

An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation

A Commentary on the Faith and Order Text *Cultivate and Care*

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Abstract

In 2020, the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC) published Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation. This article offers an introduction to Cultivate and Care, highlighting its central themes and aspects, placing it in the context of two related Faith and Order documents, and evaluating its special contributions. The article also looks at the longer trajectory of theological themes that have informed the work of the Faith and Order Commission. Cultivate and Care was developed in conjunction with theological resources for the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and, in that sense, it is a statement "on the way" to the hope for transformation within the horizon of the ultimate reign of God.

Keywords

integrity of creation, environmental concern, Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, Faith and Order, World Council of Churches

“Addressing human behavior that is responsible for climate devastation constitutes ‘not merely one justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns,’ but rather . . . one ‘of foundational importance for all existence and identity.’ Christian communities may not

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in conscience ignore this crisis and the pathos of a threatened creation.”¹ These words from the opening paragraph of *Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation* set the urgent tone and the overarching concern of this text from the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which was recently published as Faith and Order Paper No. 226.²

Ecological devastation and its already disastrous repercussions are existential realities encountered daily and globally. They impinge upon environments, living creatures, human individuals and families, organizations, cultures, economies, and governance – often in unequal and unjust ways. For example, heated, polluted, and rising ocean waters alter habitats and destroy marine life; such demise threatens local fishing economies and cultures, which can drive migration and other drastic responses needed for survival, especially when political and economic policies exacerbate rather than ameliorate the situation.³ As *Cultivate and Care* observes, “The struggle for survival that is told in Naomi’s response to the demise of her family due to famine and their emigration to the country of Moab (Ruth 1:1-5) continues throughout the world today among indigenous communities, subsistence farmers, women, the poor, and the most vulnerable.”⁴ Creaturely life and livelihoods are being unalterably affected. Science attests to it; national and global governance bodies and non-governmental organizations offer analyses and plans for addressing it. Many faith leaders and traditions have issued calls to repentance and action, including several statements cited within this document itself. Among Christian leaders and communions, these include significant leadership by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, known as the “Green Patriarch,” Pope Francis’ powerful encyclical *Laudato sí*, and many programmes and initiatives from the WCC itself.⁵ *Cultivate*

¹ A French translation of this article was published in *Istina* 66:3 (2021), 265–82, to which acknowledgement is due for its agreement for the English text to be published in this issue of *Ecumenical Review*.

² *Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation*, Faith and Order Paper No. 226 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020), §1, citing *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, Faith and Order Paper No. 224, §22. To download the English text, see <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/cultivate-and-care>.

³ See, for example, the 2017 case study of Philippines fisherfolk by Michelle Gan and Margaret Von Rotz, “Development for Whom? How Navotas Fisherfolk Resist the Displacement of Their People and Livelihood,” https://iboninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Navotas%20Case%20Story_Final1.pdf. A Faith and Order subgroup meeting in 2016 took some commissioners to local communities in Manila Bay.

⁴ *Cultivate and Care*, §4. When the commission started work on this statement, Juliet Matembo, one of the commissioners and a founder of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians in Zambia, turned to the book of Ruth. She drew a parallel between Naomi’s struggle and that of “ordinary people” today, observing, “The unfair distribution of God’s resources has resulted in an unacceptable standard of living for ordinary people.”

⁵ Regarding Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, see <http://spiritualecology.org/contributor/his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew>; Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Sí of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html; and, for example, “Care for Creation and Climate Justice,” WCC website, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change>.

and Care takes its place among other signals of the urgency of addressing ecological devastation. Among other ecumenical and interfaith statements and calls to action, it is the first such document issued by the WCC's Faith and Order Commission. As such, it draws on global perspectives from Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Pentecostal, and other Christian traditions to consider what the churches might say together about ecological devastation and the concomitant suffering of the most vulnerable in light of shared faith in God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

This article offers an introduction to *Cultivate and Care*, highlighting its central themes and aspects, placing it in the context of two related Faith and Order Papers, and evaluating its special contributions. The article also looks at the longer trajectory of theological themes that have informed the work of the Faith and Order Commission. *Cultivate and Care* was developed in conjunction with theological resources for the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and, in that sense, it is a statement "on the way" to the hope for transformation within the horizon of the ultimate reign of God. My approach will be primarily commentarial, with the aim of aiding the reception and further consideration of the text. The text does not need my defence, although in full disclosure, I contributed to this text as a member of the Commission on Faith and Order. I begin by noting the significance of shifting from a model in which creation was at best treated as a context for human action to a model in which creation – as a threatened living reality and as a historically underdeveloped locus of ecumenical theological reflection – offers a crucial context, challenge, and resource for the articulation of the churches' faith and life.

