

ESSAY

Ecological Disaster and the Role of the Church in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary ecological crisis characterized by global warming and climate change is a betrayal of the good earth that God created. Human activities stemming from greed for material wealth serves as the underlying cause for the problems being faced today. This essay presents the overview of the environmental problems and ways in which this problem can be addressed by religious communities. In particular, this essay presents the ecological initiatives by the Indonesian Christian Church (Huria Kristen Indonesia – HKI). These initiatives can be categorized as two types: (1) promoting an environmental mindset among the people, and (2) promoting environmental protection and climate justice through interreligious dialogue and collaborative actions. This essay also affirms that these efforts can take place even during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Global warming, climate justice, greediness, environmental issues, ecological projects*

1. Introduction

Climate change is a global present-day disaster that all countries in the world must work together in their respective contexts to resolve. Without

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cooperation, the world will be worse off due to increasing global warming that causes climate change. Therefore, the Indonesian Christian Church (*Huria Kristen Indonesia* – HKI) is taking part in keeping the earth running well because God created it very well. This essay will discuss the issue of global warming and plastic pollution, greediness in the form of idolatry that leads to environmental destruction. It will also discuss the ecological projects which HKI Church is undertaking to help bring climate justice to the world.

2. Global Warming and Plastic Pollution

The Scripture declares that the earth's ecosystem and the creatures that God created were very good: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (NRSV; Gen 1:31-2:1). The earth initially had a balanced, comfortable, harmonious, and healthy condition suitable for occupation by human beings and other creatures. The creator, a loving God, did not create a hot, dangerous, polluted, and vicious place for God's creation. God gave the mandate to human beings to work and maintain the earth with its ideal ecosystem: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). Thus, human beings were not given the freedom to be lazy and passive figures on this earth, and indeed not to be the planet's destroyer.³ In other words, the role of human beings are never oriented to environmental destruction; rather, they are called to maintain the goodness of this earth's ecosystem. While Christian teachings say that the fall of human beings into sin (Gen 3) has led to destructive human behavior, the act of redemption of Jesus, the Son of God (Jn 3:16), has fostered reconciliation between God and human beings as well as the reconciliation between humans and creation. In this regard, in the face of climate change due to global warming, it is the task of the believers to work towards climate justice in order to restore God's creation to its initial state of well being and flourishing.

Climate change can take place either by natural processes or through human activities.⁴ Natural events such as solar energy change, ocean current movement, and so on could affect the climate on earth. However, it is

³ J.T.E. Renner, *Genesis* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1984), 33-34.

⁴ https://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/syr/en/mains.html

worth noting that natural phenomena cannot explain the changes taking place in the Earth's climate that have been observed over the past 25 years. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) in 2014 stated that the Earth's climate has been warmer and human activities significantly have caused global warming.⁵ According to the US National Academy of Sciences, climate change, which presents great risk to human life, is real and is mostly anthropogenic.⁶ The contribution of human activities to global warming can be seen in the delivery of billions of tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere every year. As much as 97% of experts agree that climate change is not only a reality but also agree that humans are the primary cause of the crisis.⁷ This crisis has presented numerous impacts to human wellbeing and environmental balance, including the following:⁸

- Hot temperatures increase the frequency, intensity, and timing of heat waves that can endanger the health of children and parents.
- Climate change also worsens water quality and increases the spread of epidemic diseases.
- Rising sea levels threaten human settlements on beaches and ecosystems.
- Changes in weather events such as long dry seasons and floods are detrimental to human property and people's lives.

Confronting the reality of the environmental crisis, there is an increasing awareness among Christians regarding their stewardship task of caring for creation as part of the overall Christian mission.⁹ The mission of the Church is theocentric because the source of the mission

⁵ R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer Eds. *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I,II,III to the Fifth Assessment Report on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Geneva: LWF Press), 2014.

⁶ National Academy of Sciences (2010). *Advancing the Science of Climate Change*, Washington, DC.

