



**COMMON AWARDS SUBMISSION COVER SHEET**

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**STUDENT DECLARATION**

*This assignment is entirely my own work, and has not been submitted for another validated HE module. All material from the work of others not involved in the assessment is acknowledged, and quotations and paraphrases are suitably indicated.*

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Growing Faith: Ethiopian Church Forests and how they might inspire the theology, mission and praxis of churches in East London.

## Introduction

As a forest school practitioner, living and working amongst trees is something I really value. This is in part due to the feeling of wellbeing that being in a green space engenders, partly because being in nature is a crucial part of my spirituality, and partly because of the hope it gives me to be surrounded by wild green growing space at this time of climate emergency. Knowing this, a friend sent me a link to an article in The Guardian, showcasing Kieran Dodd's upcoming new book about Church Forests<sup>1</sup> and I immediately began to wonder about the links between these Church Forests in Ethiopia, and the wild churchyard I was beginning to minister in, in East London.

Reading more about the concept of Church Forests, I found the idea most inspiring. I loved the way in which the worshipping community was deeply rooted within the land and how it was intrinsically linked with their faith and spirituality. The way in which they cared for the land and the land cared for them, reminded me of a folk song created around UK land rights, where some land near to me at the edge of London was reimagined into a community garden, in The Ballad of Hawkswood: 'I'll be good to the land and the land will be good to me'.<sup>2</sup> Maybe it was not so far-fetched to look for parallels, and to see if listening to the wisdom from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/08/gardens-of-eden-the-church-forests-of-ethiopia-aoe> [6/9/23]

<sup>2</sup> <https://threeacresandacow.co.uk/category/music-2/> [6/9/23]

Ethiopia might help me to uncover some things of God that were happening in our churchyards, even in urban East London.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of green spaces, as society faces up to the climate emergency and begins to notice and value those wild spaces which may mitigate the worst of the effects. Green spaces are also an important tool in combatting the mental health crisis, as 'researchers have found a fascinating link between access to green space, such as fields, forests, parks and gardens, and a reduced risk of mental health problems, improved mood, and increased life satisfaction.'<sup>3</sup> Based in an urban environment, access to such green spaces is even more precious, and it seemed possible that this was one way in which churches could be a blessing to their neighbours. Obviously the situation and needs in Ethiopia are in many ways quite different, but I was interested to find out what it was that made it work in Ethiopia, and if and how there might be similarities here.

To this end, I identified three worshipping communities in Church of England churches in East London, my own context- a desert in its own way as the wild spaces have been concreted over and controlled. The three communities were all churches interested in rewilding their churchyard and green spaces around the building, albeit with differing amounts of space, time, and money with which to do so. I would visit each site to sit and wander, and make observations of the things that I saw. I would gather together individuals and small groups for interviews and conversations to listen to their experience of the churchyard, what caring for it meant to them, and relationship between the rewilding of their churchyard and their faith.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Thriving-With-Nature.pdf> [6/9/23]

I was hoping to draw out the commonalities between the two settings, and through this to learn what wisdom the Ethiopian Church Forests might bring to bear in the East London church communities. I was interested to find out what the worshipping communities in East London thought was really going on in their churchyard projects, and to use the lens of the Church Forests model to unpack this. I wanted to celebrate what was happening on the ground in East London, and to tie that in with something that appeared to be similar on another continent. I was keen to discover what things of faith might be growing amongst the wildflowers and ivy.

## Methodology

Researching the history and theology around Ethiopian Church Forests is, by dint of distance, environmental morality of travel, and expense, something to be explored via academic texts, looking in on a situation through the viewpoint and vision of others. Although my initial exposure to the concept of Church Forests was through the photographic work of Kieran Dodds and his photo essay utilising drone photography to illustrate the green jewels of forests nestling round churches,<sup>4</sup> I was very clear that I did not want to look in on an African phenomenon purely through Western eyes. To this end, I began to discover Ethiopian voices speaking about Church Forests, ecology, and ecotheology, and to begin to reflect on what they might have to contribute to ecotheological discourse in the UK, especially with regard to the relationship we as the church have with our church grounds.

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<sup>4</sup> Dodd, K., 2023, *The Church Forests of Ethiopia*, Hide Press.

In the early stages, I was comforted by Boyd, who observes that ‘you typically start out with a fuzzy question, are fuzzy about your methodology in the initial stages and have fuzzy answers in the early stages. As the project develops, your methods and answers become less fuzzy and so your questions become less fuzzy.’<sup>5</sup> I knew the bare bones of what I wanted to research and had some ideas about how that might happen, and over time as I got on with doing it, things began to firm up. This should not be a surprise- when Jesus healed the lepers, it is ‘as they went, they were made clean’.<sup>6</sup> Maybe God has a habit of revealing our path once we have had the courage to step onto it.

Swinton believes that ‘The dominant question for Practical Theology is not, What difference will this make in the pulpit and pew?, but rather, Who is God and how does one know more fully his truth?’<sup>7</sup> Rather than concentrating my research simply on the academic discourse around ecotheology as espoused through the Ethiopian theologians and others working in a similar field, I wanted to ensure that the research I undertook played some part in uncovering the ways in which our church grounds and our relationship with them reveal who God is, how we work alongside Her, and how She brings us into all truth. Spending time in church grounds, in conversation both with the place and with the people who belong to it, would hopefully

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<sup>5</sup> Boyd. 2017. *The Naked Preacher*, [edition unavailable] (Hymns Ancient & Modern) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1437436/the-naked-preacher-action-research-and-a-practice-of-preaching-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 31 March 2023] Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 17: 14 NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Swinton. 2016. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, [edition unavailable] (Hymns Ancient & Modern) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1437367/practical-theology-and-qualitative-research-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 1 April 2023] Chapter 1

allow me to ‘think about practice theologically in a way that sheds light on and then makes a difference to the ongoing life of the church’.<sup>8</sup>

This is not research I felt could be done in a quantitative manner- there are few useful numbers or graphs that can be extracted to bear light on the experiences of people and place- and yet it was important to me that this experience was recorded in some measure, as ‘human experience is an important locus for the work of the Spirit.’<sup>9</sup> To this end, I would use qualitative methods- ethnography thick with description of a place and the relationship it has with its people, conversational interviews in which I would seek to listen carefully to those things important and cherished between a person, their church grounds, and their faith. Moschella and Willhauck agree that ‘qualitative approaches are highly suitable for researching the fluid and multi-layered experiences that go into Christian lives, communities, and organizations to assess, transform, and challenge practice and scholarship.’<sup>10</sup>

To answer ‘the question, what is going on?’<sup>11</sup> I needed to enter research with an open mind. Academic texts could showcase the situation in Ethiopia as understood by the academics, but in order to understand the situation in church grounds in the UK, I would need to spend time in the places with the people who use them. ‘Ethnography... can help leaders hear the wisdom of the people; it can open up conversations that can transform how things work in a

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<sup>8</sup> Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology*, [edition unavailable] (Baker Publishing Group) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1277704/introducing-practical-theology-mission-ministry-and-the-life-of-the-church-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 31 March 2023] Chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> Swinton. 2016. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Chapter 1

<sup>10</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. *Qualitative Research in Theological Education*, [edition unavailable] (Hymns Ancient &#38; Modern) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1437463/qualitative-research-in-theological-education-pedagogy-in-practice-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 1 April 2023] Chapter 3

<sup>11</sup> Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology*, [edition unavailable] (Baker Publishing Group) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1277704/introducing-practical-theology-mission-ministry-and-the-life-of-the-church-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 31 March 2023] Chapter 6.

community.<sup>12</sup> Through conversational interviews, I would tap into this wisdom, into ‘the significance of the stories that people tell.’<sup>13</sup> Through time spent sitting in church grounds, observing what was going on around me, I would try ‘to become as conscious as [I] possibly can of the real situation that surrounds us’,<sup>14</sup> as Laurie Green holds that ‘The encounter with experience is fundamental to any earthed theology’.<sup>15</sup>

My practical research will take place in two ways. I will visit church grounds, spend some time within them, and attempt to observe and narrate what I see. From what appears to be the simplicity of a space outside and around a church building at first glance, I will seek to complexify them, ‘to take something that is familiar and that we assume we understand and, through levels of analysis, to reveal the extent to which it is complex and multivalent.’<sup>16</sup> I am aware that the reasons I am drawn to this research- my love of nature, my interest in the ways in which humans interact with the more-than-human, the place this holds within our spiritual life- cannot allow me to be a neutral observer. However, Vincenzo and Biscaldi contend that this is not a weakness: ‘In place of this disembodied scientist is an altogether more human one, one expected to come into presence in the ethnographic encounter with her body, emotions, unconsciousness, and relationships as well as political, ethical, and sexual orientation.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology*, Chapter 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology*, Chapter 6.

<sup>14</sup> Green, Laurie. 2009. *Let’s Do Theology*, 2nd edn (Bloomsbury Publishing) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/392442/lets-do-theology-resources-for-contextual-theology-completely-updated-and-revised-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 1 April 2023] p19.

<sup>15</sup> Green, Laurie. 2009. *Let’s Do Theology*, p19.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology*, Chapter 6.

<sup>17</sup> Matera, Vincenzo, and Angela Biscaldi. 2020. *Ethnography*, [edition unavailable] (Springer International Publishing) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/3481801/ethnography-a-theoretically-oriented-practice-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 31 March 2023] Chapter 17.

Creating a narrative around what I observe, layering up thick description to build a three dimensional portrait of a space, cannot be squashed into a simple, neutral passage of words and sentences. The person I am is bound to seep into the narrative I create, as I bring myself into the research. However, where humans are, there complexity is. 'If researching human life is an attempt to understand the complexity of individuals, groups, organizations, and systems – including the meanings, beliefs, and values that motivate them – then narrative is an ideal medium.'<sup>18</sup> As someone who understands meaning best through story, I am aware that I often write in a style that is not traditionally academic. Pollock and Bono, writing about storytelling and creating lyrical prose in academic texts, believe that 'all too often, academic writers remove the human elements from their storytelling in an effort to sound 'scholarly'. They engage in arid, context-free theorizing...'<sup>19</sup> Rather than stifle my natural expression, I have decided to utilise it in order to allow the story I am telling to sing.