Overview

Cultivate and Care "seeks to demonstrate how a committed response to the environmental devastation of our time can be motivated by Christian faith in God the creator, redeemer, and sanctifier."⁶ The title derives from a translation of the imperative in Genesis 2:15. In this Genesis account, the earth and universe are pictured as an integral and interdependent whole, as the *creation* of the Lord God, who charges the human "to cultivate and care" for God's creation. That is to say, humans are situated in this creation not as its sovereigns but as creatures, as a part and as participants who are responsible for the well-being of the whole creation.⁷ In this Genesis account, as in this document and in the Prophets, Psalms, and elsewhere in the Bible, creation is pictured as a living reality, vital but suffering, on which and with which all

⁶ *Cultivate and Care*, §40.

⁷ "We must not forget that human beings are also creatures, interconnected with the rest of creation and with the earth itself" (*ibid.*, §11). See also §9.

human activity is dependent and interrelated. In *Cultivate and Care*, creation comes to the fore as a living reality in which God is ever-present and as crucial for interpreting and orienting faith in God.

The text's subtitle indicates its approach: namely, to offer *An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation*. First, the text calls for uniting *justice for creation* with *justice within creation*. The opening section, "Urgent Environmental Concerns" (§§3–13), lays out this dilemma. Second, the text's approach is *theological* from its opening to its conclusion. Its central section, "Theological Perspectives," provides an overview of "Creation as a Theological Theme in the World Council of Churches" (§§14–17), which is to say an initial lack of attention to the doctrine of creation and an emerging focus in the WCC and in Faith and Order, and elaborates "Relevant Theological Perspectives" (§§18–27), in which the doctrine of creation comes into prominence in interconnection with other theological loci. Finally, the text is *ecumenical*, if perhaps not in the way that Faith and Order texts have typically been so – that is, by addressing an issue that divides the churches in order to provide consensus or convergence. Importantly, it forwards a robust understanding of "the unity of the church within creation."⁸ In addition, the final main sections of the text (§§28–38) call for an "Ecumenical Response Contributing to Visible Unity."

Justice for and within Creation

The opening section (§§3–13) situates the imperative to "cultivate and care" in the urgency of this moment and in an interdependent global context. In the urgency of these times, to cultivate and care for creation and fellow creatures requires uniting justice for creation with justice within creation. "The present climate devastation affects everyone, and it affects the most vulnerable among us first and most of all. Those who already had the least benefits [of God's resources] are now often forced to bear the largest share of the catastrophic consequences of climate transition while continuing to suffer basic-needs scarcity."⁹ The dilemma of holding together justice for and within creation in response to the threat of ecological devastation is a daunting matter of distributive and substantive justice and then some. Arising from the pathos of creation and the suffering of the poor and most vulnerable is "a call for the transformation of mind, will, and lifestyle."¹⁰ This is a spiritual and theological matter that goes to the root of human yearning, to the dignity and goodness of all creation and creatures, and to faith in God

⁸ Ibid., §1.

⁹ Ibid., §6.

¹⁰ Ibid., §7.

as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. The “human struggle for fulfilment often becomes a determination to win” in which “it is the weakest and poorest among us who will sacrifice or even be sacrificed for the comfort of others.”¹¹ The effects of human selfishness and greed “have been multiplied greatly” by global technological change and modernization, not only exacerbating the distribution of resources, but also exceeding inherent limits of the earth.¹² Transformation requires the confession of human sinfulness, repentance, mourning, and willingness to sacrifice. It demands the acknowledgment that “all parts of God’s creation, every person and every creature, have an intrinsic value which should be appreciated, respected, and protected.”¹³ As the Psalms and other biblical texts emphasize, dignity and value inhere in the earth and its vulnerable creatures as beloved parts of God’s creation rather than in their use value to others.

