its work. ([Lausanne Movement](#))

This paper argues that creation care belongs within the heart of Christian responsibility because it emerges from the doctrine of creation, the ethics of love, the prophetic concern for justice, and the eschatological hope of renewal. A faith-based approach to sustainability is therefore not reducible to recycling campaigns or symbolic environmentalism. Properly understood, it is a holistic practice that integrates worship, education, institutional accountability, ecological restoration, and public advocacy. It is both contemplative and practical, both local and global, both theological and organizational. ([Vatican](#))

2. Creation as Gift, Order, and Trust

Christian responsibility toward the environment begins with the confession that the world is created by God and therefore possesses meaning beyond utility. Creation is not self-generated raw material

waiting to be exploited without moral limit. It is gift, order, and trust. In Genesis, the world is declared "very good," which means nature has value before its conversion into human economic advantage. Psalm 24:1 deepens this conviction by stating that the earth is the Lord's.

Theological reflection on creation thus challenges possessive modernity: human beings are not absolute owners but dependent creatures inhabiting a world that precedes and outlasts them. Peter Scherle's eco-theological account stresses that creation must not be treated as a commodity and that an adequate dogmatic approach must recover the creaturely dependence of all life on God's ongoing creative action.

([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))

This theological logic corrects two distortions that have often weakened Christian environmental ethics. The first is reductionism, where creation is regarded merely as background scenery for the salvation of souls. The second is dominationism, where "dominion" is interpreted as license for unlimited extraction. Hitzhusen showed that Judeo-Christian theology need not be read in environmentally destructive ways; instead, it can supply constructive resources for environmental ethics and education when read through stewardship, responsibility, and creaturely humility rather than mastery. In other words, Christian theology is not condemned to ecological irrelevance. It can either reinforce exploitative habits or become a source of moral repair. ([Journal Universitas Katolik Parahyangan](#))

The biblical language of stewardship is often associated with Genesis 2:15, where humanity is placed in the garden "to till and keep it." Pope Francis explicitly draws on this verse in *Laudato Si'*, noting that the human vocation includes both preserving and cultivating the garden. This is a crucial balance. Preservation alone may romanticize passivity; cultivation without restraint may rationalize domination. A Christian theology of work therefore views human agency as participatory rather than possessive. Labor, technology, and management can be honorable

expressions of creativity when they unfold within prudence, justice, and reverence for limits. ([Vatican](#))

Seen this way, creation care is not hostility toward development. It is moral discipline for development. It asks whether productivity honors the integrity of creation, whether innovation protects the vulnerable, and whether growth can be reconciled with renewal. Christian sustainability is therefore not anti-human. It is anti-idolatry. It resists the elevation of consumption, convenience, and short-term gain into final goods. By re-situating the economy inside creation rather than above it, theology offers a corrective to patterns of extraction that sever production from gratitude and profit from responsibility. ([Vatican](#))

3. Dominion Reinterpreted: From Power Over to Responsibility For

One of the central debates in Christian environmental thought concerns the meaning of dominion. In its most careless interpretation, dominion has been heard as divine permission for rule without reciprocity. That reading has often fueled the criticism that Christianity is structurally anthropocentric and therefore ecologically dangerous. Yet this interpretation is increasingly rejected across Christian traditions. The Lausanne Movement's creation care materials frame stewardship as part of following Jesus as Lord, not as a concession to modern environmentalism. The Anglican Communion's fifth mark of mission similarly interprets safeguarding creation as an integral component of faithfulness, not a peripheral concern. ([Lausanne Movement](#))

A more adequate understanding sees dominion as delegated responsibility under God. Human beings are accountable rulers, not sovereign owners. Their vocation is analogous to trusteeship: to organize, protect, cultivate, and transmit a habitable world. Scherle's critique is useful here because he warns against concepts of dominion that do not reckon seriously with political conflict, finitude, and the need for habitability. This reframing matters greatly for management, public

policy, and institutional leadership. It means Christian responsibility cannot be satisfied by good intentions while ignoring the structural effects of production systems, energy choices, procurement chains, or land use decisions. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))

