


Mobilising towards environmental sustainability – challenges and chances for churches in Germany

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The current ecological crisis is considered a major challenge for humanity. Various scholars suggest that Christian congregations may contribute to the changes of mind-set and behaviour necessary to meet this challenge. The article presents the results of an empirical study on how Protestant congregations in Germany deal with this issue. Data were collected in an online survey and group discussions with members of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD), the Free Evangelical Church (FeG) and the Gnadau movement. The study showed that the environmental awareness of church members is similar to the population in general. Major pragmatic obstacles to mobilise congregations for environmental sustainability were the (1) views that it may compete with other tasks of the congregation, (2) that church members may feel excluded and (3) the lack of knowledge and competence regarding this topic. However, creation care was seen as a bridge to the community which allows the congregation to engage with people outside the church. The study shows which issues need to be addressed for Christian congregations to play a more active role in creation care.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The research is concerned with church management fostering ecologically sustainable practices and is situated in the discipline of practical theology. As church management is based on the understanding of the mission of the church it is linked to ecclesiology. The practice of local congregations may have effects on the general public and can therefore be studied from a sociological perspective as well as in development studies.

Keywords: sustainability; environment; creation care; awareness; churches; Germany; mission; exclusion.

Introduction

Nowadays, it is widely accepted by scientists and the general public that climate change, loss of biodiversity and the depletion of natural resources are major challenges for humanity and that a transformation of our lifestyles and economic system is inevitable. Religious bodies as part of civil society may play an important role in this process. In recent years, this issue has been addressed by theologians and leaders of various churches. In Christian churches, concerns for environmental protection and sustainable lifestyles are often summarised in the term 'creation care'. Local Christian congregations have the potential of promoting the necessary transformation towards more sustainable societies.

This article gives an introduction on the concept of sustainable development and how churches have been relating to it. The main focus is an empirical study on the concern and practice of local Protestant congregations in Germany regarding creation care and sustainable development. The study shows which issues need to be addressed for Christian congregations to play a more active role in promoting sustainable development.

Literature review and theoretical framework

This section gives an overview of the concepts dealt with in this study, particularly, the concept of sustainable development and how it has been taken up by Christian churches.

Note: Special Collection: Sustainable leadership in times of uncertainty.

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Sustainable development

Since the publication of the report 'The limits to growth' in 1972, commissioned by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972), the idea of unlimited economic growth has increasingly been questioned. In 1987, the report 'Our common Future' by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland-Commission) advocated a sustainable development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987). While this statement has been criticised of been vague regarding the definition of needs and what is to be sustained (Redclift 2014:333–334), it has been widely used as a definition of sustainability. Since then, various conferences have been concerned with the issue. One such conference, the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Agenda 21 adopted at the conference calls for fighting 'poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems' which is primarily the responsibility of governments, but shall also involve 'the non-governmental organizations and other groups' (UN 1993:ch.1). While religious institutions are not explicitly mentioned, non-governmental organisations are recognised to offer 'a global network that should be tapped' to 'activate a sense of common purpose on behalf of all sectors of society' (UN 1993:27.2+3). The issues mentioned in the Agenda 21 have been taken up in the Sustainable Development Goals passed by the UN General Assembly in 2015. The sustainable development goal 17 (SDG 17) aims to 'strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development' by encouraging and promoting 'effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships' (UN s.a.).

As already outlined in the Brundtland report, sustainable development is considered to involve economic, environmental and social aspects. Economically it aims at 'economic growth, reducing inequality and poverty eradication', the environmental aspect is concerned with 'ensuring the protection and renewal of natural resources and environmental heritage', while the social aspect involves 'social interactions, relationships, behavioural patterns and values of humanity' (Duran et al. 2015:809–810). Thus, the move towards sustainability involves various actors, such as governments and international organisations, the economy, the civil society (including religious bodies) and individuals.

