



Press Release

Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa: *Humboldt University's Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development and PaRD WECARE Work-Stream* host joint capacity building webinar

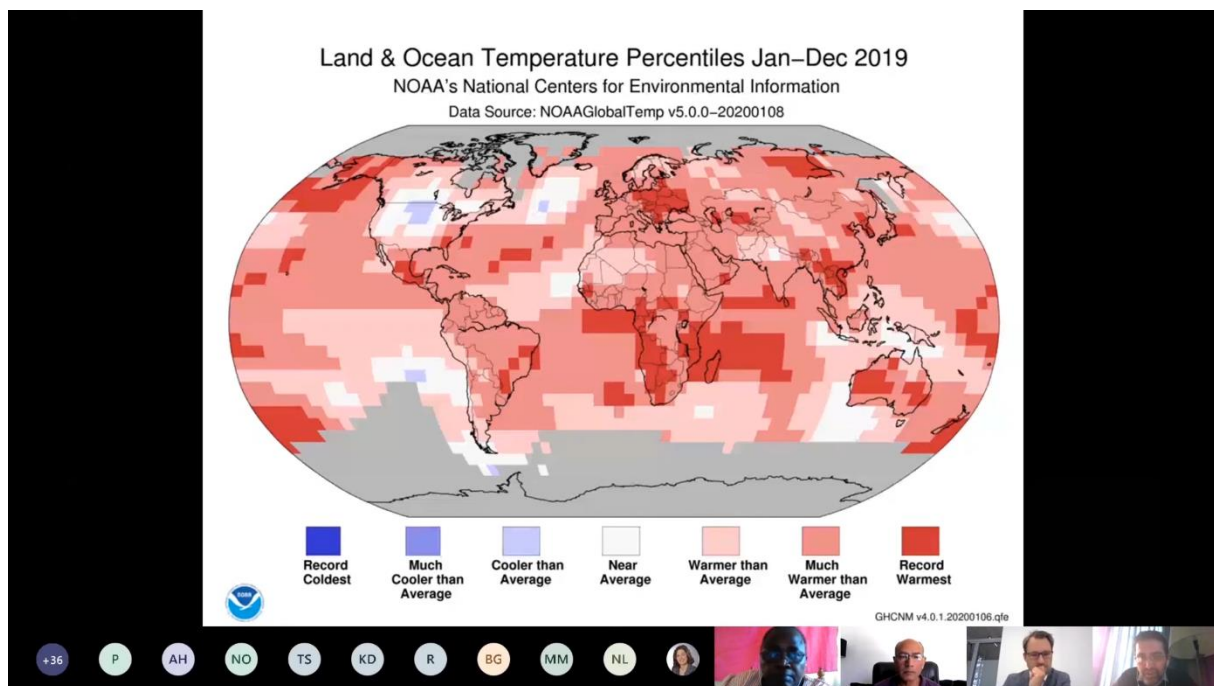
On 1 September 2020 the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Humboldt University Berlin and the Water, Environment and Climate Action (WECARE) Work-Stream of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) hosted a [joint webinar on “Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa”](#) as a side event of PaRD’s 2020 Virtual Annual Forum.

The event engaged **global and local religious leaders, environmental activists, renowned climate experts, policymakers, and development practitioners** in discussions on different aspects of the burning issues of climate change and environmental care. Topics covered included **climate change, sustainable agriculture, eco-feminism, eco-theology, local multi-faith action and water preservation**. The webinar fostered a unique learning experience on the role of ecological sustainability in the theology and the activities of different religious communities and faith-based organisations in South Africa and beyond. As a **networking and knowledge sharing event**, it raised awareness for the ecological situation and religious ecological actions of religious communities in Southern Africa and contributed to the increasing Southern African religious communities’ commitment and engagement for ecological sustainability. It **marked the start for further activism, knowledge-sharing and research initiatives on religion and ecology**.