I am very aware that there is an untold well of wisdom that resides in other people, people who never share it in academic circles and who indeed may not think they have anything of note to contribute to discourse. Scaffolding ways to support them to bring this to light must be of important account when structuring conversational interviews, as 'theology is not just something that other people have written about in books; everyone should and can think theologically about practice.'<sup>20</sup> I would have to keep in mind that the people I speak with are whole and rounded humans, and that I am having 'conversations with real and distinct

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<sup>18</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. *Qualitative Research in Theological Education*, Chapter 3

<sup>19</sup> Pollock, Timothy G., and Joyce E. Bono. "FROM THE EDITORS: BEING SCHEHERAZADE: THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING IN ACADEMIC WRITING." *The Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2013, p. 629. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43589936>. Accessed 4 Sept. 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, Pete. 2017. *Introducing Practical Theology*, Chapter 6.



people, not generic “informants” who are supposed to represent a whole group.’<sup>21</sup> The validity of extrapolating generalisations from such conversations is somewhat questionable, however there is still value in the fact that a deep dive into one person’s unique experiences gives an entirely valid view of how they see the world. After all, ‘Practical Theology takes human experience seriously.’<sup>22</sup>

Conversational interviews create a safe space into which new-to-both-parties understanding can be discovered. Wigg-Stevenson found that ‘What goes without saying because it comes without saying was brought to voice as we sketched our vast and local histories together.’<sup>23</sup> In order to create a space that is safe, it is imperative for the ‘researcher to behave ethically, from the project’s inception through execution, analysis, and dissemination.’<sup>24</sup> So what does ‘ethical research’ look like in practice? Moschella and Willhauck believe it ‘is more than that which complies with acceptable practice. It can also be thought of as that which promotes ‘the good’: in terms of excellence in research – of rigour, innovation and communicability – and as an activity devoted to the pursuit and realization of social goods by contributing constructively to participants’ welfare.’<sup>25</sup> In my research I must become an excellent communicator, sharing the reasons for my research and the way it will be accomplished with my interviewees, ensuring they are comfortable within it, and using the research in ways that materially change things for the better.

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<sup>21</sup> Matera, Vincenzo, and Angela Biscaldi. 2020. *Ethnography*, Chapter 17.

<sup>22</sup> Swinton. 2016. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Chapter 1

<sup>23</sup> Wigg-Stevenson, N. 2014. *Ethnographic Theology*, [edition unavailable] (Palgrave Macmillan US) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/3487087/ethnographic-theology-an-inquiry-into-the-production-of-theological-knowledge-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 1 April 2023] Chapter 2

<sup>24</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. *Qualitative Research in Theological Education*, Chapter 3

<sup>25</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. *Qualitative Research in Theological Education*, Chapter 3

In my communications with interviewees, I will ensure that 'Through informed consent, participants are given the information they need before they can agree to participate, so that volunteering can be made without undue pressure, understanding the commitments, any benefits and risks, and what will happen to the research.'<sup>26</sup> I have written a letter for each participant outlining what exactly I am asking of them, and what the research will be used for- they will be given these in advance of any conversational interview that might take place so they can make an informed decision about taking part. I will also suggest anonymising their responses- I will not insist on this, as 'The major consideration is agency and control: wherever possible, participants should have the final word on whether or not their identities are disclosed.'<sup>27</sup> I have decided also to anonymise the churches themselves- for anyone familiar with this part of London, it would not be hard to identify them, but as the churches themselves play an important role as characters in their own right in this research, I felt it important to allow them their privacy.

The limitation of focusing closely on particular places and the people within them is that there must then be a pay-off in a smaller breadth of experience. There is no way that I can visit every church grounds in the UK, or even within my area, and so I have decided to identify three church grounds that in some ways can be representative of the whole. I will visit one church ground that is full of nature, one that has had some work done on it to increase its biodiversity, and one that is mostly bare and sterile. There may be limits to the number of places I can visit, but I must remember that 'The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages... they study *in* villages... some things... you can best study

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<sup>26</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. Qualitative Research in Theological Education, Chapter 3

<sup>27</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. Qualitative Research in Theological Education, Chapter 3

in confined locales. But that doesn't make the place what it is you are studying.'<sup>28</sup> As I keep my focus on my research question, the locales will be the vehicle I do this through, rather than the focus themselves.

Entering into spaces that may be unknown to me, though looking at them with my familiar lenses of nature connection and spirituality, puts me in position where I am standing in two places at once: 'The ethnographer must be able to see with the eyes of an outsider as well as the eyes of an insider, although both views are, of course, only ever partial.'<sup>29</sup> Viewing and observing the world through thick description can only ever be something generated from within my mind, however this does not mean it is untrue: 'They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made', 'something fashioned'- the original meaning of *fictio*- not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments.'<sup>30</sup>

I also have to be prepared for the possibility that not only might my research potentially impact real life, but also that my life might be impacted by my research: 'since the poststructuralist challenge to metanarratives and the acknowledgement that no research is conducted 'objectively', research practices have evolved to acknowledge that the researcher changes and is changed through the process.'<sup>31</sup> Researching the relationship between people and their church grounds, and how this impacts on their faith, mission, and praxis, is research by its very nature grounded in the real earth of the ground, and in the very real actions taken by the people who have their feet on that soil. Through our conversations, I must take pains to cherish this practicality, as 'Bearing witness to the gospel is an embodied task and not

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<sup>28</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 2016. *The Interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. Basic Books. P.15

<sup>29</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 2016. *The Interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. P.12

<sup>30</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 2016. *The Interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. P.12

<sup>31</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. *Qualitative Research in Theological Education*, Chapter 3

simply a matter of the intellect.<sup>32</sup> Speaking with faithful Christians, within the physical space of their church grounds, about their praxis, will reveal the theology present already within them and their place: 'Theology is the habitus of reflective disciples, prophetic communities, and prayerful action.'<sup>33</sup>

## Literature review

To study the theological culture and implications of Ethiopian Church Forests, it is necessary to place this within a context of ecotheology. This understanding might open up a new way of noticing and interpreting the relationship between people and their church grounds- the ways in which their faith shapes their care for their churchyard and the ways in which this care shapes their faith. To this end, I will explore and review some of the literature available around this subject. I will look first at the emergence of ecotheology from a Western lens, unpack the limitations of this worldview, and then seek to bring voices from the majority world into conversation with this. By delving more deeply into specific literature around Ethiopian ecotheology and Church Forests, I will be spreading the net wider to encompass not just Ethiopian theologians but also ecologists. Drawing this together, I will outline the ways in which this speaks into an urban UK context, and the questions this research seeks to explore.

The ancient Christian spirituality of these islands, Celtic Christianity, has much to contribute to an understanding of how faith relates to the natural world: 'Celtic Christianity is grounded

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<sup>32</sup> Swinton. 2016. Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, Chapter 1

<sup>33</sup> Moschella, and Willhauck. 2017. Qualitative Research in Theological Education, Chapter 3

in the keen vision that perceives all matter as evidence of the creative activity of God'<sup>34</sup>. For many hundreds of years this understanding was somewhat forgotten in the UK as the nation's spirituality was shaped by other church traditions, but in the more recent past the wisdom of the Celtic saints has been once again discovered and cherished. This wisdom reminds us that 'all matter' is created by and integrally precious to God, not for the ways it matters to us as humans, but simply as part of God's created order. Indeed, 'The Celtic Christian tradition, ever mindful that we live our human lives within the vast habitat of the created order, reminds us that to forget that habitat is to forget the essence of our humanity'.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the theologies that superseded it, creation is valued and held as something inextricably linked to human life, a habitat that is 'a "book," a text spoken forth by God at every moment. The earth and all who dwell therein, the galaxies and stars, the universe beyond our comprehending—these are outward and visible signs of God's own breath and life, continually uttered into being by the Holy One whom we know in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit.'<sup>36</sup> The whole of creation, rather than being at our beck and call, speaks of God, if we might just listen.

The life and approach of St Francis has been influential in the development of theology through an ecological lens, as he had an instinctive understanding of the holiness of all creation. The Franciscan theologian Ilia Delio explains how this grew out of his understanding of 'The Incarnation of God [which] opened up the eyes of Francis to the inner truth of creation as the very place where God is revealed or concealed when humans fail to see God humbly

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<sup>34</sup> Earle, M. (2012) Celtic Christian Spirituality. [edition unavailable]. SPCK. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1470070/celtic-christian-spirituality-essential-writings-with-introduction-and-commentary-pdf> (Accessed: 17 August 2023). Chapter 1, para. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Earle, M. (2012) Celtic Christian Spirituality. Chapter 1, para. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Earle, M. (2012) Celtic Christian Spirituality. Chapter 1, para. 4.

present in the magnificent diversity of creation.’<sup>37</sup> In more recent years, as we have become more and more aware of the ecological and climate catastrophe building around us, this Franciscan insight can offer us some theological grounding towards a response: ‘Once we begin to adopt Francis’ worldview of our deep interrelatedness to all creation, and God incarnate in all living things, it is impossible to continue business as usual. The world becomes for us what the leper was for Saint Francis- beloved kin... we are moved from the heart to safeguard and protect it in times of need.’<sup>38</sup>

It has begun to become clear that for the continuation of life on earth and our more authentic discipleship, we must develop a theology which embraces and helps us make sense of ecological issues. The British eco-theologian, Celia Deane-Drummond writes: ‘if systematic theology routinely ignores ecological issues, it could reinforce the idea that ecology does not have much to do with theology and so can be dispensed with as a serious matter of concern for the church.’<sup>39</sup> The danger here is that we can be tempted into a hierarchical view of creation, placing us as humans at its head: ‘much modern Christian thinking about the human relationship to the rest of creation... has been understood as a purely vertical relationship, a hierarchy in which humans are placed over the rest of creation in a position of power and authority... But humans are also related horizontally to other creatures; we, like they, are creatures of God.’<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Delio, Ilia, Keith Douglass Warner, and Pamela Wood. 2020. Care for Creation, [edition unavailable] (Franciscan Media) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1388164/care-for-creation-a-franciscan-spiritualityof-the-earth-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 4 February 2023] Chapter 2

<sup>38</sup> Delio, Ilia, Keith Douglass Warner, and Pamela Wood. 2020. Chapter 12

<sup>39</sup> Deane-Drummond. 2017. A Primer in Ecotheology, [edition unavailable] (Wipf and Stock Publishers) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/882182/a-primer-in-ecotheology-theology-for-a-fragile-earth-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 4 February 2023] Chapter 1

<sup>40</sup> Jorgenson, Kiara, and Alan Padgett. 2020. Ecotheology, [edition unavailable] (Eerdmans)

Although the concept of humans as stewards of God's good creation- as the pinnacle of God's creation and placed at the head of it in order to care for it- can be used in a positive way to encourage care for the planet, the concept is only one short step away from the temptation of a transactional relationship. American Ecotheologian, Doran believes that:

'The use of steward as our primary, if not only, description of our association with nature is especially troubling in a culture wherein most American Christians, if not most Westerners, view creation as a repository of natural resources that must be transformed into something that can be bought and sold in the market rather than as something that has value merely because God declared that it is good. It perpetuates a particular relationship with creation that sees it solely in economic terms rather than as a site of moral, aesthetic, and theological consideration.'<sup>41</sup>

So, are we as humans in any unique position with regard to the created world? Jorgenson and Padgett embrace the concept of 'earthkeeping', which 'captures our human identity as earthy and earthly creatures. It reminds us that we are not owners but users and conservers of a world we hold in trust from God, who made and sustains it. It acknowledges that we humans have an important calling to serve the earth and its creatures so that all will flourish.'<sup>42</sup> Doran unpacks the meaning of the word 'keep' with regard to the biblical charge to 'keep the garden': 'it can also connote observe, as in observing the workings of the world or observing

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&#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/3044728/ecotheology-a-christian-conversation-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 4 February 2023] Chapter 1.