Justice is a pivotal and substantive term in this text. “The care or abuse of God’s earth and its resources is not merely one justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns. Rather, . . . [it] is of foundational importance for all existence and identity.”¹⁴ This important passage from *Come and See* is embedded in the *Cultivate and Care* text, with excerpts quoted at the text’s outset and conclusion. The *Come and See* text continues, “Justice for suffering human beings cannot be sought apart from the context of living in a way that is respectful of the environment. Justice is not an abstract reality to be realized within the human community alone, but it is how we as humans and we as Christians live in the web of life in reciprocity with all human beings, other creatures, and the rest of creation.”¹⁵ This vision of justice, as mutually accountable and generative reciprocity, is more robust than notions of equal rights, access, or distribution of goods. For the most part, however, this picture of justice is more implicit in the *Cultivate and Care* text than defined within it; it is recognizable to the text’s readers more than it is explicated. No definition of justice is stipulated. The registers of the text are biblical, symbolical, relational, and reorienting rather than definitional or primarily analytical. The text’s chief contrasting terms to “justice for and within creation” are suffering, devastation, abuse, degradation, and, concomitantly, diagnoses of human greed, heedlessness, exploitation, the “desire to win,” unwillingness to “sacrifice one’s own comfort,” and sinfulness. To be sure, the text’s attention to “the entanglement of ecology, economy, and cultural identity” depends upon tangible measurements of justice and equity, such as the “unfair

¹¹ Ibid., §5.

¹² Ibid., §10.

¹³ Ibid., §12; see also §19.

¹⁴ *Come and See*, §22.

¹⁵ Ibid.

distribution of resources,” conflicting goods, “unequal distribution of benefits,” “an unacceptable standard of living,” and basic needs. But these crucial measurements are placed within a relational and eschatological horizon that is theological as well as moral and that carries emotional, volitional, noetic, ascetic, and even aesthetic dimensions. The discussion of justice for and within creation in *Cultivate and Care* is closely connected to the text’s affirmation of the intrinsic value of creation and creatures. That affirmation is inextricably tied to faith in God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer who assures that power and goodness converge in an arc of history that stretches from creation to consummation. This faith undergirds self-sacrificial action that is urgent for transformation and hope that fosters it.

A Theological Approach

The text’s approach is theological from its opening to its conclusion. We might say that, liturgically, the text moves from confession and repentance to reflection and proclamation, followed by formation and engagement, and it concludes by uniting in prayer before the God of life. Its orienting theological locus is creation, but not apart from redemption and reconciliation, and the movement of the Creator toward all creation. The central section of the text tells of the movement of a creating, redeeming, and sustaining God with all God’s creation, including human creatures and the church. Thus, the doctrine of creation is interpreted in relation to theological anthropology, sin, evil, salvation, reconciliation, an incarnate and cosmic Christ, church and sacraments, sanctification, pneumatology, and eschatology. Creation is not “merely” the setting or background for a fuller revelation of God in Jesus Christ; rather, creation is “the first act of God’s revelation.”¹⁶

As the text recounts, “The doctrine of creation was not always a central theological theme in the ecumenical movement. It was not considered a matter that divided the churches.”¹⁷ The understanding of Christ, the gospel, salvation, and ecclesiology

¹⁶ *Cultivate and Care*, §23. See also *Come and See*, §23: “The scriptures testify that creation is God’s first act of revelation, and this first act reveals God as not only Creator of the earth, but as present in creation. God the Creator is present in and continues to work with humans and all creatures, the land, rivers, and seas to give life and hope.”

¹⁷ *Cultivate and Care*, §14. See Lukas Vischer, “The Theme of Humanity and Creation in the Ecumenical Movement [1993],” www.jaysquare.com/resources/growthdocs/grow10.htm, as well as the chapter by Lukas Vischer, “The Theme of Humanity and Creation in the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Sustainable Growth: A Contradiction in Terms? Report of the Visser ’t Hooft Memorial Consultation, The Ecumenical Institute, Chateau de Bossey, June 14-19, 1993*, ed. Visser ’t Hooft Endowment Fund for Leadership Development (Geneva: Visser ’t Hooft Endowment Fund, 1993), 69–88, https://www.lukasvischer.unibe.ch/pdf/1993_humanity_creation_ecumenical_movement.pdf. Parenthetically, one might add that for much of the 20th century in the West, theologians considered “nature” to be human nature; creation wasn’t a church-dividing issue, in part because it attracted little sustained theological attention. One thinks, for example, of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, published in two volumes in 1941 and 1943.

were the matters that impinged on the visible unity of the church. The theme of creation begins to emerge in the WCC in the 1960s, especially in relation to a cosmic Christ and the consummation of history as articulated at the 1961 WCC assembly in New Delhi. The assembly's theme, "Jesus Christ – the Light of the World," drew on Colossians 1:15-20 and reinterpreted creation and redemption in a cosmic key.¹⁸ "Following the assembly, the Commission on Faith and Order developed the study, 'God in Nature and History,' to consider whether theological reflection on the relation between creation and redemption belonged within the subject of church unity."¹⁹ That study concluded, "To take seriously the final events in Christ, must also mean that he is confessed as the ultimate secret of creation. The key to the understanding of history must at the same time be the key to the understanding of creation, since both are essentially one."²⁰

