

Ecofaith ‘Movers and Shakers’

Encountering religious ecological hope in action in northeastern Minnesota



View through the sanctuary window of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church,
Grand Rapids, Minnesota on 17 March, 2018, photo by author.

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ABSTRACT

Together, motivated by various belief systems, people are moved to take action regarding environmental issues. In this thesis, the compelling intersection where faith and environmental values meet is examined. Central in this research are members of the leadership team of the EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod, whose mission is to heed God’s call to be environmental stewards. Utilizing a qualitative analysis involving standardized, open-ended interviews, it was found that folks are motivated by their faith, by the energy of young people, and hope in particular, which endures due to the collective nature of the Network. This hope sustains them through obstacles that may arise, as they are able to lean on one another, and as they envisage a better future, one in which people of faith share a spot with other advocates in action concerning the ecological crisis.

Keywords: Human Ecology, Ecotheology, Environmental Stewardship, Hope, Collectives

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Dedication

For Grandma Betty, and for Loren.

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INTRODUCTION

Topic

Without the input and wisdom of people, I would be a pessimist. If I was left up to my own devices, I could become very alone and bitter. But if you have good people around you, they're a great antidote to despair and bitterness.

Tim indicates how meaningful it can be to serve as a leadership team member of the EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod (hereafter, the Network). With such feelings of despair, brought about by the current ecological crisis, he said he sometimes borrows on other people's faith, and the Network community helps him continue to move forward with a positive attitude and hopeful outlook.

Now, more than ever, we need to take action and address issues affecting the climate. At the intersection of faith and environmental values lies a compelling junction. The United Nations Environment Program addresses how this intersection is important in its Faith for Earth Initiative. Faith-based organizations are seen as key players in working to achieve the outlined Sustainable Development Goals, as "tapping into the spiritual wealth of people and their beliefs accelerates people's engagement and the organizational drive to contribute" (Why faith and environment matters 2020). Additionally, ethical values and spiritual beliefs of those who identify as religious could be stewards of the Earth and take action in creating a more sustainable future (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013; Carlson 2016). Carlson explains that the destruction brought about by the "human-centered, earth-diminishing ways of life" (Carlson 2018, p. 43) cannot be ignored, that theology calls for the church to engage in its healing and to be an advocate for all of creation. An extensive transformation is required in society, as well as in the church, to prioritize ecological issues (Carlson 2018). Therefore, it is important to highlight what various spheres of influence are doing to act upon issues and to accomplish greater public awareness surrounding

climate change. It can be meaningful to be aware of the various ways people view the world, and actively recognize what and through what measures local organizations are performing.

After nearly two years away, I returned to the northwoods of Minnesota on a chilly winter day. When I attended the 2018 Summit, I had done so out of sheer interest and curiosity about what churches in the area were doing and how they were framing the work. How might I be able to convince my own congregation to return to drinking from reusable mugs instead of styrofoam cups at coffee hour? As it turns out, the Network would commend such an action, but deeper than that, its message would be to embrace the religious undercurrent of doing work that is climate-forward.

Mission of the Network

To gain a better understanding of a regional body, I chose to research a particular social group within the Network, which contains people who hold a distinct blend of values. The Network is a network of congregations and members within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). Its mission is “to live out God’s call to be stewards of the earth for the sake of the whole creation” (Northeastern Minnesota Synod 2020a). Guiding the Network is a leadership team of pastors and ELCA members.

The Network’s leadership team offers assistance and resources to congregations. One of the ways they provide support and accomplish projects is through micro-grants, which can fund projects ranging from education to solar panel installations and community gardening to water conservation projects. The group has received grants, which funds were used to pay someone doing communications work for them for a short while, and the rest was distributed as grants for groups or congregations doing projects related to earth care. The funding was first given, in the form of a grant, \$5,000, then another \$5,000, and another \$5,000 from the InFaith Community Foundation. Since much of the funding still remains, folks interested in utilizing the funds are welcomed to apply on the Network’s website, which promotes what projects the micro-grants could be used for.

Resources offered include a checklist for ‘green’ congregations, covering the building, grounds, and practices of them, as well as toolkits for teaching about watersheds and clean energy. Through their Facebook page, ‘green tips’ are offered, as well as ways to influence governmental decisions concerning the environment. Also shared are news stories about how climate change is affecting the state of Minnesota. The Network is a ministry supported by the Northeastern Minnesota Synod, one of 65 within the ELCA, and the synod consists of 133 congregations, so the reach of their mission could be broad. A difference in the number of folks who attended the annual summit demonstrates a possible shift in interest and reach; in 2018, 45 people participated, and in 2019 that number had increased to 110. A new initiative meant gatherings in autumn 2019 brought together about 120 people and 45 congregations.

Background of the Network

To get a glimpse of the roots of the Network, we must look back to 2007. In that year, Pastor David Carlson picked up a booklet from a table at a conference at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. From there, an interest was spurred, and as a result, a creation care team was formed at Carlson’s church, Gloria Dei, and then followed a synod-wide creation care team, which would later be named the EcoFaith Network of northeastern Minnesota.

Since being established, first as a ‘creation care team’ in 2008, the Network has shifted and grown. A 2008 resolution proclaimed the formation of a synod-wide creation care team (Carlson 2016) and made clear the motivations and ambitions of the group. In 2011, Pastors David Carlson and Kristin Foster determined they would serve as co-chairs. Through the years, overnight retreats were held, in addition to hosting guest speakers, theologians with a focus on the environment, who included Larry Rasmussen, David Rhoads, and Barbara Rossing, and holding one-day summits open for learning and sharing information. Regional gatherings were held in autumn of 2019. After a restructuring and renaming in 2016, based on the model of the EcoFaith Network of the Minneapolis Area Synod, a leadership team was formed, which would provide support to congregations.