Christian churches and sustainable development

The Christian churches started to engage with the issue of environmental degradation and sustainability quite early. At its general assembly in 1983 in Vancouver, the World Council of Churches (WCC) started a 'conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation' (JPIC) (Schmitthenner 1998:35) which was implemented by its member churches. As the topic became more dominant in the public discourse, the issue has been addressed by theologians and leaders of various churches, such as Pope Francis (2015), the Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew (Bartholomew 2015), the World Council of Churches (WCC Executive Committee 2019), the

World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement (WEA & Lausanne Movement 2012).

In Germany in particular, the mainline regional protestant churches (previously known as the state churches) in the various states were engaged in the conciliar process for JPIC. The Protestant Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland – EKD) as the umbrella organisation of the regional churches has a board for sustainable development which produced various materials on the topic, among them a study entitled 'that they may have life and abundance' (EKD 2009, 2015, 2018). The conference of Roman-Catholic bishops in Germany issued various statements on climate change and energy (DBK 1980, 2007, 2011). Both the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic churches in Germany are also involved in programmes that promote sustainable and fair church management. They include among others the 'Green Rooster' and the 'Eco-fair Church'.¹ Thus, the mainline churches in Germany, as part of the civil society, have been engaged in promoting sustainable development as recommended in the UN documents mentioned above. In various free churches in Germany, working groups have been dealing with the issue; however, they did not produce major public statements.

While there are various examples of how churches engage with the issue on international, national or regional levels, the study presented in this article is concerned with the role of local Protestant congregations in Germany.

As various scholars have stated (Haluza-DeLay 2014; Römpke 2021:286; Vogt 2012:156), Christian congregations may contribute to the changes of mind-set and behaviour necessary for sustainable development. Churches are groups with their own social norms and may act in a collective way (Fritsche, Barth & Reese 2021:236f) to impact their adherents' worldviews and practices and may also influence the public sphere beyond their congregation (Haluza-DeLay 2014). Stierle (2018:190) quotes various scholars who indicate that values and spirituality may be an important resource for a transformation to sustainable societies and states that as behaviour depends on the attitudes that guide a person and give support, religions and churches can contribute to the new global partnership proclaimed by the SDGs (p. 199, translation by the author). While Blühdorn (2020:103) observes, in the western societies, an emancipation of a second order, which 'sets free from responsibilities, obligations, limitations and principles', Christian congregations expect their members to adhere to values backed by biblical teaching and may thus influence their attitudes and behaviour.

Regarding the positions and views of the Christian congregation on issues relating to the environment, climate change and sustainable development, a number of studies have been conducted in North America (e.g. Haluza-DeLay 2008; Peifer et al. 2014). The Canadian sociologist, Haluza-DeLay, identified

1. More information: <https://www.kircheundklima.de/der-gruene-hahn/>, <https://oekofaire-kirche.de/>, see also: <https://ecochurch.ch/>, www.gemeinde-n.de.

a set of obstacles and opportunities for churches engaging the environment. He differentiates paradigmatic, applicability, critical, and conviction obstacles and subcultural, motivational and public-theology opportunities (Haluzá-DeLay 2008). These categories were used in discussing the data presented here.

Little empirical research is available on how members of Christian congregations in Germany perceive the issues of ecological sustainability. To fill this gap, an empirical study was conducted by the Academy for Christian Leadership in Germany (www.acf.de) to explore how Christian congregations and their members are engaged in creation care and which factors may support or hinder such an engagement. Some results of the study have already been published previously (Kroeck 2021, 2022).

Research methods

The results presented in this article originated from a study conducted in 2020 and 2021. It used a mixed-method approach with a quantitative online survey with over 900 participants and qualitative focus group discussions with members of 13 local congregations. Details on the sampling and data collection are given below.

Sampling

To find participants for the online survey, church federations and local congregations of various denominations (e.g. Lutheran, Roman Catholic and various free churches) were approached directly by e-mail. In the second phase, the link to the survey was also distributed through various Christian networks. For comparing different local congregations only congregations with a minimum response from four individual members were considered. The characteristics of the sample are given in Table 1. As the survey was available in the Internet, the number of participants was not limited to a predetermined sample.