Cultivate and Care returns to the theme of a cosmic Christ in the central section on relevant theological perspectives (§§18–27), now elaborating the profound interrelation of creation, Christ, and consummation with additional texts from the Bible and Christian tradition – in particular, Maximus the Confessor. For example, "Jesus' offering of his life on the cross expresses God's solidarity with all who suffer and culminates the movement of the Creator toward all creation."²¹ The section opens with the Colossians 1:15-16 passage:

What does it mean to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed amidst the crisis and pathos of a threatened creation? Because Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15), in whom everything will be reconciled, the Church's primary mission of proclamation calls Christians to cry out, lamenting and denouncing the trends which are threatening to destroy the environment.²²

The drafters of *Cultivate and Care* were aware that they were reprising these theological moves. However, there is no direct through-line from the work of the 1967 commission to

¹⁸ The text cites a key phrase from the assembly's keynote: "The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and wrath of God." Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unity," *Ecumenical Review* 14 (1962), 186, as cited in *Cultivate and Care*, §15.

¹⁹ *Cultivate and Care*, §15.

²⁰ "God in Nature and History," in *New Directions in Faith and Order, Bristol 1967*, Faith and Order Paper No. 50 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1968), 12, as cited in *Cultivate and Care*, §15.

²¹ *Cultivate and Care*, §22.

²² *Ibid.*, §18. The way the question is posed also returns to the characterization of "the pathos of this threatened earth" from the keynote at New Delhi and as quoted in §15.

the current one. Rather, as the text narrates, the subject of creation emerged in other WCC contexts, and those contexts and formulations are equally important for this text.

The narrative provided in the text breaks between the 1967 study and 1983, when the Vancouver assembly of the WCC called the churches to a common commitment to “justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.” The third of these terms was newly added, giving “a new prominence” to the theology of creation.²³ More recently, the WCC’s work on eco-justice has elaborated the relations between justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. “Eco” or *oikos* suggests connections between economy, ecology, and ecumenism and a more relational and trinitarian theology. Again, as the text explains, *oikoumene* “shifts the ecumenical focus from a static understanding of church unity to a more dynamic, comprehensive, and relational notion of Christian *koinonia* – a central notion in the Faith and Order convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.”²⁴ This is a through-line from the commission’s recent work to the ecumenical theology of *Cultivate and Care*, as well as from other forms of common witness in WCC work. “Theologically, this vision of *oikoumene* affirms creation as an organic, inter-dependent, coherent, and comprehensive whole, in contrast to dualistic, anthropocentric, androcentric, and hierarchical views of life.”²⁵

Other than in the historical narrative about the WCC, the notion of “integrity” in relation to creation appears explicitly only twice in this text. Paragraph 20 advances an appealing depiction of abundant variety in and interdependence on God’s creation. It pictures the imperative to cultivate and care as involving protection of biodiversity and diversity of cultural traditions. It observes, “the rich variety in creation forms an integral whole – all is interdependent.” Citing Maximus the Confessor, the text grounds and limits this diversity in God who “contains, gathers, and limits them and in his providence binds both intelligible and sensible beings to himself and to one another.”²⁶ Here, God is the cause and the principle of the integrity of creation, which involves variety, interdependence, and, importantly, limitation, in relation to a larger whole. The next paragraph depicts humankind’s rejection of “God’s design for creation” as having “destroyed its original integrity. This resulted not only in alienation from God, from self, and from one another, but also in the earth’s

²³ Ibid., §16.

²⁴ Ibid., §17. The quotation refers to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

²⁵ Ibid., §17.

²⁶ Maximus the Confessor, “The Church’s Mystagogy,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 186–87, and as cited in *Cultivate and Care*, §20.

rebellion against human beings.”²⁷ Centuries of theological deliberation – including in Maximus the Confessor’s work, which is again footnoted in this paragraph – would nuance this quick sketch, but the relevance of these biblical texts and theological symbols to contemporary destruction is undeniable. “In our own time, the emergence of the environmental crisis demonstrates the alarming proportions of the damaging effect of sin upon creation.”²⁸ The larger text refers to many forms of destruction and damage evident in this crisis: of relationships and livelihoods, of abundance, variety, and beauty, of parts and wholes and their interdependence, and of limitations and constraints.²⁹

