GUIDANCE FOR CONSERVATIONISTS
WORKING WITH
CHRISTIAN PARTNERS

WWF | A ROCHA
WHY WORK WITH CHRISTIANS ON CONSERVATION?

If you’re reading this toolkit, chances are you are already working with Christians or have a reason to start. However, you might also be concerned: Christians from certain churches may legitimise the exploitation and destruction of nature, or some groups working in the name of Christianity may have preached troubling views, which, in the worst cases, have caused active damage to the planet. Yet, there are increasing numbers of Christian churches, organizations and individuals becoming involved in ecological concern and action, and here we present a few reasons why working with Christians on conservation is not just beneficial, but critical:

I. CHRISTIANITY IS WIDESPREAD

Research from the Pew Research Centre indicates that, as of 2010, there were 2.2 billion Christians around the world (around 31% of the global population). This is expected to grow to 2.9 billion in 2050, with growth concentrated in Latin America, Africa and Asia. If, as Achim Steiner, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has stated, “more than ninety percent of conservation work is with people”, then engaging organisations that represent billions of people across all national boundaries is essential for the conservation movement. Therefore, as with any major global group, in simple numerical terms there is good reason to involve Christians.

II. CHRISTIANITY HAS INFLUENCE LOCALLY, NATIONALLY AND GLOBALLY

In an increasingly secularised Western context, it can be easy to forget that religion has, for millennia, been the lynchpin of society. We should not overlook this: religious leaders can reach and teach a wide range of people, from different areas of the community. The Pope’s 2015 encyclical, Laudato Si’, is a famous example of this. There is no denying the impact that this publication has had on individuals, the church and even official negotiations. It has mobilised organisations, resources and countries, and placed the Catholic Church as a key advocate for the planet, reaching millions of believers around the world.

As well as the widespread nature of Christianity, in some regions of the world the Christian faith also holds a great deal of influence in politics, economics and wider society. However, it can also reach a deeper level – faith-based beliefs and influential religious leaders can speak to the individual and their morals / values. Such leaders hold role model positions and have significant power to influence. As Nick Reeves, former Executive Director of the Chartered Institute of Waste and Environmental Management (CIWEM), noted: “The world’s faith groups have been silent for too long on the environment. It is time that they fulfilled their rightful collective role in reminding us that we have a duty to restore and maintain the ecological balance of the planet.”
III. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES HAVE SIGNIFICANT FINANCIAL AND LAND-OWNING ASSETS

As mainstream faiths are often key owners of land and major investments, their management and investment decisions have the opportunity to play a major role. Faith Invest, an alliance of large investing and property-owning bodies controlled by religious institutions, is an example of this and has achieved some significant results. In 2002, 3iG reported that the total resources of Faith organisations was greater than the total value of companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange and Nasdaq combined. More recently, the Church of England has led in establishing the ‘Transition Pathway Initiative’ (TPI), a climate action asset managers and investors’ alliance representing over $50 trillion combined Assets under Management and Advice.

IV. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES OVERLAP WITH PLACES OF ECOLOGICAL VALUE

There is a remarkable correlation between ‘sacred sites’ and places of significant ecological value. Such sites may be considered sacred because of links to a biblical story (e.g., the Jordan valley), a place of pilgrimage or association with a saint or holy person, or simply because they surround a place of worship (e.g., churchyards). They are often well-conserved and may have been protected for many hundreds of years. Working to conserve these areas can support the aims and interests of both the faith community and the conservation sector. Examples include Ethiopia where, amidst catastrophic deforestation, Coptic churches are habitually located in sacred groves containing ancient indigenous trees. There are estimated to be 35,000 such ‘church forests’ across Ethiopia, most small but some up to 300 hectares. They have survived purely because of their religious value. According to Coptic priests, “The trees are said to be the jewellery of the church and ... the tree canopy prevents the prayers from being lost to the sky.” Conservationists are now researching the biodiversity contained within these ecological oases. Conversely, ignoring religious factors may lead to the degradation of important wildlife sites.

V. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES CAN LEARN FROM CONSERVATIONISTS

Christians and religious communities across the world can also learn from conservationists. In A Rocha’s own work, we have seen how receptive Christians have been to scientific practices and knowledge. For example, part of A Rocha UK’s ‘Eco-Church’ scheme asks churches to engage with land management. This includes annually surveying wildlife, planting native trees in line with guidance from environmental professionals, avoiding the use of harmful chemicals and more.