The language of responsibility also expands the moral circle. Dominion is not merely about what humans may do to the earth; it is about what humans owe to fellow creatures, to future generations, and to communities already harmed by ecological disruption. The World Council of Churches repeatedly links creation care with justice because environmental harm falls disproportionately on the poor, Indigenous peoples, and communities with the least political power. In that sense, dominion severed from justice becomes domination. Christian responsibility must therefore be measured not only by doctrinal orthodoxy but by the social and ecological consequences of institutional action. ([World Council of Churches](#))

4. Creation Care as Love of Neighbor and Climate Justice

A Christian approach to sustainability becomes sharper when viewed through the command to love one's neighbor. Environmental degradation is not only about forests, oceans, or carbon trajectories in abstraction. It is about food security, health, migration, livelihoods, housing, and the dignity of vulnerable populations. UNEP warns that the triple planetary crisis threatens the foundations of prosperity, peace, and security. The UN's SDG framework likewise insists that poverty reduction, health, inequality, and environmental protection must be addressed together. Sustainability, then, is not simply an environmental agenda with social side effects; it is an integrated moral framework for human flourishing. ([UNEP - UN Environment Programme](#))

This integration resonates deeply with Christian social thought. *Laudato Si'* argues for an "integral ecology" in which environmental, social, labor, economic, and spiritual questions are treated as interdependent rather

than compartmentalized. Lan T. Chu's analysis of Catholic environmental norms shows how the Church has increasingly articulated a foreign policy and public moral language of human or integral ecology, especially in global climate discussions. In this view, the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable. Ecological harm is never merely technical because it is experienced through unequal exposure, unequal voice, and unequal capacity to recover. ([Vatican](#))

The IPCC's framing of climate-resilient development strengthens this point from a scientific-policy perspective. Climate action, adaptation, and sustainable development are interdependent, and prospects for resilient development depend on inclusive governance, resources, and coordinated action. This aligns with Christian ethics in two ways. First, it affirms that prudence requires evidence-based action. Second, it reminds faith communities that justice is not only charitable response after disaster; it is the prior design of institutions that reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience. A church that feeds flood victims but ignores land ethics, public accountability, or energy injustice has not yet exhausted its moral responsibility. ([IPCC](#))

The World Council of Churches has pushed this argument further by explicitly speaking of climate justice and by launching the Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action for 2025–2034. Its language of "ecological metanoia" is important. Metanoia implies more than behavioral adjustment; it suggests repentance, reorientation, and transformed imagination. Christian sustainability therefore requires not only greener habits but renewed desires: less acquisitiveness, more solidarity; less extraction, more repair; less indifference, more covenantal care. ([World Council of Churches](#))

5. Theological Resources for a Christian Sustainability Ethic

Several major theological themes sustain a robust Christian environmental ethic. The first is creation itself, which grounds the

goodness and intelligibility of the world. The second is covenant, which widens moral responsibility beyond private spirituality into communal fidelity. The third is incarnation, which dignifies material existence rather than dismissing it as spiritually irrelevant. The fourth is sin, which names greed, excess, domination, and indifference as disorders that affect both society and ecology. The fifth is redemption, which points toward the reconciliation of “all things,” not merely isolated individuals. These themes together prevent Christianity from collapsing into either naïve optimism or despair. ([Vatican](#))

Scherle’s work is particularly helpful for avoiding sentimentality. By grounding eco-theology in *creatio ex nihilo* and eschatological promise, he resists both secular utopianism and ecological fatalism. Creation is neither a neutral machine nor a sacred totality dissolving all distinctions. It is a creaturely order upheld by God, marked by conflict and fragility, yet oriented toward hope. This perspective matters because sustainability discourse can sometimes become technocratic or quasi-religious in unhelpful ways. Christian thought contributes a chastened hope: human efforts matter profoundly, but they do not save the world by themselves. They participate in responsibility without claiming final sovereignty. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))

Likewise, the growing prominence of “integral ecology” in Catholic thought broadens environmental ethics beyond conservation in the narrow sense. *Laudato Si’* explicitly links ecology with labor, culture, economics, and social exclusion. Chu’s analysis shows that this language has also functioned in international politics as a re-imagination of environmental norms toward shared global responsibility. For Christian institutions, this means sustainability should not be siloed in building maintenance or occasional tree-planting. It belongs in curriculum, procurement, budgeting, pastoral care, mission strategy, and community development. ([Vatican](#))

