FAITH IN ACTION:

WHY A PRESBYTERIAN EARTH CARE CONGREGATION EMBRACES PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISM

by

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ABSTRACT

MATT MCDERMOTT. Faith in Action: Why a Presbyterian Earth Care Congregation Embraces Progressive Activism

(Under the direction of DR. GREGORY STARRETT)

Presbyterianism is a branch of Christianity that has a long history of being tied to social movements throughout the world. In a time where issues of environmental catastrophe and social injustice have become prevalent issues in our society, the Presbyterian Church has stayed true to its history of addressing everchanging socio-politics. One way that it has done so is through the creation of the "Earth Care Congregation" designation. Churches that have been awarded this designation must reach a set criteria that proves their dedication to promoting progressive change in regard to environmentalism and social justice. These churches use the concept of "creation" to stewardship and equity, believing that it is our responsibility to care for God's creations.

Through my research, I learned that the PCUSA's Earth Care designation seeks a resurrection of creation through environmental justice initiatives that are justified through the bible. The basis for this idea is found through the call to renew and heal "creation," which encompasses both the environment and the human world. This theme of resurrection and rebirth is used to justify the progressive activism which seeks to, in a way, create their own rebirth by using the power of the church community to create what they see as a more just and progressive society, particularly at the local level. Memorial uses the designation and the inclusion of humanity in the PCUSA's definition of "creation" to justify projects such as affordable housing renovations, monthly reparations collections, and their open support for the LGBTQ+, among others.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Contemporary discussions about impending ecological disaster, climate change, and systemic injustice facing marginalized communities are often associated with progressive, leftist, and secular movements. Dedicated followers of Christianity are often stereotyped as being unconcerned with these issues and opposed to progressive reforms to neutralize these injustices. However, there are Christian denominations that instead promote values of social justice and environmentalism. Catholic churches during the Salvadoran Revolution (Binford 2020), as well as Episcopalian churches and the United Church of Christ in the United States (Frederick Goldsen and Satin 2016; Tobin 2022) all have histories of progressive action. The focus of my research, however, is on Presbyterianism, which hosts Earth Care Congregations, select churches which have used their Chrisitan teachings to promote social justice and environmentalist activism. My field site, Memorial Presbyterian Church, offers an example of this kind of activism.

The Earth Care designation provides an outlet for the Memorial Presbyterian Church to not just approach environmental activism, but also focus on social justice activism. This is done through the language they use when discussing their beliefs as well as through some of the projects and events that have involved the church. My research shows how this language is connected to the way that the church defines creation, their interpretations of the Bible, and their perspectives on environmental justice issues. These themes have led to the church becoming involved in socially progressive events and projects, such as marching in the Charlotte Pride parade, collecting monthly reparations, and working to construct affordable housing on their campus.

Through my research, I learned that the PCUSA's Earth Care designation seeks a resurrection of creation through environmental justice initiatives that are justified through the bible. The basis for this idea is found through the call to renew and heal "creation," which encompasses both the environment and the human world. This theme of resurrection and rebirth is used to justify the progressive activism which seeks to, in a way, create their own rebirth by using the power of the church community to create what they see as a more just and progressive society, particularly at the local level. Memorial uses the designation and the inclusion of humanity in the PCUSA's definition of "creation" to justify projects such as affordable housing renovations, monthly reparations collections, and their open support for the LGBTQ+, among others.

Despite an opportunity for ethnographers to explore this unique mixture of progressive reformism and Christian theology, the anthropology of Christianity has produced no literature dedicated to Earth Care Congregations. There has been little research into the ways that Presbyterians have approached issues such as creation care and social justice. Additionally, few of these ethnographies have featured an analysis based on linguistics, environmental justice, and divine command theory (all of which are theories that I will be applying). This project seeks to change this by filling in needed gaps in the anthropology of religion. As well as filling this niche, this research will also contribute to ethnographic literature that seeks to understand the ways that social justice and environmentalist perspectives can intersect with one another.

History of the Church

Memorial's history begins in the early 20th century. The church's construction was funded by the descendent of a wealthy slave-owning family in Charlotte. Money was given to the

church's founders after the matriarch of the family passed away in the early 20th century. Per her wishes, a portion of her wealth would be given to the construction of the church.[1]

By the mid-20th century, the church's membership increased substantially. At its peak in the 1960s, the total number of members can be estimated to be around 1,000. However, this membership wouldn't last, and the church's membership would diminish around the early 21st century. At its lowest, membership in the church would fall to only around 17 people. "In the church, in the sanctuary, there'd be 10, 15 people in the whole sanctuary. When the collection was done, somebody would walk up, grab the collection plate, come back and see if anybody wanted to put anything in and then take it back up and set it on the stand," my informant Martin said. "One of the reverend at the time's first sermon was a children's sermon. And the youngest person in the congregation was probably 65."

However, the church's fortunes would turn around 2007. According to a video on their official website, an interracial couple joined the church the day before the session was preparing to close the doors. They decided that they would invite as many people as they could to the next Sunday's service. This led to 50 or so new members joining the church. Martin, one of the church's elders, also tells me that many others around nearby churches had grown uninterested in their former churches and decided to join, further expanding membership. "It got to be the 15th of December, and no one had put up Christmas decorations at our old church," Martin told me. "So, my wife said to the pastor, 'are we going to decorate for Christmas this year? It's a Christian holiday.' And she said, 'you can if you want to.' And that was the support we got. So, we kind of

[1] Following its construction, the church would honor them by taking on their family name. However, I'm choosing to exclude this information to maintain the anonymity of the church. I will instead refer to the church as the Memorial Presbyterian Church.

decided it was time to leave." After they came to Memorial, they brought others from the church with them, and many others came from their own churches. This period of Memorial's history has been called the "resurrection of the church." Currently, Memorial's official membership is close to 300. However, they prefer to use a "soft approach" to their membership which includes regulars not listed as official members. Therefore, they prefer to see their membership at closer to 350 people.

It was also during the church's rebirth that the few core members decided that they wanted to change the church's message. This was when the church became much more committed to developing a self-identifying progressive identity, and they developed the reputation of being "the liberal church." The church began adopting the motto "God invites, we welcome all" which may have partly been inspired by their resurrection, proving the importance to them of what can happen when you welcome diverse people of different backgrounds into the church. This period could certainly be seen as laying down the foundation for their desire to become an Earth Care Congregation, which they adopted within the past ten years.

Informant Demographics

During my data collection, I had five informants who helped me better understand the ideological dynamics of the church. These informants include the reverend of the church, two members of Memorial's Earth Care Committee, and two church elders. My first contact, Reverend Gurley, was born in Georgia and moved to Charlotte later on in life. Raised Presbyterian by their family, they would have several jobs before becoming a reverend. They came to the church in the early 2000s, just before the church was starting to discuss closing their doors. When Memorial's former reverend stepped down, Reverend Gurley rose to fill their place.

They are roughly in their 60s, cisgender, and white, representing a common demographic within the church's congregation.

My next contact was Elizabeth, a member of the church's Earth Care Committee. Elizabeth, an cisgender black woman roughly in her 50s/60s, has lived in many places throughout her life, thanks to her father being a member of the US military. The church had been an important part of her life growing up, due to her mother's influence. She told me she didn't experience racism until she had moved back to the US from overseas. This had a profound effect on shaping her worldview and she became involved with black nationalist movements. As the years went on she would become disillusioned with politics and would return to the church, hoping to create change through theological institutions. Elizabeth came to Memorial sometime in the late 2000s. During this time, she had been searching for a church that was more open to homosexuality, since her brother was gay. She wasn't initially able to find a church that fit what she was looking for, but she came across Memorial after her brother passed. She has been a member ever since.

