

Addressing the ecological crisis in Southern Africa through a missional dialogue with African values

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Dates:

Received: 26 Feb. 2026

Accepted: 15 May 2026

Published: 11 June 2026

How to cite this article:

Mpofu, B., 2026, 'Addressing the ecological crisis in Southern Africa through a missional dialogue with African values', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47(1), a3821. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v47i1.3821>

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This article utilised a desktop literature review and qualitative approach to discuss how the African values of Ubuntu and ukama can enhance the response to the ecological crisis in Southern Africa through a prophetic and missional dialogue. Drawing on the African worldview, informed by a communal life of interconnectedness, the article discusses the ecological crisis in Southern Africa as a multifaceted and growing concern, driven by a complex interplay of environmental degradation, climate change, socio-economic inequality, unsustainable land use and weak policy enforcement. This contribution takes this conversation beyond the debate around Christianity's complicity in environmental destruction cantering around the theme of 'dominion mandate in the book of Genesis', to consider a missional response rooted in African philosophical values such as Ubuntu [relational harmony], *ukama* [relational connectedness] and reverence for nature (Mother Earth as sacred) as an alternative to pathways for a spiritually grounded ecological ethic.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study is interdisciplinary and utilises a qualitative approach to intersect the fields of theology, ecology and climate change in discussing how missional leadership can draw from the African worldview as informed by communal life. This approach enhances engagement on the ecological crisis through a missional dialogue with African values and inspires the nurturing of shared values that promote environmental awareness and stewardship.

Keywords: ecological crisis; sustainable development; dialogue; African world view; missional leadership.

Introduction

In contributing to the conversation on how African values can enhance sustainability, this article uses a desktop qualitative approach to discuss the ecological crisis in Southern Africa, with a view to identifying opportunities for missional and prophetic engagement with African values as an intervention to promote ecological care. Drawing on the African worldview, informed by the communal life of interconnectedness, the article identifies emerging scholarly themes in engaging the ecological crisis through a missional dialogue with African values. The study argues that a prophetic dialogue of life centred on African values can nurture shared values and promote environmental awareness and stewardship, which translates these shared values into tangible initiatives for addressing societal and ecological challenges and concludes by highlighting emerging themes such as indigenous knowledge systems and environmental stewardship, faith-based ecological ethics and eco-theology, climate migration and displacement, youth activism and the role of civil society and gendered impacts of climate change.

It is therefore essential that we adopt different approaches to dialogue to promote cooperation among diverse religious responses to the urgent ecological crisis, as informed by the African worldview. The strength of collective action and cooperation has been emphasised by the leaders across religious traditions.

As early as 1992, Kritzing (1992)'s work, *Mission and the Liberation of Creation: A critical dialogue with M.L. Daneel*, unpacked the theme of the 1991 Congress of the Southern African Missiological Society (SAMS), which was 'Mission and Ecology', and observed that this was a major stimulant for theological discussion, as reflected in the previous three publications of *Missionalia* Journal. In this article, he entered into dialogue with Inus Daneel, whom he considered to be one of the esteemed scholars in the field at that time (1992:1). He highlighted the importance of this theme and engaged the work of Daneel to demonstrate his 'unique contribution'. In particular, one of the themes discussed in this

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Ecotheology in Southern Africa' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze, Prof. Kenneth R. Ross and Dr Gertrude A. Kapuma.

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contribution is what he describes as 'an ancestral approach', which is unpacked alongside the 'trinitarian approach' (Kritzinger 1992) and makes the important observations:

It goes without saying that the traditional African world view should be taken into account when a truly African theology is developed. If this theology is to be ecologically relevant, [according to McGregor], much in the African tradition will be found to capitalise on. McGregor (1989:201), in a study of wildlife conservation in Africa, found that 'many pre-colonial communities for whom the hunting and gathering of wild products was a traditional way of life, had developed institutions, often religious in character, designed to enforce restraint in their handling of the environment'. One of these institutions is the general belief in the active role of the ancestors in the affairs of the living. Daneel discovered that, among the Shona, certain ancestors were regarded as the 'guardians of the land' (*varidzi venyika*). These same ancestors played an extraordinary role of motivation during the chimurenga (war of liberation) in Zimbabwe. It therefore didn't come as a surprise that they became prominent once more in the ecological activities. They are now leading the fight for survival of the ancestral land. Daneel therefore calls for this 'harnessing (of) the inspiration of the ancestors' (Daneel 1991b:111, 1991c:231), even in the church. He thinks it can be done, maybe in the form of one or other commemoration of the figures leading this new 'war of the trees' – much like the role of the saints in Catholicism. (p. 105)

It is in this regard that this article identifies the nexus between interreligious and missional collaboration and African communal life as critical for 'harnessing the inspiration of ancestors' (Daneel 1991c:231 and Daneel 1991a) as it emphasises community cooperation as a means for sustainable development – something in which faith communities have a significant role to play. One of the important themes is the development of 'Eco-Missiology', which calls for a shift from a narrow focus on evangelism to a more holistic missional approach that prioritises environmental care, sustainability and the healing of the earth as an important approach to understand the role of the Church in sustainable development. For example, Balcomb (2019) observes that:

Indigenous religion contributes towards environmental protection and not exploitation [*and this*] is supported by voluminous ethnographic literature filled with carefully detailed examples of conservation practices, land stewardship, and religiously based environmental ethics among traditional peoples all over the world ... [*adding that*] ... Romantic notions of harmony between humans and nature in indigenous worldviews largely miss this element. Care for the environment that grows out of an aesthetic or spiritual appreciation is one thing; care based on a mixture of fear, respect, and a sense of profound dependence on it is another altogether. (p. 2)

The basic arguments that have been put forward for such an attitude revolve around a number of interlinking beliefs and practices, for example that indigenous societies extend beyond the human to include beings that are other than human; that all these beings are profoundly interdependent; that the natural world is suffused with spirituality; that everything in the natural world is in some sense alive and that responsible, sustainable and non-exploitative use of the natural world is essential for the survival of both the human and other-than-human.

This article argues that while interreligious dialogue embodies a multifaceted approach to various forms of engagement, the missional theological aspect of dialogues of life, action and theological exchange offers a potentially constructive avenue for advancing a collaborative effort to mitigate the ecological crisis in the African context. The study concludes that a prophetic dialogue of life centred on African values can nurture shared values, promote environmental awareness and stewardship and translate these shared values into tangible initiatives for addressing societal and ecological challenges. Farina (2000:320) explored the relationship between humanity and nature as means to attain the fullness of life – *oikodome* – through healing, liberation, reconciliation and restoration as the idea that could help communities to care for environment (cited by Mpofu 2021:2).

The current contribution argues that while interreligious dialogue embodies a multifaceted approach to various forms of engagement, the missional aspect of dialogues of life, action and theological exchange that takes African values seriously presents a potentially constructive approach in advancing a collaborative effort towards mitigating the ecological crisis within the African context.

Ecological issues that require mission engagement in Southern Africa

The ecological crisis in Southern Africa is a multifaceted and growing concern, driven by a complex interplay of environmental degradation, climate change, socio-economic inequality, unsustainable land use and weak policy enforcement. This crisis affects water security, biodiversity, food production, human health and economic stability across the region. This contribution discusses a missional response rooted in African philosophical values such as Ubuntu (relational harmony), *ukama* (relational connectedness) and reverence for nature (Mother Earth as sacred) as an alternative to pathways for a spiritually grounded ecological ethic in Table 1. There is a need for more interdisciplinary studies engaging different domains of social and theological aspects of life towards human flourishing. This was eloquently highlighted by Mahatma Gandhi, who noted that the realms of the human mind and society are not discrete compartments but rather interwoven domains in which social, political and religious dynamics interact in profound ways (Mahatma Gandhi n.d.).