⁷ <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/science/overview.html>

⁸ Yasmine Sherif, "The Climate-education crises" *The Jakarta Post* (22 April 2021), 7.

⁹ Victor Aguilan, "Mission and Climate Justice: Struggling with God's Creation" in *Mission Still Possible?* Ed. Jochen Motte and Andar Parlindungan Pasaribu (Wuppertal: UEM, 2016), 85.

is God Himself. Thus, the mission of earth care also comes from God the Creator. The mission of providence is earth-oriented because the mission of the Church is not directed to another world but to this very world, where God continues to carry out God's work, especially to maintain the earth as a suitable place for humans and other creatures to live.¹⁰ In this regard, it is necessary to listen to the ethical statement expressed by Larry Ramussen¹¹ about faith that respects the earth. Faith that honors the earth is discipleship, calling, and practice. In other words, there is a shift in the subject from humans to nature comprehensively as a starting point. All species, earth, water, and air are good because they are all part of the planet whose existence is interrelated. God created the world and its contents in an awesome way. When all the elements of creation function in harmonious relation to one another, it demonstrates the goodness of God. The Christian calling is to maintain that goodness.

The Church needs to initiate programs to restore climate justice such as planting trees, recycling garbage, reducing waste pollution, and protecting the environment from deforestation and forest burning. Forests have an enormous influence on the earth's climate because they absorb carbon dioxide gas from the atmosphere helping to keep the earth surface cool. Forests also absorb sunlight to keep the earth from being warm. Concerning the greenhouse effect, forests also play a role in absorbing carbon dioxide while simultaneously releasing oxygen and water into the atmosphere. In fact, about 80 percent of carbon absorption occurs by forest vegetation. Because of the important role of forests in climate justice, they need to be carefully and responsibly maintained.¹²

In addition to concrete actions to protect the environment, the Church could speak out her prophetic voice on the earth's behalf.

¹⁰ Norman Habel, "Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010): 114-125.

¹¹ Larry Ramussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

¹² Erika Pardede, "Menyikapi Pemanasan Global dan Perubahan Iklim" (Attitude Towards Global Warming and Climate Change) in *Pelayan Yang Memperlengkapi Jemaat. Buku Pengucapan Syukur 25 Tahun Pelayanan Pdt. WTP Simarmata, MA (A Servant Who Equips Church Members. A Thanksgiving Book to Commemorate 25 years the Ministry of Rev. WTP Simarmata, MA)*. Eds. Nekson Simanjuntak, et.al. (Medan: PGIW Sumatera Utara, 2009), 299.

This includes supporting governmental programs to reduce the use of hazardous coolants that produce a lot of chemicals that contribute to global warming. Together with 200 other countries, the Indonesian government has supported the movement to end the use of powerful planet-warming substances in air conditioners and refrigerators. In this case, the government has set a plan to stop obtaining new production containing hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) by 2024.¹³

Another task that needs close attention is maintaining the marine ecosystem. The melting of polar ice caps and rising sea levels mean that there is a lot of coastal land entering the sea. This causes great disturbances to human settlements and livelihoods of fishermen and people who depend on the land to make a living. Another equally grave threat to the marine ecosystem is the abundance of garbage pollution,¹⁴ especially plastic in the ocean. The plastic which is eaten by the fish not only causes sickness to the fish but also to humans who eat the fish that they catch. Indonesia is the world's second-largest producer of plastic waste after China, which gave 187.2 million tons of plastic waste according to 2015 statistics. In the era of industry 4.0, while plastic constitutes 80 percent of the waste made by humans, only 9 percent of that amount can be recycled. The Church must advocate the reduction of plastic use, such as for shopping and for buying drinking water. This practice, fortunately, has been applied at HKI Church Head Office and followed by many HKI Churches.