<sup>41</sup> Doran (2017) *Hope in the Age of Climate Change*. [edition unavailable]. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/881817/hope-in-the-age-of-climate-change-creation-care-this-side-of-the-resurrection-pdf> (Accessed: 20 July 2023). Chapter 4

<sup>42</sup> Jorgenson, Kiara, and Alan Padgett. 2020. Chapter 3.

the Lords commands or Sabbath.... the human is charged to keep the garden and at the same time to observe it, to learn from it and respect the limits that pertain to it... it is to be expressed actively in the service of creation by preserving it and caring for it.<sup>43</sup> There is a relationship between humans and creation, a relationship that flows both ways, and a relationship that becomes stronger when there is a better understanding that the humans are in fact part of creation themselves. As John Muir wrote: 'When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything in the universe'.<sup>44</sup>

Joyously embracing creation, creating space for it to flourish, can easily assume the privilege of agency, and borrow from the superiority of the world of the privileged an attitude of somewhat condescending 'doing to' rather than 'being one with'. For too long, Western attitudes towards ecology have grown out of a colonial mindset, where for us to engage with creation is for us to step into a position of control and ownership of it. This may take benign or even positive forms, with the current slew of overactive bug hotel making and tree planting, but it still is planted in the soil of wanting to make our mark on the world. S. Lily Mendoza, a feminist theologian from the Filipino diaspora in America, and George Zachariah, an Indian theologian and ethicist, explain that 'the mainstream ecotheology movement, in general, is embedded in colonial and neo-liberal epistemologies. Decolonizing ecotheology, therefore, is a spiritual and political vocation for all those who are committed to restoring Earth's- and earthlings- flourishing.'<sup>45</sup> It is not simply that the majority world has wisdom to

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<sup>43</sup> Doran (2017) Hope in the Age of Climate Change. [edition unavailable]. Chapter 4

<sup>44</sup> Shore-Goss. 2016. God Is Green, [edition unavailable] (Wipf and Stock Publishers) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/881462/god-is-green-an-ecospirituality-of-incarnate-compassionpdf&#62;>; [accessed 4 February 2023] Introduction.

<sup>45</sup> Lily Mendoza, S, and Zachariah, G. 2022. Decolonizing Ecotheology, [edition unavailable] (Wipf and Stock Publishers) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/3278202/decolonizing-ecotheology-indigenous-andsubaltern-challenges-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 5 February 2023] Introduction



bear on the study of ecotheology, but the Western theology around ecology has itself ‘played a significant role in the colonization of the Indigenous commons and the Indigenous and subaltern communities. Our contemporary mainstream ecotheologies tend to develop their ecotheological visions and ethics without dismantling this creation theology of conquest and displacement.’<sup>46</sup> It is essential that we make time to listen to the wisdom from the majority world as ‘from these local places they gain a privileged viewpoint that ends up addressing the entire world.’<sup>47</sup>

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, has used his understanding of the scriptures to unpack the relationships between God, God’s people, and the land itself, arguing that they demonstrate a ‘triangular interdependence of creator, human creatures, and other non-human creatures. This mode of thought moves toward an equitable justice among the creatures...’<sup>48</sup> This idea has been taken up by other scholars from across various majority world contexts, who have particular reasons to have an interest in a theology of the Land, coming as they do from groups who have had their access to the land curtailed by others. H. Daniel Zacharias, an Indigenous American New Testament scholar, explains it thus: ‘a helpful way to understand humanity’s relationship with creation and Creator is as a relational triangle. This triangulation of reciprocal relationship is established in the creation narrative.’<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lily Mendoza, S, and Zachariah, G. 2022. Introduction

<sup>47</sup> Lily Mendoza, S, and Zachariah, G. 2022. Decolonizing Ecotheology, Introduction

<sup>48</sup> Walter Brueggeman, ‘Theologies of the Land’, in Yeo, K. and Green, G. (2020) Theologies of Land. [edition unavailable]. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/2067773/theologies-of-land-contested-land-spatial-justice-and-identity-pdf> (Accessed: 17 August 2023). Chapter 1, para. 8.

<sup>49</sup> H. Daniel Zacharias, ‘The Land Takes Care of Us’, in Yeo, K. and Green, G. (2020) Theologies of Land. [edition unavailable]. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/2067773/theologies-of-land-contested-land-spatial-justice-and-identity-pdf> (Accessed: 17 August 2023). Chapter 3 para. 18.

Theresa Yugar, a Latino feminist liberation theologian, explores this reciprocal relationship in a poem/letter she wrote as part of a Latino and Indigenous collection.

‘We need to remember that Earth is a living organism

Who preserves our past, sustains our present, and promises our future.

To kill Her is to kill us.

Responsibility to Her echoes our responsibility to God.’<sup>50</sup>

There is a relationship between human life and the natural world, between God and humans, and between God and the natural world. All three of these exist independently of each other with equal validity, and each affects the others.

Zacharias uses this triangular model to critique the fact that ‘Even the most environmentally-minded Christian thinkers and publications routinely use the language of “environmental stewardship” or “creation care”<sup>51</sup>, a language that emphasises a one-way human-centred hierarchical understanding of the relationship between humans and the More-the-Human world. He believes that ‘The modern evangelical discourse needs to be reformed because the models of creation care and environmental stewardship remain limited and based upon an anthropocentric theology.’<sup>52</sup> K. K. Yeo, a Malaysian-born Chinese American New Testament theologian, writing out of his family’s experience of arriving in Malaysia from China, living under Japanese occupation and then as culturally Chinese under a Malay nationalist government before moving to America as a member of an ethnic minority, dreams of a new model of discourse: ‘to live with God as “pilgrims”—pilgrims not in the sense of passing

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<sup>50</sup> Theresa Yugar, ‘Letter to Eva’, in *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*, 2019, University of Arizona Press, Tucson. p.342.

<sup>51</sup> H. Daniel Zacharias, ‘The Land Takes Care of Us’, in Yeo, K. and Green, G. (2020) *Theologies of Land*. Chapter 3 para. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

through the land but having a long view of God working in history as well as having a deep sense of connecting to the land—believing that God and his land will take care of them.’<sup>53</sup>

Rather than ecology being a theological afterthought, ‘in the Jewish and African contexts [it is] so tied up with divine activity and interest that in the Bible, the beginnings of the story of human salvation is set within a garden, Eden.’<sup>54</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, a Ghanaian theologian, goes on further to explain that in his Ghanaian context, ‘the custodianship of the ecosystems, it is believed, lies in the hands of transcendent beings. Human beings are only custodians into whose care the environment has been entrusted.’<sup>55</sup> A traditional understanding of ecology, within many majority world contexts, is deeply rooted in a sense of connection with and of being part of the land. Lagat, writing from Kenya, explains that ‘People who appreciate the role of God in nature, and who respond by giving offerings of thanksgiving after the harvest, are easily drawn towards environmental management.’<sup>56</sup> He believes that in such a context, it is only a short step for the church to play a major role in unlocking the potential for environmental solutions from the people. ‘Linking environmental adaptation to spiritual commitment of any Christian has the potential of causing people to act beyond the ordinary. This means that, since environmental problems can also be viewed as spiritual problems, the church which usually deals with spiritual problems should take up environment as part of its

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<sup>53</sup> K. K. Yeo, ‘Theologies of Land: Contested land, spacial justice, and covenantal identity’ in Yeo, K. and Green, G. (2020) *Theologies of Land*. [edition unavailable]. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/2067773/theologies-of-land-contested-land-spatial-justice-and-identity-pdf> (Accessed: 17 August 2023). Chapter 6, para. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K., 2019. *Essays on the Land, Ecotheology, and Traditions in Africa*, [edition unavailable] (Wipf and Stock Publishers) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/1255850/essays-on-the-land-ecotheologyand-traditions-in-africa-pdf&#62;>; [accessed 5 February 2023] Foreword

<sup>55</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K., 2019. *Essays on the Land, Ecotheology, and Traditions in Africa*, Foreword

<sup>56</sup> Lagat, D. (2019) *Christian Faith and Environmental Stewardship*. [edition unavailable]. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1482989/christian-faith-and-environmental-stewardship-theological-foundations-for-creation-care-pdf> (Accessed: 20 July 2023). Chapter 6, para. 3.

ministry.<sup>57</sup> This placing of ecology as central to people's lives and faith, is able to shape both their environmental solutions and also their spirituality- it works both ways.

In this dissertation, I am taking a deeper look through one particular eco-theological lens from the majority world, in order to place that in an informed conversation with research into part of the relationship between ecology and spirituality, life and faith within church communities in East London. The particular lens I am using is that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), specifically through their relationship with the land around their church buildings and monasteries. David Goodin, an American theologian with an ecology background, has worked with Alemayehu Wassie, an Ethiopian ecologist of over thirty years standing, and together they explain that 'Remnant eastern Afromontane forests survive in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, which are currently protected by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). These "church forests" (as they are known) are biodiversity preserves of critical importance for the future of Ethiopia, and also spiritual enclaves that are home to churches, monasteries, and other ecclesial lands actively managed by the EOTC clergy.'<sup>58</sup> These Church Forests exist due to the theology of the EOTC, but it seems they also influence the spirituality of the members of the EOTC as those members interact with them, use them, protect them, and build a relationship with them.

Berhane-Selassie, an Ethiopian theologian, begins to unpack this two-way relationship as she writes: 'It is clear that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity understands nature in a holistic manner. Nature includes human and invisible beings, trees, waters, forests and other land

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<sup>57</sup> Lagat, D. (2019) *Christian Faith and Environmental Stewardship*. Chapter 5, para. 3.