Missional theology has an important role to play as it seeks to bring Scripture into dialogue with the situation in the world, '... maintaining biblical truth while valuing human realities, worldviews, and experiences' (Hiebert 2009:217). According to Hiebert (2009), maintaining biblical truth in the face of the realities of the world will require that missional theologians translate and communicate the Gospel in the language, culture and experiences of people in the particularity of their lives – building bridges between biblical revelation and different worldviews and contexts. Therefore, reading the Bible through the lens of mission is not limited to any

TABLE 1: Examples of African values in missional dialogue.

African value	Missional implication	Ecological significance
Ubuntu [relational humanity]	Promotes community-based action and mutual care	Encourages collective stewardship of the environment
Ukama [relational cosmos]	Reinforces the theological connection between God, humanity and nature	Undermines exploitation and affirms ecological kinship
Sacredness of land and ancestors	Land is not just property, but a living trust from ancestors and God	Promotes conservation, reverence and accountability
Taboos and rituals	Cultural checks on resource use	Function as indigenous ecological regulations

particular church denomination or network but embodies a growing diversity of approaches. In this regard, African values have great potential to contribute to the growing diversity of approaches to environmental care and addressing the ecological crisis.

In demonstrating how the pursuance of ‘fullness of life through harmony with nature’ can enhance ecological intelligence in the African context, Mpofu (2021) highlighted how:

The interface between religion and climate change has ... dominated scholarly research focussing on norms, practices, traditions and activism of faith communities (eds. Binay & Korchide 2019; Hancock 2018) as reflected in contributions such as *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere* (Deane-Drummond & Bedford-Strohm 2013); *Worldviews Religion and Environment* (ed. Foltz 2003; ed. Gottlieb 2006; Jenkins, Tucker & Grim 2016); *Christian Perspectives for a culture of sustainability* (eds. Heideel & Bertelmann 2018). Some have explored environmental sustainability from a theological perspective (Vogt 2009); *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions* (eds. Tucker & Grim 2014; Watling 2009); *Land, Ecotheology and Traditions in Africa* (Ntrel, Aidoo & Aryeh 2019); *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase* (Tucker 2003); *Towards and African ecogender theology* (Kaunda 2016); what does religion have to say about ecology? Beyers (2016) and works that demonstrate how all things in life are connected to God such as an exploration of the idea of economy in Calvin’s view of God and the world ‘to show what implications the idea of *oikodome* has for churches in South Africa today, especially in the context of poverty and struggle’. (p. 2)

The work of the Southern African Faith Communities’ Environmental Institute (SAFCEI) is an example of how addressing the ecological crisis in Southern Africa will require a missional dialogue that integrates Christian environmental stewardship with African indigenous knowledge and values, such as Ubuntu (a communal life that emphasises interconnectedness) and the appreciation for the sacredness of creation in the African worldview. This approach fosters a concretely ‘missional consciousness’ and embodies an eco-theology that moves beyond general conservation approaches to a more just and holistic ecological approach. Organisations such as SAFCEI provide a model for creating platforms for interfaith cooperation towards a holistic and prophetic witness that promotes awareness of ecological health, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

According to a report by Scholes and Engelbrecht (2021):

Southern Africa is particularly vulnerable to climate change because of its geographical location and socioeconomic development state. It is an already warm and dry region, projected to become warmer and drier, and has many demands on its institutions and finances in addition to climate change. Warming in the interior of southern Africa is occurring at about twice the global average rate. There is a high likelihood that agricultural production in southern Africa, including staple crops and livestock, will be reduced relative to the no climate change case. This is because the region is already beyond the temperature optimum for most crop and livestock production, and crop and forage production in an already dry country decreases if soil moisture decreases further. (p. 1)

By engaging with rural communities, we can draw on this report and African values to demonstrate how climate change is affecting agricultural production in Southern Africa and reducing staple crop and livestock production in the region. The report summarises what is known about human-caused climate change. It unpacks its consequences with respect to Southern Africa (south of 15 °S) and is intended:

[F]or people who do not have a scientific training in this field, but who need to make decisions that could be influenced by a changing climate. It also outlines the global efforts to mitigate that change, and adaptation to that part of climate change which can no longer be mitigated. (p. 2)

Given that the global climate is changing rapidly due to heightened human activities driven by industrialisation and the burning of fossil fuels, climate change impacts have gained considerable attention across all spheres of life.