In general, the language of “integrity” can connote “an organic, interdependent, coherent, and comprehensive whole,” as in the vision of *oikoumene* cited above, and also the moral standing, coherence, or dignity of something. This text can be understood to advance both senses. On the one hand, it promotes “an effective path toward greater unity not only of the churches, but also of the whole created cosmos.”³⁰ On the other hand, it attends to and affirms the intrinsic value of creation and all creatures. Both aspects are grounded theologically. Value “derives from God,”³¹ who is not an object in the world of values, but the source of value. The interdependent whole of creation is God’s gift and design. “This design of God unfolds within the vast framework that runs from the creation of the universe to its consummation in the new heaven and the new earth.”³² Creation is not only a dynamic, interdependent whole, it is a living reality in which God is ever-present. God’s plan unfolds in the incarnation and salvation and “calls for a Church of the cross, whose compassion extends to all of God’s most vulnerable creatures.”³³ The material elements of the earth – water, oil, bread, wine – become means of communion with and thanksgiving to God.³⁴ “Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit are called to embrace their responsibility to care for creation (their common house, or *oikos*).”³⁵

²⁷ *Cultivate and Care*, §21. Genesis 3:17-19 is referenced, as is Romans 8:20-21, which has already been cited in §5; it informs the depiction that follows next: “Creation became subject to futility, groaning to be set free from its bondage to decay.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, §21.

²⁹ See especially *ibid.*, §§5, 9–11, 30–32, 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §29; see also §7, 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, §19.

³² *Ibid.*, §22.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, §24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, §27; see also §25.

An Ecumenical Text

Finally, the text is *ecumenical*. One might assume that it is ecumenical simply because it comes from the Commission on Faith and Order, whose membership is unquestionably “ecumenical,” broadly and globally so. However, *Come and See* and the related texts, *Cultivate and Care* and *Love and Witness*, “. . . raised the question of the ecumenicity of a Faith and Order text whose object is not a divisive issue that has either been inherited from the past or is experienced in the present.”³⁶ How then ought it to be considered as an ecumenical text – at least by historic Faith and Order considerations? Odair Pedroso Mateus, director of the Commission on Faith and Order, who records the question, answers by pointing to the method of these texts rather than the object of the texts’ inquiries. “Taken together,” he remarks, “these three texts constitute a refreshing and promising experiment in the work of Faith and Order.” In addition, the invitation to undertake these texts “raised the question as to whether Faith and Order work can be more synchronized with the ecumenical needs of common witness.”³⁷ The texts show it is possible, and the present global situation suggests that it is necessary. Responding to the first of these texts, *Come and See*, Metropolitan Gheevarghese Mor Coorilos, moderator of the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), made similar observations. His comments at the 2017 meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order are recorded in the minutes of the meeting: “Metropolitan Coorilos began by stating that, ‘It is nearly impossible to say anything radically new about themes that have engaged ecumenical theologians for a long time now.’ The best that can be expected, he said, is a fresh perspective . . . He welcomed this shift in Faith and Order’s manner of doing theology.”³⁸

Each of the three texts at some point ventures *what the churches might say together theologically*. In the *Cultivate and Care* text, it is what might they say together about climate devastation and the concomitant suffering of the most vulnerable, what they might say together about the human action that precipitates and accelerates this crisis, and what they might say together about the faith in God the creator, redeemer, and sustainer that motivates and sustains Christian responsibility and engagement in this crisis. This

³⁶ Odair Pedroso Mateus, “Faith and Order from Today into Tomorrow,” in WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting in Nanjing, China, 13-19 June 2019*, Faith and Order Paper No. 227 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), 47.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting at the eMseni Christian Centre Benoni, near Pretoria, South Africa, 15-21 June 2017*, Faith and Order Paper No. 223 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2018), 70.

is a method of asking together, seeing freshly through others' perspectives, affirming shared faith, and finding shared formulations.

That said, the *Cultivate and Care* text does not neglect the question of what are considered church-dividing issues. As we have seen, the second section traces how creation became a central theme of the WCC after earlier years when it was not viewed as being a significant doctrinal locus for the work of Faith and Order. In fact, the text addresses the question of what is church-dividing almost at the outset. The section on urgent environmental concerns begins, "At first glance, the issue of environmental justice may not seem to be divisive for the churches, however, if we regard churches in their national and geographical contexts, dilemmas and divisive issues come to the fore."³⁹ Creation is not only a profound theological matter that demands ecumenical theological attention; the text suggests that it is also a matter of addressing the multiplying and seemingly intractable divisions of God's creatures into the more comfortable – and possibly more oblivious – and those who suffer and whose lives and livelihoods are precariously vulnerable.