<sup>58</sup> David K. Goodin and Alemayehu Wassie, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Forests and Economic Development', *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 21, 2019. Introduction.

features, even air and invisible space and political structures such as a country... What is more, all aspects of nature and human experience can be derived from Orthodox theology.<sup>59</sup> This theological understanding of ecology has worked out into practice into a situation where 'the surroundings of many churches are home to wild animals which have almost disappeared elsewhere. Around monasteries in the highlands one may see rare animals such as the colobus monkey, much hunted for its beautiful skin, baboons, leopards, huge snakes and birds of all sorts. The forests are still more or less intact. Many indigenous trees, which in some places have been destroyed completely over the last forty years, are still found standing on their own in the grounds of remote rural churches. Bees make honey inside the roofs of some churches without being disturbed, and doves and other birds make nests even on the ground.'<sup>60</sup> The impact of this theology grown out of a sense that the earth is holy ground, that a sacred space must also be a space of ecological care and protection, has very real impacts that can be seen even from the air, in these green jewels of ecological safe haven.

Living and growing a faith within these safe havens is also bound to impact the form that this faith takes. The Ethiopian forest ecologist Wassie outlines the contemplative spirituality of the EOTC, 'the perception of the divine reality beyond the realm of ordinary perception... In orthodox theology, you don't discover but you understand. They learn about a tree not by

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<sup>59</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 'Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology', in Hallman, D.G., 1994, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon. P.169.

<sup>60</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 'Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology', in Hallman, D.G., 1994, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, P.167.

uprooting, bisecting and experimenting on it in Lab, but by growing it.<sup>61</sup> This ecologically shaped theology in turn shapes the liturgy, and this shapes people's faith:

'All this manifests as reverence for the intrinsic goodness of creation, as it is confessed in the liturgy, with the forests in turn venerated as holy places where the invisible saints perform their righteous work as intercessors before God; they are the *tabot*, the Ark of the new covenant where God is present to the chosen people, and where the people can commune with the divine in the shade of the canopy amidst the ambient sounds of birds, insects, and monkey calls.'<sup>62</sup>

A spirituality shaped by the green spaces held as holy, impacts upon those very green spaces. Goodin and Wassie quote a study from the tropical ecologist Frans Bongers which illustrates this well: "Church followers are very committed to develop the forests, improve their quality and help in extension of the forests. In contrast, the same people are hardly motivated to help governmental institutions in reforestation programs" (Bongers et al.: 41). This is a most significant finding. There is something with respect to their status as holy sites that motivates the people in ways that economic self-interest simply cannot.<sup>63</sup> This feels like an extremely pertinent point to explore for those of us wrestling with a church community and a country who appear to be content sleepwalking into environmental disaster. Perhaps supporting our Christian community to explore their theology from the ecological grounding modelled by our siblings in Ethiopia might precipitate committed action. Doran wonders that 'we reflect very

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<sup>61</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.15.

<sup>62</sup> David K. Goodin and Alemayehu Wassie, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Forests and Economic Development', P.15.

<sup>63</sup> David K. Goodin and Alemayehu Wassie, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Forests and Economic Development', P.3.

little upon whether our stewardship practices are building Christlike character within us. We fail to have serious conversations about how we would justify our stewardship behavior to the one who actually owns creation.<sup>64</sup>

He goes on to exclaim that ‘In this age of climate change, the church needs to be a beacon of hope.’<sup>65</sup> Despite the many differences, there are also similarities between the churches of East London and those of Ethiopia. Both are facing a climate catastrophe of human making. The churches of Ethiopia may be oases of green in a deforested desertifying landscape; the churches of East London could also be oases of biodiversity in the desert of urban sprawl. I wondered to what extent this concrete and asphalt desert might already be influencing our theology. Certainly it implies a world where the human reigns supreme, where humans are put in a position of control and manipulation of the natural environment, where creation is there as a giant store cupboard and valued only for what it is financially worth, what the human can use it for.

There is much to inspire in the ecotheology of Ethiopia: ‘in this age of global environmental crises, EOTC stands uniquely qualified to speak with particular theological authority to worldwide Christian traditions: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant alike. The lessons for sustainability to be learned from the EOTC are a message not limited to Ethiopia, but for the entire world to hear.’<sup>66</sup> In listening to voices from East London churchyards, I will seek to be drawing together the common threads, in order to pull out a wider vision, taking Ethiopian

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<sup>64</sup> Doran (2017) *Hope in the Age of Climate Change*. Chapter 4, para. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Doran (2017) *Hope in the Age of Climate Change*. Chapter 10.

<sup>66</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, ‘Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’, research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.5.

Church Forests as a model, and seeing in which ways a similar model may be occurring here. Within these green spaces of East London churchyards, is the concrete and asphalt theology of control being rewilded into something more connected with creation?

### **Results and analysis/discussion**

In attempting to bring some case studies from the UK into conversation with the example of Church Forests in Ethiopia, this piece of research will explore what they mean, and the ecotheology they are couched within. Obviously, such case studies must by necessity be limited and incomplete- it would be impossible for me to research within a wide enough sample of UK churchyards in order to feel as if I were in any way able to extrapolate any sense of a universal truth for them. I chose instead to focus my research on one particular area- the context local to me- which feels to me as if there is a particular link to the Ethiopian situation in one specific way. Within my East London borough, urbanised since the early Victorian period, dense terraced sprawl is inexorably giving way to even more dense high rise building projects. As in Ethiopia, where the indigenous forest has been cleared for firewood, leaving an ecological wasterland, so too in East London, where the meadow and forest of the landscape has been cleared, first for terraced houses with gardens, and more recently under an encroaching concrete and tarmac desert.

Within this area, I visited three different church settings. St John's, the old village church in the centre of the historic village at the heart of what is now a major urban conurbation in this borough, is in many ways the civic church of the area. It has a large congregation and an even



larger fringe congregation. It is set within the wealthiest part of this area, although still with significant pockets of deprivation. The area immediately surrounding it is mostly Victorian housing stock, some of which is now worth millions of pounds, but there are also housing estates built in the 1960s and 1970s. St Paul's was built as a chapel of ease to St John's in the early Victorian era, as the residential project spread further afield right up to the forest margins. Epping Forest itself was set within specific bounds and given to the people of London in perpetuity by Queen Victoria, and this shaped the limits of the borough as residential expansion could continue no farther. St Paul's, therefore, sits at the edge of town, tucked inside a forest glade, despite the urban pace of London marching right up to its door, and continuing the other side of a thin forest finger. The eyes of the residents face away from St Paul's towards the centre of town and London itself; St Paul's feels like it hovers somewhat by the back door, slightly unnoticed. St Monica's is a large red-brick built church from the later Victorian era, surrounded by dense Victorian terrace and on the verge of being overshadowed by newer multi-storeyed housing blocks. A few streets away there is a park, but apart from this there is little greenery to disrupt an otherwise entirely human-built landscape. It has a small- to mid-sized vibrant congregation with a large number of first and second generation Filipinos making up the majority of those who worship there.

Wassie, researching the Church Forests in his home context of Ethiopia, outlined a variety of ways in which the green spaces around the churches and monasteries were able to act as a blessing to the community and those worshipping as part of it: 'The forests also offer a variety of services to churches'.<sup>67</sup> I was interested to discover in which ways similar blessings might

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<sup>67</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.25.

exist in the East London churches I was studying, as a space for practical use, as a missional space, and for spiritual connection. It quickly became clear to me that in an East London context, just as much as in the context of the Ethiopian theologian Berhane-Selassie: 'Attitudes towards ecology and environment are not as clearly delineated in theology as they are in popular thinking and practice.'<sup>68</sup> In both East London and Ethiopia, the attitudes to ecology and environment are more clear in practice on the ground, and less clear how they relate to the theology of the worshipping communities taking part in such practice. Therefore I was also interested to see how much and in what ways being invested in their hyperlocal ecology had affected the theology of those in these churches.

A space for practical use

Wassie writes that 'Forests serve as classrooms for the traditional church school and provide a quite shady environment'.<sup>69</sup> Creating and nurturing the green spaces around these East London churches has filled something of a similar role. At St Monica's, I had a conversation with a mixed group of Filipino, Jamaican and Irish adults after a midweek mass. I was told that 'We actually been using some of the space to have the kids involved... all the children with the wheelbarrow' [sic].<sup>70</sup> This church community were keen to utilise the space around their church to pass on and to teach traditional skills around gardening and growing plants. At St John's, the space was also used for education, as after one of my five one-to-one conversations, an interviewee explained: 'Part of my remit is to engage volunteers and to

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<sup>68</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 'Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology', in Hallman, D.G., 1994, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon. P.158.

<sup>69</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.25.

<sup>70</sup> Appendix.

teach gardening ( I ran my own workshops, but now teach for [the borough] in the space).<sup>71</sup>

In my observation at St Paul's, I noted that there is a log circle round a fire pit, which is 'used once a month for an outdoor Sunday school focussed on creation theology, and every Friday for a forest school group that meets in the church grounds.'<sup>72</sup> There is a growing sense in East London that land-based skills are important for the future, yet are in danger of being forgotten. For urban churches to provide the land in which these skills can be taught and passed on is a real gift.

A space for spiritual connection

Another observation Wassie makes about the Ethiopian Church Forests is that: 'Forests create privacy and tranquillity for hermits and monks who are praying day and night.'<sup>73</sup> How might this be true in East London? This feels like a thread that comes through strongly from one interviewee at St Paul's:

It doesn't have to be a beautiful day to make you love the place where the church is. When I had regular organ practice slots at the church I would stand in the tower porch on a wet Wednesday afternoon, watch and hear the rain pouring, and have the feeling that I never want to leave the place, that I could be an anchorite and live here because it felt held by a strong power that could sustain you in the same way a good home does, but better.

Sometimes when I've felt in trouble or miserable – not bereaved, but bearing the troubles of life, work, relationships, I've sat on the seat in the garden of remembrance

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<sup>71</sup> Appendix.

<sup>72</sup> Appendix.

<sup>73</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.25.

and thought things through and felt comforted in the same way you might do in a chapel lighting a candle. What does it offer – the beauty of the scene, the presence of the earth, the sounds of the birds, insects, the winds, the smell of the grass and flowers, the peace of just being there.

I love the sense this quote gives of the possibility of short-term urban anchorite, that of being held in a holy place, and that holy place giving them what they need to ‘pray without ceasing’.<sup>74</sup> This theme comes through also from St Monica’s: ‘It’s the brightness and the care you see as you’re coming into church, and you see it in church, and when you go out of church. You’re being greeted with it each time’<sup>75</sup>; the interviewee felt that creating and caring for green space outside the church improved her experience of accessing church. The ‘hermits and monks’ of East London may fit it in around their day jobs and caring responsibilities, but their heart of prayer, held within creation, is clear to see.

