Research report

Abundant community theology:

Working towards environmental and economic sustainability (EES)

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tearfund

Acknowledgments

Author: Dr Justin Thacker
Research managers: Clark Buys and Maria Andrade

Editorial lead: Matt Little
Creative lead: Charlene Hayden
Design: www.wingfinger.co.uk

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Cover image: Residents in the community of Palung, Nepal, who have benefitted from the water pool they built. Photo: Matthew Joseph/Tearfund

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Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, UK

+44 (0)20 3906 3906

publications@tearfund.org

learn.tearfund.org

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1. Introduction

Members of the Nhanzeco community, Mozambique, work in their fields. They have been trained in church and community transformation, self-help groups, conservation agriculture, nutrition, sanitation and advocacy around land rights and environmental conservation. Photo: Kylie Scott/Tearfund

1.1 Abundant communities

What is God's expectation for how humans should live in relation with the rest of creation? This is the question that is at the heart of this report. Our suggested answer is found in the concept of abundant communities. In such communities a relational identity replaces the individualistic, selfish and greedy mindset that is impoverishing many peoples and communities, and destroying our planet. Our proposal is that if we are truly to address the global challenges we face, we require this kind of renewed understanding of not only our humanity, but the whole cosmos.

We came to this conclusion because we listened, above all, to the voices and wisdom of theologians and activists from across the Global South[1], many of whom are doing everything they can to save the earth they love. A particular emphasis on their concerns is also important partly because such voices have frequently been sidelined, if not demonised, in discussions of such matters, but also because the topic under consideration is of immediate and practical concern to those who live in the Global South in a way that it is not to those in wealthier parts of the world.[2]

What we heard as we listened was that at the root of many of the environmental and economic crises that we face was a faulty understanding of what it means to be human, and what our relationship with the rest of creation should be. In its place, we require a new anthropology, a new understanding of our human nature and a new vision of the life that surrounds us. It is that new approach that we outline in the concept of 'abundant communities'.

Hence, this report[3] does not attempt to capture everything that could or should be said about a theology of environmental and economic sustainability (EES). Instead, we have focussed on those issues and themes that have been raised especially by our partners in the Global South. We begin though by summarising how we might understand environmental and economic theologies.[4]

1 See Thacker (2022) *Abundant Community Theology: Working towards environmental and economic sustainability (EES)* for a longer, more detailed and more academic version of this report.

2 There is no perfect term with which to capture those regions of the world where poverty and environmental destruction are most apparent. 'Global South' and 'Global North' are used throughout this report, but we recognise that such terms cannot be defined precisely, and they certainly are not intended to hold a simplistic geographic definition. Australia, for instance, is not part of the Global South.

3 The full report was prepared for Tearfund by Dr Justin Thacker. See Thacker (2022) *Abundant Community Theology: Working towards environmental and economic sustainability (EES),* Teddington: Tearfund

4 It is important to recognise that while theology can point us in the direction we should travel, it cannot provide specific answers to every policy question we might have before us. For instance, theology can indicate that wealthy governments should provide support to lower-income countries, but it cannot say whether that support should be at 0.5%, 0.7% or 1% of GDP. This should be borne in mind as this report is read. It lays the theological foundations for a response to EES, but does not necessarily indicate every specific policy response that is required.

2. Environmental theology

The primary challenges facing many in the Global South are the daily struggle to feed themselves and their families, to find work, to be able to pay for education and healthcare, and to enjoy lives of peace and security. It is imperative that we address those practical concerns. However, as all these challenges are heavily impacted by how we treat the environment, we begin by considering the impact our ecological behaviour has had on the lives and livelihoods of many.

> **'In representing God to the world, in acting as God's ambassadors within the world, our role is never to dominate, but rather to serve with justice, righteousness and above all love.'**

2.1 Dominion theology

Human relationships to non-human creation are deeply marred. As part of industrialisation and economic growth we have possessed, controlled and exploited the world we are part of, destroying it (and us) bit by bit. The following summary from the Chaco Salteño region in the north of Argentina provides just one example of the intimate connection between ecological, social, economic and political violence:

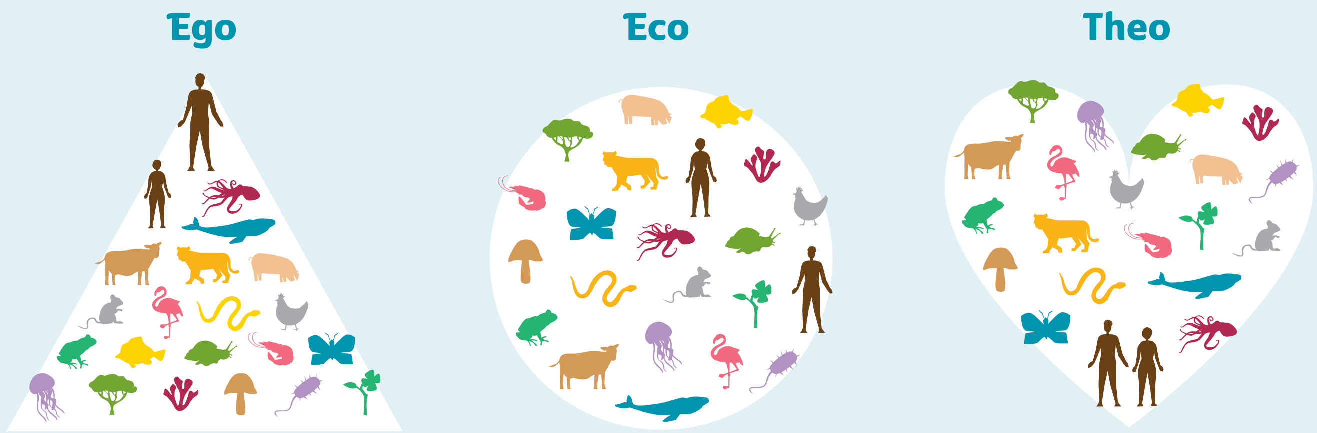
> *'Since the beginning of the 90s in the last century, an agricultural model for producing soy at a large-scale, dependent on transnational capital, has been applied over extensive sections of the rural zones in Latin America, and in particular, Argentina...This process generates negative consequences in the ecological, social, economic, and political fields. In the ecological field, ecosystems have been altered, giving a foothold to new plagues and diseases. In the social field, profits of business groups have increased, while farmers have lost land and work (greater poverty and exclusion). In the economic field, "enclave economies" have formed, based on mega businesses and capital oriented to foreign markets, with no effect on local rural development.'*[5]

Dominion theology has often provided the justification for this kind of exploitative relationship. The US historian, Lynn White, is famed for having made this argument in the 1960s, essentially blaming Christianity for being at the 'root of our ecological crisis'. He had argued that our theology justified a hierarchical approach to the natural environment in which humans were both separate and above the rest of creation, and that we could use creation in whatever way we wanted.[6] This approach has come to be known as anthropocentrism: the putting of humans (and often men) at the centre of our thinking. The biblical origins of such 'dominion' theology can be found in the way that Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 have been translated and interpreted, especially in their use of the terms 'dominion' and 'subdue' (Genesis 1:26; Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8:6-8).[7]

2.1.1 Servant theology

However, a core principle of biblical interpretation is that we do not just take a single verse out of context and apply that verse in a universal fashion. Rather, we look at all of the Bible and interpret scripture by scripture, from our particular social context, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. When we do this, not only does Genesis 2:15 help us understand that the 'dominion' of Genesis 1 is actually a responsibility to care, preserve and watch over, not a task of exploitation, but in addition the Bible's repeated description of what the ideal 'King' or 'image-bearer' looks like becomes clear. In representing God to the world, in acting as God's ambassadors within the world, our role is never to dominate, but rather to serve with justice, righteousness and above all love (Psalm 72:1-6, Psalm 145). We are God's representatives on earth whose job is to facilitate the flourishing of all humans by enabling the flourishing of the rest of creation. It is in this way, and this way alone, that we 'rule'. In her *Saying Yes to Life,* Dr Ruth Valerio[8] says this, 'God expects his rulers to be different, to be servant rulers who exercise their dominion with love and compassion, working for justice and against oppression (Proverbs 31:4-9).'[9]

5 Euribe (2020) p87
6 White (1967) pp1203–1207
7 For more on how these verses have been misinterpreted see Thacker (2022), section 2.1.1
8 Ruth Valerio, Global Advocacy and Influencing Director for Tearfund
9 Valerio (2020) p157



2.2 Egocentric, ecocentric or theocentric

There are three main frameworks that have been used to describe humanity's relationship to the natural environment.