Addressing ecological issues is not only the responsibility of a few churches already participating in ecumenical ecological initiatives but also of all believers or people. In South(ern) Africa, there are numerous indigenous movements practicing different forms of African Christianity with millions of believers (Chidester 1992). There is a broad and well-supported statistical base of evidence from scholarly sources indicating numerous indigenous movements within African Christianity with millions of adherents. Key exemplars include the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in South Africa (multi-million membership; large annual gatherings) (Nel 2016), the wide ecosystem of African Independent Churches and Spirit-type churches (10s of millions across Africa, with thousands of congregations) Smit (1998) and the large-scale Pentecostal and indigenous movements in Ghana and other parts of Africa (millions of adherents within national and transnational networks) (Agyeman & Awuah-Nyamekye 2018; Sande 2021; White & Niemandt 2014).

The compilation above draws on available references to present a cohesive picture of large-scale indigenous African Christian movements. While precise figures vary by denomination and country, the best-supported exemplars (ZCC; AIC/Spirit-type networks; African Pentecostal movements) demonstrably reach millions, aligning with Chidester’s framing of Africa’s diverse Christianities.

It is in the context of this plurality of African Christianities and other religious forms that the current contribution argues for interreligious dialogue as part of a multifaceted approach, action and theological exchange that takes African values seriously and advances a collaborative effort to mitigate the ecological crisis within the African context. According to Mani, Osborne, and Cleaver (2021):

Land degradation is a global problem impacting biodiversity and livelihoods, with profound effects on resource-based livelihoods. As such, it impedes progress towards sustainable development goals (SDGs) and overcoming climate-related poverty. Interrelated biophysical and social factors are driving further land degradation, and, internationally, there is a range of policies and initiatives designed to address these.

Some of the drivers of climate change that contribute to land degradation in Southern Africa include drought, deforestation and biodiversity loss (Mani et al. 2021). This makes Southern Africa one of the most climate-vulnerable regions globally, with recurring droughts experienced in countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. These droughts reduce crop yields, increase water scarcity and exacerbate poverty in already impoverished communities such as rural areas. A brief summary of these recurring droughts and climate-induced disasters in Southern Africa follows:

- **Elnono and La Nila:** The El Niño and La Niña climate patterns have intensified weather extremes.
- **Deforestation and land degradation:** (1) Extensive logging, agriculture and mining have led to the degradation of forest areas, particularly in Zambia, Angola and Mozambique; (2) Soil erosion, loss of arable land and desertification threaten food security.
- **Water insecurity:** (1) Rivers such as the Limpopo, Zambezi and Orange are under stress from overuse, pollution, and poor cross-border management. In the Mawaian context, the Malawi River has also experienced immense pollution over the recent years; (2) Rapid urbanisation puts pressure on existing water infrastructure.
- **Biodiversity loss:** Southern Africa is home to several biodiversity hotspots (e.g. Cape Floristic Region), but these are increasingly under threat from habitat destruction and illegal wildlife trade.
- **Mining and industrial pollution:** Extractive industries (coal, diamonds, gold, etc.) contribute to land degradation, air and water pollution and toxic waste exposure for local communities.

Missional leadership and ecological care for the environment

Missional theology is constantly evolving and takes different approaches in blending biblical foundations with insights from post-colonial thought. The missional church movement is growing and was pioneered by scholars such as Guder (ed. 1998) and other researchers. The development of an understanding of participation in the mission of God by God's people (Wright 2010), as *missio Dei*, has necessitated the rethinking of the church's role in addressing contextual

challenges and in understanding her identity in relation to the world.

