

**CONSTRUCTING AN ECO LITURGICAL MODEL OF BAPTISM THAT
ENCOURAGES ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL
SUSTAINABILITY**

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Abstract

The Orthodox Anglican tradition does not denigrate the material world as mundane entity. Her liturgical tradition provides ample evidences of her affirmation of the integrity of creation and thus material elements from the oikos, are offered sacramentally to God in worship. Through her adaptability to sacramental liturgy and practices, the Anglican Church encourages a new ethics for the "earth community"- the ethics of restraint of egoistic consumerism, behavioral change and awareness of personal responsibility towards environmental sustainability which will ultimately culminate in the "salvation of the whole oikos. The paper is a creative attempt that discusses the ecological values inherent in constructing an "eco-liturgical" model for baptism capable of not only inculcating the ethics of personal environmental responsibility but also filling the gap by dousing the tension between economy and ecology in a way that fosters economic and environmental sustainability where hitherto, they were seen as opposing each other. The methodology adopted for the study is a descriptive and constructive analytical approach focusing on understanding the relationship of the church with the material world as well as the relationship of the individual Christian with the "earth community" which the church belongs to and which the individual is initiated into through the sacrament of baptism.

Keywords: Eco Liturgical Model, Baptism, Christianity, Environmental Sustainability

Situating the problem

Lyn white in her book "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" became famous for criticizing Christianity of being environmentally irresponsible and therefore being responsible for the ecological crisis witnessed in the 60s. Ever since Lyn White's accusation, there have been series of church involvement in environmental programmes aimed at halting the progression of some of the ecological problems and creating awareness and education on the dangers of harming the environment. Many Christian organizations and/or church groups have introduced a wide range of local earth keeping projects, including projects that will encourage environmental sustainability. These

include projects such as tree planting, water harvesting, organic vegetable gardens, recycling, indigenous church gardens and “living graveyard campaigns”. They also engaged in outdoor youth and family activities to promote the love of nature, nature conservation projects focusing on habitat, wildlife or indigenous plants, job creation projects in the field of appropriate technology, the development of teaching material and networks to communicate such work to others.

In spite of the church’s commitment to environmental sustainability through the above mentioned ventures, people still make economic choices and engage in activities in most unsustainable manner, thereby causing serious harm to the environment and jeopardizing the life of the earth community. A very big problem for the church here, is not only how to make people become aware of the harm they do to the environment (after all many people are now aware of the consequences of their actions on the environment) but how to inspire commitment to proper earth keeping through sustained lifestyle and practical action. The church seemed to be constrained by having not been able to:

- (1) provide theological resources and teaching materials that will deeply inspire and change people’s behavior and attitude to the environment,
- (2) Encourage people to develop an *inner conscience* that will lead to a life of frugality and a strong self-will against greed-the mother of all unsustainable actions against the environment.

The problem is further exacerbated by the absence of a more practical and contextual way of synthesizing the indigenous ecological knowledge system with Christian ecological ethics in the church’s engagement in environmental sustainability agenda. Sometimes, the church seems to be afraid of being innovative in both her theology and liturgy. Is it possible to spur the church to action by making her engage in synthesizing the indigenous ecological knowledge system through this work-a creative attempt of a liturgy of baptism in which economic plants or seedling (instead of the candle) will be given to the newly baptized. The essence of the proposed eco-liturgical practice is to conscientize the newly baptized to imbibe the values of the integrity of creation and promote both economic and environmental sustainability? These and more, form the concern of this work seeks to address.

Commonalities of African Ecological ethics, Biocentrism, oikos theology and the role of the Church within the Earth Community

For many years now, the concept of *oikos* metaphor “whole household of God” has received tremendous popularity through the works of many eco-theologians including Wamback (2004) and Alokwu (2009). The popularity of the concept is mainly premised on the recognition it places on the issues of economic injustices and ecological destruction on one hand and the connection and relationship it made between the two on the other hand. The power of this concept lies in its ability to integrate especially three core ecumenical themes on the basis of the Greek word “*oikos*” (household) -which forms the root of the quests for economic justice (the *nomoi* or regulations within the household), ecological sustainability (the *logoi* or underlying principles of the household) and ecumenical fellowship (*oikoumene*-participating as members of the entire household of God). In this regard, Conradie (2006) suggests therefore that the household of God may serve as a metaphor to integrate a number of concerns, including the integrity of the biophysical foundations of this house (the earth’s biosphere); the economic management of the household’s affairs and the need for peace and reconciliation amidst ethnic, religious and domestic violence within this single household. This includes a concern for issues of health and education; the place of women and children within this household and an ecumenical sense of the unity not only of the church, but also of the whole of humankind and of all of God’s creation and the entire earth community.