None of the leadership team members get paid for the work they do. The leadership team meets for an in-person, day-long meeting three or four times per year and otherwise meets for a conference call monthly, and about every other week when the date of the summit approaches. Members participate voluntarily, spending hours, which vary depending on the time of year, on work dedicated to their mission. It is important to note that three of the six leadership team members interviewed were retired, and so they may have felt more able to devote time to the Network and its mission.

Certainly, only a small fraction of the people involved in the Network serve on the leadership team. It is not entirely possible, beyond the about 400 people in the database to receive newsletters, to place a number on people reached through the Network. To take into account, there are also the sum of folks who have attended the Summits over the years or the regional gatherings held in autumn 2019, the people who receive the emails or follow the Facebook page, or those who have been distantly reached. I recognize there are many others who play a role, beyond the Team, those folks who have strengthened and supported the mission.

Aim and purpose of the study

The aim of this research is to provide a perspective on the complex relationship humans have with nature and the various ways they are encouraged or feel responsible to preserve it. I intend to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which people take action within different spaces - in this case, a religious ecological space - to combat and spread awareness on climate change.

Research questions

I am interested in answering these central questions:

1. What motivates people to be involved in the EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod?
2. In what ways is being a part of a collective such as the Network impactful?
3. How might the Network be active in creating a better relationship between humans and the natural world?

Structure of thesis

First, I begin by outlining the framework of the research undertaken, providing an overview of the theoretical and analytical frame that was utilized, and presenting a brief overview of relevant literature, in addition to key concepts for the study. Next, I introduce the methodology employed, explaining the methods used, the type of material chosen, as well as reflections and limitations in regard to the process.

With these considerations in mind, the findings of the study are introduced, along with the discussion. The three research questions guide the format, with subsections within each, in addition to a corresponding discussion within a relevant context. Finally, concluding thoughts on the research are offered.

FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

Theoretical and analytical framework

Rather expectedly, the field of ecotheology has a large influence on the framework of this thesis. Put simply, ecotheology can be defined as “theology that promotes ecology or the care for the natural environment” (Andrianos 2018, p. 601). Andrianos (2018, p. 602) argues there exist three dimensions of the ecumenical theology of ‘oikos’, a term often used in the Bible, and what he interprets to be all of the living creatures on earth:

The common oikos should comprise the existential aspect – as one united family of God (theocentric); the managerial aspect – as one household of human beings (anthropocentric); and the physical aspect – as one earth for the dwelling place of all creations (geocentric).

Considering this, care for creation can envelop several levels. Cherice Bock introduces the concept of an “ecotheology of critical hope”. She explains that while the prophets in the Bible offered critique of their current circumstances, they also held on to “hope for the larger meaning

and purposes of God” (Bock 2016, p. 9). As such, she presents reasoning why ecotheologians could follow their lead, as they “must be willing to enact hope in the midst of the despair that has paralyzed so many regarding issues of environmental import” (ibid., p. 9). Bock emphasizes the need of putting orthopraxy into use, rather than simply believing or speaking a certain way because that is what has been passed down through generations, “living out love relationally through our actions, rather than legalistically holding onto ‘orthodox’ beliefs” (ibid., pp. 25-26). In doing so, folks may be able to take part in a movement requiring courage and perhaps some personal risk, and it is valuable to take note of what has been achieved. Thus, Bock (2016, p. 29) explains:

Enacting this recursive process of reflection and critique leading to action within a community can provide a space where critical thinking is developed and valued, and individuals learn new skills that engender a sense of self-efficacy, enabling them to realistically attempt ever more ambitious goals within the context of a communal support network.

Though the work may be demanding, the leadership team embodies a structure in which a shared sense of community is felt, and because of that, folks may be encouraged by one another’s strength, in an effort to accomplish desired goals.

Dalton and Simmons (2010) argue that Christian scholars can play a meaningful role in transforming the social imaginary regarding the ecological crisis. They describe the social imaginary as the widely-shared moral order of practices and understandings, which can include what is grieved for and hoped for and what is deemed significant. Christian ecotheologians have recognized “with clarity the depth and breadth of ecological degradation” for 50 years, Dalton and Simmons report. Furthermore, the pair (Dalton & Simmons 2010, p. X) explains:

The very act of continuing to expose the problems, formulate strategies for collective and communal action, articulate new understandings that make

Christian faith more clearly compatible with the needs of the planet, is an act of resistance against despair—a practice of hope.

Not only are theology scholars able to recognize the state of the world and be called to take responsibility to take action, but illustrated in this research, everyday lay people have the potential to be leaders and make an impact.

It is necessary for humans to consider nature as part of their ethics and accordingly, humans should consider themselves part of the natural world (Rolston 2003). Thinking about ethics as fulfilling duties within a certain social contract, Rolston says falls into the category of advocating for a healthy environment, as “humans desire a quality environment, enjoying the amenities of nature—wildlife and wildflowers, scenic views, places of solitude—as well as the commodities—timber, water, soil, natural resources” (Rolston 2003, p. 519). In Minnesota, a state which values, among other things, the natural resources available, outdoor recreation, and the agricultural industry and way of life, it makes sense that it would be a place to inspire advocates for the environment, both through action and through awareness of the belief that everything is interconnected and the natural world has inherent value. In a political sense, Smith (2018) cites Dobson when referring to the concept of ‘ecological citizenship’ in which the impacts humans have on the environment mean they may feel obligated to act in a certain political manner, which she says could only be fulfilled by making human life more sustainable.

Within a social constructivist framework, in which one’s own world is actively and socially constructed, I position myself as a researcher. Each of the congregations and each of the individuals exist in their own context. I examine what it means to be an individual and hold environmental and religious values, and also what it means to be part of a collective. At the individual level, certain values can inspire one to act on a greater scale to make a larger, more meaningful impact. When one works together with others toward a common goal, a sense of community is fostered and much can be accomplished.