Evangelical traditions have also deepened their ecological theology. The Cape Town Commitment frames Christian mission in holistic terms, while later Lausanne creation care statements affirm that the gospel “includes the earth.” This is a significant development because it refuses the false choice between evangelism and environmental responsibility. The issue is not whether the church should preach Christ or care for creation; rather, the church is called to bear witness to Christ in ways that reflect his lordship over all of life. Environmental neglect, under this logic, becomes a truncated gospel. ([Lausanne Movement](#))

6. From Doctrine to Practice: Faith-Based Approaches to Sustainability

The most credible test of creation care is practical embodiment. Christian communities must ask how theological commitments become visible in everyday institutional life. Worship is one starting point. The ecumenical Season of Creation, observed from September 1 to October 4, offers a liturgical rhythm through which churches pray, teach, and act for creation. The World Council of Churches helped expand this observance ecumenically, and the Season of Creation initiative now draws together a broad coalition of Christian partners for prayer and action. Liturgical formation matters because people rarely sustain costly moral action without symbolic worlds that shape attention, gratitude, and belonging. ([Season of Creation](#))

Education is a second major pathway. Sermons, catechesis, Bible studies, youth programs, and Christian higher education can all cultivate ecological literacy alongside theological discernment. Hitzhusen argued that Judeo-Christian theology can become a serious source for environmental education when it moves beyond defensive skepticism and engages constructive ethics. In practical terms, this means teaching believers to read Scripture with ecological awareness, to understand the social dimensions of environmental harm, and to interpret sustainability

not as ideological fashion but as faithful responsibility. Without this pedagogical work, churches may endorse creation care rhetorically while remaining captive to consumerist habits. ([Journal Universitas Katolik Parahyangan](#))

Institutional operations form a third pathway. Churches, schools, seminaries, hospitals, and faith-based NGOs manage buildings, land, energy, water, food, waste, and purchasing systems. These are moral decisions, not merely administrative details. A Rocha provides a compelling model of how Christian commitment can be translated into ecological monitoring, habitat restoration, environmental education, and community-based conservation across more than twenty countries. Its vision of nature flourishing as people live equitably and sustainably demonstrates that faith-based sustainability can be scientifically informed, locally rooted, and publicly credible. ([A Rocha International](#))

Public advocacy is a fourth pathway. Christian responsibility does not end at internal reform. WCC's long engagement with UN climate processes and its climate justice advocacy show that churches can act as transnational moral actors. Chu's analysis of Catholic environmental diplomacy similarly suggests that religious institutions can function as "norm entrepreneurs," helping reshape public discourse. This is especially important where environmental policy is stalled by short-term political incentives or by the invisibility of those most harmed. Faith communities possess narrative, moral, and relational capital that can support public accountability, intergenerational ethics, and solidarity with marginalized communities. ([World Council of Churches](#))

A fifth pathway is resilience-building at the local level. The Christian congregation is often one of the most durable social institutions in vulnerable communities. It can host disaster preparedness training, support water conservation, build community gardens, encourage sustainable livelihoods, reduce food waste, create cooling or refuge

spaces during extreme weather, and partner with scientists, local governments, and civil society. The IPCC's emphasis on coordinated and inclusive climate-resilient development suggests that such local initiatives matter most when linked to broader governance and equity considerations. The church's role is not to replace the state, but to strengthen the social fabric through trust, participation, and moral imagination. ([IPCC](#))

7. Illustrative Narrative Cases

Consider an illustrative coastal congregation in eastern Indonesia. The community has begun experiencing more erratic weather, saltwater intrusion into wells, and declining fish catches. At first the church responds through prayer and pastoral visits, which are necessary but insufficient. Over time, leaders realize that creation care is inseparable from the survival of households. The congregation partners with local schools, fisheries officers, and young volunteers to restore mangroves, monitor waste dumping, and teach children about water stewardship through Bible stories and science lessons. Worship incorporates lament for ecological loss and thanksgiving for renewed coastal life. What began as a "green program" becomes a form of social resilience, intergenerational education, and public witness. This is what Christian sustainability looks like when theology enters the geography of everyday life. The logic of such a response is strongly aligned with climate justice, community-based conservation, and the integration of prayer with action advocated by ecumenical and scientific bodies alike. ([World Council of Churches](#))