The divisiveness and divisions here may be between nations, regions, and economic interests more than between churches, but the text makes clear that the line of suffering runs through the churches and that greed and xenophobia divide communities and ourselves. The lines of division are not solely out there beyond the churches, they are surely within the churches just as they are within ourselves. In response, the text forwards a robust understanding of "the unity of the church within creation."⁴⁰ In this expansive interpretation of unity, "The churches should not only see themselves as one body of Christ – where one suffers, the others will suffer as well – but also as part of one whole creation, which is the work of God and where the Holy Spirit is still at work within and through us."⁴¹

As Odair Pedroso Mateus observed, the text may also be considered "ecumenical" insofar as Faith and Order's work joins with and contributes to "the ecumenical needs of common witness." I take this to be the animating spirit of the final of the three main sections of the text "Ecumenical Response Contributing to Visible Unity" (§§28–38). These paragraphs call for response through an ecumenically and ecologically formed reorientation of community, life, worship, and witness.

³⁹ *Cultivate and Care*, §3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, §1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, §7.

In a generous and astute response to *Cultivate and Care*, Aaron Hollander of the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute highlights what he sees as a potentially underappreciated “ascetic dimension” to the text. He writes, “I applaud the document’s handling of an issue that bedevils to much conversation – religious and otherwise – about ecological sustainability, namely, the concern that devoting too much attention to the environment will come at the expense of human flourishing.” In fact, he observes, it is “human corruption” rather than flourishing that is at odds with ecology, and “the frameworks . . . that incentivize and reward economic exploitation/injustice are the very same as those that incentivize and reward the pleasures of the moment over the long-term good of the species and the planet.” Arguing for the Christian ascetic heritage as “one of the great ecumenical repertoires,” he contends that this heritage “has the means to ‘talk back’ to these demonic frameworks.”⁴²

Three Related Papers: *Come and See*, *Love and Witness*, *Cultivate and Care*

One of the contexts in which *Cultivate and Care* should be interpreted is as part of this set of three recent Faith and Order Papers. A January 2021 press release from the WCC announced the publication of *Cultivate and Care* together with another new text from the Faith and Order Commission, *Love and Witness: Proclaiming the Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World*.⁴³ Both papers build upon and expand the insights of *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, Faith and Order Paper No. 224, which was approved in 2017 and published in 2019. The three texts were developed in conjunction with each other.⁴⁴ The group of commissioners who studied these matters and drafted these texts worked together on *Come and See*, and they continued to work in tandem as they divided their efforts to prepare drafts for the latter two papers. Together, these three statements allow the churches to speak together theologically as they journey together toward visible unity and the consummation of creation and history in God, and particularly as this journey begins in and is responsive to situations of social marginalization and

⁴² Aaron T. Hollander, unpublished response to *Cultivate and Care* for the WCC webinar “Common Witness on Environmental Justice and Religious Pluralism,” 18 February 2021.

⁴³ *Love and Witness: Proclaiming the Peace of the Lord—Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World*, Faith and Order Paper No. 230 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020). See also “WCC Faith and Order Commission releases papers on ‘Love and Witness,’ ‘Cultivate and Care,’” World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-faith-and-order-commission-releases-papers-on-love-and-witness-cultivate-and-care>.

⁴⁴ For a narrative of the process, see Sandra Beardsall and Jaeshik Shinn, “Report of Study Group 1,” in WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting, 15-21 June 2017*, 24–26; see also 70–71; and WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting, 13-19 June 2019*, 7–8, 32–33.

injustice, violence, and the devastation of creation. As we have seen, *Cultivate and Care* addresses the unequal burden of ecological devastation, demonstrating that the churches' journey toward visible unity must include a sustained dialogue with a theology for justice for and within creation. Acknowledging that encounter with other religions will necessarily be a part of the pilgrim way, *Love and Witness* addresses peace and religious plurality by engaging with the insights of WCC member churches and others to ask what our many traditions can say together as we journey toward visible unity. *Come and See* prepared the way for both documents.

The theme of the 10th Assembly of the WCC, meeting in Busan in 2013, was "God of life, lead us to justice and peace," and the assembly invited "Christians and people of good will everywhere to join in a pilgrimage of justice and peace."⁴⁵ Subsequently, WCC general secretary Olav Fyske Tveit invited the WCC to make decisions about all programmes in light of the call "to move together" in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.⁴⁶ The Faith and Order text *Come and See* responded to the theme and the call by offering "a theological invitation" and a theology for the Pilgrimage. The text's stated purpose is to explore "the ways that 'pilgrimage' can help the churches deepen and express the commitment to oneness in their work."⁴⁷ Odair Mateus Pedroso narrates the significance of the invitation to envisage the common life of the churches as a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace:

Placed between the isolation of the churches in the past and a distant future vision of churches living in a global conciliar fellowship, the ecumenical movement is in constant need of what W. A. Visser 't Hooft once called a theology for the in-between. The call to a pilgrimage of justice and peace corresponds to that need and seeks to respond to it. Faith and Order established a study group to respond to that invitation.⁴⁸

Come and See offers theological perspectives to inform and undergird the churches' intent "to move together" on a transformative journey that culminates in the eschatological fulfilment of the reign of God. In addition, it sets the stage for the more focused theological reflections and affirmations of *Love and Witness* and *Cultivate and Care*.