3. Greed Is Idolatry

The environmental crisis is the consequence of sinful behavior stemming from human greed to exploit nature. In the Indonesian context, this greed can be seen in the forest fires every year in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. In the Bible, gluttony is deemed as an idolatry (Col 3:5) and was expressed in the form of worshiping material objects such as statues made of wood and stone. The prophets rebuked

¹³ Hans Nicholas Jong, "RI agrees to quit using hazardous coolants". *The Jakarta Post* (19 October 2016), 1.

¹⁴ See "Our Ocean Conference 2018, Bali, 29-30 October 2018", *The Jakarta Post* (1 November 2018), 3.

the practice of idol worship, that is, worshiping inanimate objects created by human hands (Hos 10:1-8; Isa 56:6-13; Jer 10:1-10). In the New Testament, the concept of idols is shifted from worshiping concrete objects to worshiping abstract objects by submitting human lives to the pursuit of money or mammon. The Bible forbids people to serve mammon (Mt 6:24; Lk16:13), which represents all forms of worldly treasure or money. While mammon in itself is a neutral object, it can be used by Belial or Satan (2 Cor 6:15) to draw humans away from God and to cause harm to others. The problem of climate change is fundamentally related to the pursuit of money, which according to 1 Timothy 6:10, is the root of all evil. The Bible thus, calls on the faithful to avoid being corrupted and trapped in the bondage of evil by serving God alone (Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30).¹⁵

Greed for money can be seen in the extraordinary annual forest fires in Indonesia, especially on the island of Sumatra. The poisonous smoke from the forest fires has become a health disaster not only within the country but also in neighboring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Because of the enormous amount of CO₂ emitted from the forest fires, residents have fallen ill and children have died due to shortness of breath. The existence of these fires, in addition to bringing about enormous environmental and health tolls, has also negatively impacted the nation's image in the eyes of the international community. Unfortunately, the effort to curb the fires has failed because even when the perpetrators are caught, the cost of punishment is not severe enough to discourage them from setting the fires. It is easier for companies to give bribes to get out of the heavy legal snares. Consequently, every year there are forest fires and there are always arrests, but the problem never stops. The forest fires are intended to open oil palm plantations that suck much water and make the earth warmer. As a result of this environmentally destructive behavior, several European countries have decided to boycott Indonesian palm oil.¹⁶

¹⁵ Batara Sihombing, "A Narrative Approach to God and Mammon (Matthew 6:19-34) and its Relevance to the Churches in Indonesia". *Asia Journal of Theology* 26 (2012): 37-40.

¹⁶ Tri Ananto Wicaksono, "Indonesia's Fight against the EU Palm Oil Ban" in *Geopolitical Monitor* (17 February 2021), <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/indonesias-fight-against-the-eu-palm-oil-ban/>

4. HKI Church Ecology Projects

As one of the Lutheran Churches in Indonesia, the Indonesian Christian Church (*Huria Kristen Indonesia* – HKI) was the first self-reliant Church in 1927 due to equality and nationalism reasons.¹⁷ With its head office in Pematangsiantar, the church currently has 340,000 members. The faithful come from Batak tribe background and are scattered throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The following section describes the eco-theology projects of HKI Church which is supported by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) since 2018.¹⁸

Shaping the mindset on environmental issues

To get involved in environmental issues we need to bring ecological themes to the mindset of the Church members regardless of sex, age, and background. Ecological degradation is the destruction of this earth as the home of all people. Thus, to build up a healthy and clean house or planet is the task of every individual. As a result, HKI Church has carried out training initiatives on environmental themes for the youth, Sunday school teachers, women, and pastors. The goal of the training, which started in 2018, is to increase awareness among Church members, other people of faith, and the wider community about the need to treat the earth as our common home that should be managed and maintained responsibly (Gen 2:15).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted some of our programs, we still managed to carry on with some activities. In July 2019 the Church organized a three-day workshop¹⁹ attended by 450 young people in Parapat, Simalungun District, near Lake Toba, one of Indonesia's most famous tourist destinations. The youth festival for ecological issues brought together young people from local parishes to

¹⁷ Batara Sihombing, "Batak Churches". In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*. Ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103-104.