For the focus group discussions, congregations that responded to the online survey or that were known to the researcher were contacted. All congregations that were willing to participate were included in the sample. The congregations were asked to invite a cross-section of their members to the discussions. Thus, convenience sampling

was applied. In each discussion, five to ten members of the different congregations participated. The age and educational level of the participants was comparable to the respondents of the online survey. Like most participants of the survey, these congregations were also mostly located in the western part of Germany.

The survey was aimed at the whole spectrum of Christian congregations in Germany. However, the response came mainly from three denominations:

- Mainline protestant churches (previously known as the state church) in the various regions, which are part of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD).
- Free Evangelical Churches (FEG) which emerged from revival movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
- The Gnadau movement which has its roots in the German pietism of the 17th century and the revival movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is an umbrella organisation of various regional associations of congregations, as well as theological seminars, mission agencies, etc. While they are independent of the mainline churches, a majority of their adherents are also members of the EKD churches.

Survey

The topics of the survey covered environmental awareness, characteristics of the congregations, reasons for or against involvement in nature conservation and demographic data. The questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions. Some of the topics mentioned in the open questions were also surveyed using Likert-type scales. A number of items were taken from the representative study of the Federal Ministry for Environment on environmental awareness in Germany (BMU 2019). It provides information on the environmental awareness of the German population. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

For the results presented in this article, information was used from congregations from which at least four responses were received and which belong to the above-mentioned denominations (EKD, FeG and Gnadau). In the case of the congregations of the Protestant regional churches, a

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the sample of congregations in the online survey.

Churches	Congregations					Individual respondents			
	n†	Middle-town and city (%) ‡	Importance of creation care for the congregation§			n¶	Average age	Female (%)	With high school and/or university (%)
			Below average (%)	Average (%)	Above average (%)				
EKD with certificate	7	43	0	29	71	78	54	47	64
EKD without certificate	7	43	0	71	29	44	56	55	48
FEG	12	67	42	50	8	163	50	47	72
Gnadau	13	69	15	85	0	126	51	43	78
Total	39	-	-	-	-	411	-	-	-

EKD, Evangelical Church of Germany; FeG, the Free Evangelical Church.

†, number of congregations; ‡, more than 20 000 inhabitants; §, Importance of creation care for the congregation compared to other congregations of the same denomination as perceived by the respondents; ¶, number of individual respondents.

distinction was made between those that were certified in this respect (e.g. green cock, eco-fair congregation, etc.) and those without certification. Among the participating congregations, there were no FeGs or Gnadau congregations with any such certification.

Table 1 gives an overview of the sample of congregations. Women and men were almost equally represented in the sample. The majority of the respondents had a high school diploma (A-level) or a university degree. The average age was 50 years and above. Only six of the 39 congregations were located in the eastern part of Germany (former GDR). Table 1 also shows how the respondents rated the importance of nature conservation and sustainability in their congregation compared to other congregations of the same denomination.

Focus group discussions

In the second step, 13 focus group discussions (semi-structured group interviews) were conducted in congregations from the three church denominations (EKD: 4, FeG: 4 and Gnadau: 5). These congregations were also mostly located in the western part of Germany. The age and educational level of the participants was comparable to the respondents of the online survey. Because of contact restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussions were conducted via video or telephone conferences. They lasted between 49 min and 1 h 35 min. The discussions were recorded and analysed using qualitative content analysis with deductive as well as inductive codes.

Ethical considerations

The required procedures for ethics in academic research were applied. The research was considered to be of low risk for the participants. Besides the contact data of the congregations involved, no personal data were collected. All data published were anonymised. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the survey and the group discussions. The research was approved by the leadership of the Akademie für christliche Führungskräfte, Gummersbach, Germany.

Results and discussion

While recognising the important role of theology and worldview regarding the concern for the environment, this article focuses on pragmatic opportunities and obstacles for the engagement of Christian churches for environmental sustainability. It presents data on the environmental awareness of church members, shows how churches are engaging and then discusses the obstacles and chances. A previously published study discussed how theology and worldview may encourage or hinder the willingness of Christians to engage in creation care. In particular, the understanding of the mission of the church, anthropology and eschatology were found to play an important role (Kroeck 2022).