VI. INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION REQUIRES COLLABORATION BETWEEN CONSERVATIONISTS AND LOCAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Inclusive conservation has recently come to the top of the agenda of many conservationists and environmental agencies. Practitioners and stakeholders now recognize that conservation depends on the recognition and consideration of the needs of local and Indigenous communities, as well as on their unique set of skills, values, knowledge and traditions. These communities, many of them deeply religious, are the rightful custodians of their territories and should ultimately decide how to change manage to govern them. Recognizing local faith beliefs is key to understanding local people’s perception of and relationship with nature, as well as their needs and ambitions regarding the management of natural resources.
As the table indicates, these traditions are not equally spread across the world. For example, if you are from Central and Northern Europe, you will have most likely experienced Protestant traditions, whereas, if you are from Latin America or Southern Europe, you are more likely to have been exposed to Catholicism.

Furthermore, it is worth noting the particular prevalence of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, particularly in Africa and Latin America but also across the rest of the world. Both Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism (which overlap substantially) are sometimes categorised as ‘groups’ in their own right rather than a subsection of Protestantism. Pentecostalism is the fastest growing of all the Christian groupings. In broad terms, Evangelicals place a strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible (whilst others also emphasise reason and tradition) and the need for personal faith in Christ.

Pentecostals share these and also emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit (eg. speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy). These emphases mean that in practice authority is often delegated to the local level (pastors, elders) and there is less hierarchy.

With such a variety of traditions, and such fragmentation, it is important to understand the particular affiliation and beliefs of the Christian group(s) that you may be working with. Each one of these holds distinct beliefs about the environment, as explained in the following section. Christian communities are also influenced to varying extents by their cultural contexts and traditional beliefs.

### DEFINING CHRISTIANITY AND ITS DENOMINATIONS

As with the general population and other faiths, Christian beliefs on the environment vary between denominations, cultures, countries and individuals. This guide hopes to capture some of the most prominent beliefs that are held by Christians on the environment, but it is by no means exhaustive.

It is first worth defining what is meant by ‘Christianity’ in this context: the term is used to refer to those who follow a religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. However, there is huge variety in how the Christian faith is practised. Christianity can generally be split into the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>INFLUENTIAL LEADERS</th>
<th>DENOMINATIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CATHOLIC (1.1 BILLION FOLLOWERS)</td>
<td>Mainly Latin America and Europe. Substantial presence in Africa, Asia and North America.</td>
<td>The Pope, Cardinals, Bishops.</td>
<td>In addition to the Latin, or Roman, tradition, there are seven non-Latin, non-Roman ecclesial traditions: Armenian, Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian, East Syriac (Chaldean), West Syriac, and Maronite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROTESTANT (1.1 BILLION FOLLOWERS)</td>
<td>North American and Europe (though populations declining), Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania (generally growing).</td>
<td>Varies greatly: in institutional churches Archbishops/ Bishops/Moderators. In Evangelical churches (c.600 million, some within mainline Protestant churches, also independent churches and networks) it may be influential preachers, thinkers or pastors.</td>
<td>Adventists, Anabaptists (including Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren). Anglicans/ Episcopalians, Methodists, Reformed, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Charismatics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORTHODOX (250 MILLION FOLLOWERS)</td>
<td>Eastern Europe, Middle East, India</td>
<td>Ecumenical Patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem</td>
<td>Four ancient ‘patriarchates’: Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem</td>
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WHAT DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT AND WHY?

THE BIBLE

In order to understand what the Bible says about nature, it is first helpful to consider what the Bible is. The Bible is Christianity’s Holy Book and is central to Christian theology; it informs what Christians think and believe on all topics, including the environment. The Bible is divided into an ‘Old Testament’ and a ‘New Testament’. The Old Testament contains 39 books and is also sometimes referred to as the ‘Hebrew Bible’. This is because the majority of the 39 books were originally written in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people, during the period from around 1200 to 100 BCE. The Old Testament includes the ‘Torah’ (a compilation of the five first books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) which are still sacred to the Jewish people today. The New Testament is slightly shorter, containing 27 books. These include accounts of Jesus’ life (the Gospels) and other writings from the early church, all written between around 50 and 100 AD.