An examination of biblical texts and Christian traditions in *Come and See*, which comprises the text's first main section, indicates the connection of themes of creation and consummation with historical pilgrimage. For example, many of the psalms were songs of

⁴⁵ "An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace," *Ecumenical Review* 66:3 (2014), 383.

⁴⁶ *Come and See*, §1. The discussion references Olav Fyske Tveit, "The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace," *Ecumenical Review* 66:2 (2014), 123–34.

⁴⁷ *Come and See*, §2.

⁴⁸ Pedroso Mateus, in WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting, 13-19 June 2019*, 47. He cites W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 14.

pilgrimage that “expressed the hope and joy of restoration and renewal. Broken community would find healing; the dry land would flow with springs; and even swallows would find nests to shelter their young (Ps. 84:3, 6).”⁴⁹ Paragraphs 8 to 11 discuss sojourn, exile, deliverance, and journey as central practices and themes in the prophets, the gospels, and the letters. Subsequent Christian traditions offer accounts of pilgrimage as a practice, for example, in the 4th-century diary of Egeria and in Margery of Kempe’s 14th-century actual and mystical pilgrimages, and as a spiritual metaphor, such as in Gregory of Nyssa’s description of “the deification (*theosis*) of the believer being an endless dynamic journey into the infinity of the divine life (*epektasis*)” and in the desert fathers and mothers.⁵⁰ Historical practices and theological uses of pilgrimage were not free from corruption and criticism, even as pilgrimage expanded as a modern global phenomenon.

Today, practices and themes of pilgrimage “may allow Christians more fully to appreciate humans as created earthly beings and to honour the sacred gifts of physical spaces: both specific sanctuaries and indeed the creation itself.”⁵¹ While the explicit practices and themes of pilgrimage are not the focus of *Cultivate and Care*, attention to the historical and contextual situatedness of the Christian life and journey remains acute. The connection of creation and consummation is, if anything, more pivotal to *Cultivate and Care* than to *Come and See*, as is the relationship between theological themes and ascetic and communal practice, specifically the call to justice for and within creation as a global and religious imperative.

Come and See moves from biblical and historical perspectives to systematic theological themes, identifying trinitarian, Christological, theological, anthropological, ecclesiological, and eschatological bases for a theology of pilgrimage. “The Pilgrimage of Peace and Justice is not ultimately directed to a particular holy place but rather toward the fulfilment of the reign of God. It finds its ultimate source in *the love of the Triune God*, who has created the world, who empowers and renews it through the Holy Spirit, and who perfects and reconciles all things in Christ at the end of time.”⁵² In this theological elaboration, “concern for justice, peace, and care for creation necessarily flows from the way Christian faith understands the relation of human beings with God, with one another, and with nature.”⁵³ Interestingly, creation is not articulated as a distinct theological basis but appears as a context for theological reflection and a site of moral concern.

⁴⁹ *Come and See*, §7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, §§12–14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, §16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, §17, italics original.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Or so it may seem at first. Significantly and crucially, *Come and See* also affirms social and ecological dimensions of a theology of pilgrimage and of the invitation to the churches' journey together. "Each human being and, indeed, the whole of creation, can be said to be on a kind of pilgrimage from creation to the final fulfillment of justice and peace."⁵⁴

The attention to social and ecological dimensions especially helps to set the stage for the two later Faith and Order statements. The pilgrimage of the churches together necessarily entails a transformative engagement with other traditions and walking justly with creation and alongside other living creatures. This attention comes to its sharpest focus in "society's margins." The spatial metaphor of margin/s and marginalization is introduced in paragraph 19 to elaborate the social and ecological dimensions of the theology of pilgrimage. This adds yet another dimension to the interpretation of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, to how the churches "move together": the movement flows to and from "the margins." This metaphor attunes the perception and creation of solidarity among disparate situations of oppression and disempowerment, victimization, and violation. Those who dwell in the margins are pictured in detail: "victims of war and brutality, victims of religious intolerance, refugees and migrants who are compelled to flee their homes, those exploited by unjust economic practices, those oppressed because of race and ethnicity, those who have suffered sexual violence or human trafficking, families in distress, children and youth who live in despair, and those who are marginalized by society." Like the poor, imprisoned, and disinherited in the scriptures, voices from these present-day margins demand attention as potential voices of prophecy and truth. "It is from these sites of God's visitation – from society's margins – that a new world will take shape, and it is here that the pilgrimage needs to take shape." The margins are places where God reveals God's self and is encountered as liberator; they are places where Christians also live and worship and proclaim their faith.⁵⁵