Within various geographical levels, on a larger scale within the state of Minnesota and larger yet at the national level, it is necessary to discuss the results of the study and position the

Network. Putting into conversation what is being done at the smaller geographic scale and context and more localized within congregations, is integral. Other groups are active in a similar mission, like Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light. In addition, Lutherans Restoring Creation, which works on the national level, provides an avenue to examine the work of other regional communities. At a wider level, there of course exist other religions and other religious communities. Certainly, the climate crisis affects people of all or no faith backgrounds, thus making the topic at hand of universal concern. This is a study involving Christians and their experiences, though there is no one way of taking care of the environment.

Steffen et al. presents two models of what could potentially happen to planet Earth, one deemed the ‘Hothouse Earth’ pathway and the alternative ‘Stabilized Earth’ pathway. In order to go the latter route and achieve a secure future for the Earth, Steffen et al. suggest humanity’s relationship with the Earth would need to be managed, which would take a great deal of intention, “recognizing that humanity is an integral, interacting component of the system. Humanity is now facing the need for critical decisions and actions that could influence our future for centuries, if not millennia” (Steffen et al. 2018, p. 6). Rather than humans being separate from all else, they are in fact part of a much larger, interconnected web.

METHODOLOGY

Research methods

Primarily, a qualitative research method was utilized, as an avenue to obtain people’s unique perspectives, experiences, and opinions.

I performed standardized open-ended interviews and then manually applied an analysis of the content gleaned, a method outlined by Turner 2010. This approach allowed for a general guideline to follow while remaining open to appropriate probing or follow-up questions after allowing participants to take their time sharing stories. Considering the leadership team is made up of dedicated leaders who act as nurturers to the Network’s mission, six members of the team

were interviewed, in an effort to learn about their views and experiences. Using a phenomenological strategy, personal experiences would be described, in an effort to understand through others' experiences and stories (see Denscombe 2007).

Participants signed informed consent forms before being interviewed and were informed they could withdraw at any point, they were given my contact info, and were told this thesis could be shared with them my thesis once done, in an effort to be transparent. I met the participants at the January 13 2020 meeting; following that, I emailed or called to ask if they would be willing to interview, offering a brief description of my research. In this thesis, participants' names were changed in an effort to anonymize them, though it is a small group in which people seem to know each other quite well.

An introduction to the interviewees:

Interviewee	Years involved in Network	Date interviewed
James	12	16 January and 13 February 2020
Barbara	9	11 February 2020
Carol	4-plus	12 February 2020
Melinda	3 or 4	12 February 2020
Tim	1-plus	13 February 2020
Patty	5	14 February 2020

In total, 19 people serve on the leadership team. Individuals from the five 'conferences' in the Northeastern Minnesota Synod, along with at-large members, make up the team. I supplemented the interviews with a general analysis of content from the Network's various communication avenues, namely their website and Facebook page, through which they share messages with the public.

A quantitative analysis had been planned, through the use of questionnaires to be distributed to this year's summit attendees, in order to review results from a larger pool of involved individuals. However, due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the 2020 summit, which was entitled "Now the Green Blade Rises: The Easter Gospel for the Whole Creation" and planned for 28 March, was canceled. In light of this, responses from online evaluations, sent to attendees following the Summits in years 2018 and 2019 and included in a follow-up email sent from the leadership team, were solely considered.

Methodological and ethical reflections

As a researcher, it is important to be aware of one's positionality before beginning a study. On March 17, 2018, I attended a summit organized by the Network, entitled: "Renewing Energy, People, Planet and Promise". As a person baptized into the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America as an infant, and who consequently grew up within that space and still identify as a Christian, I was drawn to this unique event. I had never before heard of such a group and was curious about the work they were doing. The mission stuck with me, and I grew to think about it as feasible and appropriate to study this group as a master's thesis project.

Because of these stated reasons, I was situated as a subjective researcher. Within such a unique position, having a commonality with the interviewees may have proven helpful. Being from the Midwest and making references to how I wanted my home church to adopt some of the practices mentioned at the meeting, may have influenced how I was received as a student researcher. As an outsider to their community, I also had a bit of an insider's perspective in my position and having gone to one of the summits. It is not possible to be objective or neutral, contrary to what some older research standards may claim, so sharing one's experience, identity, and values may have allowed for a different interview. It is important to note that as a researcher, in addition to values, biases could intrude into the research at any point (Bryman 2012).

As I set out, my objective was to interview the participants in person. It was important that I meet the individual face-to-face. Initially, I introduced myself at the January meeting and met members of the leadership team who were present. I observed the meeting and was able to

see how the members warmly greeted each other and seemed eager to get the day started. I also noticed the team seemed to be largely white and culturally homogenous. After that first meeting and having built a base level of trust, I met some people for an interview, perhaps making it more comfortable for both of us.

Having limited time and resources, only a select few people were interviewed. Due to this, a restriction was set: the participants were selected from a defined group, from the pool of 19 leadership team members. Of the five conferences within the Network's geographical area, four were represented. A combination of lay people and pastors serve on the team, and therefore that was mirrored by the participants. Accordingly, the people chosen to be interviewed could indeed contribute to a better understanding of the Network and its team.

Choice of material

The material to be analyzed were the interviews conducted with the leadership team members of the Network. The sampling was purposive in that a select few who are a part of the leadership team were chosen and were invited to participate voluntarily. Participants' experience with the Network varied, ranging from some who had been involved since the beginning to some who had only been on the leadership team for a year or so, contributing to a wider lense in which to capture members' involvement.

After transcribing the interviews, the data was analyzed by identifying themes, be them phrases, expressions, or ideas, that appear to be common among a number of participant's responses (see Turner 2010). Upon reading through the interview transcripts several times, commonalities were determined (see Kvale 2007), understanding how they fit with the research questions and theories.