The *missio Dei* approach places emphasis on the Church as a sent community rather than just a gathered one (Roxburgh 2011:54). This transformative shift in understanding the church's identity requires that we develop leadership models that prioritise contextual analysis and cultural understanding, community discernment and adaptability over rigid programme implementation (Branson & Warnes 2014:28). Global theological education has moved to embrace a deeper contextual analysis and approaches that engage critically with both cultural traditions and biblical texts in what Hiebert (1987:110) calls 'critical contextualisation'. There is also a concerted effort to acknowledge the demographic shifts of Christianity from the West to the Global South. This shift presents an opportunity for previously overlooked epistemologies, such as African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), to gain momentum in promoting a missional culture (Woodward 2012).

Similarly, the increase in migration challenges has necessitated a missiological engagement with diaspora communities, embracing them as both subjects and active participants in mission, a development that challenges traditional, territory-based mission models (Cruz 2008:98).

Key to the recent developments, missional theology has been widened to promote ecological issues, such as caring for creation as a vital part of God's redemptive plan. Wright also considers a holistic approach to mission, which holds that God cares not just for humanity but also for all creation (Wright 2010). As Bevans (2018:161) also observed, these developments and approaches have a similar commitment to mission as prophetic dialogue and emphasise the distinct Christian witness by engaging in deep listening across different religious, cultural and ideological divides. This rich tapestry of missiological approaches is essential for understanding the ahistorical and theological context in which to explore specific missional leadership models, including Bosch's (1991) transformational approach.

Brief literature review on the ecological crisis in Southern Africa

Several scholars and institutions have contributed to the understanding of these challenges. Below are some key figures, studies and frameworks. The previously mentioned works are SAFCEI (2022), Daneel (1991a, 1991b), Balocomb (2019), Kritzinger (1992) and others. Some of the contributing scholars, such as Mamphela Ramphele reflected on Eco-Justice, connecting environmental degradation with historical injustice and structural inequality. Drawing on her experience as a former managing director of the World Bank and South African scholar-activist, Ramphele (1991) emphasised eco-justice and the interlinkage between social and ecological well-being in post-apartheid South Africa. Later in 2018, the University of Cape Town (UCT) conducted interdisciplinary

studies on climate resilience, urban water crises and ecosystem-based adaptation strategies, driven by Cape Town's Day Zero.¹

On April 12, 2018, the four million residents of Cape Town – a city with some of the widest socioeconomic disparities between residents on the African continent – narrowly avoided a major shortage of drinking water [when] A rising population and climate change set off the 'largest drought-induced municipal water failure in modern history'. (p. 1)

Scholars such as Nhamo (2014) have also contributed immensely to leading climate governance in Africa. His work (2014) focuses on green economy transitions, climate finance and the implementation of the SDGs in Southern Africa. His publication, *Green Economy and Climate Mitigation in Africa* (2014), has guided African governments in developing early intervention strategies. Similarly, Scholes and Engelbrecht (2021)'s *Climate Impacts in Southern Africa during the 21st Century Report for the Centre for Environmental Rights*, published in September 2021 by the Global Change Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, also sheds light on climate change impacts in the region. This work, among others, informs the Southern African Development Community (SADC) reports and influences regional policy developments on transboundary water management, biodiversity strategies and climate action by providing frameworks for collective environmental cooperation and governance among member states.

The 'climate justice' from theological and missional perspectives

Further to the literature discussed earlier, there is a number of African theologians who have engaged with the nature of human interaction and co-existence with natural resources. For example, De Gruchy (2010) devoted much of his work to exploring the intersections between Water, Public Good and Theology. De Gruchy, a South African theologian, argued for a theology of water as a public good, suggesting that ecological degradation is a theological crisis that challenges mission to be prophetic, public and participatory. In his essay 'Water and Spirit' (2010), he bridges Christian theology, public policy and eco-justice, calling for faith communities to resist commodification and fight for the integrity of creation. He engaged African spirituality's reverence for water, land and the interdependence of all life. Therefore, the mission must engage with ecological issues as an expression of God's reconciliation with all of creation – not just humanity.