Joyce was my other informant who is a member of the church's Earth Care Committee. Joyce, a middle-aged, cisgender, white woman, was my only informant who wasn't Presbyterian. She was actually an Episcopalian and even held membership in both Memorial and another Episcopal church, where she also served on their version of the Earth Care Committee. She joined Memorial through her husband, who was drawn to the church because of their music. Joyce has long been active in politics and activism, even serving as Charlotte's mayor at one point and running for Congress unsuccessfully.

Martin was one of the first people I met at Memorial. He serves as one of the church's elders and plays an important role during church services doing work such as frequently greeting

attendees and handing out pamphlets before services, as well as passing around the collection plates. Martin is a cisgender white man roughly in his 60s/70s and became an active churchgoer when he was younger through Alcoholics Anonymous. He had been a member of previous church's in the Charlotte area for several decades before coming to Memorial just before the church's resurrection. This position made him essential for understanding much of the church's recent history since he experienced it firsthand.

Robert was the other church elder I who helped with my project. Robert, a cisgender white man, is a relatively newer member to the congregation having started around the time that I also started my project. Robert is also the youngest of my informants, being roughly in his thirties, and also younger than the average attendee of Memorial. Professionally, Mark is active in the restaurant industry around Charlotte and is associated with organizations that provided food services for those in need.

CHAPTER 2: DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE

Varieties of Presbyterian Social Engagement

The history of the Presbyterian Church is tied to addressing social issues. According to the PCUSA's website, the history of the Church is connected to socio-political ideas such as civil rights and women's rights. In the 19th century, the church split into two factions over slavery, one in the northern US and another in the southern US. Presbyterian churches continued to be tied to social activism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, calling for various social justice issues such as women's rights and civil rights, and a particularly strong stand critical of Israel's military occupation of Palestinian lands (PCUSA; PCUSA 2003). In 1877, a Presbyterian parish in Manhattan created an organization called Fresh Air Fund. This initiative was dedicated to promoting environmental conservation in Urban areas through the creation of parks and other green spaces. They did so because they believed moral and physical health were closely tied together. They saw rural areas as being a good example of healthy areas that are worth preserving and hoped to bring the greenery of rural landscapes into urban spaces (Berry 2015).

Environmental reform is another political theme that some denominations have begun to support. In the 1970s and 1980s, Presbyterian churches, through the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC), began addressing a need for sustainable energy policies. Because each church is run by its own governing committee, they were well positioned for addressing the local needs of each congregation, despite having fairly conservative bases at the time. The result were two documents being drafted by the Presbyterian church in the 1980s. These included the *1981 Presbyterian Energy Policy*, which called for church members to live sustainable lives by embracing a frugal lifestyle, and the 1987 report *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, a report which sought to balance the need to promote jobs and economic

growth with environmental care. Over the following decades, these concerns would become more pronounced, with oil and gas consumption and climate change being the biggest environmental concerns for members of the PCUSA, a significant change since the complacent attitude towards climate change which previously permeated the church. Several other official policy statements towards energy consumption and climate change would be released throughout the 2000s, as well (Townsend 2013).

The successes these churches saw in the formation and implementation of sustainability policy was through reframing environmental concerns as moral issues directly tied to the everyday language of their congregations. This is done through using language related to biblical and liturgical themes such as “creation”, “witness”, and “stewardship”. By promoting environmental concerns as a matter of moral, ethical, and theological duty, Presbyterian churches are leading their congregations to think in the long-term of how climate change will impact future generations (Townsend 2013).

Environmental Justice

The past decade of ethnographic research has opened the potential for studies into how Christianity, and religion more broadly, shape our knowledge of issues related to social justice and the environment. Sabrina Danielsen (2013) looks to understand the ways that evangelicals have changed their perspectives on the environment from 1984 to 2010. She shows that evangelicals proved to be more diverse than stereotypes often assume. Although many evangelicals oppose climate change reforms, there are others that believe the religion needs to adopt “creation care” initiatives. Danielsen also notes that holding firmly oppositional views towards environmentalism is most common among the political elites in evangelism but are more varied among the average evangelical (Danielsen 2013).

Environmental justice is a theory which promotes an understanding of the connection between environmental degradation and social injustice (Booth 2020; Eichler and Baumeister 2018; McGregor 2018; Schelhas and Hitchner 2020). This theory first gained prominence in the early 1980s when researchers from the United Church of Christ and Texas Southern University saw a high correlation in Warren County, North Carolina between environmental health risks from industrial pollutants and people living in nearby predominantly black communities. The theory continued to develop throughout the 1980s in the United States highlighting connections between environmental degradation and BIPOC communities (Booth 2020).

Bureaucracy

According to an official PCUSA document updated in 2018, the General Assembly of the PCUSA adopted a resolution in support of creation care in 1990. Within this resolution was official support for the following goals: restoring creation as a central concern for the church, that this ideal was new to evangelical missions, that creation restoration is a continuing task that the entire world must unite towards, and not only is it a biblical duty to care for creation but doing so will help the church accomplish its other goals (PCUSA 2018, 1).

It was through this Assembly meeting that the Earth Care Congregations began to form. An Earth Care Congregation is an official designation among Presbyterian churches that can be earned through a commitment to the ideals outlined above. Gaining this designation requires going through a formal process within the PCUSA's structures. First, an application must be filed and a committee of at least two people from within the local church must be formed. Following this, the church must meet a certain level of requirements proving their commitment to the PCUSA's eco-theological views (PCUSA 2018). This process is based on a point system, where 25 points must be earned in the four categories of Presbyterian creation care: addressing the need

to restore creation in worship services, promoting education towards creation care through learning and teaching, upgrading the church's facilities to promote sustainability, equity, and inclusion, and promoting political policies that protect the environment and marginalized populations through the church's outreach (PCUSA 2018; presbyterianmission.org). When these actions have been reviewed by the Presbyterian Hunger Program and if all requirements have been met, then the church will earn their official designation. Additionally, this designation must be reviewed and renewed each year between January 1st and February 15th in order to maintain this commitment to the church's eco-justice ideals. Having taken on the designation, churches will be expected to reform their church in a way that honors creation, done by embracing the values of eco-justice. It is also expected that this dedication will move past the church and enter the homes of the church members and officials (PCUSA 2018).

The most recent application (2024) submitted by Memorial is divided into three sections: Earth Care Congregation Information and Audit/Narrative report, Next Steps/Visioning, and Earth Care Pledge. The first section (information and audit) provides basic information on Memorial as well as information provided by the PCUSA on how to approach the application. The audit itself is examines Memorial's commitment to earth care with information surrounding worship, education, outreach, and facilities. The second section (visioning) is focused on ways that Memorial plans to move forward in the four sections of the audit. The final section (Earth Care Pledge) is simply a digital signature showing that Memorial agrees with the PCUSA"s pre-written pledge.