NATURE IN THE BIBLE

Given that the Bible is a diverse collection of writing emerging from a largely pastoral society, it is unsurprising that it constantly references nature. The books of the Bible are full of references to creation and many of the parables that Jesus tells use examples from the natural world. However, the key passages from which Christians derive their environmental theology today largely come from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the Psalms (a collection of songs used in Hebrew worship), some key New Testament passages about the scope of Jesus’ relevance for creation (eg. Colossians 1, Romans 8), and the last book of the Bible, Revelation. The accounts of origins and purpose in Genesis and ultimate destiny in Revelation can be important for conservation, but it should also be noted that they can be polarising, stereotyped and misunderstood by Christians non-Christians alike.

GOD AS CREATOR

Christians believe that the world was created by God. The opening chapter of the Bible begins with “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth” (Genesis 1:1, NIV) and goes on to describe how God created the world in 7 days: the heavens and the earth, light, land and sky, plants and animals and, finally, humanity. In the past, some Christians have taken this to mean 7 literal days (such as Day-Age Creationism) and others believe it to be 7 defined time periods. Today, there continues to be a variety of beliefs on the particularities of how God made the world, but Christians universally agree that God created the world, giving it value and purpose, and that it ultimately belongs to Him. As Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.”

A GOD WHO LOVES CREATION

The Bible is also clear that God not only created the world, but also that God loves it. Throughout Genesis 1, the phrase “And God saw that it was good” is repeatedly used to describe each element that God creates. For example,

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land” and the gathered waters he called “seas”. And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:9-10, NIV).

God’s joy in creation is not only evident here but emphasised throughout the Bible. For example, another passage in the Old Testament says:

In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:10, NIV.)

This theme is carried on through to the New Testament:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, NIV).
HUMANITY AS MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE

When God creates humanity in Genesis 1, the Bible is very clear that we were created like, but not the same as, God.

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness…” (Genesis 1:26).

Whilst this does not directly concern this guide, the importance of the theological concept of ‘imago dei’ – being made in the image of God – should be noted. The Bible is clear that there is a symbolic relationship between God and humanity, but the debate as to what that means in practice is centuries old. As outlined in the next paragraph, it does, however, have an implication for nature.

CARING FOR CREATION

After God creates humanity in God’s own image, humanity is swiftly given two commands: first, to breed and spread across the earth and, second, to rule and care for the earth.

God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1:28, NIV)

In most Christian denominations today, you would be unlikely to find many discussing how we might ‘rule’ the Earth. However, there is a much greater prevalence of a concept called ‘stewardship’ or ‘creation care’. It is important to note that the ideas of ‘stewardship’ and ‘creation care’ are not directly mentioned in the Bible, but rather extrapolated from the understanding that we should be good guardians of God’s earth because God created it, loves it and commanded us to look after it. In other words, the concepts of stewardship and ‘creation care’ hold in balance God’s command that we rule over the earth, and the acknowledgement of God’s role as Creator. As God has placed the earth in our custody, so we should care for it.

A GOD WHO WILL RESTORE HIS CREATION

The New Testament focuses on the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and eventual return of Jesus. For Christians, this has implications both for humanity and for the whole of creation. Christianity recognises that humanity has consistently failed to reflect the ‘image of God’. Christ’s coming is God’s answer to the problem of human ‘sin’ and its devastating impacts on every relationship: with God, other people and the rest of nature. Jesus’ death and resurrection are believed to enable a new start for human beings who have faith in Christ. They also enable the reconciliation and eventual renewal of the whole of creation. This is explicit in passages such as Colossians 1:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Jesus Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Colossians 1:19-20

Similarly, in the letter of St Paul to the Romans we read:

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. Romans 8:21

Not all Christians have understood this wider ecological dimension of Jesus’ work. Some, particularly many evangelicals and Pentecostals in Africa and the Americas and has direct implications for conservationists. If you are working with a group of people who do not see the value in the earth because God will shortly be renewing it, practical conservation may be more challenging, but it is still possible to emphasise the Bible’s teaching on creation care and ‘stewardship’. Whilst most Christians will agree that caring for creation is important, it is impossible to capture all Christian attitudes towards the environment. As this section has explored, the Bible can be both harmful and helpful for conservationists, and environmental theology is largely dependent on the teaching of a particular denomination, culture or personal belief. The next section, therefore, will look at ways that you can prepare yourself to work with individual Christian groups.

BUT… CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENVIRONMENT VARY

The final book of the Bible, Revelation, addresses the end of the world. In terms of what this means for conservation, there is one verse in particular that is important to note:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. Revelation 21:1.