The empirical data gathered was supplemented by an analysis of:

- The Network's online presence via website and Facebook page.

- In addition, attendee evaluation data from the 2018 and 2019 summits was acquired from the unofficial communications director of the Network. The data was used as a supplement, integrated throughout this document as a way to “hear from” summit participants since they are the target audience of the Network.
- Document of reflections: “Now the green blade rises from the buried grain.... EASTER for the whole creation during the COVID-19 pandemic”.

Limitations

With regard to omissions existing in the study, there exists a greater network of Lutheran churches that are working on related issues, both on a state and even national level. The EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod itself has connections to Lutheran Advocacy of Minnesota, which promotes creation care; Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light, in which faith groups work to be more sustainable; and Lutherans Restoring Creation, which is a national grassroots organization encouraging care for the environment. Beyond Lutheran congregations, other denominations share a similar mission and have proclaimed their dedication through faith statements on the environment. This study, however, focuses on one particular body of people, one particular physical area and denomination in order to highlight the narratives of a selected group. A limit does exist on how great of a reach the Network has, as there is a focus on making sustainable changes to the church itself. However, it still allows for exploration within different congregations and also among individuals.

This study represents a singular geographical and ideological space, compared with the larger scale of issues. I do not want to generalize about other religious groups based on this one case study. However, I believe this research could provide an insight into how groups, such as the one researched, work, and the position they could hold moving forward. The research would be used primarily to understand and learn from participants’ experiences. It could be used to identify opportunities for what the group is helping achieve in terms of climate change and mobilization, as well as what similar groups could work toward.

ANALYSIS

Findings and discussion

Firstly, data from the interviews held with the six leadership team members are presented in the findings section, and subsections help direct the material. A brief discussion follows each question's section, in which content is brought into conversation within a broader context. Themes that emerged include: motivating factors of involvement, personal and Network-level impact, obstacles to the work, and a hopeful vision for the future.

Research question 1: What motivates people to be involved in the EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod?

1. Motivators

a. Human-nature relationship

Rather than taking on a rather common anthropocentric viewpoint, participants discussed their relationship to nature and the rest of the world in a more ecocentric way. James said the neighbor that people of faith are called to love means loving God and fellow human neighbors, of course, but it can also be a call to love the earth neighbor, and it can take mindfulness to embrace that relationship. As Tim puts it, the land outside his house is his neighbor, as well as the deer who pass through; he considers the environment in general as his neighbor. From Carol's perspective, the importance of loving and caring for the non-human neighbor is clear, as planet Earth, "for all we know, there's nothing quite like it in the universe, certainly not something we're going to ever be able to be a part of. And I wouldn't really wish the human race *on* another planetary body because we haven't taken care of this one." In addition, Carol criticized the dichotomy often presented by Western thought:

Man is at the top, stands alone, and we conquer nature and we tweak it to meet what we think our needs are and our desires. And it turns out, that's killing us. In

all humility, to recognize we are not apart from nature. We are a part of nature.
And we are very dependent on the lowliest microbes.

Melinda said she acts for the environment not only from a motivational standpoint of being a steward and caretaker of the earth, but also out of a sense of gratitude and obligation, as she recognizes how her faith has brought her where she is today and Jesus has been by her side through life events. In the reflections publication released during Holy Week 2020, Robin remarks that the coronavirus pandemic is “puncturing our civilization’s pretensions of control over nature and over other humans. Nature is not under our control. In fact, when we objectify the rest of nature to exploit it, we unleash forces over which we have no control” (EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod 2020).

b. Hope

Participants all seem to look to and lean on hope, which Robin points out, can only come after fear is felt: “If people don't think there's anything that's wrong, there's no need for hope, so that awakening, to an alertness, to 'this is an urgent situation' is part of creating hope.” The people involved in the Network do recognize there are issues that need to be addressed and believe they can do something about them, together. James said there’s a process to work through, that the brokenness which exists in the world, that is “systemic” and “pervasive” needs to be acknowledged, while also allowing time for healing and a sense of hope to be harnessed. James believes in leaving on a hopeful note when discussing climate impacts, as people of faith and in supporting people of faith: “Even if it turns out that we've sort of crossed that threshold of where we can safely be, as a human civilization, or as a very biodiverse earth community, creatures, the church still needs to be there, to sort of provide support and community.” He said such a place acknowledges there is “deep darkness” but is not overwhelmed by it. In fact, it can be a “joyful journey” filled with encouragement and hope when people work together and realize they are not alone. As James shares, each person involved “brings their own passions and their own interests and their perspectives and what gives them joy about earth stewardship, to the conversation” as well as different gifts to share with others. James works to get everyone at the same level of

understanding about the Network's mission and at the same time "trusting in God, even though the world is falling around, God is still there to catch us." He also sees a great deal of ownership among those involved in the Network, which contributes to a sense of community.

c. Youth

Tim describes the emotions that come up when hearing unfavorable news stories, saying at times he feels "nauseous" or "absolutely furious". However, he remains an optimist: "I look at little children, and I'm an optimist. Because kids are optimistic. They don't bring the garbage with them." For personal decision-making, Tim has what he calls a "board of directors" that includes Jesus and Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, Ensuring that he is thinking about the younger generation when making choices, he takes into account their future. James also reflected on how society could take notes from children about adapting and shifting during this time: "They are more willing and open to learning and to trying new things, to experimenting, and it's those kinds of things, I think, that we need to capitalize on." A motivating force behind her involvement on the leadership team are their grandchildren, says Melinda: "I'm not gonna live enough to see the full impacts but I have grandchildren, and they're going to live in this world. And I'm worried for them." Tim also said he does the work for the sake of his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren but also for every other child who deserves to have fresh air, fresh water, and a safe environment to grow up within. As part of the Network's video series, a video released on and celebrating Earth Day highlighted "young climate activists and earth advocates". A main theme of the messages shared was that of hope, how hope could, or rather must, still be mobilized while pushing for change to happen.