Earth Care Congregations are not only ecologically conscious churches, however. They are also striving for "eco-justice" by promoting the well-being of all of God's creation, including human beings. This ties the ideals of the ECC message to both environmentalist action as well as

a support for social justice initiatives. Notably, throughout the official document that explains Earth Care Congregations, the term "creation" is used throughout as a way to show that these two issues are viewed through the same theological lens and biblical passages are used to justify the creation of this designation (PCUSA 2018). The document states, "Our faith urges us to strive for eco-justice: defending and healing creation while working to assure justice for all of creation and the human beings who live in it" (PCUSA 2018, 1). This quote demonstrates the mission of the designation by emphasizing the connections between human beings and the environment.

To understand the way the Earth Care designation's bureaucracy impacts the church, I will draw from Max Weber's work on bureaucracy. In his essay *Bureaucracy* (1921), he defines bureaucracy as a system of rules and hierarchies which governs public and private institutions. At the top of this hierarchy is the official. These officials are expected to hold a degree of expertise in their fields that prove their ability to effectively lead the bureaucratic organization. Officials also often hold a high status in society because of their expertise and are often expected to have benefits from these positions.

Weber also notes that bureaucratic structures maintain their permanence by proving themselves superior to other means of governance. He notes that bureaucracies create outputs with effective speed, costs, and precision that outperform other governance systems. He states that other systems, such as work by collegiate bodies, are also effective to a degree, but cause friction and delay that bureaucracy is able to maneuver around. With experts at the top of bureaucratic hierarchies, they are effectively able to produce outputs that surpass the constant compromising of collegiate bodies (1921).

Weber writes in *Nature of Charismatic Domination* (1922) about three different types of authority: traditional/patriarchal, charismatic, and bureaucratic. He positions these authorities as

juxtaposed, with charisma being more fluid and bureaucracy being permanent. Charisma is based on the personalities of leaders being able to prove their authority to their followers. Bureaucracy, on the other hand, is based upon a formalization of authority through rational procedure and ideas about specialization. He notes, however, that charismatic authority can become bureaucratic as a means of preserving itself. Charismatic leaders desiring to establish their authority as permanent will need to turn to traditions and law in order to establish a more formal, permanent form of authority.

Divine Command Theory

One of the theoretical frameworks that I'm using to analyze my data is an idea called divine command theory. This is an ethical theory that states that proper morality stems from the word of God. The theory is based on three points: moral obligation, moral rightness, and moral wrongness. These are acts that philosophers of DCT claim are God's requirements, permissions, and prohibitions. In the biblical Decalogue, God directs his followers by teaching them how they should live. These verses are seen as the framework for the theory because they reveal what God believes is a proper lifestyle. (Carson 2012; Quinn 2013)

As one example, Mittermaier (2014) uses divine command theory in a study of a volunteer-driven charity in Egypt. The charity's work involves actions such as food distribution to those in need and visiting orphanages. This organization is driven by a deep sense of Islamic religiosity that leads them to volunteer charity work. Their motives are directly driven by a sense of religious duty that they feel they are called to do. Although some in the organization state that they gain personal satisfaction from this activity, others have denied that their ideas should be seen as a sign of compassion to others. For the latter, this service is purely religious in nature, believing that their actions need to be in line with the way their religion dictates them to act.

Therefore, these acts are not done for the people they benefit, but in service to God (Mittermaier 2014).

As will be seen throughout this study, divine command theory is used by Memorial Presbyterian Church in order to justify their social activities. Memorial justifies their actions by stating that they are following the will of God. They make references to biblical passages and talk about following the callings that God has given them. They often frame their social activities as part of this calling from God. This allows them to reframe their social desires in a way that equates them to the moral importance of obeying the word of God.

Language and Religious Identity

Studies into the relationship between language and religion over the past two decades (e.g. Avineri 2015; Baker-Smemoe and Bowie 2015; Bebiroglu, Roskam, van der Straten Waillet 2015; Bielo 2019; Chladek 2018; Han 2014; Richert and Corriveau 2022; Timol 2020). These works provide a foundation for understanding the linguistic practices of the Memorial Presbyterian Church. Patterns of language socialization and use influences religious identity formations, narrative construction in religious argumentation and linguistic power dynamics in religious traditions.

Religious literature is not the only linguistic research that is useful for my study. Delfino (2021) writes of the ways that woke, white liberals in the US perpetuate systems of white supremacy despite their visible allyship with social justice movements. They argue that this is done through the creation of othering narratives between white people. Woke white people will often do this through stereotyping white racists with terms such as “conservative” or “redneck.” This is done not only because these are examples of white people who support more overtly

racist rhetoric but also as a means of distancing themselves from racism and white privilege. It leads to the separation between "racist white people" and "good white people."

Additionally, Delfino argues that the solutions that many woke, white liberals offer are based on individualism, such as educating oneself. The promotion of individualist values as opposed to collective values helps to reinforce systems of oppression across society. By only focusing on individualistic thinking, woke white people end up hyper fixating on one aspect of racial oppression and leave no room for how social structures and histories may still be continuing systems of oppression. This serves as another means for them to distance themselves from the stereotypical traits of racism and to continue preserving white supremacist social structures.[2]

As will be seen, transformative and othering language has been used by individuals within the church. Some informants have noted the importance of social activism within the church rather than outside of it. This argument is based on the premise that more can be done through religious activism rather than secular activism because of the religious framing that this work is a spiritual duty. This othering becomes intrinsically tied to the divine command that was discussed in the previous section because of the commitment to God's perceived commands to social activism rather than the commitment to secular activism. (Carson 2012; Quinn 2013).

[2] From June 2023 to January 2024, I attended the church's services regularly. I did not need to record the services, since they are livestreamed every week. I also conducted interviews throughout this same time period. My total number of interviews were five, with each participant being interviewed once. These interviews were semi-structured, and I came prepared with pre-planned questions for them to answer. However, the semi-structured nature of these interviews means that I was not be strictly relying on these questions, and I asked several questions that came up throughout our conversations. These interviews were conducted primarily in-person, except for one which was conducted through Zoom. I recorded each of these interviews, as well, with the permission of those involved. I used Otter.ai to record these in-person interviews and Zoom's record feature for the one online interview.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

Social Justice as Creation Care

Despite being an Earth Care Congregation, the church does very little to promote environmental causes. This is something that Reverend Gurley acknowledged in my interview with them. They said, “We are trying to do a lot of big, hard things, and one could argue very easily that we’re not doing enough for the environment.” Apart from the work that their Earth Care Committee does, the church is much more focused on social justice issues like race and poverty. Although this might seem confusing, the church sees both environmental stewardship and social activism as being important parts of creation care.

Despite the apparent contradiction of advertising as Earth Care but focusing more on social justice issues, the church and broader PCUSA don’t see it as such. As previously mentioned, the PCUSA states that churches wanting to gain the designation need to show commitment towards both the environment as well as people, by trying to care for all of God’s creation. (PCUSA) This allows for the church to have a degree of flexibility on how they approach these issues, so long as they meet the minimum requirements to gain the designation. In this case, Memorial is able to focus their attention on the social justice aspects of the designation so long as they are meeting a minimum requirement of points for the application.

This approach reminded me of environmental justice, which seeks to acknowledge the ways that social inequality and environmental degradation can be related to one another (Booth 2020; Eichler and Baumeister 2018; McGregor 2018; Schelhas and Hitchner 2020). In fact, many of the conversations that I had with members of the congregation showed that the church understands environmental justice initiatives. Even if they may not know the term, each of my

informants were knowledgeable of the ways that environmental degradation can at times impact marginalized communities more than others. Most of my informants brought up ways that the environmental and social issues could be intrinsically tied to one another, although only Joyce directly used the term.