Environmental awareness of church members

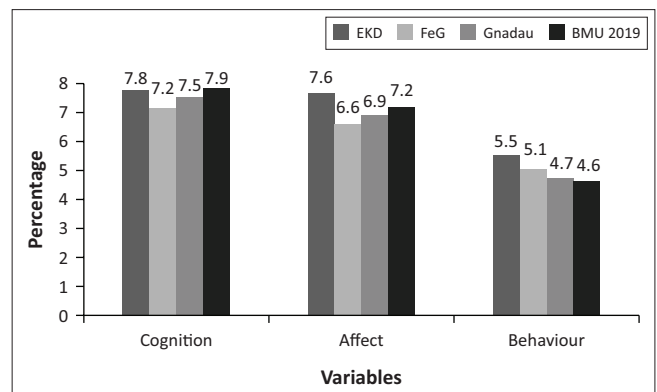
The study showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) in the survey agreed in principle that Christians and Christian congregations should care about nature conservation and ecological sustainability.

To measure the environmental awareness among the respondents, questions from the representative study conducted on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Environment and Consumer Protection (BMU 2019) were applied. The study uses the categories *environmental cognition*, which concerns evaluations of this subject, *environmental affect* related to positive and negative emotions and *environmental action* as concrete behaviour (BMU 2019:68). In general, the results for the church members were close to those of the BMU study for the population in Germany. With regard to congregational affiliation, members of the Protestant mainline church (EKD) had somewhat higher values (Figure 1).

Engagement of churches in creation care

Although the environmental awareness of church members was not below the German population (Figure 1) and the majority agreed that Christians should be involved in nature conservation, this awareness is not clearly discernible on the level of Christian congregations. To the open question 'How is creation care visible in your congregation?' half of the congregation stated that it was not visible. This may indicate that this topic is not in view, or that the respondents were dissatisfied with the commitment of their congregations in this regard. Among the FeGs and Gnadauer, this was the case in about three quarters of the congregations and among protestant mainline congregations without eco-certification, this was one-third. It was not mentioned in congregations with certification.

Nevertheless, for all congregations, some indicators for environmental concern were mentioned. In most congregations, the worship service, using fair trade or sustainable products (mostly Fair trade coffee) and reducing energy consumption were mentioned. Other aspects, such as reducing the use of



Source: BMU, 2019, *Umweltbewusstsein in Deutschland 2018: Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Bevölkerungsumfrage*, Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit (BMU), Berlin.

EKD, Evangelical Church of Germany; FeG, the Free Evangelical Church.

FIGURE 1: Parameters of environmental awareness (respondents with average interest in creation care).

cars, seminars on the topic or swap meets for second-hand clothes were mentioned less often. Generally, more aspects of creation care activities were mentioned in the EKD churches. The avoidance of disposable tableware at congregational events, the correct separation of waste and the personal lifestyle of church members were mentioned more often in FeGs and Gnadau congregations. Promoting biodiversity on the church premises and the sale of Fair Trade products play a role mainly in certified congregations. These results were also confirmed by the discussion groups in the congregations.

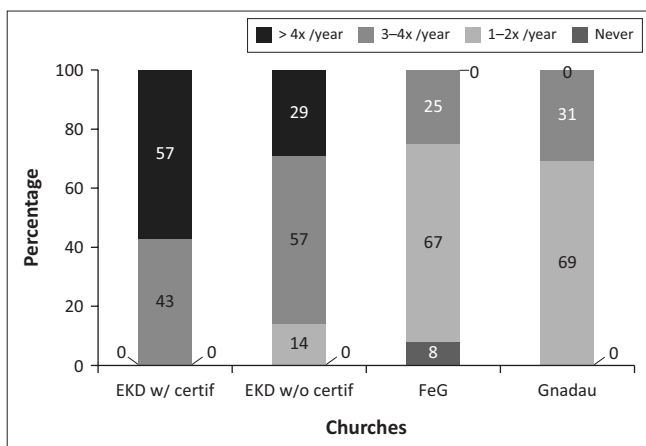
Some of the topics mentioned in the open question were also surveyed using scales. In most congregations, the topic is occasionally addressed in worship services. However, there were clear differences in the frequency (Figure 2). In the majority of FeGs and Gnadau congregations, the topic was only addressed once or twice a year, compared to three or more times in the congregations of the mainline churches (EKD).