Consider also a Christian university in an urban setting. It starts with a narrow facilities agenda: lowering electricity bills and reducing paper use. But faculty and administrators gradually recognize that sustainability is not only a cost-saving measure; it is a pedagogical and moral framework. Business students study sustainable procurement, theology students

explore creation care and integral ecology, engineering students design low-energy systems, and social science students examine environmental justice. Procurement rules are revised, cafeteria waste is composted, and campus land becomes a living laboratory for biodiversity. The institution moves from compliance to culture. In this scenario, sustainability becomes a cross-disciplinary expression of Christian formation because it joins knowledge, habits, governance, and vocation. This is consistent with the UN's integrated understanding of sustainable development and with Christian traditions that refuse to separate worship from public responsibility. ([Sustainable Development Goals](#))

A third scenario may be imagined in a low-income urban parish facing heat stress, flooding, and unemployment. Rather than treating these as isolated social problems, the parish frames them as interconnected. It establishes a small resilience committee, audits local vulnerabilities, installs rainwater harvesting, creates shaded communal space, and develops a neighborhood food garden supported by older women and unemployed youth. Sunday preaching links Sabbath, rest, justice, and restraint with the practical need for cooling, food access, and dignified work. Over time, the parish becomes known not only as a place of worship but as a trustworthy anchor institution. Here, sustainability is neither abstract policy nor ideological branding. It is neighbor-love organized. ([World Council of Churches](#))

8. Tensions, Critiques, and Theological Cautions

Christian sustainability must also face important tensions. One risk is moral reductionism, where the gospel is collapsed into environmental activism. Christianity is larger than ecological ethics, and creation care should not become a substitute creed that empties worship, grace, and redemption of their centrality. Another risk is quietism, where churches speak beautifully of stewardship yet avoid structural questions involving energy systems, extractive economies, wasteful lifestyles, or political

accountability. A third risk is romanticism, where “nature” is idealized without sufficient attention to poverty, labor, development needs, and real social conflict. Scherle’s account is useful because it preserves realism, conflict, and eschatological tension while still demanding responsibility. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))

There is also the practical problem of translation. Many congregations affirm creation care in principle but lack tools for implementation. Leaders may fear polarization, especially where environmental debates are associated with party politics, international agendas, or elite discourse. Yet official Christian initiatives increasingly provide precisely the practical bridge that is needed. WCC’s climate justice resources, the Season of Creation materials, Lausanne’s creation care network, and A Rocha’s long-standing field practice all demonstrate that the issue need not remain at the level of abstraction. Faith communities can begin with liturgy, audit their institutional habits, collaborate locally, and build gradually toward public witness. ([World Council of Churches](#))

A further caution concerns language. “Stewardship” has been enormously useful, but some ecumenical voices now warn that it can still sound too managerial or hierarchical if it implies that the rest of creation exists only under human supervision. The WCC’s recent climate justice language sometimes prefers metaphors of participation, partnership, and repentance. This critique should not force a rejection of stewardship, but it does invite refinement. Christian responsibility is most faithful when it combines stewardship with humility, reciprocity, and the recognition that human beings are members of creation before they are managers of it. ([World Council of Churches](#))

9. A Strategic Framework for Churches and Christian Institutions

A practical Christian framework for sustainability can be organized around five verbs: **receive, discern, reform, collaborate, and witness.** To receive creation is to recover gratitude. Institutions that see the world

only as inventory will never sustain moral care for it. Gratitude is not sentimentality; it is the spiritual discipline that resists commodification. To discern is to interpret ecological issues through Scripture, theology, science, and local experience together. This protects churches from both anti-scientific suspicion and uncritical assimilation to secular rhetoric. The IPCC's climate-resilient development framework and the UN's integrated SDG agenda are useful public tools for such discernment, especially when translated into local moral language. ([IPCC](#))

To reform is to change institutional practice. This includes energy use, waste systems, land management, procurement, curriculum, transportation, finance, and pastoral priorities. *Laudato Si'* and *Laudate Deum* both press believers beyond vague appreciation for nature toward structural and moral change, while the Anglican and Lausanne traditions reinforce that ecological responsibility belongs to mission and discipleship. Reform also means measuring what matters. Christian institutions can adopt simple indicators: energy reduction, food waste reduction, curriculum integration, water stewardship, community partnerships, resilience programs, and inclusion of vulnerable groups in decision-making. These are not secular intrusions into faith; they are forms of accountable obedience. ([Vatican](#))