Wassie observes that in Ethiopia: ‘Forests give grace and esteem to churches and play a protective role. The church scholars and followers equate a church without trees to a naked person. The majestic creation of church forests prompts the followers to fantasize about how more beautiful and graceful their creator, i.e. God, could be.’<sup>76</sup> One of the interviewees at St Monica’s explained how since they had been involved with the work the church had done outside, nurturing the green spaces around the building, ‘we can say like the psalmist say, how wonderful are the fingers of your hand, and you can think about that while you walk

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<sup>74</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5: 17 NIV

<sup>75</sup> Appendix.

<sup>76</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, ‘Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’, research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.25.

around and see what people done and what the Lord has done [sic].'<sup>77</sup> The beauty outside the church was prompting them to think about the nature and the beauty of God. In St John's too, 'being part of a place of worship also carries a much greater seriousness than a similarly sized park would. Mostly, this is respected and appreciated. I think of the churchyards as a way to reflect God's love, his creation and his care for us. Many of the visitors appreciate and are comforted by their visits.'<sup>78</sup> The 'church' element to this green space is particularly valued as a link to the spiritual, not just for those Christians involved in its upkeep but also for those of many faiths and none, who find it a place where they connect with something of 'greater seriousness' than their daily life. A respondent from St Paul's highlights this special nature of the churchyard:

Looking at it as a green space comparable to a park or nature reserve, I think the fact that it's a churchyard adds to my perception of the connection between humanity and nature. When I go spend time in green spaces, I am seeking out the peaceful feeling of being surrounded by nature, but whereas in those other spaces I might feel like a visitor to the natural world, in the churchyard there's a sense that people are a PART of that landscape (literally and figuratively!) rather than just passing through. I mean obviously being in a graveyard invokes thoughts of mortality and death, but in a 'wild', green churchyard like ours there's also an overwhelming visual argument for the inevitability of new life emerging.

It makes me feel small-- in a good way. A small part of something bigger.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Appendix.

<sup>78</sup> Appendix.

<sup>79</sup> Appendix.

She values the green space of the churchyard specifically because of the prompt it gives her to ponder those things spiritual and to make some kind of connection between her life and the wider Life of God's kingdom.

In Ethiopia, Wassie notes, '[Church Forests] indicate the presence of churches in the area from a distance, reminding Christians passing by to bow, which signifies the deep respect they have for the church of the Almighty.'<sup>80</sup> In East London, it feels less like these nurtured green spaces are reminding Christians passing by to bow, but more that the creation of them encourages passers-by of all faiths and none to nod an acknowledgement of something bigger than themselves, to find themselves caught up in wonder, struck by beauty. At St John's, 'many regular volunteers... comment on the comfort and awe given by the churchyards. Whether Buddhist, agnostic or atheist, our volunteers feel something positive in the space and in the work of caring for it. So, I take that to be God at work.'<sup>81</sup> Within my own observations there, I noted: 'Despite the busy setting of the church at the heart of this urban village, the churchyard feels peaceful. It is well used- I saw someone eating a packed lunch, someone else walking around taking a work phone call, a couple out for a stroll watching the comings and goings at the pond.'<sup>82</sup> I noticed a similar sense of peace within St Paul's, which 'is set within a forest clearing in Epping Forest. The main road down from the A406 towards [the] hospital runs directly along the east end of the churchyard. However, despite hearing sirens loudly and regularly, the churchyard still feels somehow set apart from the busyness of the world.'<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.25.

<sup>81</sup> Appendix.

<sup>82</sup> Appendix.

<sup>83</sup> Appendix

At St Monica's, one of the congregation had noticed that: 'As we're walking down people will be stopping and looking at the garden and that by the hall and appreciating'<sup>84</sup> [sic]. Their hope is that the care they put into nurturing and curating the small amount of green space outside their church- and it is small, as I observed: 'The church is set in small grounds, nothing much more than paths and a few flower beds, and yet the impact of the church on the natural environment immediately around it is large. The small amount of space they have is full of flowers, wild flowers, higgledy piggledy plants, poppies and tall daisies'<sup>85</sup>- will enable it to speak of the things of God to the people who pass by and enjoy it. At St Paul's, it was noticed that 'The number of people who pass and pause in the churchyard (many regularly) find it a place of contemplation and perhaps prayer where they do not participate in formal prayer and worship.'<sup>86</sup>

Another respondent from St Paul's shared how she had noticed the way that the green space of the churchyard meant something special to the volunteers and other people who use it, who may not be linked to the worshipping community of the church:

the part that has meant the most to me is the way I see people interact with the space, and with each other within it. When I'm feeling quite jaded with The Church as an entity, or just bombarded with negativity in general, St Paul's can be a really restorative place to spend time and watch all the people that use the space in one way or another.

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<sup>84</sup> Appendix.

<sup>85</sup> Appendix.

<sup>86</sup> Appendix.

We have one volunteer that comes and tends to the churchyard, gardening a little bit at a time twice a week, rain or shine. She cannot possibly make it neat and tidy, or clear away all the stinging nettle, or carefully plant ornamental flowers on each grave - especially by herself. And she doesn't want to! I think she loves the churchyard, wildness and all, and she wants very much for other people to be able to enjoy it as much as she does. It seems like her love of the place and the people that visit it is what keeps her relentlessly trimming overgrown hedges and scattering poppy seeds and making compost for next year. It's somehow the perfect embodiment of loving something or someone exactly as they are and still pouring endless amounts of care and time into helping them grow. I imagine that's how God loves us, and how we ought to love each other.<sup>87</sup>

I am particularly struck here, not just by the observations of the interviewee herself, but the theological nature of these- the interviewee has seen not just how the space is valued by those who pass by and use it, but also begun to reflect what it might mean for them, theologically.

A space for mission

I wondered at the ways in which nurturing these green spaces around churchyards might be seen as missional activity for the churches concerned. At St John's a respondent explained that: 'Many of the volunteers who work with me are not church people. Yet their work has drawn them closer to the church and to church events. People who would not go to a service, come to the churchyards. So, although I started out most interested in growing plants, I would

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<sup>87</sup> Appendix.



now say that growing people is at least as important to me.’<sup>88</sup> Growing plants and growing people; this feels like a clear indication of how environmental care supports two directions at once. At St Monica’s they noticed how once they started nurturing their green space around the church building, this led to greater community contact: ‘You see it all and think, ‘oh yeah’ and you stop to see what’s coming through, and as we’ve gone by we’ve had other people stop and talk to it with us, and I think that’s part of the growing as well, you’re growing as you’re coming in, and I think that’s the best part.’<sup>89</sup>

Due to the setting of St Paul’s within the forest, the link with nature has been clearer even before the church brought some theological intentionality into that relationship. A parishioner here reminisced: ‘I remember picnics when we would all go into the forest after church, walk up and over the bridge over the main road, into the wood again and to a clearing where you could sit and picnic and play rounders, and ride on the bouncy tree, now long fallen into the ground. These are things my non churchgoing children will remember in the context of church, so I think there’s a way in which it’s not the same as any bunch of friends spending Sundays together.’<sup>90</sup> Allowing a community to be held within nature provides an opportunity for groups to grow together, to feel part of each other’s lives and the life of the world around them, and this sets up echoes with being part of a wider Life, the life of God. She goes on to say that: ‘Whilst the whole forest is available to people many choose to come to this oasis knowing that this has been a place of prayer and worship for generations and is somewhere special. Other places of worship with formal gardens and cut lawns do not seem to generate

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<sup>88</sup> Appendix.

<sup>89</sup> Appendix.

<sup>90</sup> Appendix.

the same feelings of awe and mystery.<sup>91</sup> This green oasis of St Paul's acts in a missional way even without any words or explicit human agency.

A space for biodiversity

Wassie believes that the Church Forests in Ethiopia are of great importance as: 'They protect the church building from strong wind, storms and soil erosion'.<sup>92</sup> The Church Forests have a pivotal role to play ecologically within their area and within Ethiopia itself. 'These churches are not only religious spots but are also biodiversity spots. It is also expected from outside to be a viable and a functioning site ecologically from the whole landscape in the area'.<sup>93</sup> It is this 'viable and functioning site ecologically' that acts in this protective way against extreme weather conditions in Ethiopia, acting against the adverse conditions becoming more and more prevalent in a world on the brink of a climate emergency. Similarly in the UK, Kieran Doick, the head of urban forest research in the UK, writes that: 'a 100 ha greenspace can cool the surrounding 400m of built-up area by up to 4C'<sup>94</sup> along with providing mitigation against

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<sup>91</sup> Appendix.

<sup>92</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.25.

<sup>93</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.8.

<sup>94</sup> Kieron J Doick, 'Climate change and urban forests: Can urban forests help cities adapt to climate change?', 2022, [https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/04/21\\_0024\\_Leaflet-CC-factsheet-Urban-forests\\_wip06\\_Acc.pdf](https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/04/21_0024_Leaflet-CC-factsheet-Urban-forests_wip06_Acc.pdf) [accessed 10/8/23]

flash flooding, and providing air purification.<sup>95</sup> Are these green space churchyards able to provide this kind of protection to the communities that surround them?

Each green space I visited seemed to be a biodiverse oasis within the urban streets surrounding it. At St Monica's, I wrote that: 'The council has put in soakaway beds, and the church has taken these on to care for them. They are planted up with trees and native wild flowers and plants, cared for and beautiful. From the cavelike darkness of the church door, the brightness of this space in the sunshine really pops. It feels warm, inviting, and alive.'<sup>96</sup> St John's tells a similar story:

The medieval village church... has stood on this site while London grew around it. The large churchyard is bisected by paths, effectively creating three churchyard areas. One of these, directly opposite the church, is full of large memorial tombs. Long grasses grow between these, at high summer topped with a variety of seedheads. There is a purple buddleia standing proud above the graves. The area across an alleyway from the church has smaller gravestones, and feels slightly detached from the rest. There are mature trees around the perimeter and long grass around the graves. There are bee hives set back against the far edge, with a constant stream of bees coming in and out. The area surrounding the church has a relaxed formal area, with mown grass and some more cultivated flowers in one part, segueing into wildflowers with evening primrose, thistle, and agrimony among others. There is a newly built pond, which the bees from the hives were thirstily taking advantage of, planted up with pond plants.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Appendix.

<sup>97</sup> Appendix.

When I visited, I noticed that at St Paul's:

The trees just outside the churchyard are ancient woodland, mostly beech and hornbeam with some oak and holly. Within the churchyard there are also large trees of note, particularly an old oak, a horse chestnut and a stand of ash. It is late spring, and you can smell the wild garlic that has colonised a large space near the church door... I can see green alkanet, bluebells, primroses, and the sweet smell from the elderflowers lingers from where I brushed past it on my way down the path. Around the base of the old oak, a log pile provides a habitat for beetles, spiders, slugs, snails, and woodlice. The bees from the hive on the south wall of the church are just waking up and enjoying a feast of dandelion and sow thistle. A newt crawls through the damp grass.