In advancing the conversation on eco-theology from an African Religion perspective, Magesa (2013), a Tanzanian Catholic theologian, is also well known for his work on African religion and values. He insists that African Traditional Religion (ATR) promotes a sacred view of nature and should

be part of any theological conversation on ecology. His works, including *What is Not Sacred?* (2013), explore how African cosmology regards nature as alive, spiritual and relational – critiquing Western dualism that separates the sacred from the secular and humans from nature, and arguing that African values view humanity as stewards and kin within creation.

A Zimbabwean theologian, Chitando (2020), brings a gender-aware and justice-oriented approach to environmental theology and challenges the Church to empower women and marginalised communities, who are often the most affected by environmental degradation. For Chitando, missional engagement with ecology is a call to practical discipleship, which includes working with women in farming, water care and sustainable living as acts of worship. He critiques theological models that neglect the earth or focus only on heaven, emphasising that African Christian theology must be earthy, holistic and liberating.

Addressing ecological crisis: A missional dialogue with African values

According to Vigil (2012:19), Christians should approach mission with the intention to engage in dialogue with partners. This should be the foundational 'mental attitude', rooted in 'respect and friendship'. The Latin American theologian Vigil (2012:19) also asserts that not only is mission a process of dialogue, but it is also 'only dialogue'. For him, dialogue should be at the heart of mission, and anything that is not founded on sincere dialogue or is opposed to dialogue cannot be part of true Christian mission.

Therefore, engaging with the ecological crisis in Southern Africa through missional dialogue grounded in African values offer a rich and necessary lens for addressing the environmental challenges of our time. Southern Africa faces severe environmental issues – land degradation, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, deforestation and climate-induced disasters, as highlighted in the preceding sections. These challenges disproportionately affect the poor and rural communities, often severing their deep cultural ties to the land. This approach recognises that ecological degradation is not only a scientific or political issue – it is deeply spiritual, moral and cultural. Several scholarly voices have emphasised that the Christian mission in Africa must be contextual, holistic and in dialogue with African worldviews and ecological wisdom.

In many ways, the concept of mission as dialogue aligns seamlessly with the nature of human interaction and co-existence, including the African values as presented in this article. Given that the African communal life places community well-being at the centre of co-existence, as opposed to individual well-being, dialogue becomes a fundamental aspect of existence in African communities and permeates our lives naturally. In the context of African

¹For more details, see: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/why-cape-town-running-out-water-and-whos-next/>.

communal values, it involves actively participating in exchanges – posing questions, listening attentively, offering responses and seeking a consensus. This approach is not new and has been, in part, informed by the work of theologians such as Bevans and Schroeder, who further elaborated on the concept in their books *Constants in Context* (Bevans and Schroeder 2004) and *Prophetic Dialogue* (Bevans and Schroeder 2011). The concept of prophetic dialogue has since garnered widespread acceptance among the authors from various denominational backgrounds. According to Bevans (2022), prophetic dialogue encompasses both a theological framework and a practical application, emphasising deep receptivity to the Spirit's guidance, profound respect for the socio-cultural contexts of evangelisation and a commitment to contemplative engagement and meaningful conversation with all stakeholders involved.

Mission redefined: Towards an African eco-theology

The philosophical values of Ubuntu and *ukama* cited above can provide a nexus for prophetic dialogue in Southern Africa, and this dialogue should meet the following criteria if it is to be relevant and effective for addressing ecological and environmental challenges:

- Integrate African cosmologies into Christian environmental ethics.
- Empower local communities through participatory ecological discipleship.
- Engage policy and justice, challenging structures that perpetuate environmental exploitation.
- Educate churches on eco-theology, not only as a niche issue but also as central to the gospel.

Prophetic dialogue is an integral part of mission. The SDV (2000) General Chapter Document highlights how dialogue has a prophetic character as it reminds us that:

... in dialogue ... we are able to recognize 'the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit' (RM, 56) in all people, that we are called to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to engage in constant conversion, that we witness to God's love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate. It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith. Together with our dialogue partners, we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way, our dialogue can be called prophetic. (n.p.)