Joyce, a member of the Earth Care Committee, was vocal about her passion for environmental justice and the need to see these issues as being one in the same. Throughout our interview, when the issue of environmental justice was brought up, Joyce would mention various ways that we have polluted the environments of areas with low-income and/or communities of color. Noting the ways that polluting factories, concentrated animal feeding operations, and wood pellet plants end up in the aforementioned communities. This disproportionately impacts BIPOC and people of low SES more than others.

Joyce also spoke to me about her passion for addressing the health impacts of environmental degradation. She notes the ways that pollution becomes not just an issue about the environment but one with impacts that can be directly tied to humanity. “You know, environmental... Clean air, clean water. I mean it seems pretty obvious that that’s part of your health. But I think that in the United States we take for granted that we usually have clean water, clean air… Although there are communities in the US that have suffered tremendously from contaminated water and contaminated air. And soil. And that’s part of the environmental justice piece that I’m interested in.”

Joyce discussed the importance of faith leaders in the push to start environmental justice movements. She discusses the history of the movement and how the first time the term was used was in research in Warren County, North Carolina. The research looked at the ways that contaminated soil placed alongside roads, which was intentionally placed by the federal

government in an area that they believed wouldn't cause problems, causing harm to poor towns in the county. This research led to protests in which faith leaders held prominent positions in trying to create changes for these communities. Twenty years later, after many lawsuits and pressure, the soil was eventually cleaned and disposed of it in a responsible way.

When I spoke with Reverend Gurley, they offered a perspective that showed a commitment to other aspects of creation care over the environment. "I'm concerned about a whole lot of things," they began. "But climate care was just not, not that I don't believe it, not that I don't care about it, but I was just focused on other things. And so, when a few members came and said, 'there's this earth care thing and we can do things here to make a difference.' You know, shame on my for having that blind spot and credit to them for ensuring that it's one of the priorities here." This answer was not all that surprising for me, since the several months I had spent sitting in the church's services, I saw very few sermons related to climate change. Most of the time, when the Reverend Gurley brought up climate change in their sermons, it was anecdotal, to emphasize the fear surrounding the state of the world that people may be feeling.

Reflecting on the demands of the designation's application, I pressed Reverend Gurley on this to learn more about if it had an impact on the church's decision to focus on social justice rather than explicitly environmentalist activism. "I imagine, too, with, like, how much the earth care designation seems to like, I don't want to say demand but, ask of the churches that it gets really hard to really put so much effort into just one thing. Because you've kind of got to find a balance it seems with everything," I said. "That's right, Matt," Reverend Gurley replied. "I-I think the good news of this congregation and I; I really say it's about them is that they're interested in doing so many big, important, meaningful things. And that's the spirit of this congregation, they're passionate, they're very missional, they are statedly progressive, you know we don't have

a lot of political arguments around here. And by nature, then, the DNA of this congregation is to care deeply and passionately about a lot of things and sometimes those things overlap."

I presume this stems from the callings that Memorial believes God calls them to do. The church believes that God calls them to be responsible for the earth and to take care of one another. This enshrines a sense of responsibility to members of the congregation to care about progressive social issues. Because they believe God calls on his followers to act in ways that prove they are allies for marginalized communities, they are obligated to march in the Pride parade and to collect monthly reparations in order to fulfill God's calling for them. This also falls in line with what the earth care designation requires them to do. It promotes the healing and stewardship of God's creation, which in this case includes humanity and marginalized communities.

The above quote also reveals one of the core inspirations driving Memorial's worldview: mission work. Throughout my interviews with Reverend Gurley and Elizabeth, they describe the church's activism as "missions." This transforms their social activity to missionary work and further shifting their narrative of progressive activism from that of a personal duty to a spiritual duty (Quinn 2013; Townsend 2013). It is not simply because they wish to do it, but also that God is requiring that they do it. In this regard, if they were to accurately present themselves as being good Christians then they must take on these progressive aspirations because it is what God has called them to, both through taking on this designation but also through biblical verses.

This can be interpreted as a way that the church uses virtue signaling in order to prove themselves as allies to marginalized communities both to the communities themselves but also to God. Using Delfino's (2021) analysis, this works to prove themselves as being above bigoted ideologies that might stereotypically be associated with other churches. This proves the church as

being anti-racist or pro-LGBT and others more conservative churches that may not be willing to embrace these same ideals.

The connection to mission work further shows the ways that the church and its members see the work that they do as being a spiritual commitment rather than a personal goal (Townsend 2013). This use of language solidifies their progressive actions with their religious identities, making it so that serving God, in their eyes, should involve caring for the poor and marginalized. They see spreading the word of God through missions as proving oneself as an ally to marginalized communities, taking care of the earth, and promoting other progressive causes. This can all be traced back to the church's implementation of divine command theory by equating proper morality with how they interpret God's message (Quinn 2013).

Robert, one of the church's elders, showed his understanding of environmental justice through his devotion to food security. He mentions that when food is put into a landfill, it produces methane gas as it rots, which then pollutes our air and contributes to climate change. Because of this, he has started to associate food justice with environmental activism because redistributing food to those in need, rather than sending it to a landfill, will help contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. "When we talk about how to address climate change, a lot of our energy, a lot of our attention and focus, is on fossil fuels. But I have always contended that there is I was gonna say easier, like it's, it's a more tangible way to help turn the boat around, proverbially, is and that's not wasting food."

Reverend Gurley noted in my interview with them that everything we do has to do with the environment in some way. "When we you know bringing a person off the streets is an environmental act. That may sound like a cop out but we're starting to see that it all overlaps. So, we're not doing the most progressive thing out there in the world, but step by step." It was clear

through my interviews with members of Memorial that they do not see social justice and environmental activism as being distinct from one another. Instead, they see them as being connected to one another in many ways.

Defining Creation

To properly understand why and how an Earth Care Congregation can claim such a designation while not being focused on environmental activism, we have to understand how the church cares for creation. Defining "creation" is essential to understanding the ideologies behind the way the Memorial Presbyterian Church's approaches their designation. The church's understanding of creation encompasses a wide range of social concepts that make it possible for an Earth Care Congregation to focus more on social justice issues rather than environmental ones.

Both the PCUSA official documents and the Memorial church members I spoke to defined "creation" as encompassing both humanity and the environment (PCUSA). The Book of Genesis describes all things in the world as being made by God. That includes all of the environment and humanity. This story is used to connect humans and the environment together as "creation," through the immaculate conception of the world. The church is then able to use this definition and apply it to progressive causes. In order to care for and respect God's creation, the church has to embrace progressive ideologies that promote the well-being of the environment and humanity. This could include promoting sustainable lifestyle choices, allying with LGBTQ+ organizations, and helping people of lower socio-economic statuses.

When asked how to define creation, each of my informants created a response that was in line with the official PCUSA definition; that creation encompasses both the social and environmental

aspects of our world. However, each person defined creation with unique distinctions. Although each informant was able to provide a definition that united social and environmental concerns together, perspectives surrounding the term are certainly not unified and there are certainly disagreements on the specifics of how to define it.

