ÉKWÉ INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF IGBO SCHOLARS FORUM FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL ADVANCEMENT (INC) Volume 19, No 4, OCTOBER, 2026 ISSN: 2476-8448

THE CONCEPT OF FAITH-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP: EVALUATING THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND ECOSYSTEM CONSERVATION

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Abstract

Environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources pose significant threats to human well-being and the integrity of ecosystems. In response to these challenges, faith-based environmental

stewardship provides an important framework for promoting responsible relationships between humanity and the natural world. This study evaluates the role of the Church in environmental protection and ecosystem conservation, with particular emphasis on the theological, ethical, educational, and practical contributions of Christian communities. Drawing from biblical principles of creation care, stewardship, responsibility, and justice, the study examines how churches can influence environmental attitudes and behaviours among their members and within wider communities. The study also identifies challenges that may limit effective church engagement, including inadequate environmental awareness, the perception that environmental issues are secondary to spiritual concerns, limited financial and technical resources, and insufficient integration of environmental themes into church programmes. The study argues that the Church possesses considerable social and moral capital that can be harnessed to encourage sustainable lifestyles and strengthen community-based ecosystem conservation. It concludes that environmental stewardship should be understood as an integral dimension of Christian discipleship rather than a peripheral social concern. By integrating ecological responsibility into theology, worship, education, leadership, and community action, the Church can make a meaningful contribution to environmental protection and the promotion of sustainable and resilient communities.

Keywords: Faith-based environmental stewardship, Church, environmental protection, ecosystem

conservation, creation care, Christian theology, sustainability.

Introduction

Studies have shown that Faith traditions possess moral narratives concerning creation, human responsibility, stewardship, justice, and intergenerational responsibility that can provide a significant ethical foundation for environmental conservation. Within Christianity, the natural environment is understood within the broader theological framework of creation. The biblical account portrays the world as God's creation and humanity as having a distinctive responsibility toward it (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15). The mandate to "work" and "take care of" the garden in Genesis 2:15 has particularly important implications for contemporary Christian environmental ethics because it suggests that human dominion should not be interpreted exclusively as unrestricted exploitation but also as responsible care.

Christian stewardship recognizes that creation ultimately belongs to God and that human beings function as custodians rather than absolute owners of the earth. Psalm 24:1 declares that "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," while Psalm 115:16 differentiates between divine ownership and human responsibility for the earth. Such biblical perspectives challenge exploitative relationships with nature and encourage responsible management of ecological resources. Pope Francis (2015), in Laudato Si', similarly presents environmental degradation as both an ecological and moral crisis, arguing that care for the earth is inseparable

from concern for human dignity, social justice, and the welfare of future generations. Although Laudato Si' emerges from the Catholic tradition, its ecological theology contributes significantly to the wider Christian conversation on creation care.

Veldman et al. (2014) argue that religion can influence environmental attitudes and practices by providing communities with moral narratives and institutional structures through which ecological concerns can be interpreted and acted upon. Consequently, faith communities can potentially contribute to environmental protection by transforming ecological responsibility into a matter of moral and spiritual commitment. The encounter between Christianity and African traditional worldviews has consequently produced complex transformations in understandings of land, nature, sacred spaces, and human responsibility. Modern Christian environmental theology offers an opportunity to engage these indigenous ecological values critically and constructively while developing contextually relevant approaches to environmental conservation.

Despite the potential of religious institutions to contribute to ecological sustainability, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2024) identified that the role of the Church in environmental protection remains insufficiently explored in some African contexts. Much of Christian institutional activity continues to prioritize evangelism, church growth, doctrinal formation, humanitarian intervention, and socioeconomic development, while environmental concerns may receive comparatively limited attention. In

some contexts, environmental issues are treated as secular or governmental responsibilities rather than as integral dimensions of Christian discipleship and social responsibility. This creates a gap between Christian theological affirmations about creation and the practical ecological behaviour of Christian communities. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to determine whether Christianity possesses environmental teachings but to evaluate the extent to which those teachings are translated into concrete environmental practices.