Discussion on motivators

The relationship between humans and the natural world was naturally a topic that was examined among participants. Specifically, some described their frustration with the state of the world and of the environment. In light of that, they looked to a familiar call, to love and care for one's neighbor, to mend the relations. As Hrynkow explains, such a relationship regards the neighbor to be humanity and also the "rest of the ecological world, so that deep equity among people is

understood to be buttressed by the health of the other-than-human members of the Earth community and vice versa in a positive feedback loop” (Hrynkow 2017, p. 87). Rolston (2003, p. 528) spells out how ethics have broadened this century toward more ecological, more global:

It is not just what a society does to its slaves, women, blacks, minorities, handicapped, children or future generations, but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems and landscapes that reveals the character of that society. We humans are Earthlings and care for the Earth is a developing and an ultimate human virtue.

With this in mind, social justice and environmental justice can both be integrated ministries in the church. Ever-present is the notion of hope. Andrianos echoes what Bock says about hope, in that it must be active in order to be effective. He explains that if faith and love are present, elements he deems the “two lungs for breathing hope” (Andrianos 2018, p. 612), hope then exists for the ‘oikos’, for the earth. He says: “Christians’ hope for justice is based on salvation by love and faith in Jesus Christ” (ibid., p. 612). However, Andrianos discusses how greed is the “greatest of all plagues against justice, peace, and sustainability” (ibid., p. 613) and calls on folks to take action upon acknowledging how these destructive effects have been caused by human greed: for divestment from fossil fuels, for restraint from deforestation, and for changing consumeristic ways, among other actions.

Research question 2: In what ways is being a part of a collective such as the Network impactful?

1. Impact

a. Individual

On a personal level, members of the leadership team feel impacted in several ways. They enjoy being connected to the group and being able to contribute to the work they do. What that means to them as an individual varied. However, a common theme was the importance of relationships

created by way of the group. Patty says one of the reasons the Network appeals to her and is effective, is that the folks on the leadership team “understand the power of relationship” and the value of building and maintaining relationships with congregations and their members. Carol says being involved on the leadership team has allowed her to get to know people she wouldn’t know otherwise, as the geographic area of the synod is large. Within her interactions with others, a “great ferment of ideas and inspiration” occurs, which can then lead to action. James gleans inspiration from being around other members of the team as they share personal stories, resources, and book recommendations. In fact, a few interviewees described how they can feel frustrated with the state of things and not know what to do, but collectively, they feel they can be motivated to make a difference. Robin shared how she can get “extremely impatient with what seems like a status-quo, business-as-usual perspective.” Engaging with others in a similar vision is essential in creating meaningful, sustained impact.

Tim also shared that his involvement on the leadership team has made him reevaluate his own personal habits, helping him to be more conscious of such practices as his driving and recycling habits. James highlights the importance of living out and working toward a desired community without an emphasis on the outcome: “Even if, in the big picture, changing one lightbulb out isn't going to make much difference, it can make a difference for the person doing it, and for their community around them.” He recognizes the need for people to physically take action within their local context, even if it be considered too small in the greater context.

b. Network

The Network makes an effort to meet people where they are, infusing compassion into their approach. Physically meeting where the people were in the autumn of 2019, gatherings were held in each of the five conferences, in an effort to foster relationships between people in the same region. In addition, they are reaching people otherwise unreachable. One aspect of note is that the Network is reaching people who have perhaps otherwise thought climate change was not real or who labeled having such a belief as a radical position. By framing the work as ‘creation care’ or ‘caring for the Earth that God gave us’, perhaps more people can be introduced to the

reasons why there are folks working on such projects. They can therefore relate to the faith-based ‘why’ behind the work and may be influenced to do something about it. As illustrated by the evaluations filled out by summit attendees in 2018 and 2019, the sharing of resources and ideas was appreciated. Some reported feeling inspired, hopeful, or having a “renewed determination” for projects at their home church. Not only were they able to hear presentations about relevant topics, participants saw it as an opportunity to take the newfound inspiration and education back to their congregations. Also appreciated was the space to meet with others who are like-minded.

Discussion on impact

Considering impacts on a scalar level, individuals can feel transformed by being part of the leadership team, personally changing habits or benefiting through built relationships. Participants in the research are part of a team that values the environment, that recognizes the importance of taking action on issues. They find their positions to be meaningful and feel that even making small changes personally, or within their communities, can make a difference. As one participant disclosed, they would feel “alone and bitter” if not for being involved with the group. Bock explains that “critique alone leaves us feeling stuck and despairing, without a sense of agency to be able to solve the problems, leading to a pervasive hopelessness and meaninglessness” (Bock 2016, p. 13). As a group, people are around to share in the despair and work together to get past those feelings, toward actionable steps. Further, in order to bear anxiety, it is necessary to have emotional support for such feelings surrounding the climate crisis and humans’ role in it (Weintrobe 2013). In fact, she says that we can be “incapacitated by anxiety when thinking about climate change, we are, in a realistic sense, not nearly anxious enough, given the current news that warming is proceeding faster than had been estimated” (Weintrobe 2013, p. 46).