The concept of *oikos* theology reminds us that God is both the architect and owner of the *oikos* (psalm 24:1 and Lev.25:23) The place of the church in the *oikos* is that of a responsible tenant whose role within the entire earth community is to teach humans of the need of playing “the Big Brother role” as well that of steward to the other weaker members of the earth community. We need to understand this role from African Christian’s perspective by synthesizing the African ecological ethics of communitarianism with the *oikos* theology which best describes the place of humans in the *oikos*. In Christian ecological ethics, the concept of communitarianism is adumbrated or rather similar to biocentric ethics. According to Jason (2004) the term biocentrism encompasses all environmental ethics that “extend the status of moral object from human beings to all living things in nature.”

In what he describes as 'biocentric theology' Setiloane (1995) has lucidly shed more light in our understanding of community in relation to *oikos-theology* and African sense of community especially as it relates to the Igbo notion of *onye aghana nwanne ya*. Biocentric ethics calls for a rethinking of the relationship between humans and nature. It states that nature does not exist simply to be used or consumed by humans, but that humans are simply one specie amongst many, and that because humans are part of an ecosystem, any actions which negatively affect the living systems of which humans are a part, adversely affect them as well, whether or not we maintain a biocentric worldview. Biocentrists, like eco-theologians (who emphasize the integrity of creation), believe that all species have inherent value, and that humans are not "apart" from other species in the *oikos*.

Cock (2007) in his contribution, uses the term biocentric theology to emphasize the inclusive nature of community life in all its forms. He reminds us that the term "biocentric" was originally formulated by Leopold in his notion of land ethic which implies an expansive notion of community. This term was later broadened as "ecocentric" or "biocentric" ethics by different philosophers over the decades to mean that we are all part of a biotic community. Cock, amplifying Leopold's position, argues that all living things have intrinsic worth-value in and of themselves-not just instrumental or utilitarian value. He concludes that land ethic involves the extension of our human ethics to include the other species with which we share the land. In this perspective, all ethics rests upon a single premise: "that the individual is a member of a community with interdependent parts and the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, waters, plants and animals". Therefore "biodiversity is necessary not only for utilitarian and humanitarian reasons (for maintaining the present and future health of the entire biosphere, for enhancing the quality of life, and for aesthetic enjoyment), but its own sake.

The writer coming from an African Christian's perspective, observes that there is a similarity between biocentric ethics and African ecological ethics and that they are all related to the Christian concept of *oikos* theology. For example, all the four main pillars of a biocentric outlook are similar to African ecological ethics and *oikos* theology:

1. Humans and all other species are members of the earth's community- the *oikos* of God.
2. All species are part of a system of interdependence.
3. All living organisms pursue their own "good" in their own ways.

4. Human beings are not inherently superior to other living things.

African ecological ethics, biocentric ethics and *oikos* theology are in agreement that humanity is closely connected to each other and to other creatures itself. This idea has been explained by Mbiti (1980) in his popular *obiter dictum* “we are; therefore, I am”. By this dictum, Mbiti means that an individual does not exist apart from the community. He writes: “What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and what happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. The phrase “being in plenitude” best describes the African notion of persons because it emphasizes the unity or connectedness of persons to one another, to the community (*oikos*) and to nature. No less explanation could be offered to understand the phrase “being in plenitude” than the eloquent elucidation by Sindima (1990) in the following quotation:

We cannot understand persons; indeed, we cannot have personal identity, without reference to other persons. Nor can we understand ourselves without reference to nature. People understand themselves and gain identity only in a total framework of life. They are defined as they engage in work, ritual practice and symbolic activities. But they must also understand themselves as belonging to nature, as living the life of nature. It is through their relationship with nature that people discover their identities and approach the possibility of living life fully. As nature opens itself up to people, it presents possibilities for experiencing the fullness of life, possibilities for discovering how inseparably bonded people are to each other and to all creation.