Furthermore, environmental stewardship raises important questions concerning the Church's prophetic and transformative responsibilities. If environmental destruction disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, then ecological responsibility becomes inseparable from the Christian commitment to justice. Environmental degradation can undermine the livelihoods of poor households, expose communities to pollution and environmental hazards, and intensify existing social inequalities. Christian environmental stewardship should consequently be understood not only as conservation of natural resources but also as an expression of social justice, human dignity, and care for vulnerable communities. The Church's response to ecological crises can therefore contribute to the development of a more comprehensive theology of mission in which care for creation forms part of Christian witness and public engagement.

The present study, therefore, examines faith-based environmental stewardship by evaluating the role of the Church in environmental protection and ecosystem

conservation. It focuses on the theological, institutional, educational, and practical dimensions of the Church's environmental responsibility. Particular attention is given to how Christian teachings concerning creation and stewardship can influence environmental consciousness, how churches participate in ecological conservation, the challenges limiting effective church-based environmental initiatives, and the opportunities available for strengthening faith-based environmental action. By situating environmental stewardship within Christian social engagement, the study argues that ecological responsibility should be understood as an integral component of contemporary Christian discipleship and mission rather than as an optional or peripheral concern.

Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the growing scholarship on religion and ecology by demonstrating how the Church can function as a moral, educational, and community-based agent of environmental sustainability. Its central premise is that effective environmental protection requires not only scientific knowledge, environmental policies, and technological innovations but also ethical convictions capable of shaping human behaviour. The Church, through its theological resources, institutional structures, community networks, and moral influence, possesses significant potential to nurture such convictions. A renewed theology and practice of environmental stewardship can therefore enable Christian communities to move beyond merely acknowledging ecological crises toward active participation in protecting creation, conserving

ecosystems, promoting environmental justice, and safeguarding the earth for present and future generations.

Conceptualizing the Faith-Based Environmental Stewardship

Faith-based environmental stewardship refers to the ethical, theological, spiritual, and practical responsibility of religious individuals and institutions to care for, protect, restore, and sustainably manage the natural environment. The concept is rooted in the conviction that the natural world possesses moral and theological significance and that human beings have a responsibility to preserve creation for present and future generations. Within Christianity, environmental stewardship derives particularly from the biblical understanding of creation, human responsibility, and the interconnectedness of human life with the rest of creation. The biblical account of creation establishes a theological foundation for environmental responsibility. Genesis 1:26–28 presents human beings as having dominion over creation, while Genesis 2:15 qualifies this dominion by describing humanity's responsibility to “work” and “keep” the garden. The latter passage has increasingly been interpreted as providing a basis for responsible custodianship rather than unrestricted exploitation. Environmental stewardship therefore implies a relationship of responsibility, accountability, restraint, and care rather than domination for selfish ends.

The concept has become increasingly significant within contemporary Christian ecological theology. Pope Francis (2015), in Laudato Si': On Care for Our

Common Home, presents environmental protection as inseparable from Christian moral responsibility. He argues that ecological degradation is connected with social injustice, poverty, consumerism, and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. His concept of "integral ecology" emphasizes that environmental, economic, social, cultural, and human concerns cannot be treated independently.

Similarly, contemporary scholarship increasingly understands environmental stewardship as involving both individual behavioural transformation and institutional action. Magezi (2024), for example, argues that biblical stewardship can provide a theological nexus through which churches move beyond ecological awareness toward practical environmental protection. The study is particularly significant because it identifies a gap between the development of eco-theological perspectives and the actual environmental engagement of many churches. Thus, faith-based environmental stewardship may be understood through four interconnected dimensions: theological responsibility, ecological ethics, behavioural transformation, and institutional/community action.

