

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS:  
ORCHESTRATING A THEOLOGICAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT  
ON CLIMATE CHANGE, THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA), AND  
DIVESTMENT FROM FOSSIL FUELS

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Abstract:

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In this dissertation, I connect the work of activists in the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PC[USA]) calling for divestment from fossil fuels to Protestant Christian ideas of ecological vocation. I use an interdisciplinary and grounded method that highlights an integrated care for the earth in a time of global climate crisis, centering the wisdom and experiences of a cross section of faith-based organizers. The purpose of this study is to understand how and why a faith-based movement for climate justice built people power so that other scholars and organizers can organize for a better world.

In conversation with the interviews, I construct a concept of Christian ecological vocation using Hiebert's biblical scholarship on ecology and human vocation and Ayres' work on human inhabitants of the world, with a particularity toward Protestant Christian understandings. I review the use of divestment as a tactic in two other international social movements, noting how it has been used by communities with social power to build solidarity with people who have been marginalized, as called for by those marginalized people. Then, I review how divestment from fossil fuels has been used in the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the PC(USA), with some

background on its use in colleges and universities. Finally, I pull the biblical, cultural, and theological contexts of the PC(USA)'s ecological work into conversation with divestment as a tactic that had previously been employed by activists in the denomination to make change to analyze if this movement has been a success.

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## Acknowledgement

This is an acknowledgment of accountability, connection, and whiteness (and a dominant narrative of who is seen and recognized in a movement. In my reading for this dissertation, particularly for the chapter that includes environmentalisms and Protestants, I repeatedly encountered references to John Muir as one of America's first environmentalists.<sup>1</sup> He is, but only if the dominant ascribe to an environmentalism rooted in a particular white Protestantism and political power in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Such a moniker, however, lacks definitional nuance and is a mark of environmental injustice because it erases the work and heart of so many who came before him.

Evan Berry situates the “emergence of environmentalism as a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern western ideas about nature, a history largely, but not exclusively shaped by religious factors.”<sup>3</sup> If we more broadly define environmentalism as humans recognizing and caring for the natural world even as it is degrading at the hands of human beings in the context of everything being connected (as Christopher Carter does in his chapter “Blood in the Soil”), there are at least two categories of people who must be recognized as the first environmentalists in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The first is the Indigenous nations of people that have lived with and stewarded for millennia the land we now call

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<sup>1</sup> See Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature, The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 3. Terry Tempest Williams, “Introduction,” *Selected Writings of John Muir*, (New York: Everyman's Library, 2017), xix.

<sup>2</sup> Muir does not emerge out of nowhere. I briefly explore the theological and cultural conditions of his work later in this dissertation as a nod to Protestant environmentalisms and commitments that have been shaped by many.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Carter, “Blood in the Soil: The Racial, Racist, and Religious Dimensions of Environmentalism,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Nature*, ed. Laura Hobgood and Whitney Bauman, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 46.

the United States.<sup>5</sup> Writers and theologians like Randy Woodley, Tink Tinker and Winona LaDuke, scientists/knowledge holders like Robin Wall Kimmerer and Orem Lyons, and protector-activists at Line 3 in what is now called Minnesota and Standing Rock in the Dakotas are all modern witnesses to the lineage of care by Indigenous peoples. While these relationships between Indigenous peoples and places have sometimes been romanticized or used to essentialize Indigenous peoples, these complex relationships predate white environmentalism in the United States. The second group of people, as Dianne Glave, Melanie Harris, and others lift up in their historical analyses, are comprised of Black Africans who were enslaved by white people and their collaborators and capitalism in the United States who had complex and deep relationships with the ecological systems in which they lived and worked and suffered.<sup>6</sup> The forests and swamps and other wild spaces were places of solace and of danger, wonder and worry. It is environmental racism to forget these relationships in favor of a white male legacy of stewarding natural spaces in the United States for the sake of white leisure and recreation. Indeed, this is what Carter calls a “white racial frame” for environmentalism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There are myriad names and phrases used to describe Indigenous peoples in what is now the United States, some steeped in colonization and white supremacy. In her book *As Long as Grass Grows*, Dina Gilio-Whitaker (a member of the Colville Federated Tribes) surfaces the broad preference for the use of nations and tribes, instead of the language of “native Americans” (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019), x-xi. In this chapter and the next, I will primarily use “Lakota and Dakota Sioux nations,” as that is the terminologies used by the communities at Standing Rock, though I make no claim that this language choice on my part is better than others, especially since I am not part of an Indigenous community (see Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, “About,” accessed March 2, 2024, <https://standingrock.org/about/>).

<sup>6</sup> Dianne Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010). This idea of a “complex and deep relationship” with the natural world is of course also true of settler colonists and all different kinds of people. Here I mean to un-erase people who have been part of the ecologies of what we now call the United States of America.