Revelation focuses on the restoration of the earth, God’s people and their relationship to God. However, the idea of a ‘new earth’ has created problematic environmental theology in some places. If God is about to create a new earth, what is the point in conserving this one? However, the idea that this earth is not our ultimate home has become prevalent amongst some Evangelicals and Pentecostals and this new idea of a ‘new earth’ has created new attitudes towards the environment.

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KEY STEPS: HOW TO WORK WITH CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Before you start, it is important to frame your mindset to work with Christian communities. Below are some steps and questions that it might be useful to ask before you start a project.

**STEP 1**
**ACTION:** FRAME YOUR MINDSET TO WORK WITH CHRISTIANS / CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

**QUESTIONS TO ASK**
- What Christian group / denomination are you hoping to work with? How does this group self-identify?
- In what ways do you need to prepare yourself for this work? Think of these four categories:
  1. Practical
  2. Theological
  3. Cultural
  4. Structural

**TIPS**
1. Practical: Do desk-based research and speak to any contacts you have in order to find out about the religious make-up of the community you hope to work with. What are the demographics / denominations and religions / cultural or tribal groups / languages? This can help you avoid partnering with an unrepresentative minority group who may not work with other churches / faiths or be misrepresentative of its wider community. Is there information on previous partnerships with ‘external’ bodies (e.g., local government / development NGOs). If so, these can be referred to and, if helpful, provide a template for your cooperation.
2. Theological: Take time to understand the theological position of the group(s) and avoid making assumptions about what they believe and prioritize. Where possible, let the group articulate their own theology rather than assuming it will fit with preconceived ideas or desk-based research.
3. Cultural: Sensitivities include:
   - the post-colonial context (e.g., concern about being patronized or exploited; expectation of financial support) requires you to emphasize equal partnership / mutual learning / combining science and local wisdom,
   - Your own attitude to science may be perceived as ‘western’ and in conflict with locally held belief systems wisdom / Bible, so seek to learn humbly and where relevant share examples of great scientists who were/are people of faith,
   - Customs differ hugely and often depend on culture more than faith (but these can be conflated). Areas to consider include: diet (Are certain foods taboo? Should only the right hand be used to eat with?); dress (appropriate covering of arms & legs, removing shoes, covering head & hair in a place of worship); how to speak to elders; relationships between the sexes; how to refer to God / the Bible. It’s best to find out what you can in advance and then play ignorant, expressing that you want to show respect and asking how to behave appropriately. Humor and humility can cover most mistakes.
4. Structural: With hierarchical denominations (Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant) it may be helpful to refer to global statements on ‘creation care’ / environment. If a national authority figure (e.g., Bishop / Moderator) is happy to write in support of the proposed project it may carry substantial weight. In less hierarchical churches (e.g., Evangelical / Baptist / Pentecostal) trust-building leading to clear and transparent relationships are key (see below) and may take more time. It may still be helpful to share examples of evangelical statements, biblical resources such as Planetwise: Dare to Care for God’s World, or examples of other Christian-based conservation projects.
**Step 2**
**Action: Be Informed**

**Questions to Ask**
- What are the community’s core beliefs? How might these be different to other branches of Christianity?
- What does the community believe about the environment? Which beliefs resonate with you, and which don’t?
- Be aware of attitudes and values that may conflict with yours.

**TIPS**
There is no need to fully understand the whole Bible but having a few key points to relate on (such as those mentioned in Section 2, what do Christians believe about the environment and why) may be useful.

Discuss what terminology works best in describing the potential collaboration. For instance, ‘creation care’ or ‘stewardship of God’s world’ may resonate and explain the work of ‘conservation’.

Attitudes on gender, sexuality and hierarchy may conflict with modern liberal values. You do not need to compromise your values but be careful about when and how you challenge deeply-held cultural norms. Where you disagree, do so with respect and humility, remembering that we all have our own cultural biases. (see section 4, FAQs).

**Step 3**
**Action: Initiate Contact**

**Questions to Ask**
- How does their governance structure work? Is it hierarchical, group-based (e.g., elders / deacons / council), or informal?
- Who is best to approach and why?
- What are the links between leaders and the wider community? Is there clarity and transparency or is it a very hierarchical setup?