Reducing energy consumption in the buildings seems to be a concern in all congregations. This probably has to do with the fact that it can often also reduce operating costs. This concern

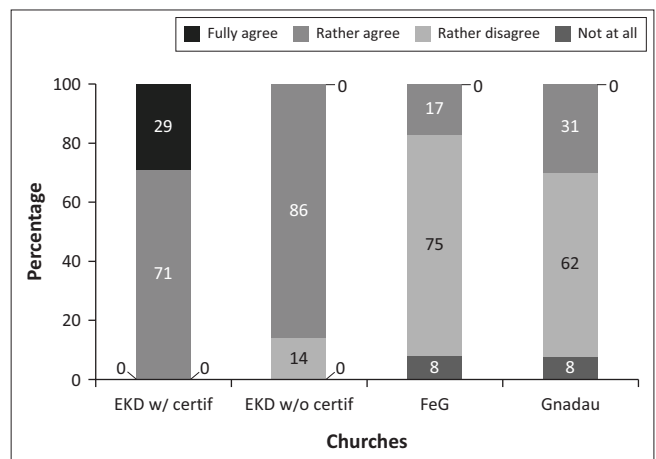
seems to get special attention in the certified EKD congregations (Figure 3). Several of the certification programmes require the monitoring and reduction of energy consumption.

As shown in Figure 4, the promotion of biodiversity on congregational properties is mainly a concern of the congregations of the mainline churches. The same applies to the promotion of sustainable mobility such as using bicycles or public transportation (Figure 5). However, this aspect does not seem to be of particular importance in any of the congregations studied. With regard to this question, it should also be noted that Free Evangelical and Gnadau congregations often cover a larger area than mainline church congregations and their members are therefore more dependent on the use of cars to attend church events.

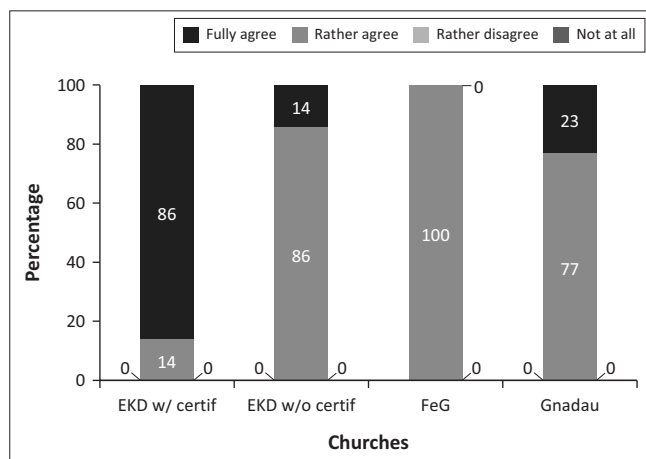
The activities related to creation care mentioned most frequently were addressing the topic in the worship service, the use of fair trade products and saving energy. These activities do not require major changes, as preaching on the creation is often linked to the traditional Sunday of harvest thanksgiving, the use of fair trade products is often limited to coffee and a major concern for saving energy is economic



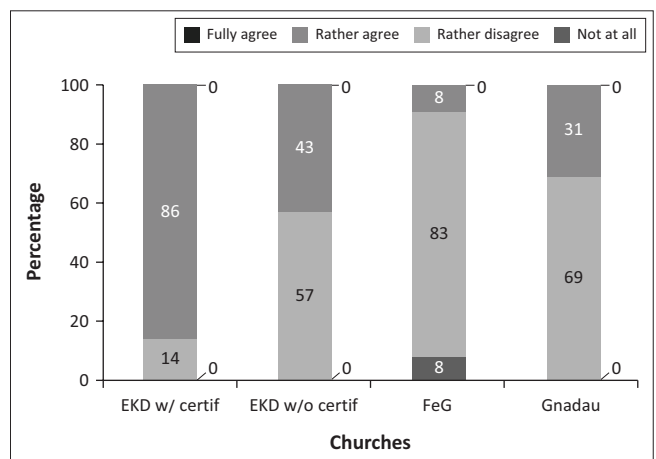
EKD, Evangelical Church of Germany; FeG, the Free Evangelical Church.
FIGURE 2: Frequency of addressing creation care in sermons (survey, percentage of congregations).