“The event was a **unique opportunity of knowledge transfer and mutual engagement** on issues of ecological sustainability in a region that will bear the most devastating impacts of climate change. In the event we were able to connect the global to the local – an exciting multi-perspective dialogue!” says **Philipp Öhlmann** of the **Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt University**, who moderated the event. Welcoming the participants, **Iyad Abumoghli** (UN Environment Programme/PaRD WECARE Work-Stream Co-Lead) highlighted that

“the discussions about the role of religious communities on environmental issues will be inspiring to other countries all over the world and will provide some actions for South Africa but also elsewhere.”

The keynote of the event was held by [Prof. Francois Engelbrecht](#) (Climatologist, Professor at the University of Witwatersrand and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC). Engelbrecht highlighted the challenges Africa (and the entire the world) is facing when it comes to the **future impacts of climate change**: He emphasized “how import it is to still do our very best to mitigate the most dangerous impacts from climate change”. Global warming, he showed, manifests in Southern Africa through a **more frequent occurrence of heatwaves and draughts** – e.g. during the warmest summer in recorded history in 2015/6. 2019 was the second warmest year and predictions indicate 2020 will possibly be the warmest year ever recorded. The effects of unmitigated continuing temperature rises will alter Southern Africa to a place almost uninhabitable by humans. Maize and cattle, the current most common food sources will not grow and live in Southern Africa anymore, he warned. Engelbrecht pointed out: “We can either continue on our current pathway and we will experience drastic global warming or we can take immediate action to restrict temperature increases in Southern Africa to less than 3°C and globally to 1.5-2 °C. ... **There is still hope but it requires tremendous efforts and collaboration from all the world’s main economies.**”



Prof. Engelbrecht’s keynote on climate change showing the worldwide recorded temperatures in 2019.

[Apostle Mangaliso Matshobane](#) (Community Church, South Africa; University of Pretoria) called Engelbrecht’s lecture “**a wakeup call to some of us.**” In his response to the keynote, Matshobane presented the **Pentecostal perspective on climate change and ecological sustainability**. He pointed to the traditional Pentecostal view on ecology based on the literal interpretation of Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2, which sees humanity as having dominion over creation. According to him this creates a hierarchy, where the human soul is more valued than any other creation. However, a change of this perspective is visible in many churches and there are **signs of the emergence of a Pentecostal eco-theology**. Apostle Matshobane said that it is “important for Pentecostals to open up for dialogue with the rest [of the] ecumenical bodies in this issue[s]”. He advocated the development of a liturgy based on scripture and reflective of the African heritage to assist African Pentecostal churches in formulating

an African-based eco-theology. One important initiative in this respect is the **“Green Teaching and Learning Community” (Green TLC)** launched on the occasion of the webinar. The GreenTLC was initiated by University of Pretoria, Brot für die Welt, Humboldt University jointly with various religious leaders from sub-Saharan Africa. It was presented in the webinar by **Dr. Tanya van Wyk**. The initiative seeks to **provide local religious communities and leaders with resources for effective engagement with and action on ecological sustainability.**



Dr. Loreen Maseno (bottom right hand side) in discussion with participants in working group 1 on eco-theology.

In working groups, specific themes were deepened in interactive discussions among the participants based on the inputs by five distinguished speakers: **Dr. Loreen Maseno** (Senior Lecturer at the Department of Religion, Theology and Philosophy, Maseno University, Kenya) described **eco-theology** as “key to addressing environmental degradation and climate change.” **The role of eco-theology is to provide the language and ethical framework, which speak to and promote ideas and praxis,** as well as, to express environmental responsibility. In her

introduction into eco-feminism, Dr. Tanya van Wyk (Senior Lecturer in Spirituality, University of Pretoria, South Africa) focused on the question “What does it mean to be an eco-feminist in your context?” She asked: “What are your challenges, what are the perspectives you bring to the table, how is the culture and religion and your indigenous roots affecting your situation, how is it different or the same of other women’s? “. She emphasised that eco-feminism should not only be an agenda or theory, the important thing would be how people can take action in different contexts.