Christian environmental thought has undergone considerable development. Earlier interpretations of Christian dominion over nature were sometimes criticised for encouraging anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment. White (1967), in his influential critique of the historical roots of the ecological crisis, argued that Western Christianity contributed to environmental exploitation by placing humanity above

nature and legitimising human mastery over creation. White's argument stimulated extensive debate within theology and environmental studies. Subsequent Christian scholars have challenged interpretations of dominion as absolute human control and have instead emphasized stewardship, relationality, humility, and care. The shift from "dominion" to "stewardship" has consequently become an important development in Christian environmental ethics. The stewardship perspective understands creation as belonging ultimately to God rather than humanity. Human beings are therefore trustees rather than absolute owners of the earth. This theological position creates an ethical obligation to protect ecological systems, conserve biodiversity, reduce pollution, and ensure that natural resources are not exploited in ways that undermine the welfare of other humans and non-human creation. Pope Francis' Laudato Si' significantly strengthened this theological trajectory by presenting environmental degradation as both an ecological and moral crisis. The document emphasizes that "everything is interconnected" and proposes integral ecology as a framework for understanding the relationship between environmental protection, human dignity, social justice, and sustainable development.

Magezi (2024) argues that although eco-theological resources are increasingly available, many churches remain insufficiently engaged in climate and ecological issues. This suggests that the major challenge may no longer be the absence of theological resources but the translation of theology into institutional and community

practices. This distinction between theological affirmation and practical implementation is central to the present study. A church may affirm that creation belongs to God while simultaneously engaging in activities that generate waste, pollution, deforestation, or other forms of environmental degradation. Environmental stewardship must therefore be evaluated not merely through doctrinal statements but through observable institutional practices.

African churches occupy a strategic position within many communities because they function not only as places of worship but also as institutions of education, social mobilisation, welfare, healthcare, community development, and moral formation. Their potential contribution to environmental sustainability therefore extends beyond their immediate congregations. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has increasingly linked ecological responsibility with climate justice, emphasising that environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Its climate justice statement released in 2023 from Abuja, Nigeria, connected the climate crisis with the responsibility to protect God's creation and called attention to the social consequences of environmental degradation.

Nigeria presents an important context for investigating faith-based environmental stewardship because the country faces multiple ecological challenges, including oil pollution, deforestation, erosion, flooding, desertification, biodiversity loss, poor waste management, urban pollution, and climate-related

vulnerabilities. Nche (2020) examined the religion-environment relationship in Nigeria and found that religious beliefs and values constitute an important dimension of how environmental and climate issues are perceived. The study is significant because it moves the religion-environment debate beyond predominantly Western contexts and provides empirical evidence from Nigeria. Similarly, Atoi et al. (2023) argue that environmental degradation in Nigeria requires attention to Christian ethical perspectives because religion influences attitudes, values, perceptions, and social behaviour. Their work suggests that environmental discourse in Nigeria has often concentrated on scientific, technological, governmental, and economic responses while giving insufficient attention to religious ethics.

More recent Nigerian research has also examined the potential of faith communities to contribute to environmental stewardship and sustainable development. Isaac et al. (2024) investigated faith-based environmental stewardship in Nigeria using Social Ecology Theory and argued that religious institutions represent an underutilised resource for environmental responsibility and sustainable development. Atoi et al. (2023) and Isaac et al. (2024) identify the potential role of the Church in promoting environmental justice within a context characterised by oil pollution, industrial activities, urbanisation, artisanal refining, and waste-management problems. Their findings also highlight a paradox: while churches can promote environmental stewardship, religious institutions themselves may contribute to environmental problems through activities

such as deforestation, land-use pressures, noise pollution, and inadequate waste management. This paradox makes environmental stewardship an important subject of critical investigation. The question is not simply whether churches preach environmental responsibility, but whether their theology, institutional structures, physical facilities, leadership practices, and community activities demonstrate ecological responsibility.

