

Research report summary

Abundant community theology

Working towards environmental and economic sustainability (EES)



▣ Residents in the community in Palung (Nepal) who have benefitted from the water pool they built. Photo: Matthew Joseph/Tearfund

‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’

Romans 12:2

If we are to understand what God’s will is, we need to radically change how we think. This is especially important as we try to find appropriate responses to the environmental and economic crises that plague us. If we are going to think rightly regarding the greed and inequality destroying our planet and claiming lives, then we need to **rethink what it means to be a human in the world.**

This is especially the case if we are prone to an unbiblical, individualistic notion of our human nature. Tearfund’s proposal is that we instead understand ourselves as members of abundant communities who live in harmony with one another and with the planet, precisely because we have embraced God’s vision for our humanity.

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The environmental crisis and human nature

How we think of ourselves as humans lies at the root of many of our environmental and economic challenges. Many have suggested that our ecological crisis is largely the result of a belief that as humans we have the right to exploit and dominate our planet. Ecological destruction occurs when we view ourselves as entirely distinct from the rest of creation, standing on top of it like some colossus who can use the world in whatever way best serves our purposes. This idea has led us to the brink of environmental catastrophe.

Yet, at the same time, some seem to go too far in the opposite direction suggesting that no distinction at all should be drawn between humans and the natural environment: concluding that we are merely another part of the animal kingdom. This also is flawed, for the Bible tells us we alone are created in the image of God. So part of the renewed thinking in which we need to engage is to work out more carefully how we relate to the rest of creation. We obviously are not called to dominate, but neither are we merely one creature among many. **Who are we, then?**

Survival of the fittest

In parallel, a certain kind of economic thinking that originated in the West has persuaded many that fundamentally we are individuals in competition, both with one another and with the planet. Under this framework, the only way to survive is to do better than others, including the animal kingdom: accumulating and consuming more than others, and certainly more than we need.

There is an infamous sculpture – *Survival of the Fattest* – which depicts a starving young man of African origin carrying on his shoulders a very large Westerner. It was created to depict the inequalities in wealth that afflict our world. The inscription reads, ‘I’m sitting on the back of a man. He is sinking under the burden. I would do anything to help him. Except stepping down from his back.’ The person on top is holding a set of scales suggesting they consider themselves to be living justly when in reality they are not. This mindset can be a real danger for many of us. The question is: **is there another way of thinking about what it means to be human?**

Both of these questions can be considered issues of theological anthropology. They are concerned with how we consider ourselves as human beings in light of our relationship with God.

Rethinking our humanity

In a series of consultations, we asked partners, colleagues and representatives from across Africa, Asia and Latin America what they thought about the environmental and economic challenges before us.

The answer we heard most often was that we need to rethink what it means to be human.

Community and interdependence

The consultation that took place in Latin America talked of our need to develop ‘an integral and communal view of life. Thus, if the creation is affected, all are affected; and if one (living or nonliving being) is affected, all creation is affected.’¹ They challenged us to embrace ‘a life of community and interdependence, in contrast with individualism and instrumentalisation,’ that is characteristic of the West.²

The Nicaraguan theologian, Blanca Cortés, said:

‘We need a new way of understanding...that opens up the doors to an existence with new behaviours and new forms of learning. And although this seems too difficult to accomplish, we cannot doubt our capacity to love and envelop ourselves in the web of life that receives all of the immigrants and children, the flowers and rivers. There is always something in us that makes us feel linked, interconnected, and interdependent.’³

Abundance and harmony

Similarly, consultation that happened in Africa stated that, ‘Jesus’ promise is for an abundant life that brings shalom: a deep state of harmony-based healthy relationships between God and human beings, amongst the created order and between human beings.’⁴ This idea is perhaps best captured in the Bantu concept of *ubuntu*. The Tearfund-initiated *Abundant Africa* report wrote:

‘All humans are interdependent. We are human because we belong to, participate in and share our society...Ubuntu extends to caring for the natural ecosystems of which we are a fully dependent part... 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.’⁵

1 Uribe, Pilar (2020) *Construction of a theological framework for environment, economy, and sustainability in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Teddington: Tearfund, p20.

2 Uribe (2020) p137.

3 Uribe (2020) p129.

4 Anderson, Valerie and Graham McGeoch (2020) *Exploring theologies of environmental and economic sustainability in Africa*, Teddington: Tearfund, p40.