¹⁸ Batara Sihombing, *Shaping Mindsets, Strengthening Community*, "for the Sake of Ecology." Geneva, LWI, 2022. <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/shaping-mindsets-strengthening-community-sake-ecology>

¹⁹ Pucuk Pimpinan, *Laporan Umum ke Sinode HKI ke-63 (General Report to 63th HKI Church Synod*; Pematangsiantar: Kantor Pusat HKI, 2021), 25-26.

reflect on caring for the country's rich natural heritage. Resource persons including a health practitioner, environmental activist, and theologian explored the relationship between faith and the environment. Samosir Island, where Lake Toba is located, was also the venue of the cycling for justice campaign, in which university students ride to the island on bicycles and learn about the local culture and traditions.

The other program was a youth camp in which young people from other regions stayed with HKI congregation members in the Sigaul village, Tobasa District, in order to gain skills on being peace bearers for a just climate. A group of nearly 50 young people spent three days with their hosts who led them in Bible studies related to environmental issues, field exposure, and personal reflections. The goal was to enable the youth to critically connect ecology to politics, economy, social and cultural dimensions, to ecumenism, and religious diversity. Around 40 percent of Indonesia's city dwellers do not have access to efficient waste management services. Concerning this, on 3-5 June 2019, the HKI eco-theology program organized the youth in Pematangsiantar to clean the streets and marketplaces as a way of encouraging joint efforts to keep the city clean and healthy. If the youth have a good mindset on the environment, it would be a good capital to maintain human and environmental well being because it is the youth who have inherited this crisis from the previous generations.

Similarly, early childhood environmental education is critical in shaping the mindset about responsibility toward creation. HKI Church, therefore, works with Sunday school teachers on how to inculcate environment-loving characteristics in children from an early age. This includes identifying children's songs, which are embedded in environmental themes, and getting family members interested in ecology-sensitive activities not only at the church but also in schools and community playgrounds.

The training on ecological issues that involved all Church members (pastors, women, men, and youth) was done in Java Island and Borneo Island, outside of Sumatera Island. The ecological workshop in Borneo took place on 3-5 June 2022 and was attended by 152 participants from five different Churches and also representatives from

the local government and non-governmental organizations (NGO). The workshop equipped the participants with the topics of ecological crisis and climate change, and what the people could do to establish climate justice. This workshop served as a significant forum for the faithful to raise their environmental awareness considering Borneo is Indonesia's biggest island and is placed with many palm oil plantations and coal mines. During the three-day workshop, it was decided that the participants and other believers should start initiating a green and healthy environment by using their own budget without depending on the donor's support. The participants also decided that the green environment could be begun within the Church altar by putting fresh flowers on the altar every Sunday. The ecological workshop in Java was conducted in Jakarta on 1-2 June 2022 and attended by 145 participants from HKI Church as well as other churches. The participants received presentations on various ecological themes and how people living in a crowded city like Jakarta could participate in promoting climate justice and in reducing the usage of plastic in daily life.

Promoting interfaith dialog on climate justice

One of the significant initiatives by HKI Church ecology projects is an interfaith dialogue initiative on climate justice.²⁰ For example, on 13 December 2019, the Church held an interfaith dialog program attended by 120 people in Medan city. Religious leaders representing the Batak traditional beliefs, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ahmadiyah and Moslem, joined Catholic, Lutheran, and other Christian leaders to share their understanding of ecology from their respective spiritual and sacred scriptural perspectives. In the course of this dialogue, the participants agreed that our religions and beliefs shared a common understanding of caring for the Earth and creation. Each religious representative was given an equal chance to address the issue of ecology from his/her own spiritual and textual beliefs. The religious participants shared their common concerns instead of their differences on ecological issues. It was an opportunity for people of different traditions to lend a prophetic voice reminding us that our ways of living disrupted the rest of the earth. We must act together for the sake of our shared environment. In

²⁰ Pucuk Pimpinan, *Laporan Umum Sinode HKI ke-63 (General Report to 63th HKI Church Synod)*, 24-26.

the jubilee for the earth (2020) God the Creator reminds God's creatures that we should love the earth as well as all of creation. The second interreligious workshop on climate justice action held in Medan on 19 January 2021 was attended by 51 participants from different religions (Christian, Moslem, Buddhism, Hinduism, and traditional belief).