**TIPS**
Communities and churches have varied forms of formal and informal governance, which has implications for decision making, communications, support and participation. Pay attention to who has authority within the community, and who you choose to share your message with. Seek to identify trusted messengers within the community; it helps if they are known and respected Christians. Be aware that the best person to contact may not be the overall leader; it could be a member of the congregation or a personal assistant.

When addressing the leader of a Christian group, make sure you use the correct titles. There is not any agreed standard across churches as a whole, and each denomination refers to their leaders in different ways. For example, priests in the Catholic Church are often referred to as ‘Father’, whereas other traditions use the term ‘Reverend’ or ‘Pastor’. Other leaders may prefer to be known by their given name or – in an institutional church – they may use titles such as Bishop, Archbishop or Cardinal. Some churches do not have a hierarchy at all, and rather operate through each member contributing equally (for example, the Quakers). If in doubt, ask!

Ensure the wider community is included and informed, as well as the leader. In some hierarchical contexts this may be counter-cultural and need sensitivity (e.g., ‘With your permission and blessing, could we have a community meeting to explain this project?’).

**Step 4**
**Action: Build Relationships and Find Common Ground**

**Questions to Ask**
- Who are the key individuals in the organisation? Are they the leaders, or are they members of the congregation?
- Think about where and when to meet, what you wear (modest dress?), and who you might bring with you (are there cultural norms on women and men mixing indoors?). Is there anything in particular that you need to be aware of? Seek advice on this from community members by asking ‘naïve’ questions. It is always better to appear ignorant than arrogant!
- Be as inclusive and transparent as you can be. Mistrust is usually a result of poor communication or false assumptions.

**TIPS**
Building relationships and trust can take time and does not always align with western efficiency and timescales! Do not be discouraged if progress is slower than you would like; time invested in building a relationship (e.g., cups of tea, meals, prayers, celebration events) can create relational capital and prevent later distrust between parties.

Be aware that some Christian groups might see initiating contact with you as an opportunity to ‘evangelise’. This can lead to difficult and complicated situations. However, it is important to note that it rarely comes from a bad place – these Christians have found what they believe to be the truth and want to share the peace and joy they have found with you.

**Step 5**
**Action: Develop Shared Goals**

**Questions to Ask**
- What are the communities’ spiritual and conservation goals? What are your goals? In what ways do they align, and in what ways do they differ?
- How can you open up room for further collaboration?

**TIPS**
Be aware that your goals and concerns may not be easily understood. Seek to connect conservation goals to existing values and concerns of a Christian community – do not present conservation as a new issue but recognize it as one that already has deep roots in the Bible.

**Other Considerations**
It is important to remember that research can have limitations and it should be done alongside listening: be eager to hear from and engage the communities you are working with. There are likely to be other context-specific cultural, theological or historical sensitivities. Take time to understand what these might be. In general, it is also good to be mindful of the following:

- Be aware of spiritualising nature – most Christians see nature as God’s ‘handiwork’ but reject the idea that nature itself is divine. Be aware of using language like ‘mother earth’, as it can be controversial.
- Be aware of suspicion of the perceived dominance of science amongst some groups. Focus on how science can contribute to deepening an understanding of God’s world (nature / creation) and how God works (science as ‘thinking God’s thoughts after Him’). See section 4, FAQ 5, for more on this.
- Some groups may have experienced uncharitable secular assessments of Christianity, so establish a respectful, curious attitude early on. See next section, FAQ 5.
- Be mindful about the history of Colonialism. Often carried out under the guise of Christianity’s values, many Western populations have inflicted immense harm upon Indigenous communities across the globe. From the European conquests in the Americas, Africa and Asia, to the forced assimilation and cultural erasure. Indigenous Peoples suffered displacement, enslavement, violence, and loss of their lands, languages and traditions. This is especially important to take into account in regions where both groups co-exist. See next section, FAQ 6.
1. WHERE DO CHRISTIANS LIVE?
As of 2010, a quarter of the global Christian population was in Europe (26%), a quarter in Latin America and the Caribbean (25%), a quarter in sub-Saharan Africa (24%). The remaining quarter is split between Asia and the Pacific (15%), North America (12%) and the Middle East-North Africa region (1%). However, by 2050 this is likely to have changed significantly, with only 16% of the world’s Christians expected to be living in Europe as of 2050, as numbers of practicing Christians decline in the region and grow rapidly in Africa and Latin America.