Reverend Gurley describes creation as something that is not to be subdued but shared. “The animals are to be treated with dignity and respect that they are a gift to us. That land and property are a gift that come with real clear expectations that are problematic if we embrace them, you know. They’re not convenient. That we honor God by caring for those things that God gives us. I think that’s what creation is all about.” They see the creation story in the bible as being only a myth and metaphor, comparing it to poetry. “I had not studied it well enough to know what the heck the apple is supposed to represent. But I-I think the very myth of God putting Adam and eve in a garden and saying ‘this is all you’ll ever need’ is true today. The earth is all we ever need. And then the age old story of sin that we don’t see what God gives us and we think we know better. And so, we go out on our own and we turn our back on the god that gives us everything we need. I think that’s literally true. I don’t, I don’t think there was ever an Adam and Eve, but the story is true. It’s still instructive. The bible in that regard is truer than true.”

Reverend Gurley continues to describe how his understanding of creation involves marginalized communities, notably focusing on the LGBT community, who are often the target of Christian fundamentalists. “You know, we are each made in a particular way in God’s intentionality. You know, all the hate passages or all of the ‘gay people are being a mistake’ are insulting to God’s intentionality in creating us so many different ways. Just as God created nature in so many different ways,” they said. “Fundamentally, the Garden of Eden is a metaphor that God gives us all we need if we work together, if we care for it, if we receive it as a gift and not

something that we can take for granted. If we work the land, if we work the garden, if we plant and reap in the right ways, the earth has enough for all. So, if you apply that to America, there are more than enough resources in America to feed everyone adequately, to house everyone adequately, to harvest in a sustainable way that benefits the earth or crop rotation. Not by fracking! I think creation gives us the principles of how to live together on the land, from the land and care of the land and worship the land as God's beauty."

Elizabeth, when describing her relationship with God says, "My understanding [of God] isn't just Bible. It's a stewardship about the interrelationship between all things universal. So, I worship a very universal Christ. And, so, earth and I are the same. And my responsibility to it is my responsibility to myself. Which is how I honor God." She notes that her alignment with Presbyterianism, a largely decentralized religion, is helpful for her understanding of God because they don't tell her what to believe. "So, I can be Presbyterian, and I can honor earth, God, and me, without a rule that dictates what that's supposed to look like."

Elizabeth tells me, "We had, in the beginning, some personalities that said, 'you can't be a good church and not do the stewardship of creation that we're called to do.' And then you had the personalities that said, 'we're not just talking about stewardship! We're talking about how we disenfranchised the wrong people!'" Her use of the word "called" stands out to me, especially as she concludes this point later on by saying, "God will not let important work not be done by his people." These statements show that she sees a direct connection between the will of God and the way that he is perceived to command the church with the actions the church chooses to take. Elizabeth believes that she is listening to the word of God as they take on new activist goals and projects, because they are what God has called them to do, an example of divine command theory (Carson 2012; Quinn 2013).

Despite Memorial's advertisement and identity being based around support for progressive policies and social action, it is interesting to see that their emphasis on humanity has similarities to conservative worldviews in Christianity. Although their definitions of creation incorporate both the environment and humanity, the actions they take which are inspired by healing creation are almost always focused on humanity. This invokes some of the more anthropocentric worldviews more associated with the religion's conservative followers (Veldman 2019). However, there are certainly differences between Memorial and the anthropocentric camp, notably with Elizabeth's definition, which states that she will "honor Earth" as being one in the same with God and herself. As Veldman (2019) writes, this is something that the anthropocentric-minded Christians could disagree with because honoring the Earth leads to people honoring something that isn't God and, thus, takes them further away from God. Within Memorial's followers, like Elizabeth, there is still an emphasis that the Earth is worthy of being respected.

My informants see the actions that the church takes as being justifiable through the commands that God makes throughout the Bible. Several of my informants mentioned that their interpretation of biblical verses have led them to interpret scripture to fit their progressive worldview. Genesis was an example that both Reverend Gurley and Elizabeth used since this is where the creation story can be found. But Reverend Gurley also brought up the story of the Israelites in Exodus as an example. The Book of Exodus describes the Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt and having to live off the land. When God gives them the land of Israel, he tells them that it is all they'll ever need, but they begin demanding more, which Reverend Gurley sees as contradicting their own philosophy that God gives us all we'll ever need. They continue to describe the prophets and stories of Jesus and the Disciples who encouraged people to share with

one another and to live off the abundant land that God provides them with. “You know, Jesus was the original environmentalist, in some respects,” Reverend Gurley said.

Elizabeth also mentions The Book of Matthew as a justification for her progressive worldview. “I’m also a Matthew 24 girl about how we’re called to look at, to look at, the disenfranchisement of the world.” This quote is her reflection on the chapter in the Book of Matthew which discusses Christ’s return during the end times. The chapter notes that Christ will return at an unexpected time and, thus, Christians should live their lives in accordance with his will as if any moment will be when they are judged by God. By applying this verse to Elizabeth’s social worldview, she likely is using this chapter to justify her desire to create social change. Since God has commanded his followers to support progressive causes, she must always act this way because she wants to prove herself to God as worthy of being brought to heaven when Christ returns.

Joyce cites scripture as a justification for why nature is an inherently spiritual thing to her. She notes the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the burning bush as examples of this enlightenment. This shows a direct connection between the spirituality and the environment. “Yeah, I think nature is very spiritual to me. And very much the way I connect to the divine,” she says. Much like the stories that she referenced, nature serves as a place where Joyce can feel connected to God. Joyce goes on to tell me that the complexity and balance between species and ecosystems, as well as the “beauty and awe” of the natural world are all ways that she feels she can connect with God. This divine connection can, thus, be directly related to her biblical interpretation of nature as a place of enlightenment, where it is possible for someone to connect with God.

By turning towards scripture to justify their worldview, a clear connection can be made to the application of divine command theory. The spiritual worldviews of my informants are informed by their interpretations of scripture and what they believe God's message to his followers is. These interpretations leads them to determine that God is calling on them to support progressive causes. Thus, they see supporting these causes as the morally right thing to do because it is what God asks of them. This leads to the application of divine command theory because the sense of morality among my informants is largely derived from the question of "what is God asking of us" (Quinn 2013). They see the steps that they've taken in support of the earth care designation among other causes as having been God's divine plan for the Memorial Church community. Since their ethical code is based upon following the commands of God, they see their actions as morally justifiable because they are simply following God's plan for them like good Christians should do.

Linguistic Justifications

One of the ways that these interpretations can be justified through biblical and official PCUSA sources is based on the ways that the language of these sources is interpreted based on the perspectives of Memorial's members. While exploring the relationship between environmentalist skepticism and conservative Christians, Robin Veldman (2019) analyzes a text released by many prominent Southern Baptist leaders which called for engaging in the discussion surrounding climate change. The Declaration, as she refers to it, was picked up by news media and scholars as an example of Southern Baptists attempting to ally with secular environmental activists to find solutions to the climate crisis. When she spoke to the signatories of The Declaration, however, she learned that most of them were themselves climate skeptics. She learned The Declaration

was not designed to ally Baptists with secular activists, but to instead claim their place in addressing environmental issues through a perspective of stewardship.

The confusion was caused by the vagueness of much of the language used in the document. For instance, when the text calls to "address" climate change, this was interpreted by media sources as meaning that Baptists had to find solutions to reduce emissions. However, the word "address" in the eyes of the Southern Baptists simply meant that they should be engaging on discussions about whether climate change is man-made. Depending on the ideological interpretations of those reading, they could see either meaning within the text (Veldman 2019).