The first implementation program of the interfaith dialogue was a safari on eco-theology done in the predominantly Moslem Langkat District in North Sumatera on 15 December 2020.²¹ The safari on eco-theology involved interfaith groups initiating campaigns for the environment by planting trees at the UNESCO's Leuser conservation site. The participants comprised around 125 people from Church members and followers of other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In addition, there was also participation from Healthy Planet Indonesia Foundation (HEPI), an NGO dealing with the environment. Besides the involvement of interfaith communities, there were about 47 participants representing local governments and schools. Apart from planting trees together as green action, the participants were also involved in discussing environmental projects that needed to be implemented soon in our respective contexts, particularly in Sumatera Island. Through this collaborative effort to promote environmental sustainability, it can be observed that religions served as a source of peace instead of conflict. In addition, students who participated also realized that various endangered animal species in Sumatera such as the orangutan, elephant, tiger, and rhino needed serious protection.

The second implementation program was an interfaith camp organized on 4-5 December 2021. This activity which took place in the middle of the forest in Besitang, Langkat District was attended by 56 participants. Various faith communities were invited including Buddhist, Ahmadiyah, Moslem, Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and Methodist. The groups addressed the interfaith collaboration needed to protect the forest and advocate for the rehabilitation of 100 hectares of lands formerly cultivated for palm oil. The participants shared their views of how their interfaith mindset was molded by the event and the sharing of love despite the religious differences each of the participants held.

²¹ Pimpinan, *Laporan*, 24-25.

In connecting the ecological projects to interfaith programs, HKI Church visited the Moslem *Pesantren* Al-Huda in Deli Serdang District in North Sumatera. This *Pesantren* or boarding school, which is run by an ex-terrorist who has reformed himself, educates the children of the terrorists. The parents of the students have either died from their suicidal actions or serving their time in prison for their terrorist activities. According to the chaplain of the Al-Huda School, 47 children are being educated to help them not resorting to revenge for their parents' punishment or following the parents' path as terrorists. The HKI Church ecological team was kindly welcomed in the school on 19 October 2019. As a symbol of hope, we planted trees together in the area of the school. As the trees grow providing the surrounding with shade, they symbolize the hope that the children's lives in the future will be characterized by peace instead of violence. In addition, we also donated other materials such as masks, books, rice, and other supplies to help the school face the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

Global warming has given rise to the phenomenon of climate change with its multiple negative impacts on the good earth that God has created for humans to inhabit. Unfortunately, human irresponsibility has caused all of God's creatures to suffer. Environmental awareness entails the notion that earth as a common home must be maintained together by humans regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, and background. In the context of Indonesia, the Church must also take on a role by inviting its members to work for climate justice and reduce the use of plastic and other harmful actions detrimental to the environment. These ecological issues need to be addressed by children, young people, and adults, as carried out by HKI Church Ecology projects. The notion of earth as a common home also entails that interreligious cooperation and collaboration is an imperative. Only through an interreligious and dialogical approach can environmental wellbeing be accomplished. In this essay, we have demonstrated how the HKI Church has promoted environmental awareness and actions among our members as well as with adherents of other religious traditions in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental entities.

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Photos:



HKI Church ecological team organizes an interfaith workshop on environmental issues for the youth in Medan.



HKI Church ecological team and the teachers of Al-Huda boarding school plant trees as a symbol of hope for a green environment. This school in Deli Serdang aims to educate the terrorists' children to love the truth and other creatures.



The workshop and the action of planting trees for the sake of climate justice were done by various interfaith followers, government and NGO apparatus at the Leuser conservation site in Langkat District.