EKD, Evangelical Church of Germany; FeG, the Free Evangelical Church.
FIGURE 4: Promoting biodiversity on the church premises (survey, percentage of congregations).



EKD, Evangelical Church of Germany; FeG, the Free Evangelical Church.
FIGURE 3: Reducing the energy consumption (survey, percentage of congregations).



EKD, Evangelical Church of Germany; FeG, the Free Evangelical Church.
FIGURE 5: Promoting sustainable mobility (survey, percentage of congregations).

reasons. Regarding waste management, avoiding the use of disposable dishes and separating waste are common practices in Germany. These actions may be considered symbolic behaviour or a single action bias (Von Bronswijk, Komm & Zobel 2021:129) which may help to make people feel better but have only a limited effect for promoting sustainability.

The study showed obvious differences between the denominations. In general, congregations belonging to the mainline regional protestant churches (EKD) were more actively engaged in creation care. Congregations that were certified as eco or fair trade were only found in this denomination. As major social actors, the regional protestant churches have a history of addressing political issues, including environmental policy, like those addressed in the conciliar process for JPIC. They also have the necessary resources to work on these topics and to develop and implement statements, concepts and programmes. The FeGs and the Gnadau movement focus less on a political impact on society, but rather call individuals to conversion and a spiritual renewal, which should then also become visible in changed behaviour. Because they are organised in a rather decentralised way and have considerably fewer staff, they also lack the resources to work on socio-political issues.

The article now considers the pragmatic obstacles and chances for creation care in churches.

Pragmatic obstacles and chances for creation care

The study also provides insights into reasons for and arguments against a commitment to creation care. As mentioned above, the reasons based on theology and worldviews have been discussed in a previous study (Kroeck 2022). The creation mandate (Gn 2:15), the commandment to love one's neighbour and to provide a sustainable environment for future generations were all mentioned as motivational factors for creation care, while a one-sided spiritual understanding of mission, trust in the sovereignty of God, an eschatological understanding of a discontinuity and the fear of nature worship were identified as obstacles.

In the online survey and the group discussions, a number of issues were mentioned, which can be considered as pragmatic obstacles. They were the following: competition with other tasks for limited financial and staff resources, the fear of excluding church members, lack of knowledge and competence, and inertia.

Competition with other tasks

The most frequently mentioned obstacle for congregations to engage in creation care, both in the online survey and in the group discussions, is a competition with other aspects of the mission of the church, in particular with spiritual tasks (e.g. evangelism and spiritual nurture) and caring for humans (e.g. diaconia). If the mission of the church is understood primarily in these terms, a concern for the environment may

distract from it. This competition was seen particularly in terms of time and money. The costs of investments in sustainable technologies (e.g. heating systems) and of purchasing sustainable and fair trade products were often mentioned. This plays a role especially for congregations that are financed mainly or exclusively by donations but was also seen as an obstacle by mainline congregations, which receive a major part of their funding through the church tax. The limited time of full-time or volunteer workers was also seen as an obstacle. However, it must also be noted that some respondents did not see a competition between creation care and other activities of the church and considered it an integral part of its mission and saw opportunities to overcome this dichotomy.

In his typology of obstacles and opportunities, Haluza-DeLay (2008) calls these:

[A]pplicability obstacles [which] are conflicts over the appropriate amount of attention to give environmental concerns. [...] Expressions of this obstacle include prioritizing evangelism or charity-work as more important than social justice, or the claim that religion has no place in the public sphere. (p. 75)

Von Bronswijk et al. (2021) include them under 'perceived risks' as financial, temporal and psychological or social risks (pp. 127–128). This pragmatic obstacle is thus closely linked to the theological understanding of the congregation's mission, which has been discussed in a previous study (Kroeck 2022).