2.2.1 Egocentric

It is summed up in this image in which a man is shown as being above both women, and the rest of creation.[10] Across the Global South, ecofeminist theologians have been reminding all of us how the exploitation and domination of women has paralleled the exploitation and domination of the planet. Nicaraguan theologian Blanca Cortés, for instance, writes, 'After having been sources of life – both women and the earth – we have come to be considered as resources to be utilised and abused as the power structure pleases.'[11] As such, this egocentric (or anthropocentric) view is one which must be immediately rejected as being thoroughly unbiblical.

2.2.2 Ecocentric

At the same time, though, it is also possible to critique a second approach which remains very popular among some Christian environmentalists. In its best form, this ecocentric (or biocentric) framing is simply reminding us that as humans we are not entirely distinct from creation but are in fact part of the natural world. If that is all that is being claimed, then this approach can certainly be welcomed. However, it is also the case that at times this view denies entirely any distinction between humans and the rest of creation, and suggests that all that is required for us to solve the environmental crisis is a return to the belief that we are simply animals. The problem with such a model is that it is at risk of leaving God out of the picture entirely and in the process it can distort our God-given role within creation.

2.2.3 Theocentric

In contrast, the third model – and most consistent with our understanding of Christian discipleship – is the so-called theocentric framing in which we are called to understand ourselves, the rest of creation and our relationship to creation within the lens of our relationship to God. The particular distinction of the theocentric model is that it does not suggest that we can solve the environmental crisis simply by paying attention to how we relate to the rest of creation; it emphasises that our relationship with God needs to govern our care for the environment. That is what this image is seeking to show. Humans are shown as equal to one another, and at the bottom of a love heart (symbolising God) because their relationship to the rest of creation is intended to be one of love, care and service, motivated by the love of God.[12]

In light of this, we can recognise that our care for creation might well be motivated by a range of theological concerns. In the box on the next page, we list many of the reasons we might find for why we should love the world God has created. Our suggestion is that all of them in different ways can form part of a fully-orbed theology of creation, but that our emphasis must be on the first category (love, worship, reverence and obedience towards God) as providing a foundation for all of the others. This is what is meant by a theocentric theology of creation.

10 Dave Bookless / A Rocha International www.arocha.org – original source of image unknown. https://blog.arocha.org/en/noah-beyond-the-blockbuster/
11 Cortés cited in Thacker (2022), section 2.1.1. This section also discusses in more detail the intersection of gender and climate justice.
12 For more on the theocentric framing, see Thacker (2022), *Environmental*, section 2.1.3

We should care for creation…

1. **Out of love, worship, reverence and obedience towards God**
    a. Because all of creation is God's creation
    b. Because God has commanded us to care for it
    c. Because Jesus cares for creation
    d. Because caring for creation reflects God's character. God loves his creation
    e. Because God has commanded us to love our neighbour and looking after creation helps preserve the lives and livelihoods of our human neighbours
    f. Because creation is God's gift to us, and so we care for it out of thanks/praise for what God has provided
    g. Because caring for creation is part of the mission of God, and indeed has evangelistic benefits
2. **Out of our own self-interest**
    a. Because pollution and climate change are bad for our own (human) health and livelihoods. In this sense an ecological commitment can be a vehicle to sustainable economic development.
    b. Because greed and consumerism (a theology of domination/exploitation) is bad for our own spiritual health and a form of idolatry
    c. Because the rest of creation holds us to account for what we as humans have done
3. **Out of an intrinsic respect/care/love for the rest of creation**
    a. Because all of creation is spiritual/sacred and reflects God's fingerprint
    b. Because we think it is beautiful and want to preserve it for its beauty and majesty
    c. Because creation has inherent worth that should be valued for its own intrinsic sake. We love the trees, meadows and whales simply for who they are
4. **Out of a different understanding of our identity with respect to the rest of creation**
    a. Because as bearers of God's image, we have a particular responsibility and privilege to care for creation
    b. Because we are part of creation, at one with creation, one whole community of creation
    c. Because creation praises God, and we join in that cosmic choir as we care for the rest of creation
    d. Because creation itself is our neighbour (sometimes extended to the idea that it is our mother/sister) and therefore love of neighbour includes love of non-human creation

2.2.4 Stewardship[13]

One particular term that is often used to sum up this theocentric approach is that of 'stewardship'. Across the Global South, this appears to be the most common word used to describe our relationship to non-human creation. For many Global South authors, the term has connotations of a servant and so to say that we 'steward' creation is to say that we serve and care for creation much in the same way that a steward (servant) in a household looks after the owners of the house. In this way, the concept also indicates that we are not the ultimate owners of creation, but that we are under the authority of someone else (God), and that our commission is one of caring, serving and protecting. In contrast to this, some Global North authors fear that the term 'stewardship' implies a managerial hierarchy which tends towards the anthropocentric model already critiqued. For this reason, we propose that the phrase is used where the linguistic and cultural context is one in which stewardship is primarily conceived of as service and nurture rather than management.[14]

2.2.5 Indigenous creation spiritualities

In parallel to this, we also need to recognise the call by some that we should pay far closer attention to the creation spiritualities of indigenous communities who have emphasised the sacredness of creation. It is certainly the case that all of us have much to learn from such spiritualities to the extent that they embody a more caring, earth-centred response to the rest of creation. For instance,

> *'The Gunadule people have galu (sacred sites). When people enter these spaces, they should do so*

13 This is not to claim that non-human creation has precisely the same status as humanity. Rather, we are using the concept of 'neighbour' in an anthropomorphic way much as Isaiah 55:12 does. Hence, the claim is simply that we love the rest of creation in the same way that we love our human neighbour, not that there is no distinction between the two.