This picture of a pilgrimage that flows from and to "society's margins" subsequently informs the section "Urgent Environmental Concerns" in *Cultivate and Care*. It undergirds the observation about the limitations of charity and solidarity as adequate responses: "Suffering due to the abuse of the environment should not only be seen as a stimulus for charity or solidarity, but as a call for transformation of mind, heart, and will."⁵⁶ The notion that the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace begins from the margins finds further expression in *Cultivate and Care*: "The grassroots struggle

⁵⁴ Ibid., §19.

⁵⁵ All citations and paraphrases in this paragraph are from *Come and See*, §19.

⁵⁶ *Cultivate and Care*, §7.

for justice for and within creation is where the Church's pilgrimage toward unity within creation must begin."⁵⁷ To be clear, neither text defines the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace solely in terms of the movement from and to the margins. Rather, they layer the social and ecclesial dimensions of pilgrimage with depictions of the journey of the churches toward visible unity, of God's movement with creation and in Christ to consummation, of historical and contemporary practices of pilgrimage, of pilgrimage as a metaphor for a disciplined spiritual journey, and of movement directed toward the reign of God.⁵⁸

The next two sections of *Come and See* announce the subject matter of what will become the two subsequent statements. "Justice and the Challenge of Moving toward a Sustainable World" (§§22–25) offers a first foray into the subject matter of *Cultivate and Care*, while "Peace: Living the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World" (§§26–30) gives a first taste of the themes and approach of *Love and Witness*. The disastrous effects of injustice on creation and on human life are denounced in a passage that is quoted at the outset of *Cultivate and Care*, but the dilemma is not yet formulated as the interrelation between justice for and within creation. "Among the deplorable effects of injustice and violence, which have drastic effects especially upon people living in poverty and augur tragic consequences for future generations, is the degradation, objectification, exploitation, and commercialization of God's creation."⁵⁹ Creation comes to the fore as a theological locus and interrelations with Christology, soteriology, eschatology, and ecclesiology are sketched. "The intention of the gospel includes the liberation of God's creation." Citing Paul's interpretation of a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), paragraph 25 continues, "The church's unity flows from this profound promise."⁶⁰

As we have already noted, the theme of justice is treated in paragraph 22. There is a parallel treatment of "peace" in paragraph 26 at the outset of the other section. These two treatments help to flesh out the meaning of the key terms that specify the "pilgrimage of justice and peace." Metropolitan Coorilos' response to *Come and See* is again relevant here. It is recorded in the minutes of the meeting: "Justice and peace are not the objects of pilgrimage, but rather the agents and subjects of pilgrimage. As attributes of God in the Bible, justice and peace are nothing less than expressions of *missio Dei*. They are not human projects, but divine initiatives to which

⁵⁷ Ibid., §13.

⁵⁸ See especially *Come and See*, §31.

⁵⁹ Ibid., §24; quoted in *Cultivate and Care*, §1.

⁶⁰ *Come and See*, §23.

we respond. Such an understanding will help us avoid ideological absolutism, in favour of faithfulness to the divine notion of justice and peace.”⁶¹ Justice for and within creation does not exhaust the meaning of “justice” in the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The recognition here is that the churches cannot move together in faith or respond to the needs of a suffering humanity and world if they ignore the crisis and pathos of a suffering creation.

Conclusion

To conclude where this ar began, “addressing human behavior that is responsible for climate devastation constitutes not ‘merely one justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns.’” Rather, it is “‘of foundational importance for all existence and identity.’”⁶² The text *Cultivate and Care* instructs us not to forget that “human beings are also creatures, interconnected with the rest of creation and the earth itself. When, for our own gain, we neglect the earth and the well-being of other living things, we will eventually also reap the consequences. The rising of global temperatures, contaminated water, polluted air, and the extinction of some species – in one way or another these will affect our lives, sooner or later.”⁶³

⁶¹ WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes, 15–21 June 2017*, 70.

⁶² *Cultivate and Care*, §1, quoting *Come and See*, §22.

⁶³ *Cultivate and Care*, §11.