These green arks of creation set within the concrete and asphalt desert of East London are set to play a small but significant role in mitigating the worst of the climate catastrophe heading towards the communities who live there. They act as biodiversity hotspots, providing a home and nurturing environment for dozens if not hundreds of species which would be struggling to maintain a presence in East London if their existence was limited to precariously growing between pavement cracks and at the bottom of moss-covered drain downpipes. The organisation *Caring for God's Acre* offers support to local communities, enabling them to protect the biodiversity inherent in their churchyards: 'Often these sites have been set apart for centuries and as such offer much needed refuge for our native wildlife of all varieties – plants, mammals, invertebrates, reptiles.'<sup>98</sup> Although the organisation has no explicit

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<sup>98</sup> <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/about-us/> [4/9/23]

theological underpinning, being ‘an independent, non-religious charity’<sup>99</sup> the support they are able to offer can answer some of the practical questions a faith community may need answered in order to act out work they are doing through religious conviction.

The presence of such churchyard biodiversity hotspots has a two-fold impact: partly it protects species from localised extinction, and partly it allows them to support other interlinked species who rely on them for their existence. They act as rainfall sinks, soaking up excess rainwater from flash floods, an event which is becoming more commonplace in this region in recent years. The London Wildlife Trust highlights such incidents in South London: ‘Lost rivers have a desire to return. Memorably in April 2004 the waters of the Effra dramatically flooded Herne Hill as 10cm of rain fell in just half an hour sending the sewers erupting into shops and homes. These desperate scenes were repeated again in August 2013, when a burst water main exposed the same area’s vulnerability to flooding, covering the area once more in just 10 minutes.’<sup>100</sup> They suggest the creation of rainwater sinks, green roofs, and de-paving, explaining that ‘When it rains, water that falls on hard surfaces like paving and rooftops can be diverted into rain gardens where it can soak into the ground or be absorbed by plant roots.’<sup>101</sup> Rather than the precious water being washed straight into the overloaded sewage system, it is able to settle slowly into the soil, sink into the water table, irrigate the plants that have rescued it- a happy God-filled accident of circular economy, ‘For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth’.<sup>102</sup> These green spaces provide essential cooling from the extremes of the heat, both

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<sup>99</sup> <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/frequently-asked-questions/> [4/9/23]

<sup>100</sup> [https://www.wildlondon.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-05/living-with-rainwater\\_0.pdf](https://www.wildlondon.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-05/living-with-rainwater_0.pdf) [4/9/23]

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Isaiah 55:10 NRSV

from tree canopies and also from the plants which grow densely enough to protect the soil and therefore their own and their neighbour's roots.

At St Monica's, they see this as an act of service towards God's creation: 'It's an extension of our faith. Jesus calls us to love and to serve, and we doing this action of caring for the ground, caring for our gardens, caring for our church, caring for each other, I think that's an extension. You know, what we do outside, what we do in here, is like a mirror image of that, it's a true embodiment of what we are called to do as Christians'[sic].<sup>103</sup> They are making a link between caring for each other as a Christian community, and caring for the wider 'each other' of the whole created order, the More-than-Human world. Wassie writes that: 'The perception of the community as to how the church forest survived rests on the belief of sacredness and thus, they believe those church forests could not survive if the churches had not been there'.<sup>104</sup> Just as in Ethiopia, where the Church Forests have survived because of the theological beliefs of the church community, so too in East London green spaces are coming into existence, being nurtured and protected, because of the theological beliefs of the people who make up the churches there.

A space to shape theology

I wondered how much a part these green spaces had played in nurturing and developing the faith of the worshipping community who held them. Ellingson, an American theologian, writing about the way in which the rise of the ecological movement has shaped a section of

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<sup>103</sup> Appendix.

<sup>104</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.3.

the Church, explains: 'We're not the environmental movement in prayer. We're trying to bring care for God's creation to the heart of religious life, or to weave programs to care for God's creation across the entire path of religious life. And henceforth, to be religious means if you love your neighbor, you care for creation... Care for creation brings life to faith, it revivifies faith... This new movement was as much about the renewal of faith as it was about saving the environment.'<sup>105</sup> How far was this true for these faith communities in East London? Did their care for the environment, specifically their immediate green and rewilding surroundings, renew their spirituality and their faith?

In Ethiopia, Wassie notes that, 'the theology of Ethiopian Orthodox church in conserving forest and biodiversity is not available as such as an independent and logically structured document or scripture. Rather embodied in the miracles, lives of Christians, symbols of the teachings.'<sup>106</sup> It is the things that the Christians in Ethiopia do, the way that they live, that contains their theology. This is an interesting observation, given that in this research I am exploring three East London churches, which are all within the Anglican tradition. Anglican theology is also held not within a formal document of beliefs, but gathered up within Anglican practices. Ashley Cocksworth, a theologian writing within the UK, outlines this, writing that: 'doctrinal claims are not adequately understood, either historically or theologically, if the spiritual practice from which they emerge is side lined.'<sup>107</sup> If caring for their church grounds

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<sup>105</sup> Ellingson, S. (2016) *To Care for Creation*. [edition unavailable]. The University of Chicago Press. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1852547/to-care-for-creation-the-emergence-of-the-religious-environmental-movement-pdf> (Accessed: 20 July 2023). Chapter 1, para. 2.

<sup>106</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.16.

<sup>107</sup> Ashley Cocksworth, 'Theorizing the (Anglican) *lex orandi*: a theological account', in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 36, Issue 2, April 2020, p. 316.

in an ecologically wise and sensitive way is a 'spiritual practice' for these congregations, their theology will be held within this.

At St Monica's they seem to have a strong sense that their work on the grounds is an outworking of their faith: 'we come to here, pray, and then we go outside, it looks like we are appreciating the nature God has given us, instead of being neglected, so what we learn in the church like appreciate, be grateful for what we have, appreciate nature, so we look after what is outside the church as well just as praying. We have to go outside and see more of God's creation and I think that links to us as well.'<sup>108</sup> [sic] They believe that it is part of their call as Christians to care for God's creation; it is also part of their call to show gratitude and appreciation for it. They are aware of how their interactions with the green growing space outside feed into their spiritual life inside the church building, and vice versa. In Ethiopia, Berhane-Selassie explains, 'Ethiopian Orthodox Christians interpret and practise Christianity from the perspective of how they see their environment, their lives and their relationship to God and the Bible. Their relationship with their environment stretches the tenets of Christianity to include their experiences of the physical world around them in a particularly African manner.'<sup>109</sup> The congregation of St Monica's perhaps does similar in a 'particularly Filipino manner'- I was very aware when talking to them that as first or second generation immigrants in the UK, from the Philippines, Jamaica, or Ireland, their childhood experiences or that of their parents were based in setting with far more nature and far less concrete than that around their church at the moment. Perhaps this is a particular gifting of the church in

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<sup>108</sup> Appendix.

<sup>109</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 'Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology', in Hallman, D.G., 1994, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon. P.155



East London- the ability to consider a particular UK context through a different cultural and experiential lens.

St Paul's has a very different congregation despite being just a mile down the road, and yet there is also a strong sense here that the natural world just outside the church door shapes the faith they inhabit: 'There's such a strong sense of being in nature here, perhaps because most churches aren't actually *in* a forest, so the trees around the churchyard and the creatures there, and the wood between the churchyard and Forest Rise feel like they are God's things and you feel like a co-creature with all that is living here whether it's human or not and with a sense that it is/we are part of God's creation.'<sup>110</sup> Being caught up in this wonder, in this sense of community as one part of God's created whole, comes directly out of this experience of worshipping within a church within a protected and cherished green space. Elizabeth Johnson, an American Roman Catholic feminist theologian invites us 'to keep before your minds eye... a place... where land or water with their plants or animals... has drawn your attention, refreshed your spirit, even lifted your mind and heart to God. Let this place function in your imagination as a touchstone... We are embarked on a dialogue. The goal: to discover that love of the natural world is an intrinsic part of faith in God.'<sup>111</sup> The churchyard around St Paul's acts as this touchstone, not just to the community of faith who gather within the church building at its centre, but also to the wider community for whom this churchyard acts as a special place, a place of some kind of spiritual connection.

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<sup>110</sup> Appendix.

<sup>111</sup> Johnson, Elizabeth. 2014. *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, 1st edn (Bloomsbury Publishing) &#60;<https://www.perlego.com/book/807817/ask-the-beasts-darwin-and-the-god-of-love-pdf&#62;> [accessed 5 February 2023] Preface

## Conclusion

In this research I have attempted to look at what is happening on the ground around three urban East London churches through a lens informed by the practice of Ethiopian Church Forests and held within the wider discipline of ecotheology. Just as the Church Forests of Ethiopia are intrinsically tied up with the theology, mission, and praxis of the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches they surround, this research has sought to explore in what ways this might also be true for churches in an urban East London context. To this end, I visited three urban churches in East London, sitting on differing points of a nature-rich spectrum. I spent time observing their church grounds, noting what and who this was hosting, and how it was used by both the church and local communities and by the community of the More-than-Human. I met with a range of people from within the church communities, enjoyed conversations with them as they shared their love for their precious places, and felt humbled by the depth of thought and feeling they shared with me.

### *Theology*

The Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Guitierrez holds that a function of theology is 'as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word.'<sup>112</sup> This is very much the angle Wassie believes the Ethiopian Orthodox church is approaching theology from. Rather than a thought-through theology enshrined in a formal document shaping their praxis, there is much more fluidity between the two: 'The eco-theology of EOTC is contemplative and focus on life rather than knowledge and thus teaches the church forests of Ethiopia have survived and

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<sup>112</sup> Guitierrez, G., 1988, A Theology of Liberation, SCM Press, Suffolk. p.11.

exist today as a testimony of God's promises, faithfulness, full redemption and symbol of true reconciliation with God.'<sup>113</sup>

From the conversations I had within these three urban East London churches, the theology around their nature spaces was somewhat light in character. There was some explicit theological reflection around their praxis, but mostly it was implicit, felt and sensed rather than articulated. These people, as part of a worshipping community that nurtured their green space around the church, knew that this nurture was linked to their faith, that it happened because of their faith, and that their faith was being shaped by their practice. However, I felt that they were fumbling around to find the words to explain this; it was something they knew in their bones but not something they had verbalised together or something that had been preached about from the pulpit or discussed within a bible study or small group. There is somewhat more of a sense that nature care, discipleship, and belief are linked together within a formal understanding inside the Ethiopian Orthodox church, and perhaps in this area the churches of East London might do well to take the Ethiopian Orthodox church as a model, scaffolding conversations and providing opportunities to reflect on their praxis in the light of the bible.