14 Thacker (2022), section 2.1.4

in silence and raise their prayers to Baba and Nana (God).[15] When cutting a plant, in an act of respect, the nergan (Gunadule doctors) request permission and raise a prayer to God that the plant might be used to give health to someone. Having sacred sites favours the reproduction and sustained harvest of hunting species. In Gangandi, some Suu trees (a fichus) – which grow at the banks of the river are considered sacred and cannot be chopped down. Their leaves and fruits are food for the iguanas which are part of the Gunadule diet. In Gangandi, people are not allowed to eat wild meat, which is another way of avoiding overexploitation.'[16]

In noting this, it is important to draw a distinction between the sacredness of creation which we affirm, and the divinisation of creation (that is, making creation equal with God) which we deny. It is perfectly appropriate to say that all of creation is sacred, and indeed spiritual, if what we mean by that is that nature reflects the handiwork of God, that it praises God through its being, and that it is created by the Spirit of God. We should rightly consider ourselves as part of the community of creation which collectively gives glory to God and, in this sense, there is no distinction between ourselves and the rest of creation. Yet, at the same time, we also need to affirm that only humans were created in God's image, and that status does confer a different functional role upon us. We do no service to the world if we ignore the particular set of responsibilities God has given us as custodians of creation. In addition, we need to recognise a critique of indigenous spiritualities that has been highlighted by some Asian theologians who have pointed out how worship of creation has not led to the environmental protection we might assume. Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi have written:

'There is a naive and mistaken notion in the West that our environmental crisis is a result of the human desire to have dominion over creation. The fact, on the contrary, is that we cannot manage the environment unless we see ourselves both as an integral part of creation, therefore dependent on it, but also as being over creation, and therefore being responsible for it. The environmental mess in India, which is far worse than in the industrialised West, is a clear indication that the worship of nature damages creation more than our attempts to manage it.'[17]

Given the reality of climate change, it may be going too far to say that worship of creation does more damage than anthropocentric domination. Nevertheless, what these authors do make clear is that worship of nature is not always the panacea we might have hoped. The idea we are left with is that while there are some indigenous spiritualities that reflect our biblical mandate to preserve and care for creation, and as such provide shining examples of how to live with creation, they are not necessarily the final answer as to what it means to live as God's representatives on earth. Our primary concern must always be that our relationship to God and the biblical mandate governs our relationship to the earth, for **appropriate care of creation does not result from worship of creation, but only from worship of the creator**.

Members of a women's entrepreneurship project in Cajamarca, Peru, display their traditional weavings to be sold at market. The project aims to improve the livelihoods of women in this indigenous community. Photo: Maria Andrade/Tearfund

15 The words here refer to God as both male and female.

16 Euribe (2020) p136

17 Mangalwadi (1993) pp107–108

3. Economic theology

3.1 Capitalism and Christianity

Turning to the economic sphere, it can be helpful to think of four broad categories for how we might think about the relationship of capitalism (as the dominant economic system) to Christianity in the context of poverty. They are:

1. Those who defend free-market capitalism as the best mechanism for alleviating poverty
2. Those who argue for the application of Christian ethics to business practices
3. Those who seek a significant reformation of capitalism
4. Those who understand capitalism as incompatible with Christianity[18]

We do not necessarily have to choose between these options, and the first three of them were reflected at different points in the 2015 Tearfund report, *The Restorative Economy*. Overall, that report adopted a relatively pro-market stance in its outline of how global poverty should be addressed. It stated, 'the countries that have done best over the past two decades are ones that established the right enabling environment to foster private sector growth'[19] and therefore 'the first step towards meeting everyone's basic needs is for governments to work with markets to create a context in which business can flourish'.[20] That approach contrasts starkly with comments from Latin America that fed into this report which talked of 'the destruction of the neoliberal capitalist patriarchal system, which, through its market logic and the hoarding-exploitation of goods produced by ecosystems, is responsible for the destruction of the planet'.[21] They went on to argue that 'an alternative world to capitalism is possible'.[22]

3.1.1 Measuring growth

In seeking a resolution to this apparent tension we need to dig a little deeper into how we define poverty, and indeed capitalism, for whether or not capitalism has reduced poverty depends crucially on how we understand those terms. Jayakumar Christian, for instance, argues that poverty is primarily about relational disparities of power and not merely the level of economic wellbeing as measured by GDP per person.[23] This highlights an issue raised in the Tearfund initiated *Abundant Africa* report, namely that we require new tools of measurement:

> *'GDP counts the value of goods and services produced in a country, so more is better, even if it comes at the cost of trust and social cohesion. GDP measures income, but not equality, growth or destruction, and ignores social cohesion, health, happiness, spirituality and the natural world. It usually ignores unpaid work (therefore excluding many women) and the informal economy, which three in five people around the world rely on for their income. Measuring GDP alone drives greed, inequality and exploitative extraction from both people and the planet.*[24]

In response they issued a call for a new, community developed 'People's Abundance Index' which would be a more holistic measure of wellbeing that goes beyond the narrow confines of income and wealth. One alternative measure currently in existence is the 'Happy Planet Index' produced by the New Economics Foundation. It measures a country's wellbeing based on self-reported life satisfaction scores (ie how happy people are), life expectancy, inequality of outcomes within the country and the average ecological footprint of citizens in the country. They are keen to point out therefore that the index is not a measure of the happiness of a country's citizens, but a measure of the 'happiness' of the planet which includes the wellbeing of the citizens combined with the wellbeing of the earth.[25]

Interestingly, using this index, Costa Rica has repeatedly come out top of the rankings despite having an economy that is classed as only middle income, and which is a fifth of that of the US. What is even more striking about the Costa Rica example is that there is some evidence that in one particular region the poorer you are, the happier you are and the longer you live.[26] The reason for this seems to be that among the poorest communities the social ties

> **'Strong social ties seem to be more significant than other factors in generating wellbeing and a long life.'**

18 Theos (2021) p41
19 Evans and Gower (2015) p11
20 Evans and Gower (2015) p40
21 Euribe (2020) p55
22 Euribe (2020) p68
23 Christian (1999) Chapter 1 and p121
24 Giljam et al (2021) p38
25 http://happyplanetindex.org/
26 Marchant (2013) See also Martínez and Sánchez-Ancochea (2016)

are far stronger, and strong social ties seem to be more significant than other factors in generating wellbeing and a long life. All of this suggests a model in which a population can be happy, live long lives, have a low impact on the environment and yet in economic terms not be rich. Such redefinitions of what we mean by wealth and poverty are therefore important as we consider claims that only capitalism reduces poverty. It only does so on one particular measure of poverty.

3.1.2 The good and bad of capitalism

At the same time, we also need to appreciate that 'capitalism' is not one thing; it is certainly not to be equated with a functioning market as these have existed since antiquity. The reality is that 'capitalism' encompasses a wide range of ideas, some of which we would undoubtedly support and others which need to be rejected. Positive aspects of 'capitalism' include the security and stability of private property; a well-educated and healthy workforce; entrepreneurial freedom; the availability of capital (money for investment) and stable currencies amongst others. At the same time, there are also elements that should be rejected: a narrow focus on profits; a blind eye to the social and environmental consequences of its activity; the promotion of desire and greed; a focus on consumption; the goal of relentless growth and so on. What this means is that we do not need to make a decision for or against capitalism as such. We can simply state that there are specific policy goals that are good and that should be pursued – eg a healthy, educated workforce – and there are others we should definitely avoid – eg the failure to address environmental consequences. All of this means that what is required is both a reformed capitalism, and a reformed measure of progress. Hence, the greatest contribution of theology is not so much in specifying the precise metrics that should be used, but in providing a vision for what it is that we seek. The next few sections unpack the content of that theological goal.