Similarly, the members of Memorial do a similar interpretation of official ECC documents and biblical passages. The ideological underpinnings of the church are based on a need to create progressive social change with an emphasis on issues related to gender, race, and poverty. By taking this interpretation to the aforementioned documents, Memorial's members are able to interpret the ECC documents as being a justification for their social justice work. Since creation incorporates both humanity and the environment according to both Memorial's members and PCUSA documentation, trying to create projects that address social justice issues rather than environmental issues is a valid means of trying to heal creation.

Language use is thus an important part for understanding the dynamics of Memorial's Earth Care designation. Drawing on Bielo's (2019) work, language, in this regard, is essential to shaping how members of the Memorial Presbyterian Church see themselves in regard to their progressive ideologies. Their desire to embrace social activism as a form of mission is driven by their ideological orientation that God is pro-LGBTQ+. This belief is then used by church members to determine how they see themselves. Because God is pro-LGBTQ+ and following the word of God makes them a good Christian, then they must also support the LGBT community.

And in order to demonstrate and spread the word of this ideological and identitarian perspective, they must march in the Pride parade because it not only spreads their perspective but also legitimizes it more through the eyes of others.

During a sermon given the week before the Charlotte Pride Parade, Reverend Gurley uses the term "righteousness" to equate tolerance and love as being essential to Christian ethics. He states: "So, what is righteousness? It gets back to the keystone passage we listened to in the Shama last Sunday. And we hear Jesus say it again, God makes clear what is right. To love the lord with all our heart, and strength, and soul, and mind. And our neighbor as ourselves." Although righteousness may not be defined biblically in such a way, Reverend Gurley uses it as a tool to equate loving others to loving God. This is because of the diverse ways religious groups can use language (Baker-Smemoe and Bowie 2015). Similarly, Reverend Gurley is able to apply his own understanding of the term righteousness in a way that might be different from other Presbyterians. But because of the authority that Reverend Gurley holds over church's services, this definition can be accepted as representing the definition that Memorial upholds (Bielo 2019).

Reverend Gurley introduces the term by asking what it means to be righteous. This question is answered in the final lines of the passage by stating that righteousness and love are directly connected to one another. If the best way to show one's love and devotion to God is to follow his word and the church believes that God commands us to love others, then the only way to love God is to love others. Instead of explaining this threefold process to the church, Reverend Gurley instead uses the word "righteousness" which is able to summarize this process and make it theologically sound.

In this regard, love becomes a linguistic symbol that takes on two meanings: it is essential to Christian ethics through righteous action, and it is an important form of allyship. "Love", much

like the “righteousness” becomes a word that signifies the connection between the church’s theological and progressive concepts. It is a way for the church to promote what they see as right action to God and to society. When they argue that we should spread love and understanding to others, “love” becomes a metaphor not just a call to religious action but also a call to action. Because the dual meanings they assign to “love” are seen as being intertwined through their definition of righteousness: God commands us to love others, so spreading love honors God’s command (Carson 2012; Quinn 2013) as well as proving allyship to minority communities.

Memorial’s approach to earth care can be understood as being based on both social and environmental principles. The major concerns of Memorial’s congregation are not issues that might appear to be directly associated with environmental issues. This is notable through the sermons that I’ve observed take place in the church. Most of them rarely ever mention environmental issues and when they do, they’re usually just passing references to help address a broader issue, such as the congregation’s fears regarding the state of the world or country. Additionally, the projects that interest members of the community would appear to have more in common with social justice rather than environmentalism, such as the affordable housing project being organized by church leaders or Robert’s passion for food justice.

Despite the apparent contradiction of an Earth Care Congregation focusing on environmentalism, Memorial has found ways to approach these issues with environmental sustainability in mind. These issues are seen by church members as being able to both help people and the environment. Robert justifies food justice by both feeding people and helping to reduce the carbon emissions within landfills. At the same time, Memorial has designed their housing project in a way that doesn’t contribute to polluting the environment. This makes the

project one that both keeps people off the street while also proving the church's commitment to minimizing their carbon footprint.

These justifications transform these issues from social justice causes into earth care causes. In the eyes of the church, caring for the earth involves caring for both the environment and humanity. This approach is rooted in their ideas of Christian love in which God has commanded his followers to prove themselves as allies for the marginalized. This is how an Earth Care Congregation can justify having a float in the Charlotte Pride Parade and collecting reparations for the city's black community. These issues can sometimes overlap as well, such as with the church designing a housing project that both helps people of low socio-economic status while also minimizing their own carbon footprint.

Their reason for focusing on social justice issues may be partly because the congregation feels that these issues are more pressing or are simply more attainable for the church. It was easy for the Memorial to install solar panels and to work towards a carbon neutral deadline, but harder for them to make those same changes at the city, state, or national level. However, issues like affordable housing renovation are things that the church has the power to control. This, in turn, helps them to find ways to accomplish their duties of earth care in a way that is more tangible, where they directly see the immediate benefits, rather than in ways that may feel beyond their control.

Paradox of Perceptions

One of the surprising things that I learned during my research was that the Earth Care designation seemed to not be very well known among the people I spoke to. Both Martin and Robert, my two informants who weren't involved with the Earth Care Committee, weren't aware

the church had the designation. Although both agreed with the values the designation promoted after I explained it to them, both said that they had simply never encountered it before. I found this to be surprising because the church advertises themselves as a Earth Care Congregation. One quick visit to their website will prove this, with the Earth Care designation logo clearly visible on their home page.

Elizabeth was one of the people who told me that there wasn't widespread enthusiasm for the designation. When I asked if she thinks the designation has had an impact on the church she said, "Nah, I don't think it's had any… I think only a handful of folks even know, let alone remember. I think more people knew that we were designated as an Earth Care Congregation than remember that we're an Earth Care Congregation. And except for the fact that Betty (another member of the Committee) and I renew the application and remind folks that we had to redo the application again, I don't think anybody ever really cared. But I think, and I think that the only reason we care is because we're in the committee!"

Joyce agreed that there wasn't a large interest in the designation outside of the committee. "I don't, I don't think people outside of the committee are interested in a name," she began. "I think that people, are, are not that, they don't care about how they're categorized. They care about what they're doing." Apart from Reverend Gurley, the statements made by members of the committee ring true throughout my interviews with those outside of the committee. When I sat down with Martin and Robert, two church, neither were aware that the church had the designation. In fact, they weren't even aware of what it meant to be an Earth Care Congregation. After explaining it to them, both seemed to agree on the importance of having the designation and supported the initiative, but interactions like these coupled with my interviews of Reverend Gurley and Joyce made it clear that the church has other priorities outside of environmental care.

This was notable even during sermons, where environmental causes were primarily mentioned in passing; frequently being included as an addition to other current events that are causes of concern for the church's congregation.

When I asked Reverend Gurley about the impact that the designation has had on the church, they said that there was much more of an internal impact than an external one. They spoke about the ways that it has inspired members of the church to better address environmental issues, giving examples of members of their grounds crew who put solar panels on the church that weren't aware of environmental action before. "Now they're mini-environmental advocates!" they said. "It's formative to the congregation, right down to our liturgy. So now I think, as we choose the confession, our liturgy and our prayer, I know now to be inclusive to environmental concerns in how we worship. So, I think we're much more internally on the journey than externally." Additionally, Reverend Gurley states that the church's use of refusal to use single-use plastics and dishware during their events has led to some members realizing that they can reduce their own usage of plastic and paper items in favor of reusable items.