To deal with the concern of higher expenses, it may be useful to identify areas in which considerable improvements can be made at reasonable costs. The congregation may start with low-cost but relatively effective measures and then add others later. Some measures, such as using energy more efficiently or even producing their own electricity may save money in the long run. While it is good to improve step by step, congregations should avoid becoming a victim of the 'single action bias' (Hagedorn & Peter 2021:193) by being satisfied with a few actions that only have a very limited impact.

Fear of excluding church members

Another obstacle that was mentioned in almost all discussion groups is the different attitudes of church members and the danger of excluding people who are less concerned about creation care or who are not willing to change their behaviour towards more sustainability. In all three denominations, it was pointed out that congregational members cover a wide spectrum in terms of their attitudes towards these issues. The personal freedom of opinion of the individual members and the acceptance of different opinions are important values in the congregations.

Both in the online survey and the discussion groups, some respondents described these topics as being too political. Since the topics are politically occupied, there is a fear that the congregations may lose their political neutrality if they

would take a firmer position regarding the ecological crisis. This concerns both the relationship towards the general public, as well as towards their own members. Therefore, the participants consider it important to accept different views in the congregation instead of judging members who are less concerned with creation care or imposing expectations and concepts on them.

The fear of excluding church members is in contrast to what Haluza-DeLay calls subcultural opportunities. He states that 'Churches promote dialogue and engagement with issues and important life questions through study and fellowship groups' (Haluza-DeLay 2008:76). Churches promote certain values among their members. While this seems to be accepted regarding issues such as the observance of Sunday, use of drugs or sexual ethics, there is a fear that environmental ethics may cause divisions. Dealing with this obstacle would involve a focus on biblical teaching regarding this topic and a positive approach that connects it to worshipping the creator and enjoying his creation and offers suitable strategies to deal with the problem (Beyerl 2021:364), rather than negatively focusing on unsustainable behaviour.

Lack of knowledge and competence, inertia

Lack of knowledge and competence were mentioned as obstacles mainly in the discussions in FeG and Gnadau congregations. This concerns three levels: the understanding of ecological processes and their threats, the knowledge of possible options for action and the skills necessary for their implementation. The fact that a lack of knowledge and competence was mentioned less frequently by mainline congregations may be related to the fact that in this denomination, there are numerous institutions and programmes that provide information and support sustainable church management.

In the online survey, as in the discussion groups, members of all church denominations mentioned laziness and inertia as an obstacle to engage in creation care and for promoting sustainability. Inertia plays a role both at the personal and at the congregational level and relates to the lack of willingness to engage with these issues, challenge habits and adopt new behaviour patterns. Besides being a general human condition, this inertia may also be linked to the worldview and theological positions, like a trust in God's sovereignty that substitutes personal responsibility (see Kroeck 2022).

The results of the study demonstrate the value of programmes to promote sustainable church management, such as the Green Rooster, Eco Church or Eco-Fair Church, etc. By taking stock, giving advice on how to improve sustainability, certification and regular auditing, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement are identified and the congregation's attention to these issues is kept alive. Eco Church, a project of A Rocha UK and Switzerland may be a good start, as it offers checklists for congregations to do their own stock-taking (A Rocha UK 2020; Eco Church Network 2022). They also provide a platform

for sharing experiences among churches that are on the way towards more sustainability.

No topic in the congregation

In discussion groups from all three denominations, participants stated that topics of nature conservation and sustainability are rarely addressed in the congregation. This does not seem to be because of a lack of interest on the part of church members. Even people who care about these issues rarely address them in church. It is not perceived as a topic to be discussed in the congregation. There could be various reasons for this behaviour. As discussed above, the fear of distracting from the 'real mission' of the church, of wasting limited resources and of upsetting some members of the congregation may play an important role. In many congregations included in the study, creation care and sustainability seem to have limited relevance for the mission of the church and are therefore banished to the personal sphere of life. This appeared to be the case in particular in FeGs and Gnadau congregations and may be caused by a more individualistic perspective on faith in congregations of the pietistic tradition (eds. Kröck & Rust 2022:97).