> **'What is required is both a reformed capitalism, and a reformed measure of progress.'**

3.1.3 A theology of gift

Kathryn Tanner makes the case for an economic theology of grace and giftfulness which is grounded in the whole sweep of God's character and dealings with the world. The central feature of her idea is that just as God has freely given to us, so we should freely give to one another. She calls this a 'non-competitive economy' in which whatever we have received can be freely distributed without in any way diminishing our own status or wellbeing. This stands in stark contrast to a culture which not only selfishly hoards, but also uses possessions as a

Participants clear weeds in a demonstration plot at a farmer field school project near the town of Warawar in Aweil, South Sudan. Through a Tearfund project in the area, farmers in Warawar have received improved seeds for crops such as sorghum, soya, sesame and pumpkin. They are also taught good agricultural practices to improve the quality and quantity of their crops during harvest time. Photo: Will Swanson/Tearfund

One of the women from the local community tidying up the banks of an irrigation channel in a village near Nawalparasi, Nepal.
Photo: Chris Hoskins/Tearfund

way to falsely prop up social status. She notes how in an economy of gift, 'The recipients do not hold these goods simply for themselves as a form of exclusive possession, but distribute them to others in much the way God has distributed those goods to them in the first place.'[27] In light of Tanner's framework, the question that confronts us is what are the broad policy objectives that such an economic theology of grace might generate?[28]

3.1.4 Poverty and inequality

There are, at least, four biblical principles for us to consider. The first of these is simply that before Jesus returns **poverty** (in all its forms) should be reduced. In light of numerous biblical commands to that effect (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Galatians 2:10; 1 John 3:17), this hardly needs justification. The second is that we should also be seeking a reduction in **inequality**. While **almost** all Christians would agree that we should tackle poverty, it is in respect of inequality that we find disagreement. In 1998, the average CEO was paid 47 times as much as the average worker. By 2017, that had risen to 145 times higher.[29] Most of us would think that 145 times is excessive, but what about 47? We need to be clear that the Scriptures do not provide concrete answers to this question, but they do indicate that inequality is neither justified nor helpful. Importantly, they make it clear that our wealth is not our own, or the product of our own effort (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). In addition, they teach us that under God we all equally bear the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and are all equal before God (1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Unsurprisingly, then, the scriptures encourage redistribution (Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15) and the goal of economic equality (2 Corinthians 8:13-14).[30]

3.1.5 Work

The third biblical imperative is that **work** should be rewarded appropriately. The Old Testament is full of injunctions that we must pay a fair wage, pay it in a timely manner, and treat our workers well (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Jeremiah 22:13; Malachi 3:5). Indeed, in the book of James, the wealthy business owners are excoriated for their maltreatment of their labourers (James 5:1-6). All of this represents a significant challenge to the market ideology which believes that a fair wage and employee rights are whatever the market demands. It may be difficult to determine precisely what a fair wage is, or how flat a pay structure any organisation should have, but what is clear is that market demands

27 Tanner (2010) p179
28 For more on Tanner's theology of giftfulness, see Thacker (2022), section 2.2.4
29 Theos (2021) p11
30 For more on inequality and why it should be tackled, see Thacker (2022), section 2.2.4

cannot and must not be the sole determining factor in making such decisions.

3.1.6 Integral ecology

The final principle to be outlined is simply that of **integral ecology**. This is the idea that the social, economic and environmental aspects of our lives are intertwined. Wangari Maathai shows us one way in which this is true:

> *'The way I look at it, we tend to put the environment last because we think the first thing we have to do is eliminate poverty and send children to school and provide health. But how are you going to do that? In Kenya, one of our biggest exports is coffee. Where do you grow coffee? You grow coffee in the land. To be able to grow coffee you need rain, you need special kinds of soils that are found on hillsides, and that means you have to protect that land from soil erosion so you don't lose the soil. You also want to make sure that when the rains come you're going to be able to hold that water and have it go into the ground so that the streams and the rivers keep flowing and the ground is relatively humid for these plants. For the rains and the rivers you need forests and you need to make sure these forests are all protected, that there is no logging, that there is no charcoal burning and all the activities that destroy the forest. All this really needs to be done so that you can be able to grow good coffee, so that you can have an income, so that you can send your children to school, so that you can buy medicine, so that you can take them to hospitals, so that you can care for the women, especially mothers...you can't reduce poverty in a vacuum. You are doing it in an environment.'*[31]

This has also been a special concern of Pope Francis who has written frequently of the concept.[32] **In practical terms, this means that we – whether as governments, businesses or as individuals – need to intentionally consider all of these aspects as we conduct our activities in the world. Governments can no longer pursue growth irrespective of its impact on the planet, businesses cannot ignore the environmental and social costs of their ventures, and individuals must stop consuming on the basis of the greatest value for money alone, or as a means to prop up their social status. All of us need to think far more integrally than has previously been the case.**

> **'At the bottom line, our present economic system – whatever we call it – needs substantial reform.'**

3.1.7 Charity versus justice

The final topic to be mentioned in this section is that of structural justice. It has frequently been pointed out that as Christians we sometimes focus so much on acts of charity (giving food to the hungry, sheltering the homeless etc) that we fail to pay sufficient attention to the underlying causes of those problems. One African interviewee commented:

> *'So we can take any passage and interpret it in terms of 'God calls us to charity' – which is true. 'God calls us to kindness when we see poor people' and so long as we give them our leftovers and our consciences clear us, we can drive on. But we don't see the Lord who is asking deeper questions of the systemic cause of how the world has come to where it is. When Amos was shouting about the injustice of his days, it would have been easy to educate people to ensure that people who have more give one pair of sandals to those who don't have any sandals. But he confronts their sin by saying, 'You treat them like sandals!' That is deep analysis.'*[33]

One particular call that has emerged in this space is that of reparations. A range of international and regional bodies have made this issue a central part of their campaigns as part of a decolonising agenda.[34]

In all of this what matters is not so much whether we can identify a particular economic system that is more biblical than another, but that we address specific policies within the dominant system and advocate for their reform in line with the biblical and theological principles outlined.

At the bottom line, our present economic system – whatever we call it – needs substantial reform. We've begun to point in the direction of what those policy changes might look like. Now we need to examine how we can embrace a new future.

31 Maathai (2009)

32 Francis (2015) p141, Francis (2020) p32. Interestingly, he has also frequently chastised the cult of individualism indicating the intimate connection between the two concepts.

33 Anderson and McGeoch (2020) p47. Quotations are in italics when they are direct quotes from consultation participants.

34 This topic is discussed in much more depth in Thacker (2022), section 2.2.5

4. Abundant community

4.1 Who am I?

This section – Abundant Community – represents the heart of this report. It begins by challenging us to rethink what it means to be human, in particular what it means to be a person in relation. Our suggestion is that at the root of our environmental and economic crises is a fundamental misconception of our human nature. That faulty idea is a product of some particular Western thinkers and it has led us to embrace a lifestyle that is exploitative, acquisitive, individualistic and selfish. In contrast, this report holds out a vision of a very different view of humanity. That alternative is best summed up in the concept of an abundant community. Such communities believe that their identity is formed in relation to God, and this in turn defines their relationships with self, one another and the rest of creation. This represents a relational dynamic in which what matters is not just how we relate, but who we are in relating. It is about a different understanding of me, an expanded version of us, that leads me to conduct myself within our shared planetary home according to a household, rather than competitive market, mindset. This means we share and care abundantly, not just our wealth, but also our power, voices and lives, for we store our riches in the lives and wellbeing of our global neighbour and the world which God has provided. As such, it is more about an abundance of love, hope and trust, expressed in relationships, connections and interdependence, than an abundance of goods. All of this is how an abundant community thinks and acts. We point to the biblical and theological basis of this framework and how versions of it have persisted in the wisdom and traditions of many communities in the Global South.

4.1.1 Panic in the community

We can introduce this idea by drawing a distinction between a theology (or mindset) of abundance and a theology (or mindset) of scarcity. It is important to note that these two approaches are not primarily concerned with the abundance or otherwise of material goods; they are mainly concerned with the values, attitudes and belief systems associated with whatever goods are in existence. In this way, a theology of abundance does not deny our ecological limits, but suggests that how we handle environmental goods could be very different. The phenomenon of panic buying illustrates these two approaches. The mindset of the panic buyer (the mindset of scarcity) goes something like this:

- I'm not sure there are enough x for everyone;
- I'm worried that I won't have enough x to meet my needs;
- Therefore, I am going to take as many x as I can in order to safeguard my future requirement for x.