According to Botman (2007) in Africa, a strong sense of community is what holds the society together. Rukuni (2007) in his contribution suggest that the *oikos* concept is not only key to the Bible but that it is also a central concept in African cosmology and ecological ethics in particular. *Ubuntu* as a concept is a bit difficult to translate to other meanings. But its contextual meaning is that it is the essence of being human. It emphasizes that “my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours ...I am because I belong”. This fosters a strong sense of community. Ronald (2008) opines that the term community in its African wider context refers to an organic relationship between individuals. Community recognizes that we live in one household, that we need one another to survive and thrive. Both the concept of *Oikos* and *ubuntu*

are related to the Igbo notion of *onye aghana nwanne ya*. The notion of *onye aghana nwanne ya* aims not only at recognizing the humanness and the dignity of the individual members of the community especially the weaker ones, it also seeks to ensure that their rights in whatever forms are guaranteed. It fosters the collective well-being and happiness of the whole community. In this regard, there is no justification for a community member to be happy while a fellow community member is suffering. The notion of *onye aghana nwanne ya* simply stipulates-do not leave your fellow community member alone especially in their suffering.

Sindinma (1990) strongly argues that in Africa, the word 'community' refers to more than a mere association of atomic individuals. According to her, the term suggests bondedness; it refers to the act of sharing and living in communion and communication with each other and with nature. To communicate is to stay in a relationship and inculcate a sense of sharing. This is what she meant by saying that "in community we share and commune with selves who are other than ourselves and yet united to us". She continues, "in a community of life where all are bonded together, everyone is responsible for everyone else". Shutte (1993) in his contribution suggests that 'persons' are not individual entities or strangers to one another. It is the community which defines the person as person, "not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory". According to him, since people belong to the fabric of life, their life-like nature must be respected. This call for respect is also a charge to the community to create possibilities for persons to realize full personhood.

How could the church's rite of baptism encourage economic and environmental sustainability?

Having established the commonalities of *oikos* theology, biocentric theology and African ecological ethics, the pertinent question here is how the church especially the Anglican church in Nigeria, could appropriate and synergize all these concepts in producing ecological liturgy that will practically inspire behavioral change-one that will provoke a deep sense of personal environmental responsibility and commitment? It is the opinion of this paper that if the church will achieve the desired behavioral change in people's attitude to the environment, the church has to be flexible, contextual and constructive in her theology and liturgy. In doing this, the paper proposes an innovation-the construction of an "eco-liturgical" model for baptism capable of not only inculcating the ethics of personal environmental responsibility in people, but of helping to douse the tension between economy and ecology in a

way that fosters economic and environmental sustainability where hitherto, they were seen as opposing each other.

Since the 1988 Lambeth Conference which focused on the environment, some Anglican Provinces had practically responded to directives of the Lambeth Conference by making efforts in creating environmental awareness in their Provinces and Dioceses. The Anglican Churches in the global South could be said to have been committed in working towards becoming environmentally friendly churches than the Anglican churches in Africa. Many of the Anglican churches in the global South have been engaged in environmental projects /programmes in line with the Lambeth Conference resolution on the environment.

The Anglican Church in Nigeria deserves commendation to have lately joined other Anglican churches in the Global South in responding to the Lambeth Conference resolution on environmental issues. What the Anglican Communion recently did in the area of liturgical flexibility in baptismal rite, could serve as a spring board upon which future liturgical flexibility in other denominations be established. Some of the Bishops in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) have started adopting this liturgical initiative. For example, the Bishop of Amichi Diocese, Rt. Revd. Ephraim Ikeakor, has introduced Synod Tree Planting campaign. Tree planting during synods has become a liturgical tradition of the diocese. This liturgical innovation by the Anglican Communion in Nigeria has given the writer optimism that before long, other denominations could follow suit in becoming liturgically innovative in responding to other areas of concern in the *oikos*, including environmental issues.

Before now, the researcher had been worried about the church's rigidity to liturgical issues that could reflect our traditional ecological values. This concern was reflected in one of his articles many years ago where he had proposed the inclusion of 'theology and development studies' as a course in the curriculum of the Theological Colleges in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) as a way of encouraging upcoming pastors to be interested in how the church could be actively involved in economic and development issues plaguing the society. In that paper, the researcher was advocating for a more contextual approach by the church in what he termed "doing theology instead thinking theology" It is therefore interesting to note that the Anglican Communion in Nigeria has recently introduced the practice of giving candle during the sacrament of baptism as a way of being contextual in her theologizing against her former attitude of just "thinking theology".