Nevertheless, there is comparatively less integrated empirical attention to the specific mechanisms through which churches translate theological convictions into measurable environmental protection and ecosystem-conservation practices. Although emerging studies have examined religion and environmental responsibility in Nigeria, the literature remains fragmented across specific environmental problems, regions, or theological perspectives. There is a need for a more comprehensive assessment of the Church as an institution that simultaneously performs theological, educational, behavioural, community-development, advocacy, and conservation functions. A major gap concerns the potential contradiction between the Church's environmental message and its institutional practices. Churches may preach stewardship while their buildings, events, waste-disposal practices, land use, energy consumption, and community activities produce environmental pressures.

The present study addresses these gaps by conceptualising faith-based environmental stewardship as a process that moves from theology to institutional

practice and ultimately to environmental outcomes. It therefore shifts the discussion from the question of whether Christianity contains environmental teachings to the more practically significant question of how effectively the Church converts those teachings into environmental protection and ecosystem conservation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is best anchored in Christian Environmental Stewardship Theory, complemented by the broader ecological perspective of Social Ecology Theory. Christian Environmental Stewardship provides the primary theological foundation for the study. Its central proposition is that creation ultimately belongs to God and that human beings have a responsibility to care for it. This perspective rejects unrestricted exploitation of nature and emphasises accountability, responsibility, moderation, conservation, and intergenerational justice. The biblical foundation can be traced to Genesis 2:15, where humanity is placed in the garden "to work it and take care of it." Psalm 24:1 further establishes divine ownership of the earth, while Romans 8:19–23 portrays creation as participating in humanity's fallen condition and awaiting restoration.

Social Ecology Theory provides a complementary analytical framework. Associated particularly with Bookchin (1990), social ecology argues that environmental problems cannot be adequately understood without examining the social structures, institutions, values, and power relationships that shape human interaction with nature. The theory is useful

because environmental degradation is rarely caused by individual behaviour alone. Economic systems, political decisions, patterns of consumption, institutional practices, technological choices, and social inequalities all influence environmental outcomes. Applied to the Church, Social Ecology Theory encourages an examination of how church structures, leadership, theology, institutional resources, congregational practices, and relationships with surrounding communities influence environmental behaviour.

The combination of Christian Environmental Stewardship and Social Ecology Theory therefore permits the study to address both why churches should care for creation and how church institutions can translate that commitment into practical environmental outcomes.

Methodology

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, specifically a **convergent parallel design**, to investigate faith-based environmental stewardship. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate because the study seeks to examine both the measurable relationship between religious commitment and environmental stewardship and the meanings, beliefs, values, and experiences through which faith influences environmental attitudes and practices. Mixed-methods research permits the researchers to collect quantitative and qualitative evidence and subsequently integrate the findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The American Psychological

Association (APA) recognizes mixed-methods research as a distinct methodological approach requiring transparent reporting of its quantitative, qualitative, and integrative components (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Quantitative evidence established patterns and relationships among variables, whereas qualitative evidence explained how participants understand and experience those relationships. The integration of both forms of evidence is therefore expected to produce a more comprehensive interpretation of faith-based environmental stewardship (Shehu, 2023).

The study was conducted in selected Christian communities within A**wka South Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria**. The communities were selected because of the presence of diverse Christian denominations and active religious institutions, making it suitable for examining the role of faith communities in promoting environmental responsibility. The study also included selected churches and their surrounding communities. Attention was given to churches that conduct activities potentially related to environmental stewardship, including sanitation exercises, tree planting, community development, waste management, environmental awareness programmes, and charitable activities addressing environmental or social concerns. The methodology is designed to provide both empirical evidence of behavioural patterns and contextual explanations of the religious meanings underlying environmental responsibility (Activating Faith, 2022).

Discussion of Results/Findings

The findings of this study are consistent with the broader literature, which identifies stewardship and respect for creation as important principles through which religious traditions can contribute to biodiversity conservation (Maheshwari et al., 2024). Religious institutions can therefore influence environmental behaviour not merely through environmental information but by presenting ecological responsibility as a moral and spiritual obligation (Eom et al. 2021).