In contrast, the non-panic buyer (the mindset of abundance) thinks along these lines:

- I'm not sure there are enough x for everyone;
- I'm worried that everyone won't have enough x to meet all their needs;
- Therefore, I will take just one of x (or even none at all) to ensure that I have left sufficient for everyone else.

4.1.2 Enough is enough

The crucial point is that the fundamental difference between these two approaches is not about the actual quantity of stuff out there, but our attitude towards that stuff. **The theology of scarcity tells us we have to selfishly consume and accumulate; the theology of abundance tells us we can generously share.** Hence, the mindset of scarcity generates the individualism, selfishness, greed and competitiveness that is ravaging our planet – both economically and environmentally. In contrast, the mindset of abundance generates a communitarian, open-handed generosity that fosters relationships of care, both for one another and for the community of creation. It represents a theology of enough where I take what I need, not what I desire (Hebrews 13:5). In Paul's letter to the Philippians he tells us that he has 'learned to be content with whatever I have'. (Philippians 4:11) In Ephesians 4:28, he encourages work so that we 'have something to share with the needy'. What these verses point to is the rich theological tradition of 'enoughness'. Contemporary economic thinking tells us we should never be satisfied with whatever we have and must always compete for more. God encourages us to pursue an entirely different dynamic.

4.2 A relational anthropology

4.2.1 Ubuntu and buen vivir

The biblical and theological foundations for this idea of an abundant community can be found in a different way of thinking about what it means to be human – a different anthropology. This approach continues to exist in many communities throughout the Global South but it has largely been forgotten in the Global North. It can be found in the Kichwa people of Latin America and the Blackfeet of the Great Plains.[35] It is evident in the Korean concept of Sangsaeng and especially in the Bantu idea of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is the idea that 'a person is a person through

35 Burkhart (2004) p25

Pastor Idrissa on his farm in Perakuy Village, Ouarkoye commune, Burkina Faso, showing two of the pawpaw fruits grown there.
Photo: Jonas Yameogo/Tearfund

other people.'[36] The *Abundant Africa* report describes it thus:

> *'All humans are interdependent. We are human because we belong to, participate in and share our society. Maintaining social solidarity is a collective task. Ubuntu extends to caring for the natural ecosystems of which we are a fully dependent part... Ubuntu implies that a person can increase their fortunes by sharing with other members of society, thereby enhancing their status within a local community. The philosophy of Ubuntu gives Africans a sense of pride, ownership, sharing and caring and motivates us to become better people. Everyone is considered to be important because they belong to our community. Ubuntu means that our abundance as Africans depends on the betterment of our communities and the environment, and promoting it is therefore vital for tackling poverty, political conflicts, injustice and environmental challenges. This can be done through showing empathy for others, sharing common resources and working cooperatively to resolve common problems.*[37]

In highlighting this, we are not claiming that everyone in a Western context fails to live with the kind of community orientation that is characteristic of Ubuntu thinking, nor that everyone in Africa lives in relational harmony. Individualism affects many in the Global South, and communitarianism has a rich tradition in the Global North.[38] Nevertheless, the predominant mindset of the Global North is undoubtedly individualistic.

'The point here is not just that we as individuals must relate well to other humans and to the planet, but that our very identity – how we understand ourselves – is tied up with and formed by our relationships to others and the rest of creation.'

The point here is not just that we as individuals must relate well to other humans and to the planet, but that our very identity – how we understand ourselves – is tied up with and formed by our relationships to others and the rest of creation. Some of our partners from Latin America stated, 'other cultures, particularly ancestral cultures, possess an integral and communal view of life. Thus, if the creation is affected, all are affected; and if

36 Giljam (2021) p20
37 Giljam (2021) p20
38 The monastic movement, the Bruderhof community, some expressions of Celtic Christianity and Franciscan spirituality are all examples

one (living or non-living being) is affected, all creation is affected.'[39] They drew on the Andean concepts of 'sumak kawsay' and 'suma qamaña'. According to both ideas, we can only live well if others are living well too. The former is often translated as 'buen vivir' (good life) and both speak to a concept of community, interdependence, relational harmony with creation and with one another. They comment, 'We need to learn more about the buen vivir (good life) as an ethic of life from the indigenous peoples, which challenges us to a life of community and interdependence, in contrast with individualism and instrumentalization.'[40]

4.2.2 'We are one'

Biblically, such relational anthropology can be found throughout the Scriptures. It is perhaps most clear in Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 that we are one, just as he and the Father are one, and in Paul's theology of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. Theologically, it can be found in the trinitarian relationships where the Father is the Father because of his prior relationship to the Son. It is the relationship that comes first, not the individual members of the trinity isolated from one another. The theologians of the early church used the word *perichoresis* to describe this reality. It means an indwelling and interpenetration of each member of the Godhead. Hence, when Jesus prays that we are one just as he and the father are one, he is praying that we would know this reality, know that our very identity is formed in community. This is more than saying we must have good relationships with each other – which of course is true. It is saying that who we are is to be found in community. 'I am because we are' is how Ubuntu is often defined, 'individually we are members one of another' is how the apostle Paul stated it (Romans 12:5). This is the profound truth we need to recover.

Moreover, this communal identity extends not just to other human beings, but to the rest of creation. In a very real sense, our human bodies are comprised of numerous microorganisms that enable us to digest food, breaking it down, generating nutrients we require and neutralising toxins that would otherwise harm us. You literally could not live without the bacteria in your gut. But more than that, we are part of the created world that surrounds us. Yes, we have a different functional role to play within that creation which includes the fact that we are created in God's image and so represent God to the rest of creation. Yet that truth does not negate the fact that in our being we are integrally related to the rest of creation, we exist alongside that wider creation, worshipping God with creation, giving glory to God alongside non-human creation, being part of one glorious community of creation.

> **'In our being we are integrally related to the rest of creation, we exist alongside that wider creation, worshipping God with creation, giving glory to God alongside non-human creation, being part of one glorious community of creation.'**

4.2.3 The Spirit of the household

All of this is a work of the Spirit. God's Spirit was central in the original creation, but in addition on the day of Pentecost, God did not merely fill a series of individuals with his Spirit so that they, as individuals, could go out and preach the gospel in isolation from one another. Instead, the immediate effect of the Spirit was the establishment of a new community seen in fellowship, breaking of bread, shared possessions, generosity and gratitude for God's good provision (Acts 2:42-47). In short, they developed new relationships with one another and with the rest of creation. Daniela Augustine writes of this new community being characterised more by the economy of the household than the economy of a competitive market. Within such a household economy, 'The family's wealth is the wealth of all its members, and material possessions are utilised for the common good since personal well-being flows from the household's shared well-being in mutual safe-keeping.'[41] Moreover, the identity of this new community is found not in selfish accumulation but in enabling everyone to flourish, including the rest of creation.

Therefore, if we adopt the thoroughly relational and integral anthropology that we have been discussing then a new framework emerges. Under this approach, we begin with the assumption that **the earth produces sufficient, if not plentiful, resources for everyone to thrive**. **We recognise that this can only be realised in practice if our default position is to share those resources**. We engage in such sharing because our self-identity is that **we are people in relationship, both with one another and with the earth**. We simply do not think that any resources we acquire belong to us alone either as individuals or as humans, nor do we think that the planet is our shopping mall from which we can consume and hoard as we please. Rather, our assumption is that **the goods of this earth are part of our home, and so belong to everyone, including the other species with whom we live**. Our only question is how we share them in the particular context in which we find ourselves.