2. WHAT DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHRISTIANITY MIGHT I ENCOUNTER AND WHAT DO THEY BELIEVE?
It is important to note that, whilst the tenets of belief may stay the same, there is huge diversity amongst practising Christians. Religious faith concerns an intimate and personal experience, varying hugely from person to person, not just between cultures and regions. Around half of all Christians in 2010 were Catholic, 37% Protestant (including most Evangelicals and Pentecostals), 12% Orthodox and the remaining 1% including other groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Section 1 of this guide, Why work with Christians on conservation, has further information on differences between denominations.

3. HOW DO I PREPARE FOR A COLLABORATION WITH CHRISTIANS / CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES?
To prepare for working with Christians and Christian communities, it is important to frame your mindset and think through what practical, theological, cultural and structural elements you should be sensitive to. Section 3 of this guide, Key Steps, has a checklist that you might find useful to think through before making contact.

4. WHAT TO DO WHEN ENCOUNTERING ENVIRONMENTALLY PROBLEMATIC BELIEFS?
It is quite possible that you will encounter an attitude or belief that is environmentally problematic (varying from a belief that this earth is temporary and only heaven is eternal, to a hatred of snakes due to the serpent’s temptation of Adam and Eve). Try to always remain respectful and open to hearing the community’s point of view. If appropriate, point them in the direction of a resource (see section 6, Further Resources) written by a Christian that might give the group a greater understanding of environmental theology, using language that they will be familiar with.

5. HOW SHOULD I DEAL WITH SUSPICION TOWARDS SCIENCE?
The relationship between science and Christian faith has been complex and contested since Darwin. Some see no conflict, with science answering ‘how’ questions, faith answering ‘why’ questions, and the purpose of good science as simply ‘thinking God’s thoughts after him’. Others perceive science to be driven by an atheistic agenda undermining the authority of the Bible (for example on creation and origins, or the special place of human beings). In addition, some see science as a form of western colonialism setting itself up as superior to indigenous and locally led belief systems worldviews. It may be best to avoid the terms ‘science’ and particularly ‘evolution’ in initial conversations until a relationship of trust is established. Alternative language could include ‘evidence-based approach’ or ‘conservation research’. As ever, an attitude of openness, humility and seeking to learn from potential local partners will disarm potential mistrust.

Once relationships are established, there can be constructive discussions around how science and faith can work harmoniously together, such as stories of successful conservation-church partnerships (see section 5, Case Studies), and examples of scientists inspired by their Christian faith. If a leader or church community advocate a literal understanding of Genesis 1 (God’s creation of the world in six days) it is best to avoid discussions on evolutionary biology as these views are very deeply held, but need not be a barrier to cooperation on practical conservation framed as ‘caring for God’s world’ or ‘creation care’.
6. WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I ENCOUNTER A BELIEF OR RELIGIOUS PRACTICE THAT RUNS COUNTER TO INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION PRACTICES AND OBJECTIVES?

Some Christian groups hold exclusive views, for example that they have ‘the truth’ and other faith traditions are misled or wrong, as well as regarding issues around gender and sexuality. When conservation organizations engage in partnerships with Christian actors, communities, or organizations, it is crucial to approach such collaborations with an awareness of the historical relationships between Christianity and colonialism and also between conservation and ‘Western values’. By acknowledging this troubled history, conservation organizations can work towards ensuring that their partnerships are built on principles of justice, respect, and empowerment.

Wisdom and care are needed here. Coming in too quickly or strongly with what might be perceived as a ‘western secular liberal agenda’ may be counter-productive. Rather, once trust is built and relationships established, productive conversations around inclusion and human rights ought to be held. The Christian belief that every human is made equally in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-28) and that, in Christ, ethnic, economic, social and gender differences are overcome (Galatians 3:28), provides a good starting point.

In recent years, many Christian communities around the world have made efforts to recognize, apologize, reconcile and remedy harm inflicted on peoples and minorities in Christianity’s name. This has involved initiatives such as issuing formal apologies, acknowledging the destructive consequences of colonialism, and fostering dialogue and solidarity with affected communities. Moreover, many Christian organizations are now actively committed to social justice, advocating for human rights, supporting Indigenous rights movements, and promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive practices.

Through these actions, conservation organizations and Christian communities together can strive to address historical harm and promote reconciliation, justice, and equality.
CASE STUDIES

There are many examples of collaborations between Christian communities and conservation organisations around the world, often producing fruitful results. Below are some examples from A Rocha’s work and others.