However, Elizabeth also emphasized that the congregation does care about the designation, even if they don't think much about it presently. "If Betty and I stop filling out the application, or if we stop doing enough stuff to have enough points that we'll lose it. And no one will notice until someone up one day, out of nowhere, will say 'aren't we an Earth Care Congregation?' And someone will say, 'well we haven't had anyone do the application.' And the someone will say, 'Well why not?' And then we'll like, wrap ourselves on the fingers and say, 'we better do this.' And then we'll go back to it and when we do it, we'll do it with the kind of faire that this kind of congregation will embrace. Like 'we can't not do this!' And then we'll start all over again and we'll become the most Earth care centered congregation that there is."

This statement was interesting since it stands out from the rest of the data that I gathered. There must be some members of the congregation who are aware of the church's affiliation with the Earth Care designation. However, these members may be in the minority of the church. Since the values of the designation resonate broadly with the members of the church, this minority of church members would likely be able to sway the unknowing majority into becoming more invested in the designation.

This lack of interest in the designation could be a symptom of the negative effects that leaving this kind of action exclusively to experts can create. My interview with Reverend Gurley shows that including experts in the committee is one of the positives aspects of the designation. They state that this allows for those most knowledgeable in environmental issues to take the reins and steer the church in a more sustainable direction. Drawing on Weberian (1921, 1922) understandings of bureaucracy, this is a key element of modern bureaucratic systems. By placing experts in positions of power, the efficiency of bureaucratic regimes can be increased resulting in a greater output of the desired outcomes. This is in line with the statements made by Reverend Gurley, since putting experts in positions of power regarding the bureaucracy created by the designation results in more impactful environmental action to take place in the church.

However, as previously stated, this can also be a downside to the designation. Despite the congregation's support for the designation's ideals, the dominance of experts in the decision-making process may lead to the disassociation of the congregation with the Earth Care label. This may partly be because it plays little impact on their lives. The congregation isn't impacted by reapplying for the label or by the committee's projects like putting solar panels on the church's roof. I presume this leads to the congregation largely ignoring the designation for aspects of the church that they feel makes a greater impact on their own lives.

This lack of interest of the designation may also be why Memorial has chosen to focus on more social justice oriented projects rather than environmental-based projects. By doing work that the congregation feels is more tangible to their everyday lives and produce results that impact them in the present day rather than slowly in the years to come, the congregation is able to feel more passionate about the work the church does. This is why they choose to work on a housing project that's renovation is environmentally friendly rather than taking on more major environmental challenges that could be more sustainable in the long run. The positive emotions the congregation feels regarding the housing project are more impactful to their positions towards the church rather than when they installed solar panels to power the church, since housing people feels more immediate.

Patterns of Renewal

Central to the Earth Care designation is its desire to "restore creation." (PCUSA) This central theme implies two things: that themes of renewal are central to the designation, and the importance of "creation" in Earth Care theology. Based on the official PCUSA document regarding the designation, Creation can be defined as a term that encompasses both the environment and humanity, linking the two together as both important because of their connection as God's creation. The focus of the designation, then, becomes interested not just in environmental sustainability but also in how the church can create projects that benefit humanity as well.

Patterns of renewal can be seen throughout Memorial's worldview. One of the reasons why some of my informants value having a socially charged church is because they see it as an alternative to making change through secular political means. Two of my informants, Elizabeth and Joyce, both members of the Earth Care Committee, were at one point practicing political

activism by focusing their attention on secular organizations. Now, they use Memorial as their avenue for creating social change.

Elizabeth told me that the church can provide a different avenue for creating change that politics can't. "I had had some personal struggle with the politics of the country. And I literally left politics to go back to the church," she said. "Because I know the church were the people of God with nothing but good intentions. And so, I'm backed here because politics is really kind of all screwed up. But you know what, I can't not do it (laughs)!" Her perspectives towards politics, which are at least partly shaped by her past association with black nationalism, led her to feel alienated by our political system. However, she was able to use her faith to not only find refuge, but also to find an avenue for her to create change outside of politics. This would explain why she found herself drawn to work on the Memorial Presbyterian Church's Earth Care Committee.

She expands on this saying, "I used to think politics was the place that you go and make the world what you thought it should be. And in my maturity, what I've learned about how that doesn't work in politics is that the church is where you go to be who you are to be that influences the politics that you're a part of." She notes a separation that she learned from when she was younger, and she believed that politics was about doing the right thing. Now, however, she believes that being Christian is being right and that rightness is what should dictate her politics. "In politics, I was always right," she says. "In the church, I leave it to God, and he'll figure it out." Her desire to "leave it to God" is another way that Joyce displays divine command morality, as she is following what she sees as God's commands when she approaches politics.

Joyce made similar statements in regard to the relationship of churches and politics. She told me that one of the appeals of having the Earth Care designation is that it creates a different feel for political activism. "The power of the faith community is in the justice part. Because the

awareness is more likely to be with people who believe that every human life is valuable. and that there are certain communities that have been underinvested and disinvested in green infrastructure and clean air and clean water and that we have a moral obligation to try to right those wrongs. I think that is a very powerful role that the faith community can play in the space of environment and environmental advocacy in mitigating climate change. They're doing important and great work but they're not the-the whole equity and justice is not centered the way that it is with faith communities." She notes that she's seen this more in places of faith with sustainability initiatives rather than in secular organizations trying to achieve similar environmental goals. This may include organizations that she has been involved with and worked alongside throughout her political career.

Both of these examples show the way that the church can provide its members with their own form of renewal. Elizabeth and Joyce both became disillusioned with secular political organizing and instead saw activism through the church as being not only preferential but beneficial. By doing so, both of them see a renewal in their own activist identities, one that is connected to their spiritual identities. Also, because of the Earth Care designation, both Elizabeth and Joyce are able to use it as an avenue for creating the types of changes that they want to see throughout the community.

The designation has also led to members of the church seeing changes in their personal lives. In particular, some members of the church have begun to embrace more sustainable ways of living because of the church's new focus on environmental care (a renewed identity as environmentalists if you will). Elizabeth is one of my informants that made this claim. "I think it has helped me to educate myself on what more I could do," she tells me. "When I came to Memorial, I thought that I was doing okay. Which is why I joined the committee for Earth Care.

And what Memorial has done for me is it has allowed me to become more educated on how much more I could do." She mentions a recent event that the church's committee hosted on how certain banks can contribute to pollution and why we should disinvest our money from them. "I never would have thought of that. Only Memorial would have had me think 'you know, there's some real responsibility there.'" She added that the church helped her to make more sustainable lifestyle choices, from which banks she works with, to making sure she brings recycling bins to the church meetings.

Elizabeth tells me that she has outgrown the spiritual worldview that places her in a position of power over the earth. She said that this was something that she believed when she was younger. But as she grew older and matured, her perspective started to change. This can be seen in how her definition for the word 'dominion' has changed. "Although I appreciate dominion as it relates to a responsibility for how I can cause damage, but I do not recognize dominion as a responsibility that makes me bigger than earth itself," she says.