### *Mission*

The three churches I studied seemed to have a clearer understanding of how their green spaces formed and nourished their mission. Clearest of all was the way in which they highlighted the ways in which the work they had done and the very existence of their green

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<sup>113</sup> Alemayehu Wassie, 'Unfolding the Mystery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church', research report submitted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church development and Inter Church Aid Commission, December 2020, Addis Ababa. P.2.

spaces affected those who passed by and used them. They valued the conversations with those outside of their church community that grew out of a mutual appreciation for the nature around them. They shared the ways in which the work they were doing was drawing in others to work alongside them, and how this was expanding the nebulous edges of their church community. There was a depth of appreciation for the created world, which sometimes stopped short of an understanding of stepping into the *mission dei* as that might apply outside of the purely human sphere.

Doran believes that 'If human beings cannot see themselves as sharing this planet (as companions, literally, share bread) with the rest of creation, then all the features of the ecological crisis, from overpopulation to pollution, will simply spiral on to catastrophe... companionship is foundational to Jesus command to love our neighbors as ourselves... our nonhuman creatures can be conceived of as our neighbors.'<sup>114</sup> There is maybe some more work that these church communities could do to better notice this companionship with the More-than-Human that they are already enjoying.

After all, the fifth 'Mark of Mission', reads: 'To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'.<sup>115</sup> Mission is something that embraces far more than simply human life, extending out across that web of relationships being built and nurtured in these green spaces, amongst the oak trees and elder shrubs, the agrimony and green alkanet, the woodlice and the green ring-necked parakeets. As neighbours, we live

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<sup>114</sup> Doran (2017) Hope in the Age of Climate Change. [edition unavailable]. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/881817/hope-in-the-age-of-climate-change-creation-care-this-side-of-the-resurrection-pdf> (Accessed: 20 July 2023). Chapter 4

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx> [4/9/23]

together in God's world, and the work these communities have done and continue to do will support and grow these holy webs of love and life into the future.

### *Praxis*

In Ethiopia, Berhane-Selassie notes, 'More to the point of ecological preservation, the grounds around churches are considered holy... Monasteries have huge grounds which are kept holy; small churches often have only a small fenced-in compound immediately around them.'<sup>116</sup> Their praxis is clear in the strong link between the understanding of what they do (regarding their church grounds and keeping them wild and protected) and the reasoning that propels this. The churches in East London are similar; they have a strong sense of the importance of the ways in which they cherish, protect, and nurture their wild spaces, and it is obvious that this comes out of a strongly held faith and belief.

It is not simply that these churches have decided to care for their churchyard for their own reasons, eg. that they wanted them to look nicer when they walked through them on the way to worship. Freire, the Brazilian educational and philosophical theorist, believed that at the heart of praxis was 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.'<sup>117</sup> This transformational action on the world comes, for these communities, in a direct relationship with the transformational action of the Holy Spirit, of a belief that they are being the hands of Jesus in their area, that they are working in partnership with their Creator God as they nurture their small green wild spaces.

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<sup>116</sup> Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 'Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology', in Hallman, D.G., 1994, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon. P.167.

<sup>117</sup> Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin. P.52.

### Ethiopia and East London

The differences between these two contexts are many in number and huge in scale. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a deep and far-reaching relationship with the communities living in the area. Almost all the residents have some relationship with the church; almost all residents would have some form of understanding of the Church Forest and what it meant to them on a spiritual as well as a practical level. This is not the case in East London now, if indeed it ever was. Local residents may have some awareness of the church building, but it is often somewhere that they simply walk past and have no engagement with at all. The worshipping community is an incredibly small subsection of the local community. Therefore, the missional possibilities inherent in a Church Forest or rewilded churchyard will be different in those different contexts. The praxis will be different too, a more focussed group effort from the tinier worshipping communities in East London, versus a wider more instinctive care from what may be a small group but supported by the entire wider community in Ethiopia. Unlike these churches in East London, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is clearer and more confident in the theology underpinning and growing out of their Church Forest praxis.

### The Future Forest

Within the limitation of this study- time, small selection of contexts, limited number of conversations- I was surprised to find how similar the experiences and shared thoughts were amongst those I had conversations with. Despite the Ethiopian Church Forests being a continent away and growing out of a very different cultural context, the movement of the Spirit was taking a very similar shape, dancing a similar dance.

I would be interested to explore the ways in which the East London churches might be more intentional with regard to delving more deeply into the theology around their churchyards, what they are doing with them, and how that is shaping them. I wondered if there might be space for these church communities to work through a version of the theological reflective cycle as they dug, carted loads of woodchip, and scythed their wildflower meadows. Many of the respondents valued activity and enjoy the part they play in the churchyard as a practical contribution to the life of the church. I would be loathe to create an impression that this is somehow not so valuable unless it is couched in theological language, as God surely values the work of their hands. Yet I think there is also a value in curating a space where the voices of all can be heard together, to uncover the truths about what they believe that are thus far hidden or glimpsed only in part. Perhaps taking Ethiopian Church Forests as our model might allow and support such theological questing, as we are challenged by their praxis-based theology and supported by the wider discipline of ecotheology, to develop our own indigenous one, grown from the soil of East London.

14039 words

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Luke 17: 14 NRSV

1 Thessalonians 5: 17 NIV

Isaiah 55:10 NRSV

## Appendix

### Transcripts and observations

#### **St Monica's transcript**

So, with St Monica's, you don't have a large green space, but I know from fb that what happens inside the church is also happening outside, it doesn't finish at the doors...

This is G\*\*\*. We actually been using some of the space to have the kids involved. We been using, the most recent one was the trees was being trimmed and woodchipped and we taken the opportunity to take that and spread it at the sides of the church. So it's more of an eco friendly way of supplying what we need to buy.

And all the children with the wheelbarrow.

As you walk up and down to church from this road you'll see it round the trees, all the way along.

As we're coming along, where the children have planted flowers, and looked after the trees, whether you're coming that way or from that road, you'll see flowers growing in places especially round in this square and you're sort of coming to it and you see the flowers and blooms where it's spring, it's summer, I mean we've had lovely sunflowers out there before... and we've had the tulips, and it's always nice to be walking up and seeing them greet you. The same with the trees. We had a special year this year, fascinated me this one, they lobbed the trees back at the right time but left a bit, it was like a tree growing within a tree, it had all been done down, and all of a sudden you've got this long stem with a little bunch of tree on top, there was a bird's nest on top. And that was so nice to see every time you come up and down, well, it's part of nature isn't it. And because that one was late, it was saved... It's the brightness and the care you see as you're coming into church, and you see it in church, and when you go out of church. You're being greeted with it each time and it's linked by the children.

It's interesting because it's not just one person doing it. She's been able to mix up everyone, the adults, the young children.

Side garden and into the hall and all the grounds are done there. You see it all and think, 'oh yeah' and you stop to see what's coming through, and as we've gone by we've had other people stop and talk to it with us, and I think that's part of the growing as well, you're growing as you're coming in, and I think that's the best part.

I think it's such an important part with the community and we have a lot of people coming since, with the care that we're taking.

Also, I think it links, we come to here, pray, and then we go outside, it looks like we are appreciating the nature God has given us, instead of being neglected, so what we learn in

the church like appreciate, be grateful for what we have, appreciate nature, so we look after what is outside the church as well just as praying. We have to go outside and see more of God's creation and I think that links to us as well.

It's an extension of our faith. Jesus calls us to love and to serve, and we doing this action of caring for the ground, caring for our gardens, caring for our church, caring for each other, I think that's an extension. You know, what we do outside, what we do in here, is like a mirror image of that, it's a true embodiment of what we are called to do as Christians.

As we're walking down people will be stopping and looking at the garden and that by the hall and appreciating.

And we can say like the psalmist say, how wonderful are the fingers of your hand, and you can think about that while you walk around and see what people done and what the Lord has done.

### **St Monica site observation**

St Monica's is a large red brick block of a church set on a street corner in urban W\*\*\*\*. There is a park nearby but apart from that it is a heavily built up area with red brick terraced houses and very small gardens. The church is set in small grounds, nothing much more than paths and a few flower beds, and yet the impact of the church on the natural environment immediately around it is large. The small amount of space they have is full of flowers, wild flowers, higgledy piggedly plants, poppies and tall daisies. One door of the church opens onto their tiny green space, the other directly onto the street. But it is a street where this corner has been pedestrianised as part of a low traffic neighbourhood. The council has put in soakaway beds, and the church has taken these on to care for them. They are planted up with trees and native wild flowers and plants, cared for and beautiful. From the cave-like darkness of the church door, the brightness of this space in the sunshine really pops. It feels warm, inviting, and alive.



### **St John's site observation**

The medieval village church of St John's has stood on this site while London grew around it. The large churchyard is bisected by paths, effectively creating three churchyard areas. One of these, directly opposite the church, is full of large memorial tombs. Long grasses grow between these, at high summer topped with a variety of seedheads. There is a purple buddleia standing proud above the graves. The area across an alleyway from the church has smaller gravestones, and feels slightly detached from the rest. There are mature trees around the perimeter and long grass around the graves. There are bee hives set back against the far edge, with a constant stream of bees coming in and out. The area surrounding the church has a relaxed formal area, with mown grass and some more cultivated flowers in one part, segueing into wildflowers with evening primrose, thistle, and agrimony among others. There is a newly built pond, which the bees from the hives were thirstily taking advantage of, planted up with pond plants. Despite the busy setting of the church at the heart of this urban village, the churchyard feels peaceful. It is well used- I saw someone eating a packed lunch, someone else walking around taking a work phone call, a couple out for a stroll watching the comings and goings at the pond.

### **St John's interviews**

We are trying to maintain a balance between relatives, visitors, historical buffs, wildlife and "pretty gardening". The churchyards are always open and are a kind of park. I tend to err on the side of nature, wildlife, habitat creation and biodiversity. Although, there are lots of competing interests in the space. The site is nearly 4 acres and is varied: meadow, paths, borders, pond, woodland, scrub and lots of monument niches. Part of my remit is to engage volunteers and to teach gardening ( I ran my own workshops, but now teach for LBWF in the space). Both of which have been more successful in the last year.

Being in a churchyard has its own special quality. The graves are one thing which create an atmosphere of quiet and reflection and respect. It is sometimes useful to have this to remind people of (those taking drugs, drinking or behaving in an anti-social way). Some people carry notions of "respect for the dead". But also being part of a place of worship also carries a much greater seriousness than a similarly sized park would. Mostly, this is respected and appreciated.

I think of the churchyards as a way to reflect God's love, his creation and his care for us. Many of the visitors appreciate and are comforted by their visits. I hope this is noticed by the casual visitor. However, many regular volunteers also comment on the comfort and awe given by the churchyards. Whether, Buddhist, agnostic or atheist our volunteers feel something positive in the space and in the work of caring for it. So, I take that to be God at work.