39 Euribe (2020) p20

40 Euribe (2020) p137

41 Augustine (2020) p372. See also Augustine (2019). For more on Pentecostal theology and its relevance to EES issues, see Thacker (2022), section 2.3

4.3 A theology of scarcity and a theology of abundance

4.3.1 The roots of scarcity[42]

If these relational concepts seem unusual, it is only because too many of us (especially in the Global North) have been sold an entirely different way of thinking about what it means to be human. That unbiblical alternative is the individualistic, competitive mindset that we have been calling a theology of scarcity. The origins of this approach can be found in the Western philosophical tradition. It begins with the assumption that our planet has insufficient resources for everyone to survive. It then combines this with Western individualism and a Darwinian survival mentality to generate a worldview in which we compete as individuals with one another for the scarce resources we need to survive. The fruit of this belief system is the domination, exploitation and competition that characterise our relationships with one another and the planet. It is this belief system that fosters the greed and excessive consumption that has come to characterise the typical Western individual. It is also evident in how capitalism has justified an extractive relationship to the earth in which illegal logging, overfishing and intensive farming have led to deforestation, loss of species, soil erosion and desertification across the world. All of this is instead of the caring embrace that should have been our mode of interaction.

4.3.2 Scarcity and charity

This framework of thinking can also impact how some in the Global North think about justice. They understand the world's resources to be scarce, they see those who are poor and are moved by compassion to respond. If one assumes the basic features of a scarcity mindset then the only possible solution is to expand the economy so that those of us who have a bit more of a social conscience, and who have won in the competition of life, can share a bit of our excess with those who have lost. Crucially, however, such 'generosity' is understood as acting against our own natural instincts to be selfish and competitive, and it certainly does not question the system that enabled our status as winners in the first place. Such confidence in the status quo is misplaced, for it ignores the biblical solutions that God has provided. Lowery writes:

> *'Assumptions of scarcity and unlimited needs and wants are the twin pillars of classical economic theory. These assumptions underlie actual economic decisions made by firms and governments, creating an imperative toward unlimited economic growth. Under these assumptions, the only humane response to poverty and unemployment is constantly to expand the economic pie, creating more wealth and cutting more people in for a slice. The social and ecological problems created by unlimited economic growth are, in this view, the unavoidable costs of bringing the necessities of life to greater numbers of people. Sabbath and jubilee principles of abundance and self-restraint run counter to these largely unquestioned assumptions of contemporary economics, and focus attention on better distribution, rather than greater levels of production. The problem is not scarcity, but the will to share.*[43]

4.3.3 Biblical abundance

While a theology of abundance is evident in a range of biblical passages – not least John 10:10, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' – the following verses from Deuteronomy provide perhaps the neatest summary of the framework. They stand in stark contrast to the theology of scarcity that has just been described.

> **'There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today … If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.'**
>
> **Deuteronomy 15:4-8**

This passage can perhaps be summarised in this way:

> There need not be any poverty,[44]
>
> because God has provided sufficient resources –
>
> however, this is dependent on our obedience to God:
>
> specifically, we need to be generous in sharing what we have.

In this way, an abundant community is the outworking, the practical expression, of a theology of abundance. The former refers to what we see – a community of creation in which generosity is the norm; the latter

42 For more on the theology of scarcity, see Thacker (2022), section 3.3

43 Lowery (2000) p151. See also Myers (2001) who drew heavily on Lowery in his concept of sabbath economics. See also Brueggemann (1999) who indicates that 'the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity'.

44 As Tearfund has repeatedly stated: 'Poverty is not God's plan.' It is not how God intended the world to be.

A community meeting in Rift Valley in Tanzania. Photo: Toby Lewis Thomas/Tearfund

refers to the theological framework that enables this, in particular a relational anthropology in which our identity is formed in community. In contrast to this paradigm, a theology of scarcity teaches us:

> There will always be poverty,
>
> because God (or the planet) has not provided sufficient resources –
>
> therefore, if we are to avoid poverty, we need to selfishly accumulate in order to protect ourselves.

The argument we are making is that it is this mindset of scarcity that generates the fear, greed and lack of trust in God that in turn leads to environmental exploitation and economic injustices, and as such lies at the root of the problems we are seeking to address.

In saying all this, it is important to recognise that a theology of abundance accepts the finite nature of our earth's resources. There is nothing in abundance thinking that denies the fact that collectively we need to live within ecological limits. Abundance thinking should also not be equated with prosperity teaching. **The prosperity gospel is all about accumulating excessive resources for me as an individual; abundance thinking is all about how we thrive together as a community.** A parallel can be drawn with the famous story of manna in the desert. In that miracle, God provided the Israelites with everything they needed to thrive (Exodus 16). However, in the process he told them specifically not to hoard the manna but simply to take what they needed for that day (Exodus 16:19). The Israelites disobeyed and as a result the manna turned rotten. Indeed, it is perhaps ironic that the only manna God did tell them to 'hoard' was a symbolic portion so that they could show future generations God's generous provision to them in the desert (Exodus 16:32). In other words, the only time we should keep more than we need is when we are showing others how we do not need to hoard!

4.3.4 Human greed

As will be obvious, what happened with the manna in the desert is in parallel with how we are treating the environment today. God has provided abundantly for all. He has even given us specific instructions for how to look after that environment. Yet, we have ignored God and, out of selfishness and greed, we have gone our own way and tried to consume and hoard as much of God's created world as we can. In the process, it has gone sour and so we see all around us the degradations that result from our behaviour: loss of habitats, species extinction, droughts, floods and wildfires. Yet what makes this even worse than the sin in the desert is that those who have done most to cause this problem are not those suffering its worst consequences. Our brothers and sisters in the Global South are dying because too many of us (especially in the Global North) have worshipped this idol of greed.

By way of contrast, abundance thinking (which accepts the finitude of our planet) does not lead to the same behaviours precisely because its emphasis is on what we need, not on our greed. This is clearly illustrated, not just in the scriptures, but also in the wisdom of so many indigenous communities who continue to remind us that the world is one of abundance if only we stop our selfish exploitation. Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis, who is from an indigenous group in Panama, tells the story of

the Balu Wala tree. This tree was a very large and leafy tree, and in its crown was a forest with animals and plantations of corn, sugarcane, succulent bananas, and other crops. All the earth's inhabitants could be fed from this tree. But there were people who appropriated the resources of all and wanted to keep them for themselves, upsetting the harmony of life with their greed. Ibeler is a figure within the Gundadule community who fought against the oppressive system of power, because he knew that everything 'BabaNana had created was not for one group, but for all the children of Olobibbir-gunyai (Mother Earth)'.[45]