"How I think of the earth is a kind of awesome reverence for how God shows up in the world," Elizabeth says. "And I think that my relationship to who God is- is about loving me, and loving God, and loving everything created in that kind of spirit of worship. That makes it awesome." This perspective around God is something she says she needs within a church community, which she finds at Memorial. She notes that she doesn't believe that it is very big at Memorial but says that's okay because it doesn't need to be. "It's planted in the seeds, the hearts, and the loves of how we love and that that's what love is," she says.

Elizabeth has a similar interpretation of the term. "I don't believe it. I don't believe that God gave us dominion over the earth," she tells me. "I believe he gave us responsibility for things that we can do things about, but I do not believe that." She notes that her definition for the word has

changed over time. “I used to believe that dominion meant that I had a responsibility to do things for the earth that was more valuable than it could do for itself. But I no longer believe that” she begins. “My definition of dominion now is that I have a dominion over my relationship to things that honors God in everything. And in honoring him, I put forth a sense of love for it all. He loved me and I love it. And that is the dominion that I call now ‘responsibility.’ And it’s vast! It’s huge!” She notes that this perspective change turns “dominion” from an idea that places humanity above all nature to one where humanity is equal to all things. She notes that fruit, the air, and the sun all provide us with the things we need to survive. This places us in reliance on all things and, thus, not above anything else in nature. “So, there is a dominion that is a shared existence. And if I don’t know that relationship as dominion then I sell short who God’s created me to be” she concludes.

Joyce also notes that there is a command to protect the natural world and life as a whole, but that she doesn’t like the term “dominion.” She equates this with a white savior colonialism where a group of people believe themselves to be superior to others and it becomes their responsibility to save those inferior from harm. Instead, she thinks that there needs to be a symbiotic relationship between man and nature. “To me it implies a different power structure than I would like to see when we work with nature,” she says. “I do think that we need to be a little more humble and respectful in the way we manage the natural environment.” Her association of dominion with white savior worldviews is also interesting in that it shows another connection between social justice and sustainability, further noting her environmental justice perceptions.

One of the most notable ways that the church approaches renewal, however, is with the housing project that they are currently working on. When I sat down with Reverend Gurley to talk, they told me about this project in quite a bit of detail. They talked about how they have

building on their property, right next to the main chapel, that hasn't been in use for some time. This is easily apparent to anyone who would see the building, as it has become overgrown with vegetation. They told me that the church decided to renovate the building and turn it into an affordable housing complex called "Easter Suites," a name that was chosen not just to represent their Christian faith, but also because a slave on the founder's plantation was named Easter.

The inspiration for the project comes from the church's belief that Christ calls on his followers to show concern for the impoverished. They saw the opportunity to act on this belief with this building since it wasn't in use. The church wanted to turn the building into a housing unit that could benefit impoverished people in the city, so they began working out how to go about doing it. They spoke to architects to figure out the steps they'll have to take and the cost of everything. They were even given a donation from another church that they have close connections with in order to start funding the project. Reverend Gurley has said that the project cost around $6 million and they have been trying to raise as much money for it as they can.

Part of why the project is so costly, though, is because they are choosing to renovate the building instead of tearing it down and building a brand new one. Reverend Gurley noted that it would've been cheaper for them to have torn it down, but he says this would've had a bigger environmental impact. They found this alternative as a way to appeal to their values of environmental justice fueled by their sense of righteousness. If they were to take the cheaper option that causes more environmental harm, then they would be betraying their value of righteousness, since they believe God calls his followers to care for the environment.

The Easter Suites project is a notable way the church attempts to renew creation through environmental justice initiatives. The construction of the project is done in a way that will reduce the pollution committed by the church. They are intentionally taking steps to ensure that the

building's renovation is done in a way that won't increase the church's carbon footprint. Additionally, the project is designed to provide alternative, affordable housing for community members of low socio-economic status. This latter intention further cements the project as one of renewal, by having the possibility of giving future tenants a chance at renewing their own lives by providing them stable, affordable housing. Both of these intentions, then, lead to the project becoming a means of renewing creation, both at an environmental and humanitarian level.

Patterns of renewal can be found throughout Memorial Presbyterian Church, both at the institutional and individual levels. The Earth Care designation has had an impact on the instances of renewals occurring within the church. The designation has led to the creation of projects that promote the healing and renewal of both the earth and humanity, such as with the notable Easter Suites housing project which aims to help people of low socio-economic status and is planned so the renovation will not increase the church's carbon footprint. Additionally, members of the church have seen their own renewals through the church that have been influenced by the designation. Some members of the church, including some of my informants, have become more environmentally conscious since taking on the designation, and the designation has allowed them to use the church as an alternative to secular social change. These instances provide individuals with a renewal of their own identities as activists as they now have new methods for seeing themselves as drivers of social change.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The Earth Care designation is an interesting component of the Memorial Presbyterian Church's institution. Even though the designation could be assumed as being environmentally focused, it is used by Memorial as an avenue for embracing social justice activism over environmental activism. This is because the designation is focused on creation care, which both the PCUSA and members of Memorial define as involving humans as well as the environment. To promote these values, the church has created projects that focus on both environmental stewardship as well as social justice, such as the Easter's Suites housing project. They also justify their actions through biblical passages and use language that connects these passages to their definition of creation care. These examples provide a space for the church to promote one of the designations central tenets of "healing creation" as well as foster a sense of renewal throughout the church, by giving individuals an opportunity to renew their identities as activists through the demands of the designation.

Despite the influence the designation has had on the church, the designation seems to largely go unnoticed in the congregation. Those I spoke to not directly associating themselves with Memorial's Earth Care Committee are unaware that the designation exists. This may partly be in response to the bureaucratic structure of the designation that places experts in decision-making positions. This leads to the congregation feelings dissociated from the designation because the committee and the projects they influence seem distant to their everyday lives.

This dissociation could be impactful on the decision-making process that the church uses to determine what work should be done. Since the congregation may be more interested in achievements that are more tangible to their daily lives, finding ways to incorporate environmentalism into social justice projects creates more passion towards the work that the

church is doing. Focusing purely on environmental projects, such as when they installed solar panels, may lead to a degree of alienation among the congregation to the work being done over time. However, finding ways to incorporate environmentally friendly actions into the church's social justice work can help maintain a passion towards the work the church is doing, since these results feel more immediate and impactful in the present day. This shows that the designation is a pragmatic tool for creating the kind of social change that Memorial Presbyterian Church believes is important to their theology.

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APPENDIX: PROJECTS AND PROMISES

List of projects that occurred during my time in Memorial:

1. Easter Suites
2. Marching in the Charlotte Pride Parade
3. Monthly reparations collections that were donated to a local organization funding black musicians.
4. Collaborations with organizations and people that helps to provide resources for homeless people in Charlotte.
5. Video project to raise awareness of their solar panel installation.
6. Hosted classes and seminars about racism through Memorial's Anti-Racism Council.
7. Hosted a seminar on how banking can be environmentally damaging.
8. Host support groups for addiction, grief, etc.
9. Collaborated with the Catawba Cultural Center for a visit.

List of promises from Memorial's last ECC Application

1. "Continue to develop ministry with Indigenous People. Worship Celebration for Faith Climate Week."
2. "Church website still needs to be updated. Success of previous fair to be duplicated at All Church Retreat."
3. "Look at earthcare opportunities in gardens and grounds."
4. "Continue to encourage participation in [Eco-Church] events and citywide [Memorial] clean-ups."