It has certainly deepened my faith and my appreciation for God's creation working here.

Many of the volunteers who work with me are not church people. Yet their work has drawn them closer to the church and to church events. People who would not go to a service, come to the churchyards. So, although I started out most interested in growing plants, I would now say that growing people is at least as important to me.

### **St Paul's site observation**

St Paul's is set within a forest clearing in Epping Forest. The main road down from the 406 towards Whipps X hospital runs directly along the east end of the churchyard. However, despite hearing sirens loudly and regularly, the churchyard still feels somehow set apart from the busyness of the world. The trees just outside the churchyard are ancient woodland, mostly beech and hornbeam with some oak and holly. Within the churchyard there are also large trees of note, particularly an old oak, a horse chestnut and a stand of ash. It is late spring, and you can smell the wild garlic that has colonised a large space near the church door. Sitting on one of the logs around the fire pit outside the main entrance, I can see green alkanet, bluebells, primroses, and the sweet smell from the elderflowers lingers from where I brushed past it on my way down the path. Around the base of the old oak, a log pile provides a habitat for beetles, spiders, slugs, snails, and woodlice. The bees from the hive on the south wall of the church are just waking up and enjoying a feast of dandelion and sow thistle. A newt crawls through the damp grass.

### **Interviews at St Paul's**

**S:**

I think the phrase that springs to mind for me is 'ancient forest'. The massive old trees, the brambles and bushes all around, and the slightly-overgrown churchyard makes me feel almost as if the church itself is a 'new growth', something that's sprouted up in the middle of a space that is already thriving and been allowed to grow up along with its surroundings. That might sound a bit fanciful but I am always struck by the way the forest around St XXX's feels like it's been there forever.

The tombstones are definitely a feature! They certainly help me to visualize just how many people's lives have occupied the space before us, which I think in turn adds to the sense of history and community surrounding the church.

Looking at it as a green space comparable to a park or nature reserve, I think the fact that it's a churchyard adds to my perception of the connection between humanity and nature. When I go spend time in green spaces, I am seeking out the peaceful feeling of being surrounded by nature, but whereas in those other spaces I might feel like a visitor to the natural world, in the churchyard there's a sense that people are a PART of that landscape (literally and figuratively!) rather than just passing through. I mean obviously being in a graveyard invokes thoughts of mortality and death, but in a 'wild', green churchyard like ours there's also an overwhelming visual argument for the inevitability of new life emerging.

It makes me feel small-- in a good way. A small part of something bigger.

The fact that this is a green space closely tied to a faith community absolutely makes a difference in how I interact with it and how I see others interact with it. It invites the kinds of thoughts I expressed in the previous question, which are significantly more existential than what I'm thinking just sitting in a neighborhood park! The connection from nature to faith and religion and eternity is already present around St XXX's, which kind of gives you permission to drift into a more reflective mindset.

I'm in a little bit of a different position because I wasn't brought to St XXX's by my faith or spiritual journey, that's just been kind of a bonus. I came at it initially as my place of work and really looking at it as a community space, and I've found that the faith community surrounding it adds another dimension entirely because it invites thought and conversation around things with greater depth and vulnerability than I think people would be likely to engage in elsewhere.

This has been a place of healing for me, spiritually. Plenty of places have given me that sense of 'the world is so vast and so old and I'm insignificant in the scheme of things', and being at a church surrounded by generations of families at rest in the churchyard and immersed in an ancient forest definitely evokes that! But the part that has meant the most to me is the way I see people interact with the space, and with each other within it. When I'm feeling quite jaded with The Church as an entity, or just bombarded with negativity in general, St XXX's can be a really restorative place to spend time and watch all the people that use the space in one way or another.

We have one volunteer that comes and tends to the churchyard, gardening a little bit at a time twice a week, rain or shine. She cannot possibly make it neat and tidy, or clear away all the stinging nettle, or carefully plant ornamental flowers on each grave-- especially by herself. And she doesn't want to! I think she loves the churchyard, wildness and all, and she wants very much for other people to be able to enjoy it as much as she does. It seems like her love of the place and the people that visit it is what keeps her relentlessly trimming overgrown hedges and scattering poppy seeds and making compost for next year. It's somehow the perfect embodiment of loving something or someone exactly as they are and still pouring endless amounts of care and time into helping them grow. I imagine that's how God loves us, and how we ought to love each other.

I'm really not sure how much I could contribute on the matter, except to say that I've often felt closer to God and more at peace with myself in nature than in a church. Before St Xxx I hadn't had much experience with the combination of the two as a lot of the churches I grew up in/around were suburban and modern and had no associated green space aside from possibly fields used for sports. Nature definitely wasn't a part of any worship I was involved in growing up. Bit ridiculous in hindsight, since immersing yourself in creation seems like a great way to experience God, but there you go.

The green space outside St Peter's is very woodland-y. You have to pick your way and there are no grassy spaces – I could wish there were, the nearest one is not far, down Forest Rise, but we only go there when walking away from church, so when I walk there I remember conversations with church people.

I remember picnics when we would all go into the forest after church, walk up and over the bridge over the main road, into the wood again and to a clearing where you could sit and

picnic and play rounders, and ride on the bouncy tree, now long fallen into the ground. These are things my non churchgoing children will remember in the context of church, so I think there's a way in which it's not the same as any bunch of friends spending Sundays together.

But in the churchyard, the uneven ground makes you careful how you walk, and the tree cover encloses the space somehow. Of course the birdsong is fantastic and you feel very close to nature.

Are there ways that being in a churchyard makes it unique or unusual- I don't mean the tombstones!- but are there differences with other green spaces you know and use? Not so much the tombstones but that for nine score years it has been a place people came to in order to focus their memories and their prayers, to strengthen their community, knowing that in this place the children of past generations, perhaps these dead have romped in the same way that our children are romping now and we hope others will in future. You could get that feeling from a village green or a loved local wood, but I think it is stronger here, because of the prayers and the association not only with death and memorials, but also other life events, weddings, babies, anniversaries, recently the accession of the King, and that God is our hope for the future.

Has your faith influenced what you do here?

It doesn't have to be a beautiful day to make you love the place where the church is. When I had regular organ practice slots at the church I would stand in the tower porch on a wet Wednesday afternoon, watch and hear the rain pouring, and have the feeling that I never want to leave the place, that I could be an anchorite and live here because it felt held by a strong power that could sustain you in the same way a good home does, but better. Sometimes when I've felt in trouble or miserable – not bereaved, but bearing the troubles of life, work, relationships, I've sat on the seat in the garden of remembrance and thought things through and felt comforted in the same way you might do in a chapel lighting a candle. What does it offer – the beauty of the scene, the presence of the earth, the sounds of the birds, insects, the winds, the smell of the grass and flowers, the peace of just being there.

There's such a strong sense of being in nature here, perhaps because most churches aren't actually *in*

a forest, so the trees around the churchyard and the creatures there, and the wood between the churchyard and Forest Rise feel like they are God's things and you feel like a co-creature with all that is living here whether it's human or not and with a sense that it is/we are part of God's creation.

It's very important, because I'm not very outdoorsy at all, and I suspect a lot of churchgoers are like me, so this natural environment around the church reminds me I am as much a part of the created world as the next woman who loves to crouch in mud and cheer herself making fire as I cheer myself making music and poetry.

Because we are in a wood, I could wish we had a lawn or meadow, because I would love us to have a labyrinth here, and ideally in a public place where anyone could access it. I think that is one way churches can use green spaces to allow prayer and contemplation for those who don't go inside. I've seen prayers hanging on a tree, which sounds a bit pagan, but

could I'm sure be done in a Christian way, to make spiritual practice accessible to those who are not inclined to attend a church service.

**B:**

Next to a busy road where traffic noise is constant, entering the churchyard gives an immediate feeling of tranquillity.

The wildness, wild flowers and trees and collapsing graves show the transitory nature of life. Nature taking back its own against the rushing world outside.

Being connected to a faith community emphasises the continuance of life and hope. This nurtures a feeling of respect and the presence of a greater being.

The number of people who pass and pause in the churchyard (many regularly) find it a place of contemplation and perhaps prayer where they do not participate in formal prayer and worship.

Whilst the whole forest is available to people many choose to come to this oasis knowing that this has been a place of prayer and worship for generations and is somewhere special. Other places of worship with formal gardens and cut lawns do not seem to generate the same feelings of awe and mystery.

Participant information form:

How Ethiopian Church Forests might inspire the theology, mission and praxis of 'church forests' in the UK.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. In order to help you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. You may wish to discuss it with others. For any further information or questions about my research, please contact me at [XXX@gmail.com](mailto:XXX@gmail.com) or 07\*\*\*\*\*.

I'm interested to find out what protecting and cultivating an ecological sanctuary around our churches in the UK, similar to the Ethiopian Church Forests, might look like in practice, and the ways it might influence how we think and behave with regard to our faith and our mission.

I am looking at a variety of church grounds in the UK and am interested to hear the views and opinions of some of the people who use them. You have been chosen for this as you are involved with your church ground in some way.

You are free to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you do wish to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. It is usually not practical to withdraw after the research project has been written up. If you take part you will be asked to sign a consent form, and you will be given a copy of it to keep.

I will spend some time observing the church grounds, and would like to speak with you about how you experience the area immediately around your church. This interview will not take longer than an hour; I will ask you what the area is like, whether you have made changes to it and what those might have been, and a bit about your faith.

Every effort will be made to provide as much confidentiality as possible. All respondents will be anonymised, and any personal information and data will only be accessed by me, my supervisors, and the internal and external examiners of the dissertation.

The information I collect will find its way into my dissertation, but the data and interviews themselves will be destroyed after the dissertation is marked. As your responses will be anonymised, you are unlikely to be identifiable in this.

If you require further information, please contact myself (XXXX, [xxx@gmail.com](mailto:xxx@gmail.com)) or my TEI supervisor (Rev Dr XXXX, [xxx@dioc.org.uk](mailto:xxx@dioc.org.uk)). Please refer to the Ripon College Cuddesdon Research Ethics Policy (<https://www.rcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/Research%20Ethics%20Policy%20from%202018.pdf>) if you want to know more.

Many thanks for agreeing to take part in this research.



**Participant Identification Code:**

**Title of Project: Ethiopian Church Forests**

**Student Name:.....XXX.....**

**Supervisor Name:.....Rev Dr XXX.....**

**Please read and sign:**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet about the above-named project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to the research project being written up, without giving a reason.

I agree to take part in this project.

Name of participant: .....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

Name of student: .....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

**Participants will be given a copy of this signed, dated consent form. The original signed consent form will be kept by the student.**