One important aspect of a missional theology for Southern Africa, highlighted above, underscores the significance of prophetic dialogue in addressing ecological challenges, particularly in African communities where communal dialogue is embedded in community well-being and harmony with nature (Mpofu 2021). A communal life centred on nurturing shared African values resonates with an approach anchored on dialogue to promote environmental awareness and stewardship. This approach translates shared

African values into tangible initiatives to address societal and ecological challenges. To achieve this objective, we should integrate African cosmologies into Christian environmental ethics and empower local communities through participatory ecological discipleship and ongoing engagement with policymakers to ensure social and economic justice. This should involve educating churches on eco-theology in order to challenge structures that perpetuate environmental exploitation.

Dialogues of life, action and theological exchange

It is important to highlight that the two examples of Ubuntu and *ukama* presented above as possible areas of dialogue between African values and theology in addressing the ecological challenges in Africa do not constitute a new conversation. Although there have been related debates in the past, this study revives the conversation with a specific focus on how missional leadership can play an important role in promoting a prophetic dialogue.

In the past, there has been 'a hot debate around Christianity's complicity in environmental destruction' Balcomb (2019:1) cantering around the theme of 'dominion mandate in the book of Genesis' alongside the recent prosperity gospel that promotes the propensity for Christianity to 'disenchant' the environment and thereby rid it of spiritual agency. Some scholars have argued that some practices informed by Indigenous Religion and Christianity have contributed to the environmental crisis. Among them, Balcomb (2019) observed that:

In the African context there are signs that the Christian mission continues to have negative effects on the environment and this raises the question of what would constitute an appropriate African Christian theology of the environment. (p. 1)

One way to address the negative environmental effects of Christian missions is by engaging in a deeper dialogue with African values, towards a holistic and life-affirming approach to human well-being. Various scholars (among them Kai 2024) have explored how human capability is immeasurable not only in the sinful nature of global capitalistic tendencies that destroy the earth but also in the ability to reverse the damage and repair or redeem the earth. This is evident across diverse religions such as Christianity, Islam as well as Africa's many indigenous religious and cultural traditions. The diversity of these religions requires a missional and dialogical approach towards life, sustained through action and theological exchanges that take African values seriously. This is key to addressing the ecological crisis in Southern Africa.

To promote missional and prophetic dialogue with different religions and African values, we require a sustained commitment reflected through action and theological exchanges. In order to be prophetic, this missional dialogue

should engage with indigenous knowledge systems promoting environmental stewardship; draw from faith-based ecological ethics and eco-theology and consider the implications of climate migration and displacement in order to embrace youth activism; the role of civil society (e.g. Fridays for Future Africa) and respond to the gendered impacts of climate change, especially with regard to climate impacts on women and children living in affected communities.

Conclusion

This article discussed how the African values of Ubuntu and *ukama* can enhance responses to ecological crisis in Southern Africa through a prophetic and missional dialogue. The study notes that there have been related debates in the past and revives this conversation, with a specific focus on how missional leadership can play an important role in promoting a prophetic dialogue with African values in order to address the ecological crisis in Southern Africa. The two examples of the philosophical values of Ubuntu and *ukama* were presented as possible areas of dialogue between African values and missional theology in addressing the ecological and environmental challenges. Considering that this is a multifaceted and growing concern, driven by a complex interplay of environmental degradation, climate change, socio-economic inequality, unsustainable land use and weak policy enforcement, this contribution moves beyond the debate around Christianity's complicity in environmental destruction to consider a missional response rooted in African values as an alternative to pathways for a spiritually grounded ecological ethic.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a conference paper originally presented at the Ecotheology Conference, held at Kutchire Lodge, Liwonde National Park, Malawi, on 12–15 August 2025. The conference paper, titled 'Addressing the ecological crisis in Southern Africa through a missional dialogue with African values' was subsequently expanded and revised for this journal publication. This republication is done with permission from the conference organisers.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Buhle Mpofu: Conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria research ethics committee. The ethical clearance number is T077/25.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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