To collaborate is to reject isolation. Ecological problems are interdependent, and so must be the response. A Rocha's model shows the value of combining scientific research, practical conservation, community outreach, and Christian witness. The Season of Creation coalition demonstrates the power of ecumenical partnership. The WCC's climate justice decade underscores solidarity with Indigenous peoples, youth, and frontline communities. Churches that collaborate wisely expand both competence and credibility. They also embody the Pauline intuition that no member of the body flourishes alone. ([A Rocha International](#))

Finally, to witness is to make visible a different moral horizon. The church bears witness when it tells the truth about ecological harm, practices restraint in a culture of excess, protects the vulnerable, and cultivates hope without denial. Such witness is not merely rhetorical. It becomes persuasive when communities of faith demonstrate that sustainability can be lived as joy, discipline, justice, and solidarity rather than as fear alone. In that sense, creation care is not the church imitating the world's newest concern. It is the church rediscovering an ancient vocation in a time of planetary urgency. ([Lausanne Movement](#))

10. Conclusion

Creation care belongs within Christian responsibility because the world is God's creation, human beings are accountable creatures, and love of neighbor extends into the ecological conditions that make life possible. A faith-based approach to sustainability does not replace the gospel with environmentalism, nor does it reduce theology to public policy. Rather, it insists that Christian faith must address the concrete realities of climate disruption, biodiversity loss, pollution, and environmental injustice with intellectual seriousness and practical courage. In this sense, sustainability becomes a field in which doctrine, discipleship, and public responsibility converge. ([Vatican](#))

The strongest Christian approaches today move beyond vague stewardship toward integrated practice: liturgy that forms ecological awareness, education that joins Scripture with science, institutions that reform their operations, and public engagement that defends the poor and the earth together. Global Christian bodies have already laid substantial groundwork. The Vatican's language of integral ecology, Lausanne's insistence that creation care is part of following Jesus, the Anglican fifth mark of mission, WCC's climate justice witness, A Rocha's field-based conservation, and the ecumenical Season of Creation all

show that environmental responsibility is increasingly understood as a constitutive element of Christian faithfulness. ([Vatican](#))

At the same time, the broader global context intensifies the urgency. The SDG framework warns that progress remains insufficient, UNEP emphasizes the interconnected planetary crisis, and the IPCC makes clear that choices made in this decade are decisive. For the church, this means that creation care can no longer remain an elective theme for specialists. It has become part of what it means to teach, lead, manage, worship, and serve faithfully in the twenty-first century. Christian hope, if it is to be credible, must be embodied in communities that protect habitability, practice justice, and nurture the renewal of life. ([UNSD](#))

Glossary

Creation care: A Christian term for the moral and spiritual responsibility to protect, cultivate, and renew the created order under God's lordship. ([Lausanne Movement](#))

Stewardship: The idea that human beings are trustees rather than absolute owners of the earth, accountable for how they use power, resources, and institutions. ([Vatican](#))

Integral ecology: A framework, strongly developed in Catholic social thought, that treats environmental, social, economic, labor, and cultural issues as interdependent. ([Vatican](#))

Climate justice: An approach emphasizing that climate change is not only a scientific issue but also a justice issue because its burdens fall unequally, especially on the poor and marginalized. ([World Council of Churches](#))

Climate-resilient development: An IPCC concept describing development that integrates mitigation and adaptation in support of sustainable development for all. ([IPCC](#))

Triple planetary crisis: UNEP's term for the linked crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste. ([UNEP - UN Environment Programme](#))

Ecological metanoia: A term used in recent ecumenical discourse to describe deep repentance and transformation in response to ecological injustice and climate emergency. ([World Council of Churches](#))

Season of Creation: An annual ecumenical period from September 1 to October 4 dedicated to prayer and action for creation. ([Season of Creation](#))

Faith-based sustainability: Sustainability practice grounded in religious convictions, institutions, narratives, and communities, rather than only in technical or policy frameworks. ([A Rocha International](#))

Habitability: A term highlighted in eco-theology to describe conditions that allow creaturely life to flourish within ecological and moral limits. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))

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