<sup>7</sup> Carter, “Blood in the Soil,” 46. I wonder here about the implications of adding a more explicit eco-feminist/eco-womanist frame to this critique and how this dissertation would have shifted with an exploration of gender. This white racial frame also erases the often-complicated relationship between Latinx folk and the land, particularly in a US context when farmworkers are overwhelmingly underpaid and exploited, and mostly Latinx, as well as the variety of ways that Latinx communities ascribe to

In this light, queer activists like Peterson Toscano have refused to be labeled an environmentalist, because the label is rooted in white heteronormativity that is often used in the service of capitalism and other systems of oppression.<sup>8</sup> Others, like Leah Thomas, argue that any kind of environmentalism, whether in the United States or throughout the world, must be intersectional and liberating for all kinds of people if it is going to be a system or movement that will root us in a more life-giving relationship to the planet.<sup>9</sup>

This dissertation is written about a particular part of faith-rooted environmentalism and a particular movement for climate justice; I write from and for my Presbyterian Church (USA) communities; most—but not all—of us are white.<sup>10</sup> There is a place for white environmentalisms: so much of the climate crisis is the responsibility of white Western political power and so it is especially the responsibility of white Westerners to navigate a solution while re-imaging the white racial frame for environmentalism and without also erasing the contributions of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and other non-white activists, some of whom have been in the struggle to create harmony between human and planet for millennia. This is tricky, and holy, ground.

My research, perspectives, and ecological vocation are indebted to the environmentalisms of communities that have been ignored, harmed, and silenced by white supremacy. My activism in this time and place is compelled by the witness and

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environmentalisms. See Sarah D. Wald, David J. Vazquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray, *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Peterson Toscano, “Save The Unicorn! LGBTQ Responses to Climate Change,” HuffPost, last modified February 9, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/4a5dub24>.

<sup>9</sup> Leah Thomas, *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*, New York: Voracious Little Brown and Company, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> As of 2022, the PC(USA) Research Services reported that the denomination is 89% white. See “Four Years at A Glance: Membership Diversity,” January 19, 2024, <https://church-trends.pcusa.org/overall/pcusa/diversity/5/>

work of the real first environmentalists of this country. I acknowledge the work of those communities in the past and in the present.

*Spring 2024, on traditional unceded homelands of the Council of the Three Fires: the  
Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations.*

# 1. A Homiletical Prelude: The Human Came to Life



abby mohaupt, "ecofeminist creation," crayon, 2016.

*I preached this sermon (presented here as a transcript) on April 18, 2021, at Trinity Presbyterian Church in McKinney, TX. At the time, I was finishing interviews for this dissertation, and the senior pastor asked me to preach on climate justice for Earth Day. The Scriptures for the worship service were Genesis 2:4b-9, 15 (the creation story that depicts God making the human out of topsoil) and Matthew 22:36-40 (the telling of Jesus teaching about the greatest commandment).*

*Methodologically, I include this sermon at the very beginning of this dissertation on social movements and climate change for several reasons. First, sermons are at the intersection of emotion and rationality. A feminist critique of what is acceptable for social and academic life emphasizes the role of emotions as faster-than-logical ways to*

*process information than rational thinking.<sup>11</sup> These emotions—common in shared theological life as well as social movements—can potentially assist in shifting people toward action.<sup>12</sup> In writing this sermon, I found different ways to make the case for faith-rooted organizing for climate justice, particularly for a congregation in Collin County, Texas, one of the most politically conservative counties in the United States.*

*Second, I include this sermon as a nod toward the Presbyterian commitment to Scripture and the preached word, and to a self-reflexive moment in the research itself. While the sermon does not directly reference the interviews I was conducting at the time, the stories and experiences of organizers were top-of-mind as I wrote and preached this sermon. Most of the people interviewed were or are Presbyterian, and these Scriptures surfaced in several interviews.*

*Third, this sermon at the beginning of the dissertation represents a commitment to grounding in faith as an academic. In his article “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” biblical scholar Theodore Hiebert refers to a conversation he had with Clare Butterfield, one of the founders of the eco-justice non-profit Faith in Place. While Hiebert initially believed that the work of ecological justice needed to be grounded in the problem of climate change, Butterfield convinced him that people of faith are responsible for and to their religious teachings and resources, whether or not there is a problem to be faced.<sup>13</sup> Both Hiebert and Butterfield trained me as a faith-rooted practitioner and activist in working for climate and environmental*

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<sup>11</sup> James Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 37 (2011):14.4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.5-6.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” in *Creation Groaning. Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine, E. Carson Brisson and Frances Taylor Gench. Vol. 65, No. 4 (2011), 341.