Additionally, the team may have influence over the folks connected with the Network in some way, and beyond that, into the community or wider region. While some participants revealed how the Network is reaching people in various circles of the community, through such forms as speaking engagements and film showings, a few questions beg to be asked: who exactly

is being reached? It seems to be a fairly exclusive group. Who gets to be involved? To whom are their messages targeted?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Network shifted the way they operate, highlighting the urgency of continuing the conversations and the necessary work. While the summit, originally planned for the end of March, was postponed until 2021, the team organized and released videos for Earth Day, marking the beginning of a video series released via their website, Facebook page, and email list. On 5 June, they announced a new online publication, “Green Blades Rising”. This new way of communicating and connecting could prove fruitful for the group, as more people may potentially be reached. Pastor Kristin Foster asks the question, “Could Easter in the COVID-19 pandemic be exactly where Easter needs to be? Shaking our foundations. Stopping us in our tracks. Radically disorienting, radically reorienting us” (EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod 2020, p. 1) in a publication of reflections released for Holy Week 2020. She presents additional, relevant considerations: “Dare we trust that our congregations are ripe to rediscover and reshape community, a resurrected community?” and “Will the coronavirus pandemic eclipse the accelerating climate emergency, or will it awaken more people to the emergency we were already in before the pandemic, and will still be in once the pandemic subsides?” (ibid., p. 2).

As much important as action is the recognition that humans are not in control of the natural world, that they are not at the top of the hierarchy: “Participatory socio-ecological action, thus, represents a path for moving beyond a stewardship dichotomy toward a recognition of the integral value of all beings, understood as God’s creatures” (Hrynkow 2017, p. 84). As Hrynkow points out, the Christian worldview which sees the presence of Jesus Christ in everything, is situated to carry out such socio-ecological work. Harnessing those deeply-rooted beliefs could mean a great deal in the future of the environment and humans’ relationship to it.

Research question 3: How might the Network be active in creating a better relationship between humans and the natural world?

1. Challenges

While the Network may aim to reach a greater number of interested folks and to alter the current human-environment relationship, hindrances to that intention exist, including an apparent disconnect of knowledge-sharing. Within the leadership team, participants identified a disconnect between what folks thought the Lutheran church stood for and what it actually does, and a disconnect that includes the politicization of issues related to the climate. In addition, the time commitment and competing priorities were named as present challenges. The importance of remaining grassroots-organized was described, and a further obstacle of promoting the full integration of environmental work into congregational work.

a. Disconnect

Seemingly, a disconnect exists between how people view environmental work and what the role the church has taken on issues. Though the relationship has existed for years, with the 1993 “Caring for Creation: Vision, hope, and justice” social statement from the ELCA as a visible, usable standard, more education may be necessary. James mentioned a comment a woman made, alluding to the idea that if she had known the church was environmentally forward-thinking, she may have become a Christian. So, if people knew more, maybe there would be a change. He says, though, “It’s not just to be aware, but there’s something in that awareness, I think, that sort of grips us and says, if this really is true, then I need to do something about it, as a person of faith.” Carol told the story of someone with a Trump sticker on their vehicle, who had come to an environmental film showing at their church. The film seemed to be enlightening for her, as she told someone that she never knew about the facts, she had never heard about the issues. Carol followed up by mentioning an “intentional polarization” that is occurring in the country. “When you get that, you can easily manipulate people. You just work up that foam of anger and resentment and then they just become zombie-like and follow someone off the cliff. That’s how horrifying it’s become.” Tim shared a similar sentiment in talking about Lutherans who deny the science behind climate change: “If you repeat a lie long enough and often enough that people will begin to believe it and that, I think, is what’s happened. I know that’s what’s happened.” This

is what the Network is working on combating, to break that cycle, and they are approaching it gently by meeting people where they are. People also hold views about what issues are political and how “political” the church should be, bringing into question how environmental work may be politicized. James says “Jesus was political” in response to people who may be opposed to hearing about climate issues from the church. Additionally, he says the message is, in fact, a theological one that is backed by social statements from the ELCA.

b. Time and priorities

Carol shared that she can feel “too pulled” at times, but being passionate, knowing the need, and knowing she could contribute keeps her involved. She shared the need for finding balance between time for herself and time given to the Network. Carol says about this: “I just feel too passionately to let it slide. I can't let this happen. I just feel when I come to the end of my life, I don't want to look back and have regrets that I didn't do everything I could.” James acknowledges the struggle of dedicating time to earth stewardship: “I think people do recognize the importance of it, but it hasn't always been on the top priority, and maybe sometimes, it just can't be.” There may be more urgent family or parish matters that need to be addressed first. He himself has experienced times when it was difficult to set aside the time for the Network tasks, explaining how additional time is necessary to devote to earth stewardship work, to understand the scientific and theological connections. Despite this challenge, the mission continues, as James explains: “And yet we thought it was so important that we did, so that's what kept us going. It was like, ‘well, if we don't, who will?’” This challenge is connected to the concept of integrating the work into everything, as James explains it has not historically been organized into congregational ministry and so may not be at the forefront of everyone's minds or at the top of their to-do lists.

c. Grassroots v. hierarchical

Members of the leadership team - aside from the co-chairpersons - do not hold titles. In a sense, they represent their conference, but aside from that, they all hold an equal title. They are not paid for the work they contribute to the Network and are referred to as “liaisons” by James. Robin

said, like the climate movement occurring with great power from indigenous people and young people, this movement would be from the bottom-up: “I believe in the paradoxes of the New Testament, that the greatest power comes from what seems to be weak and powerless, and so that, perhaps the movement within rural areas and congregations that seem to have no clout be a source of what the world needs rather than from the top-down.” According to evaluations completed by attendees, guests of the 2018 summit were surprised to learn about the renewable energy projects and leaders in Minnesota, how much has been accomplished in that field, and decidedly, that a reliance of the national government to implement changes is not necessary. In this sense, more awareness of the influence they could have on a local, grassroots level is fundamental.