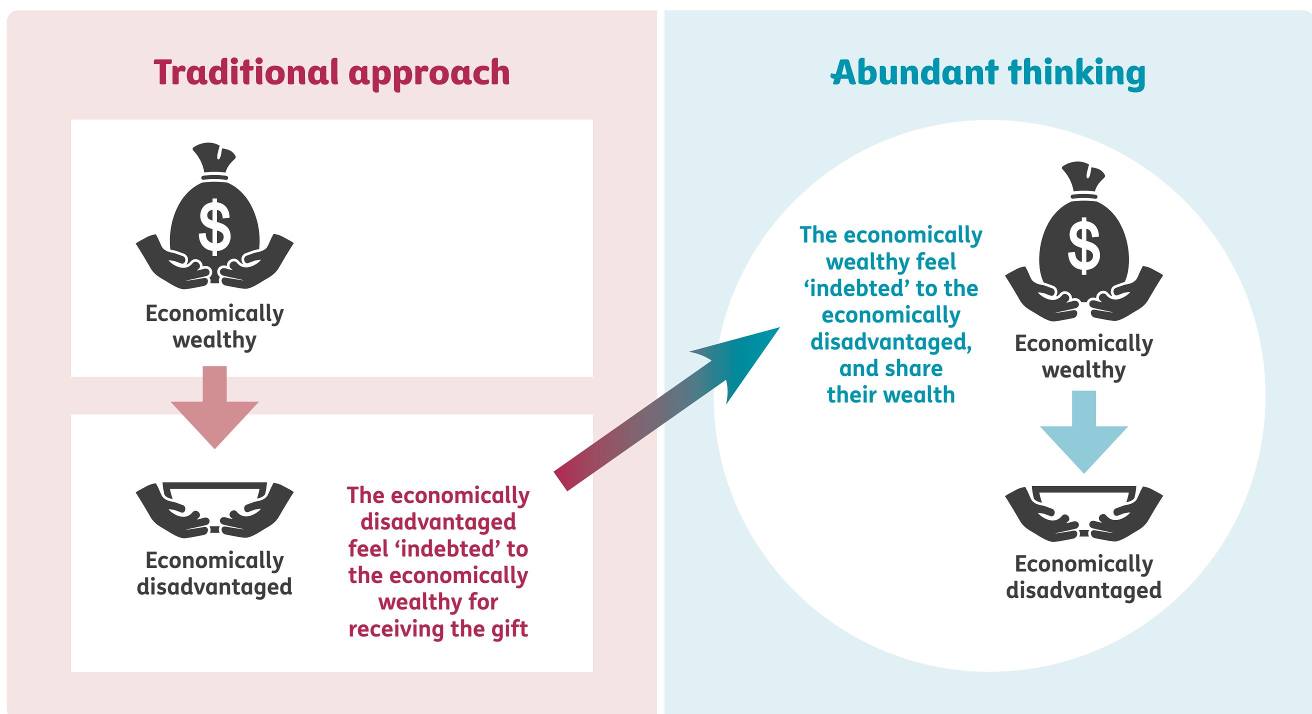
4.3.5 Giving what is owed

This alternative approach to the earth's resources is reflected in another central feature of an abundant community. This is the fact that any redistribution from those who are wealthy to those who are poor is not a matter of charity or generosity (in the sense of doing something special) but is rather an automatic practice in which the wealthy live according to their identity in Christ. Writing in the 4th Century, St Ambrose (340–397 AD) said this:

> *'It is not anything of yours that you are bestowing on the poor; rather, you are giving back something of his. For you alone are usurping what was given in common for the use of all. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich... You are giving back something that is owed, then, and not bestowing something that is not owed.*[46]

In a similar vein, he challenged us to store our wealth in 'the heart of the poor', 'the breasts of the needy', 'the homes of widows', 'the mouths of infants'. 'Those are the storerooms that abide forever, those are the granaries that future abundance will not destroy.'[47] We have already noted that a characteristic feature of the Spirit-filled life is a new community which embraces a household rather than a competitive market mindset. We would consider it a hugely dysfunctional family meal if the patriarch hoarded the vast majority of the food and then considered themselves generous as he shared a few scraps with his wife and children. **A functioning home is one in which provisions are automatically shared, and such sharing is simply considered the norm. Hence, when we give charitably we are not doing something unusual, we are simply returning to those who are poor something that is owed.**

An appreciation of this transforms our understanding of what it means to work in partnership with others across the globe. For when we really believe that our wealth belongs to those who are poor then this changes how we think about both donors and beneficiaries. No longer is it the case that the wealthy are giving to the poor and so in some sense the poor are indebted to them. Rather, both are receiving from God the blessings that God provides. The wealthy individual who gives, receives the privilege of being able to give back to God something that God first gave them; the person who is poor receives from God the material gifts that God provides. Both are in debt to God; neither is in debt to each other.[48]



45 Miselis (2020) p76. BabaNana refers to God as both mother and father.
46 Ambrose 12:53. A number of other church fathers made similar points, see Thacker (2022), section 3.4
47 Ambrose 7:37
48 For more on the biblical theology of this point, see Thacker (2022), section 3.5

4.3.6 Global sharing

There is a wonderful episode in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* which illustrates all of this. The novel tells the story of a Western missionary family who travel out to central Africa in 1959. They struggle to adapt to Congolese life in numerous ways but repeatedly throughout the novel one of the aspects that they find odd is the way in which the villagers routinely share their excess with one another. The following exchange occurs between one of the missionary children and a Congolese teacher:

> *"'When one of the fishermen, let's say Tata Boanda, has good luck on the river and comes home with his boat loaded with fish, what does he do?"...*
>
> *"He sings at the top of his lungs and everyone comes and he gives it all away."*
>
> *"Even to his enemies?"*
>
> *"I guess. Yeah. I know Tata Boanda doesn't like Tata Zinsana very much, and he gives Tata Zinsana's wives the most...That is just how a Congolese person thinks about money."*
>
> *"But if you keep on giving away every bit of extra you have, you're never going to be rich."*
>
> *"That is probably true."*
>
> *"And everybody wants to be rich."*
>
> *"Is that so?"'*[49]

None of this is to deny that a failure to share is hugely problematic within the Global South as well as between the Global North and South. Indeed, some of the most extreme inequality takes place in Global South capitals where gated communities surrounded by barbed wire exist next to urban slums.

Similarly, an abundant community is not one which draws tight boundaries around it, and so shares generously within the local group, but holds at arm's length those outside the group. Abundance thinking does not define a community; it defines an attitude. In particular, it defines an attitude of generous sharing irrespective of national, ethnic, local or tribal boundaries. This is what distinguishes it from a simple communitarian ethic. Moreover, it adopts this global perspective because the anthropology on which it is based is not national, local or tribal, but theological. It is based on the unconditional love of Christ who in the parable of the good Samaritan taught us that **when it comes to sharing our wealth there is no place for ethnic rivalry**. An abundant community may be geographically defined, but its mindset and attitude is global and universal.

Moreover, the sharing of which we speak does not just concern money or goods, but also power, information, access and voice. It also concerns our use of energy. Numerous commentators have pointed out how the average carbon footprint of someone in the UK is more than 25 times that of someone in sub-Saharan Africa. A theology of abundance does not tell us that we can spend that footprint however we wish; rather it reminds us that we need a fair and equitable sharing of the plentiful resources that God has given us. From an ecological point of view that means that a 25-fold asymmetry in what we spend is both unfair and destructive. The UK citizen needs to use far less of their notional carbon allowance precisely so that the African can use more. And while globally there needs to be an overall and significant reduction in carbon emissions to net zero, that requirement falls far more on those of us who currently, and historically, have spent so much more. It is partly for this reason that calls to limit our ecological footprint must be contextualised. There is a global need to reach net zero as soon as possible, but we need to ensure that in making that case it does not sound like the Global North telling the Global South that they cannot expand their economies in the way that is required to address poverty within their borders. Hence, we need to share our carbon footprints far more equitably, and collectively tread far more lightly upon the earth for it is our shared home that is being trashed in our acquisitive approach to the natural world.

4.4 An abundant community – some practical implications[50]

In this final section, we set out some of the practical implications of this for individuals, churches, businesses, national governments, the international community and Tearfund as a development organisation.

4.4.1 For individuals:

In embracing a new mindset, in recognising our biblical mandate to live as abundant communities, we can:

1. Hold our possessions lightly. When the new community was formed in Acts, one of the immediate effects of the Spirit was that 'No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own.' (Acts 4:32) How would our communities be transformed if we lived like that today?

2. Share generously. In recognition of our status as members of one household, we consider that sharing of material wealth is the norm rather than an unusual act of charity. In this way, we store our wealth in the lives and livelihoods of others.