Creation care as bridge to the society

The respondents in the study also pointed to reasons why Christians should engage in creation care. Besides theological reasons, such as the biblical mandate in Genesis 2, the love of the creation and the commandment to love one's neighbour, creation care was also seen as a bridge to the society. Because climate change and nature conservation are important issues in society, some of the focus groups considered these topics to be an opportunity to start a conversation with people who have no connection to the church. In a society, where the church is considered by many as being irrelevant, a shared concern for nature could be common ground and an opportunity to work together for a common goal. The chance of using creation care as a bridge to the society can be identified as 'public-theological opportunity' which 'can constructively engage the public discourse within a pluralist society' (Haluza-DeLay 2008:77). This may be particularly important for the FeG and Gnadau congregations, which often reach only a limited segment of society.

Churches can invite the public to events organised by the congregation, such as special worship services related to creation care, seminars on sustainable lifestyles, workshops for building nesting boxes, repair cafes or second-hand markets. The congregation may also partner with other organisations conducting such activities or encourage its members to get involved in landscape clean-ups or similar public events. All these events are opportunities to cooperate and build relationships with people outside the church. This may require some hours spent by volunteers, but will not create major costs.

Such activities and cooperation may also contribute to a positive image of the local congregation or the church in

general. However, there were also voices that cautioned against dealing with these issues only for reasons of publicity, rather than out of an authentic concern. In all three denominations, the idea that a responsible approach to nature is an aspect of authentic Christianity and that Christians should be role models in this respect was discussed. In the online survey, this motive was mentioned more frequently by representatives of the FeGs and Gnadau congregations.

Conclusion

The study showed that regarding ecological sustainability, German protestant congregations and their members are close to the mainstream of society as presented by BMU (2019). There is some concern for creation care, but most congregations are not forerunners of the great transformation in society. Many of the respondents agreed that Christians should care about nature conservation and ecological sustainability and see this as part of their Christian ethos. However, there are reservations about making it a task of the congregation.

How may Christian congregations deal with the tension between these obstacles and chances? As some respondents in the study suggested, creation care must not be seen as an additional branch of work for the congregation, but rather as part and parcel of the mission of the church and being included in its various ministries.

As the value of the created order and our responsibility to take care of it is deeply rooted in biblical teaching, these aspects can be included in the regular worship services, bible studies and house groups, children and youth ministry. This creates opportunities to raise the awareness of the members and help them to reflect on their theological perspectives on these issues in particular on anthropology, soteriology and eschatology. An important step would be to understand creation care as an essential aspect of Christian action, instead of playing it off against other tasks.

As some participants in the discussion groups remarked, it is important to meet the church members where they are, instead of judging them, imposing expectations on them or creating anxiety. The focus should be on appreciation and respect for creation out of love for God the creator and on the hope of reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation in Christ. The Bible contains plenty of passages that offer such a positive perspective. Besides teaching, the topic of creation can also be included in worship services in the form of liturgy and music.

As the climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe states, 'changing minds also requires providing practical, viable, and attractive solutions' (Hayhoe 2018:943). Besides sharing personal experiences with reducing garbage and the CO₂ footprint, the congregation may demonstrate practical and attractive steps towards ecological sustainability. Managing church premises in a way that encourages more biodiversity by creating different habitats, using local perennial plants

and less frequent lawn mowing will also reduce the workload. Identifying effective and manageable solutions more sustainably will raise the awareness of self-efficacy and enable changes (Hagedorn & Peter 2021:192). If the various changes are taken up as the regular procedure, they will become a 'new normality' for individuals as well as for the whole congregation and not require much time or effort.

Involvement in creation care as a bridge to society may be an important opportunity at a time when the importance of churches in society seems to diminish. However, it needs to come from a genuine concern and should not be seen as a means to an end.

In conclusion, it is clear from this study that there are strong reasons for local congregations to play a more active role in creation care and in promoting the transformation of our societies. This may be supported by the denominational leadership, but above all, it needs committed Christians in the local congregations who find practical solutions and persistently remind the congregation of its responsibility.

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Author's contributions

T.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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