Another aspect of note here, is that of framing the work as financially beneficial, when someone may not want to identify it as something they could do. Approaching it from an economic standpoint may not be as political or polarizing. More people may agree on a project because it would save the church money. Carol explains how, when someone inquired about how they went about having approved and installing solar panels on the church property about eight years ago, rather than recognizing climate change as a motivator and having people “shut down”, their approach involved going “in the back door”, focusing on the cost-benefit (free in a few years, etc.), which was more unifying. Carol said at first, there was a bit of resistance, so education was key, especially to dispel some myths about it being “socialistic” or sounding “like a government program.” Melinda commented on how there may be more congregations than they think carrying out environmentally forward actions, simply because they do not frame it as such: “They’re doing lighting retrofits because it’s economical, and they’re getting rebates from utilities.” In Patty’s professional position, she works with various congregations throughout the state of Minnesota. She said when approaching the topic of climate change, it is approached first through clean energy:

Once people have bought into the idea of more wind power or solar energy, then they're more open to talk about climate change than if you start the climate

change conversation and work it towards clean energy because then people jump into their ideological places.

Using this method, more congregations may become engaged and grow confident to be advocates for the environment.

d. Integration, not separation

Patty praised the Network's model and how well they are spreading awareness of the importance of truly integrating ecofaith practices and ways of thinking into congregational life, as she also sees it as an elemental part of the faith tradition. Carlson's research for a doctoral thesis, which took inspiration from David Rhoads, a theological and environmentalist, among others, by looking at what was being done in Minnesota with five areas in mind: worship, education, congregational life, building and grounds, and community action. Carlson explains one of his findings: "Those congregations that had green teams or creation care teams, were better equipped to incorporate earth stewardship in all aspects of ministry. And those that didn't were not as capable of doing that and sustaining that." Indeed, it is a great benefit to have a designated team to manage the efforts. Yet, Carol and Melinda identified how, though the group has been established for some time and is working to incorporate earth care into all aspects of congregational work and make it visible, it is still seen as an "outlier group" and not integrated as a whole. James described how starting a climate change-related conversation concerning Lutheran theology, helping folks to understand the motivation behind it, may be beneficial and "lead to a rediscovery of some of our scripture and our theology." Robin said she believes that it is "only through the spirit of God, at work, renewing the face of the earth and calling people to awaken, that there's any chance of healing and saving the earth, or saving the earth for humanity."

Discussion on challenges

The obstacles identified by participants come with the territory, it seems. If the group is grassroots and reliant on grant funding, folks are not generally paid for their work, and there may

always be competing priorities. Those who have more “free” time may be able to allot more time to missions they are passionate about. Still, participants voiced how it is important they remain organized with a grassroots, “permeable” (Robin p. 5) configuration in mind. Growth can still happen, and in fact would be welcomed, but there may exist challenges to face within the format.

Overcoming the apparent disconnect between values of the Lutheran church as a whole and what folks think it stands for would mean spreading awareness and a greater understanding. What may come could be explained by Hrynkow: “In green, ecotheoethical terms, it follows that seeking to heal the present crises brought about by anthropogenic environmental degradation and injustice can be understood as a moral imperative by Christians who take their faith seriously” (Hrynkow 2017, p. 87). Explained by Arne Næss, Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist who introduced the term “deep ecology”, there exists a “largely forgotten eco-friendly message contained within the Bible”, as cited by Anker (2013, p. 191). Participants shared how they feel this message is not recognized as it should be, however the Network is working to increase understanding. Carlson asks a pertinent question: “As the effects of climate change continue and magnify humanitarian crises as well as ecological ones, will the level of the church’s emphasis on earth stewardship relate to how the faithfulness and relevance of its ministry is perceived?” (Carlson 2018, p. 44). To bridge the gap, the Network holds events to meet people where they are, approaching folks with compassion and understanding, as they have conversations with folks who are curious about the connections between the call for environmental care and Lutheranism.

2. Vision for future

Participants shared how they envisage the Network evolving and the future of the environment. Even with destruction occurring within the natural environment, largely at the hands of humans and an unpredictable political climate, a sense of excitement was expressed by some participants when discussing the future. Robin shared: “Even though we are facing a really daunting, daunting, daunting set of challenges, we, human beings. But I'm so excited about the life force that's happening.” James demonstrates the power of visibility, as he has had engagement outside of the Network, with other groups and also spoken at events, for example an interfaith Earth Day

panel, because of not only what his own congregation does in terms of environmental faith work, but also what the Network's mission exhibits. The group is looking to expand beyond their region; already they have had folks from other synods attend their events. Patty anticipates the Network being a model for other synods and even other states: "They're so good at just taking churches where they are, so I think it's going to be continuing to be a process of working on *their* synod, but I think they're also willing to mentor folks from other synods that are similar, more rural synods, more greater Minnesota or upper midwest synods that aren't urban." Robin echoes that sentiment: "If people could connect with each other from different parts of the state or the Upper Midwest, they're more encouraged, they're more energized, they have more ideas." Since they are doing a great deal of planning anyway, she sees an opportunity to share with others and grow the movement. A goal, according to James, is to have a liaison between the Network and each congregation in the synod, a person dedicated to moving the work forward. However, he explained how it has not been entirely uncomplicated, as time proves to be a prohibitive factor for leadership team engagement. Nevertheless, as Carol referenced, the Network is a "mover and shaker" (hence the title of this thesis). It is a group of individuals, especially the members of the leadership team, who are working to stir things up and inspire people to make changes, in their region and beyond.

In addition to the interviews conducted, a simple analysis of communication avenues was completed to give supplementary information about the Network. The Facebook page of the Network, "Northeastern Minnesota Synod/ELCA EcoFaith Network", has been 'liked' by 163 people (EcoFaith Network NE Minnesota Synod 2020). There, some environmental news is shared in the form of 'green tips' compiled by a leadership team member. For example, one tip encourages the audience to be an advocate for regenerative agricultural practices (2 July 2020), another encourages folks to vote on a clean energy resolution (25 Feb. 2020), another offers advice on how to properly dispose of real Christmas trees after the holidays (31 Dec. 2019), and yet another announces news of a questionable viability of Alberta tar sands as the industry faces challenges, a post which ended with "Are you listening, Enbridge Energy??" (17 April 2020). These tips are to be consumed by the Facebook user, but also to share with others, including

congregation members. They urge folks to reconsider their everyday practices and take part in a community that has a vision of a better future in mind.