CASE STUDY 1 - PROTECTING DAKATCHA WOODLAND (A ROCHA KENYA)

Founded in the UK, Eco Church is an award scheme for churches who want to demonstrate their faith in God through caring for His creation. Initially developed by A Rocha UK from EcoCongregation, an earlier project developed by Churches Together in Britain & Ireland, the Eco Church concept helps churches assess their impact on the planet and their response to the environmental crisis through an awards scheme and accompanying resources. It encourages churches to think about how they worship and teaching, how they care for their buildings and land, how they engage with their local community and other global campaigns, and how individuals’ personal lifestyle choices might be impacting the planet.

Churches can collect this information and register themselves for a prestigious ‘Eco Church Award’ and, depending on their progress, may be given a bronze, silver or gold award. To date, there are over 5,000 churches registered in England and Wales on the scheme, ensuring church lands and buildings are being used to invest in restoring biodiversity.

In recent years, the Eco Church concept has expanded. From its beginnings in the UK, it is now being applied in other contexts. For example, A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand has launched its own version of Eco Church, France has a similar ecumenical scheme called Eglise Verte, and there are initiatives in Switzerland, Australia and Ghana.

As more and more churches around the world are thinking and teaching about the importance of the environment, the Christian community is becoming ever more amenable to partnerships and the utilisation of their resources to protect the planet. In terms of learnings from the success of Eco Church which may be useful to others seeking conservation partnerships with churches, the following points are worth making:

- Eco Church works across a broad range of Christian traditions and denominations. In England and Wales it has institutional support from the major Protestant denominations (Church of England, Methodist, Baptist, United Reformed), and appeals to a range of church traditions from Evangelical to Liberal / Progressive. In France, Eglise Verte includes Catholic, mainline Protestant and Evangelical churches.
- Eco Church is offered free at the point of delivery. This has helped growth especially where churches may be financially stretched and just at the start of a journey towards ecological awareness. Once engaged, churches are invited to contribute towards costs.
- Eco Church balances hierarchy and individual enthusiasm. To register, churches need to have the approval of their governing body / leadership, but each church is encouraged to delegate the leading of the scheme to a committee of ordinary lay members (often those who are already environmentally aware).
- Eco Church shares learning. Churches are encouraged to network with each other and learn from other local churches that are further along their journey. Assessment for awards is often completed by churches which are themselves award winners.
CASE STUDY 2 - ECO CHURCH AS A METHOD OF CHURCH ENGAGEMENT (A ROCHA AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND)

The Dakatcha Woodland is located c.150 km north of Mombasa, Kenya, roughly 25 to 50 km inland from the coast. It is an important water catchment area in a water-scarce landscape, protecting the fragile soil from erosion and moderating the local climate. It is also a designated Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) and forms part of the East African Coastal Forests Hotspot. Covering an area of nearly 190,000 hectares, the Dakatcha Woodland is home to 13 globally threatened species, including four classified as ‘Endangered’ in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

However, a large and growing human population depends on resources from the forest for its energy and construction needs. At present, just under 50% of the area remains as woodland or forest, with the other half used for agriculture. In the last few years, A Rocha Kenya, part of the worldwide network of Christian-based A Rocha organisations, has begun to purchase land in order to create a nature reserve and safeguard this indigenous forest from being destroyed. In particular, A Rocha Kenya is working with local churches to raise awareness of the importance of protecting the forest.

Lessons from A Rocha Kenya’s Dakatcha Woodland work:
- Local knowledge and long-term engagement: A Rocha Kenya has been established for over 20 years, initially working in the Watamu area south of Dakatcha in conservation and environmental education projects covering marine, estuary and forest habitats linked to the Arabuko Sokoke Forest, Mida Creek and Watamu Marine Reserve. The work in Dakatcha arose naturally when it was discovered that globally threatened species studied in Arabuko Sokoke also existed in Dakatcha where their habitat was under great threat. This meant that A Rocha Kenya could point to its track record of working with other local communities, including churches, within the wider area.
- Working from within, not from outside: most of A Rocha Kenya’s staff are local and Christian, reflecting the communities where they work. This has helped in terms of culture, language and shared faith-experience, reducing the risks of suspicion and misunderstanding.