Kate Davies (Southern African Faith Communities Institute, SAFCEI) stated, the formal education in Southern Africa was often inadequate in teaching about sustainability. **Religious centres and churches, however, have the potential to become centres of life-long learning about sustainability.** In relation to sustainable agriculture, **Rev. Nicta Lubaale** (Organization of African Instituted Churches, OAIC, Kenya) said: “Rather than being prophets of what we don’t want, let’s be prophets of what we want.” This includes **creating awareness through church congregations and enabling communities to build their own ecological structures** (e.g. addressing specific environmental issues the community is faced with or establishing seed banks). **Dr. Muhammed Gallant** (Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Western Cape, South Africa) provided **the Islamic view on water preservation** based on the Quran and the sayings of the prophet (SAW). Furthermore, he described the method employed at a masjid/mosque in Cape Town where water from ablution facilities is collected to water gardens and awareness about the reuse of water e.g. for toilet flushing and car cleaning is spread.

The webinar culminated in a **vivid panel discussion** on the question **“How can religious actors become active for ecological sustainability in their contexts?”** **Apostle Sinobiso Ngobese** (Gilgal Bible Church, South Africa) spoke about several environmental issues in his community in Kaalfontain: **air pollution, contaminated water, littered streets and unreliable electricity access,** which are causing different diseases within the community. Apostle Ngobese said: “humans have their role to protect all creation,” which led the church to initiate different projects to counter the mentioned environmental problems. The church established community outreach programmes through which the area is cleaned, and

gardening projects are encouraged, as well as advocacy work against illegal garbage dumping and formation of squatter camps and recycling habits in everyday life are promoted. He added: “we are the caretakers of the world and we need to act.” **Rev. Dr. Rachel Mash** (Environmental Coordinator at the Anglican Church of Southern Africa) highlighted **lessons learned from the work of the Green Anglicans**, e.g. to acknowledge the **vital role of young people** by involving them in discussions concerning the protection of the environment and to concentrate on movement building – all religious communities should form part of a river of environmental activism.

Tahirih Matthee (Bahá’í community, South Africa) highlighted the Bahá’í’s commitment to SAFCEI. SAFCEI creates a space for communities of faith to come together and work together on the topic of environmental issues. By **bringing science and religion into one space**, the Bahá’í community has the opportunity to improve its own environmental approaches and consult environmental experts. **Robbekah Ritchie** (Post-Doctoral Researcher in Buddhist Studies at Freie Universität Berlin) provided an example from South East Asia. **Facing the destruction of forests**, Buddhist monks in Thailand started different initiatives to protect the forests. This **included new rituals**, for example **ordaining trees**, by wrapping orange monk robes around them during a ceremony and thereby sanctifying them. There is “a deep societal respect around monasticism and in term of the material culture of that [...] so when people see monk robes on a group of trees, **it suddenly becomes a sacred place**” – thereby effectively curtailing deforestation. Relating to Rachel Mash’s image of the river, **Dr. Esper Ncube** (Water Quality Specialist at Rand Water, South Africa) emphasized the sacredness of water as a provider of life. The role of religious communities in preserving and protecting the freshwater resources can **foster a spiritual connection to water** and instil respect for this resource in their congregants.

Summarizing the event, PaRD WECARE Work-Stream co-leads **Lilian Kurz** (World Evangelical Alliance) and **Dinesh Suna** (World Council of Churches) highlighted the fruitful interplay “of science and religion, of religious and scientific perspectives because [...] both influence so much of our lives.” and called the capacity building webinar “**a very important initiative on a very important day**” – **the World Day of Prayer for Creation**.

All session recordings are available at <https://www.rcsd.hu-berlin.de/de/capacity-building-webinar-religious-communities-and-ecological-sustainability-in-southern-africa201d>. A **full report and an edited collection** will soon be published. Do you want to become part of the initiative? Contact Juliane Stork (juliane.stork@hu-berlin.de).