5 Giljam, Miles et al (2021) *Abundant Africa: our decade to shape the African century*, p20.



▣ 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

Life's purpose is love

The reason this new anthropology matters is because it goes to the heart of how we treat the planet and one another. The fundamental problem is that we have come to see both other individuals and the goods of the natural world as resources for us to exploit rather than as neighbours and friends whom we are called to love. But as the scriptures repeatedly emphasise, **the purpose of life is not competition, but love** (Philippians 2:1–5).

Two mindsets: two approaches

One particular way in which these ideas were drawn out, and which was emphasised by our partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America, was the contrast between an idea of scarcity and that of abundance.

The easiest way to explain this difference is to consider the phenomenon of panic buying. When we live with a mindset of scarcity we have a constant worry that there will not be enough of some particular resource for our wants, and so we consume and store up as much of that resource as we can for fear it will run out.

In contrast, when we live with a mindset of abundance, our concern is that there will not be enough of a particular resource for others, and so we consume and store up as little of that resource as we can in order to ensure that there is enough for everyone.

Crucially, whether we have a mindset of scarcity or a mindset of abundance, it doesn't actually change how much of the resource is out there: all it changes is how readily we share it with others or leave it for them. Many indigenous communities intentionally leave some of the produce of the forest, not just for other people, but also

for animals. Such behaviour, which echoes the gleaning laws of the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:9–10), stands in stark contrast to the over-exploitation that characterises far too many of our logging, fishing, farming and extractive industries. Such overexploitation is essentially panic buying but on an industrial, indeed global, scale. The problem we face is that in far too much of the world, and especially in the Global North, this mindset of scarcity has come to be considered the norm.

Our common home

Instead of a mindset in which we understand ourselves as individuals in competition living in a scarce environment, **we should instead embrace the theological truth that we can live as abundant communities in which cooperation and collaboration is the norm.** Crucially, this new mindset applies to our relationships with one another, the planet and with ourselves, and all because these relationships are defined by our relationship with God.

Within this approach, we begin with the belief that God's good earth produces sufficient, if not plentiful, resources for everyone to thrive. We recognise that if everyone consumed as much as the average Westerner this would not be the case, but we in the West consume far more than our needs. Hence, the world does have enough as long as we share more equitably the resources God has provided. We engage in such sharing because our self-understanding is that we are people in relationship, both with one another and with the earth. We understand that anything we acquire does not belong to us alone – either as individuals or as humans – nor do we think that the planet is simply a resource that we can consume or hoard as we please.

Rather, our assumption is that **the goods of this earth are part of our common home, and so belong to everyone, including the animals with whom we coinhabit this space.** In this way, we reframe our thinking so that we think of ourselves as members of one household rather than as competitors in a marketplace. **We share rather than compete because we have a different understanding of who we are as relational beings created in the image of God.**

Going deeper

The full report demonstrates the biblical and theological foundations for this approach and suggests these ideas should lie at the foundation of our EES theology. It has been deeply informed by contributions from the regions most impacted by the consequences of environmental damage and economic inequality. Such a theology can be summed up in the idea that our identity in Christ is that of an abundant community formed in relation to God, one another, ourselves and the rest of creation.

This different understanding of our identity leads us to conduct ourselves within our shared home according to the mindset of a household, rather than a competitive market. 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 natural world God has provided.

None of this is to suggest there is no place for actual commercial markets but it is proposing that the relational, household dynamic provides the foundational value for those markets. They should be characterised by mutual regard and co-operation rather than competition and exploitation.

Our true role

What matters most is that these relationships are governed by our primary relationship to God. It is God that defines who we are and how we should relate, not anyone else. In the environmental sphere, this means we embrace the understanding that although we are part of the community of creation, we do have a distinct role to play within that creation.



✎ A participant in the Farmer Field Schools project near the town of Warawar, South Sudan, who has received seeds for crops, such as sorghum, sesame and pumpkin, and has been taught agricultural practices to improve the quality and quantity of their crops. Photo: Will Swanson/Tearfund

That distinct role is not to exploit but to love, serve and take responsibility. In the economic sphere, it means we do not consider our possessions or wealth as belonging to ourselves, but to God and our global household. Our attitude therefore is one in which much of the wealth that we hold actually belongs to those who are economically poor: when we share we are merely giving back to them and to God.

We propose that our true role as humans requires that we think differently about ourselves, and then live differently with others and with the planet. That we share more abundantly and more generously. That collectively, we tread more lightly on the earth. That we hoard and consume less. And that we recognise we live in an abundant community of creation, in which love – not dominion – pervades all we do.

This document is a summary version of the full report which is available at learn.tearfund.org/abundant-community

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