Complementing The Giving Of Candle At Baptism With The Giving Of Economic Plant As A Way Of Encouraging Economic And Environmental Sustainability: An Eco-Liturgical Model

It has been established that there is a connection between ecology and economy. The environment provides all the resources for economic activities. It is therefore imperative that the church should support efforts towards making this link more friendly and strong. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams corroborated this link when in a lecture titled "Ecology and Economy" delivered at the University of Kent in Canterbury, addressed directly the relationship between ecology and economy. The Archbishop writes:

The two big "e-words" (ecology and economy) in my title have sometimes been used in recent decades as if they represented opposing concerns.... But this separation or opposition has come to look like a massive mistake. It has been said that 'the economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment'. The earth itself is what ultimately controls economic activity because it is the source of the materials upon which economic activity works.... Economy and ecology cannot be separated. We should not be surprised, after all, the two words relate to the same central concept.

The above statement from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, underscores the importance of the relationship between economy and ecology hence the relevance of the proposal of giving economic tree or seedlings to the newly baptized. The practice no doubt will encourage economic and environmental sustainability.

In the Anglican tradition of baptismal rite, a child has three God-parents, two males and a female for a male child and two females and one male for a female child. The role of these baptismal sponsors is to guide the newly baptized in the faith. It is important to note that God-parents are the first faith-teachers of the newly baptized. It is expected that the God-parents will teach and nurture the child or the newly baptized on how to walk and grow in the faith. With this proposal of giving economic tree or seedling at baptism, the child at this early stage in his or her life is taught to be environmentally friendly and responsible.

The biological parents will also help in this environmental catechism. The biological parents will plant the tree given to the child at baptism. As the child

grows up, he or she will be made to understand that the implication of the tree given to him or her at baptism is to make him or her environmentally friendly. When the child is of a riper age, he or she would be made to start taking care of the tree. He will be taught the importance of watering and nurturing the tree.

This practice of tree planting after baptism could be likened to the Igbo belief of the mystical link between individuals and the place where their “mfe” umbilical cords was buried at birth. Usually, trees are planted in the place where the “mfe” was buried so that the particular spot would not be forgotten. There is a strong spiritual attachment between individuals and the place where their “mfe” umbilical cord was buried. The individual will be taught to take care of such tree because of the significant symbolism attached to the “mfe”. With this burying of the umbilical cord, it is expected that over time, the child will grow to imbibe the culture of tree planting and environmental responsibility.

Likewise, the proposed liturgical practice of giving the newly baptized an economic tree or seedling to plant on behalf of the child, could inspire a culture of tree planting and environmental responsibility. As earlier stated, the child would be taught to take care and nurture the plant to maturity the same way both the biological as well as the God parents are expected to take care and nurture the child so that he grows in the faith and start bearing fruit for Christ.

The economic dimension to this practice could be appreciated more when the tree matures to the point of fruiting as it could help to boost the economic base of the family when it is harvested and sold. Through this practice, individual family member’s livelihoods are enhanced. The importance of this practice lies in its ability to inspire the child to develop deeper appreciation and commitment to the environment and this will gradually bring about the desired behavioral change needed to reduce the quest for excessive exploitation of the environment for economic gains. You can imagine how green and sustainable our society could be by the number of children and the number of families that would be affected and influenced by this practice.

Conclusion

It has become clear that the church in general has not lived to her full potential as an agent of moral change with regards to environmental concerns. This is antithetical to her vaunted role as a harbinger and steward of creation

as espoused by eco-theologians who contend that Christian theology rooted in the insights of the Bible is a great resource for addressing economic and environmental issues. Within this context, there is need for eco-liturgical flexibility that will encourage economic and environmental sustainability. The liturgical innovation that has been proposed in this paper should serve as the church's contribution towards earth keeping.

It is equally important to note the urgency of synergy on environmental issues since this involves both a theoretical and practical approach in dealing with economic and environmental concerns. The governments alone cannot bring about the desired behavioral change; therefore, a sincere collaboration will engender meaningful conversation/dialogue among the various eco-groups in order to share many eco-theological resources to achieve economic and environmental sustainability.

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