CASE STUDY 4 - THE AMUR FALCON (NAGALAND WILDLIFE AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION TRUST)

Every year, hundreds of thousands of migrating Amur falcons from Siberia stop in the state of Nagaland, India, on their way to Africa. It is one of the biggest falcon roosts in the world. However, during this stopover, the falcon is vulnerable as, prior to an intervention during the 2000s, villagers were hunting and hunting these birds unsustainably for meat. Environmental groups estimated that 120,000 birds were killed every year, but some believers even say it to be a conservative estimate. In 2013, the Nagaland Wildlife and Biodiversity Conservation Trust, along with other national and international partners, launched a conservation and patrolling programme called the Friends of the Amur Falcon. As Nagaland is predominately Baptist Christian, churches were engaged to support this work, even preaching and teaching from the Book of Leviticus (which prohibits eating birds of prey). The Pastor of Pangti Baptist Church, adjacent to the reservoir where flocks of Amur Falcons gather, preached with a clear message both in terms of conserving wildlife, and using the Old Testament biblical ban on eating birds of prey.

Reasons for the success of this project include:
- Conservation efforts involving local partners as equals; the enormous roosts and subsequent massacre of Amur Falcons came to light through a local Naga conservationist, Bano Haralu, along with colleagues from Nature India. A wider collaboration, including the Wildlife Trust of India, was careful to include local partners, including churches.
- Taking faith seriously: Nagaland is ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously distinct from much of India, and the population is 88% Christian, largely Baptist. Religion is central to daily life, and sermons from key pastors can catalyse social and political change. In this case, the Pastor of Pangti Baptist Church, adjacent to the reservoir where flocks of Amur Falcons gather, preached with a clear message both in terms of conserving wildlife, and using the Old Testament biblical ban on eating birds of prey.
- Combining faith, science, communication, economic and practical action: the faith-based message was combined with a media campaign, satellite tagging of Amur Falcons to understand and publicise their incredible migration, and setting up popular ‘friends of Amur Falcons’ groups. In addition, the ecotourism potential of bringing birdwatchers and photographers to see the extraordinary spectacle of the Amur Falcon gathering was implemented.
ORGANISATIONS

[**A ROCHA**]

An international Christian conservation organisation that seeks to show God’s love for all creation by conserving biodiversity while improving the well-being of local communities. Multiple examples of projects over nearly 40 years across 6 continents, and a full member of IUCN.

[**AU SABLE**]

Does conservation work, research, and education in the community with local Lake Associations, US Federal agencies, Native American tribes, school districts, and more.

[**CAMA SERVICES**]

A ministry of the Christian and Missionary Alliance; partnered with church leaders in Kosovo to start a plastics recycling business with the expressed vision of generating income while caring for creation by reducing trash in the community. They also support an aquaculture project in a part of Mali where farmers are struggling and the Niger River is being overfished.

[**ECHO**]

Teaches, innovates, and offers a wealth of resources on sustainable farming practices for small-scale farmers around the world. On the Tanzanian shoreline of Lake Tanganyika, they partnered with the Tuungane Project on an integrated conservation and development initiative focused on improving livelihoods and farming practices while protecting important fish habitat in this global biodiversity hotspot.

[**ETHIOPIAN CHURCH FORESTS**]

Are a very positive context where the Christian community has been a good guardian by instinct, so collaboration can focus on steps to affirm community has been a good guardian by instinct, making this global biodiversity hotspot.

[**PLANT WITH PURPOSE**]

Explicitly ties its work around the world to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which includes climate action among other socio-ecological concerns. In Cambodia, they are the recipient of a grant from the Disney Conservation Fund for Jahoo Gibbon Camp, an ecotourism and research center that empowers the Indigenous Bunong people to protect the endangered yellow-cheeked gibbon and its habitat.

[**WORLD HOPE**]

Models a rigorously holistic approach that seeks to address environmental degradation and rural poverty together through ecological restoration, sustainable agriculture, microfinance, and spiritual discipleship. In Haiti alone, they partner with almost 10,000 families across 153 communities to improve resilience, promote soil conservation, and plant trees—nearly 4 million to date. One particular project has engaged a local partner to protect the Black-capped Petrel through habitat re-creation [https://plantwithpurpose.org/petrel/].

FURTHER RESOURCES

WROTTEN RESOURCES


Dave Bookless. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord: The Bible and Biodiversity”, (2014).


World Evangelical Alliance. “2020 Faith Call to Action for the UN Summit on Biodiversity”, (2020).


Lausanne Movement, Creation Care: Caring for God’s creation was our first take, and it has become our greatest challenge.

Fred Van Dyke. Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection, (July 2010).