The findings indicate that churches can contribute directly to environmental conservation through practical activities. Such activities include tree planting, sanitation campaigns, waste management, recycling, environmental education, advocacy for clean water, protection of green spaces, and participation in climate-related programmes. In the areas covered, the study found that churches engage in activities such as afforestation, waste-management campaigns, climate advocacy, sanitation programmes, and community environmental education. However, the study also found considerable differences between denominations in the extent to which these activities are institutionalized.

The significance of these findings lies in the distinction between **environmental awareness and environmental action**. A congregation may express strong support for environmental protection while having few practical programmes for addressing environmental problems. Therefore, the success of faith-based environmental stewardship should not be measured only by the number of environmental sermons or statements issued by

churches. It should also be assessed through observable outcomes, such as trees planted and maintained, waste reduced, ecosystems restored, energy conserved, water resources protected, and environmental policies implemented.

The findings demonstrate that the church has substantial capacity for grassroots mobilization. Churches are embedded within local communities and often possess organizational structures that can facilitate collective action. Youth groups, women's organizations, men's fellowships, Sunday school groups, and other church associations can participate in environmental campaigns and conservation activities. This grassroots capacity is particularly important in developing-country contexts where government environmental agencies may have limited human and financial resources. Churches can mobilize volunteers, disseminate environmental information, encourage behavioural change, and establish partnerships with community organizations and government agencies. Ampofo (2025), for example, reported that church members participated in clean-up exercises, waste-management campaigns, plastic-awareness programmes, and other community-based activities.

The findings therefore suggest that the church can function as a bridge between environmental policies and local communities. National environmental policies may have limited impact if they are not translated into everyday practices. Churches can help translate broad environmental objectives into practical community activities by encouraging members to reduce waste,

protect vegetation, conserve water, maintain clean surroundings, and participate in restoration projects. An important implication of the findings is that the relationship between religiosity and environmental behaviour is complex. Religious commitment does not automatically produce environmental consciousness. Rather, the type of religious belief, the importance attached to religion, and the teachings communicated within religious communities appear to matter.

Wójcik (2023), using data from three waves of the World Values Survey, found a paradoxical relationship between religion and pro-environmental attitudes. Identification with a particular religious denomination was sometimes associated with lower pro-environmental attitudes, while personally important religiosity and participation in religious practices were associated with more positive environmental attitudes. However, the effects were relatively small, accounting for approximately 0.4% of the variance. This finding provides an important qualification to the present research. The church should not be regarded as inherently environmentally beneficial simply because it is a religious institution. Its environmental influence depends on how theological beliefs are interpreted and translated into institutional practices. The church's influence is therefore better understood as a **potential resource for environmental stewardship** rather than an automatic guarantee of conservation behavior.

The findings also reveal significant institutional and financial barriers to effective church-based environmental stewardship. Although churches may

express support for environmental protection, many lack dedicated environmental committees, long-term environmental policies, trained personnel, and reliable funding mechanisms. Ampofo (2025) similarly identified financial constraints, inadequate institutional commitment, and the absence of structured environmental programmes as major barriers to sustained church involvement. The study noted that environmental activities can remain sporadic when churches lack mechanisms for long-term planning and financing. This finding suggests that environmental stewardship needs to become institutionalized within church governance. Churches should not rely exclusively on the enthusiasm of individual pastors, church members, or temporary projects. Instead, environmental responsibilities should be incorporated into church policies, budgets, strategic plans, educational programmes, and annual activities. Establishing environmental or creation-care committees could provide institutional continuity and improve accountability.

Another significant finding is the apparent gap between theological education and environmental knowledge. Church leaders may possess considerable theological knowledge but limited understanding of climate change, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services, pollution control, waste management, and sustainable resource management. This gap can restrict the church's ability to translate theological principles into scientifically informed environmental action. Ampofo (2025) found that environmental issues were not sufficiently integrated

into the theological training of some church leaders, thereby limiting their capacity to address environmental concerns effectively. The implication is that theological institutions should adopt interdisciplinary approaches that combine theology, environmental ethics, ecology, climate science, development studies, and community engagement. Such training would enable future church leaders to communicate environmental issues accurately while connecting them to Christian moral and theological principles.