3. Purchase and invest ethically. We replace a 'value for money' mantra with a 'value for life' ethic, and so as we buy and invest we consider environmental impacts, the treatment of workers, the tax behaviour and human

49 Kingsolver (1998)

50 For more detail on some of these see Thacker (2022), section 3.5. See also the recommendations in Evans and Gower (2015) p23

After taking part in Tearfund's Church and Community Transformation training at Chirambi CCAP Church, Hamitoni Banda, 40, became a farmer and small business owner. He now shares his skills with the community and employs local people. Here, women from Hamitoni's local church in Salima, central Malawi, are employed to harvest groundnuts (peanuts). Photo: Marcus Perkins/Tearfund

rights approach of the companies we purchase from, and the banks and pensions in which we store our funds.[51]

4. Live out a theology of enough. Greed is the excessive consumption or hoarding of goods that we do not need and stands counter to the theology of sufficiency that enables everyone to thrive. This means we do not just purchase ethically, but we consume less (at least those of us in carbon intensive societies). There is no point purchasing the most ethically sourced brands if we purchase without needing huge quantities of the product.

5. Think globally. The kingdom of God knows no boundaries. So, to think globally means that we consider as a neighbour the garment worker in another country who stitched our clothes, the islander whose land is threatened by rising sea levels, the rivalrous country, political or ethnic group as well as the friend next door. All of these are part of the household with which we share.

4.4.2 For churches:

6. Teach a relational theology. For those of us in the Global North especially, we need to recognise that we swim in a culture of individualism. This means that unless we explicitly and intentionally present an alternative point of view, that is the mindset we will adopt. Church leaders then have a responsibility to draw on the rich biblical resources that show us an alternative way of thinking is possible.

7. Practise relational living. Some churches have created resource banks where anything from clothes to power tools to baby cots are held centrally and shared freely among the congregation. This is about fostering a culture of 'us' rather than one of 'me'.

8. Model alternative business practices. Churches can play a key role in demonstrating a different way of doing business. They can help establish communal gardens or farms, credit unions, co-operatives and not-for-profit businesses (eg cafes, childcare, alternative housing).

9. Live abundantly. Churches can also demonstrate their solidarity with the global church by tackling their own carbon footprint (eg Eco Church) and by sharing their wealth generously (eg charitable giving).

'Churches can also demonstrate their solidarity with the global church by tackling their own carbon footprint and by sharing their wealth generously.'

51 Ethical Consumer (www.ethicalconsumer.org) is an excellent resource to help with this.

4.4.3 For the commercial sector:

We recognise the contribution of businesses in providing jobs and driving the economy. We also appreciate that economic development requires local communities to have a strong sense of agency and entrepreneurship, a belief that they can chart their own path out of poverty and are not merely dependent on external support. Having said that, we are also concerned about rising inequality and the failure of many businesses to account for the environmental costs of their operations. Therefore, we encourage businesses to take seriously the 3Ps (people, planet and profit):

10. Treat people fairly. This will include paying a fair wage, supporting worker rights, taking responsibility for supply chains, and the conditions of the workers therein. It will also include a significant expansion in mutual and cooperative forms of business ownership.

11. Protect lives and the planet. Businesses need to acknowledge and then address the environmental costs of their activity. Such externalities have routinely been ignored, and too many businesses have engaged in greenwashing without seriously paying attention to the impact of their activity on the planet and the people whose lives are affected.

12. Distribute profits. We recognise the need of many businesses to generate a profit if they are to be sustainable. However, they need to consider the size of that profit and who benefits from it. Maximising shareholder value should no longer be their only concern. Profits need to be reinvested in order to create more jobs and to serve the communities from which they benefit. However, such community investment cannot be used as a cloak in which a charitable arm seeks to hide or distract from unethical behaviour in another part of the corporation.[52]

4.4.4 For governments:

13. Address the climate emergency. This involves a systematic process to decarbonise and to foster a circular economy by design. It also includes Western governments providing adequate levels of climate finance to low-income countries. This was promised in 2009 to help pay for loss and damage, but also to fund climate change adaptations. It has so far not been delivered.

14. Redistribute funds. This can be achieved through adequate social security floors, cancellation of Global South debt and especially reformed taxation both within and between countries. Global North governments need to take seriously the calls for reparation funds for past and present atrocities, and the UK government should reinstate the 0.7% of GDP aid commitment.

4.4.5 For Tearfund:

15. Reframe the problem. Traditionally, the problem to be addressed has been poverty over there for which the citizens of the Global North have the solution. Instead, we need to accept that a large part of the problem is in the mindset of individualism and greed, to which a solution can be found in the relational anthropology that is embodied in numerous communities in the Global South. As our African partners put it, 'The theological problem to be addressed is not scarcity in relation to the economy and environment but greed. Greed makes people poor. Greed destroys the environment,'[53] or, as Paul put it, 'For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.' (1 Timothy 6:10)

16. Expand wealth-sharing. Working alongside our community mobilisation programmes, we need to look again at initiatives such as cash transfers in which the wealth from one part of the globe is shared unconditionally with our partners elsewhere. This could be a direct expression of what it means to live as a global abundant community in which we recognise that the wealth of the rich actually belongs to those who are poor.

52 Recently it was reported that a UK pizza company, Dominos, spent $50 million on ads promoting a $100,000 community grant. https://metro.co.uk/2022/02/10/dominos-spent-50m-on-ads-about-giving-100000-to-local-businesses-16087579/

53 Anderson and McGeoch (2020) p45

5. Conclusion

This report had grand ambitions. It began life as a series of consultations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Global North with a view to developing a global theological framework for environmental and economic sustainability.

What we have discovered in the process is that there is no simple solution to the challenges we all face. The issues are complex, many of us are complicit in the problem, and even if we did identify the right solution we are imperfect creatures who would almost certainly get its implementation wrong. In light of this, this report does not claim to provide *the* theological solution to environmental and economic sustainability. It also does not pretend to cover every theological (let alone environmental and economic) issue that is of interest to us as we consider these challenges.

Instead, what we have done is draw attention to one core theological idea that was highlighted for us by our partners in the Global South, that has deep biblical and theological roots, and which goes to the heart of the environmental and economic mess in which we find ourselves as a global community. We are not saying that the concept of abundant communities is the only relevant issue; we are merely claiming that it is a central and important one that is worthy of further consideration.

In particular, we have argued that we need to embrace a different understanding of what it means to be human. The West has been beset by a worldview in which we live in a scarce environment as individuals in competition. This approach is killing us and our planet; it offers no hope for the future; it denies our very being, for the truth is that we were created as relational beings whose identity is to be found in God, and therefore in community – with one another, and with the planet. Who we are cannot be defined in isolation from one another, nor in isolation from God. Rather, who we are can only be defined in terms of our worship of God, our love of self and others, and our care with and for the planet.

‘This world and all of the people on it are our shared home and household. This leads us to live lives of generosity and sharing not because we are giving charitably but simply because this is our family.

With such a renewed anthropology in place, we recognise that this world and all of the people on it are our shared home and household. This leads us to live lives of generosity and sharing not because we are giving charitably but simply because this is our family. This approach may not solve the climate crisis or economic injustice by itself, but if we as Christians live this out in a plethora of both local and global abundant communities then we might just point the way to the one who ultimately can – the Saviour of all.

Hom Bahadur Dhal Magar, 69, in his tomato plantation in a village near Nawalparasi, Nepal. Photo: Chris Hoskins/Tearfund

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‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

John 10:10

learn.tearfund.org
Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 3906 3906 publications@tearfund.org

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