Further, as professed in the Easter amid COVID-19 reflection document, in reference to the hymn which the 2020 canceled summit was centered around, the Resurrection is not to be remembered or to simply wait for: “It meets us now, planted deeply in the life of this earth, and inviting us to see and participate in green blades rising” (EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod 2020). In its work, the Network is making strides to recognize the valuable responses to the climate crisis as well as be involved in those actions. Robin explains that the Network and other grassroots initiatives should not be overlooked though they may be “just this one infinitesimal part” of the movement happening around the world, they are working to make a difference, being part of God’s work in the broader picture, all the while.

Discussion on vision for future

In a message on the Network’s website following the postponement of the spring summit, it was explained that the leadership team would work on how they could continue “raising a grassroots movement among the people of God”, saying: “In earth's distress, including the current distress of this pandemic, we sing the promise of renewal” (Northeastern Minnesota Synod 2020). Through the cancellation of the spring summit, the Network has proven its resilience and its commitment to growing and cultivating the network of folks involved.

Norwegian sociologist Gunner Breivik played a role in presenting ecotheology to the public, firstly to university students. With reference from Takle (1978), Anker offers Breivik’s plan as a model, “in the form of an ‘ecclesiastical plan of action’ to mobilize the Bishops through the Church National Council to research, organize, and implement an eco-ethic within the entire Church (Takle 1978)” (Anker 2013, p. 203). Essentially, this is precisely what the Network is trying to accomplish. Indeed, the mission to have a liaison for each congregation in the Northeast Synod illustrates the drive to strengthen the environmental values of the churches. As Anker (2013) argues how Norway called upon deep ecology to help revive the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway in the 1970s, so may be the case for today’s ecological movement within the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, particularly within the EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod. He says incorporating these concepts within the Church were done as “church officials and intellectuals saw ecotheology as an effective way of engaging the young” (ibid., p. 204) and it “promised not only a renewal of Lutheran pietism, and thereby the Church itself, but also a renewed focus on caring for the Creation” (ibid., p. 204). Similarly, the Network has displayed its effort to incorporate young people into its events and educational work, seen through the planning for the summit, which was discussed at the January meeting I attended, and in the video series, mainly the “Earth Day, Our Moment to Arise” video, released 22 April. Highlighting the youth-led climate movement and Greta Thunberg as examples of the vital voices to be brought to the discussion, the leadership team recognizes that they can use their position to amplify young voices and harness their passion. Rather than the Network being exclusive to folks, such as retirees, who may have extra time to dedicate, they look to expand their reach across generations.

A discussion such as this leads one to question if the work the Network is currently doing will have an impact on the way young people engage with the Lutheran Church? Whereas more and more companies, be them food and beverage or health and beauty, tout their sustainability practices and their efforts in being “greener” for their customers/consumers, is it now the Church’s turn to invigorate its long-held beliefs about how to care for the natural world around us? Might this be an antidote to the disconnect identified by some leadership team members, a bridge between what they believe the Church to be doing and the kind of world it is actually working toward?

CONCLUSION

As illustrated above, this study has been one rooted in human ecology. It has indicated how the Network, specifically the leadership team, creates a culture of community and togetherness, which plays a role in one’s own personal life experiences and values. The study has also shown how power plays an important role in the working of the Network. Using their privilege, leadership team members aim to do what they can for the betterment of the Earth; for those who

are not able to do so, and for future generations. Indeed, the study is one illustrating how one group is making efforts to improve sustainability within a distinct geographical area of northeastern Minnesota and the theological area of Lutheranism to reach beyond those limits.

At the beginning of this study, I set out to inquire about what made the Network influential and how it could play a role in the future of the environment, as a leader within the Midwest region and among Lutheran communities that are prevalent here. I was interested in researching a group that would shed light on the relationship between humans and nature, and how religion may play a role in encouraging a more sustainable connection. Through this thesis, it has been shown that the Network is participating in climate crisis awareness in a uniquely hopeful manner.

The study explored how some members of the Network's leadership team are personally affected by being involved in environmental efforts. Beliefs supported by Lutheranism, including how one should care for their neighbor - in this case, their natural neighbor, how meaningful it can be to take part in collective action, and how hope can exist even - and especially, surrounding issues that bring up feelings of despair. This is in no way a comprehensive review of the work the Network is doing. Rather, it is a glimpse into the experiences of some of the people serving on the leadership team, who give freely their time to advance environmental efforts. It acts as a channel to examine the impacts, motivators, and challenges, as well as a hopeful vision for the coming years. In regard to potential future work, it may be beneficial to compare and contrast the EcoFaith Network of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod with that of the EcoFaith Network of the Minneapolis Area Synod. Though the two comprise different living areas, one is more rural and the other urban, they both work to create environmental change within Lutheran congregations in the state of Minnesota. One could look at the reasons for why and how the groups function differently, examining stories told, and the unifying work they set out to accomplish. It could also be valuable to explore more specifically the actions the members are taking personally and in their own spheres. Beyond that could be an analysis of the experiences of folks who have attended the Network's events or have been influenced by them in any way.

The Network serves as a model of active hope: a group of people who share similar beliefs coming together as a collective to make change. The Network has the potential to play a role in creating a better future for Minnesota communities and others in the Upper Midwest, as the reach continues to spread. Certainly, grassroots groups like the Network and its devoted leadership team are necessary in strengthening community, bringing awareness to environmental issues, and ultimately, putting hope into action.

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