One of the most important findings is the existence of a gap between environmental discourse and practical implementation. Churches may preach that human beings have a responsibility to care for God's creation, yet their institutional practices may not always reflect this teaching. This gap is significant because effective environmental stewardship requires consistency between what churches teach, what churches practice, and what churches encourage their members to do. For example, a church that teaches environmental responsibility but produces excessive waste, fails to manage its surroundings properly, or does not consider environmental sustainability in its construction and energy decisions sends conflicting messages to its members.

The findings therefore suggest that churches should adopt a "whole-institution" approach to environmental stewardship. This could involve waste separation, reduction of single-use plastics, tree planting and maintenance, energy efficiency, water conservation, sustainable landscaping, environmentally responsible

construction, and regular environmental audits. Such practices would make the church itself a model of the environmental values it teaches.

The findings suggest that environmental engagement varies considerably among Christian denominations. Some denominations have developed relatively structured environmental programmes, whereas others demonstrate mainly informal or occasional environmental activities. Ampofo (2025), for example, reported stronger structured engagement among some Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist contexts, while environmental programmes were less institutionalized in some Pentecostal and Charismatic settings. This variation should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that one denomination is inherently more environmentally responsible than another. Rather, it indicates that theological priorities, leadership structures, available resources, institutional history, and exposure to environmental discourse can shape the level of engagement. The finding reinforces the importance of contextualizing faith-based environmental interventions rather than applying a single model to all churches.

The findings ultimately demonstrate that the church can contribute to ecosystem conservation at several interconnected levels. At the **individual level**, churches can shape environmental values and behaviours. At the **congregational level**, they can implement environmentally responsible practices. At the **community level**, they can mobilize people for conservation activities. At the **institutional level**, they can advocate for environmental policies and collaborate

with governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This multi-level potential is supported by recent scholarship. Maheshwari et al. (2024) argue that religious institutions can influence conservation both through the management of land under their control and through religious leaders' influence on followers. The implication is that faith-based environmental stewardship should not be restricted to symbolic activities. Churches can become active institutional partners in biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration, climate adaptation, and sustainable development.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the church represents an important but underutilized resource for environmental protection and ecosystem conservation. Its greatest strength lies in its moral authority, community networks, educational structures, leadership influence, and capacity to motivate collective action. However, these strengths are undermined when environmental stewardship remains peripheral to the church's theological teaching and institutional priorities. The findings also support the view that religion has a **dual environmental potential**. Faith can motivate people to protect nature when environmental stewardship is presented as a moral responsibility. Conversely, particular theological interpretations or institutional priorities can reduce environmental concern. Contemporary research therefore cautions against treating "religiosity" as a single variable with a uniformly positive environmental effect. Eom et al. (2021) and Wójcik (2023) demonstrate that different

forms and expressions of religious belief can have different environmental consequences.

Consequently, the effectiveness of faith-based environmental stewardship depends on the successful translation of theological principles into institutional policies, environmental education, community mobilization, and measurable conservation activities. The church's role should therefore move frompreaching environmental responsibility to practising, modelling, and institutionalizing environmental responsibility.

Conclusion

The study establishes that faith-based environmental stewardship has considerable potential to strengthen environmental protection and ecosystem conservation. The church can shape environmental values, educate congregations, mobilize communities, undertake practical conservation projects, and advocate for environmental justice and sustainable development. Nevertheless, theological ambiguity, inadequate environmental literacy, insufficient funding, weak institutional structures, and the gap between environmental teaching and practical action limit the effectiveness of these contributions. The central implication is that environmental stewardship should become an integral part of the church's mission rather than an occasional social activity. Integrating eco-theology into theological education, establishing environmental committees, allocating financial resources to conservation, strengthening youth and community programmes, and developing partnerships with

environmental organizations would enhance the church's capacity to respond to environmental challenges. The findings therefore support a model of Christian environmental stewardship in which faith; ecological knowledge, institutional commitment, and practical community action operate together**.**

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