*justice, so both greatly impacted my approach. Many of the interviews I conducted for this dissertation echoed this same sentiment: that our ecological vocation—or human task to care for the planet—was inherent in our identity regardless of the crisis. It is this posture I bring to the work as an activist, academic, and clergyperson. Trusting self-reflexive methods of researchers who do not disappear into the research as well as “faith-rooted organizing” as articulated by practitioners like Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel (or, in other words, organizing that “is shaped and guided in every way by faith principles and practices”), the act of including this sermon is a requisite act of faith and a transparent act of grounding.<sup>14</sup>*

*Fourth, by including this sermon, my academic work stands on the shoulders of academicians like Emile Townes, who ends her book *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* with a sermon. Townes’ methodology throughout her book is interdisciplinary— a womanist exploration of gender, race, and class as well as a “theo-ethical analysis” (which includes ethics, Bible, history, and sociology) of a social order and a womanist ethic of care.<sup>15</sup> In that last chapter, Townes intermingles sermon and theory, writing that this is “an interplay between more academic and linear discourse and discourse that is more lyrical and metaphorical... this strategy helps me develop an ethics of care that is directed to body and soul.”<sup>16</sup> My interdisciplinary method throughout this dissertation is modeled after Townes in that I compose it using sermon, theory, academic rigor, and spiritual care. Much of the climate and environmental justice movements in the United*

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<sup>14</sup> Rev. Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

*States owe their/our commitments and victories to the heart, theologies, and strengths of Black women (see the work of Dorceta Taylor, Dianne Glave, and Melanie Harris for specific academic examples, not just in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but stretching back into pre-Civil War time) as well as the organizing and witness of Black church folk (Hazel Johnson in Chicago and Dollie Burwell of Warren County in the 1980s).<sup>17</sup>*

*Finally, many justice movements are successful because they have the moral weight of people of faith in them. This sermon is a nod toward this cloud of witnesses. Some of the content and formatting have been edited for clarity, space, and context.*

In 2018, Nathaniel Rich published an article in the *New York Times* (and later a book by a similar name) called *Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change*.<sup>18</sup> Both pieces recount how scientists and activists asked the US Congress to respond to the specter of climate change in the 1980s before everything got beyond our control to solve it. They brought out charts and facts and figures—the best science at the time. James Hansen, a leading climate scientist, testified on one of the hottest days on record at the time, June 23, 1988. In response, Congress failed to enact any meaningful legislation.

And this is still true.

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<sup>17</sup> Renee Skelton and Vernice Miller, “The Environmental Justice Movement,” NRDC, last modified March 17, 2016, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/environmental-justice-movement>. See also Dianne Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*; Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017); Dorceta Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Shirley A. Rainey and Glenn S. Johnson, “Grassroots Activism: an Exploration of Women of Color’s Role in the Environmental Justice Movement,” *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 16, No. 3/4 (2009), pp. 144-173.

<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change*, last modified August 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/01/magazine/climate-change-losing-earth.html>.

In the years since, we've faced ever hotter summers, devastatingly cold winters, and deadly fires—with few national policies to respond.<sup>19</sup> Globally and at home in the US, changing precipitation patterns have led to flooding in some places and prolonged drought in others. Famine. Millions of people have died from climate-related illnesses. Millions of people have become climate refugees.

In [March 2021], GreenFaith, the nonprofit where I work and serve and teach, hosted a Global Day of Action by people of faith, (along with 14 other organizations around the world). We organized alongside people in over 40 countries in over 400 actions—people of faith who went to the places of power in their countries to demand action on climate change. There were few cameras and even fewer congresspeople. There weren't a lot of charts.

There was a lot of faith. A lot of singing. A lot of noise making—as people around the world refused to be silent in the face of the groaning of creation. In the last few hours of preparation, before the day of action began, my colleague Oluwatosin got several messages from an organizer in Uganda. These messages got more and more urgent. The organizer was reaching out to make sure that Tosin—that all of us knew—that a group of Sudanese climate refugees was organizing an action in a refugee camp in Uganda. They were calling on the Ugandan government in particular to see climate change as a reality that displaces people and makes them refugees. They wanted to be seen as people who could organize, not just as people to be brushed aside. They relied on

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<sup>19</sup> This statement was written and preached before the Inflation Reduction Act was passed in 2022, which the White House has claimed is “the most significant action Congress has taken on clean energy and climate change in the nation’s history.” “Inflation Reduction Act Guidebook,” The White House, last updated September 21, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cleanenergy/inflation-reduction-act-guidebook/>.) It was also written before the summer of 2023, the hottest summer on record. “NASA Clocks July 2023 as Hottest Month on Record Ever Since 1880,” last modified August 14, 2023, <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-clocks-july-2023-as-hottest-month-on-record-ever-since-1880>.

their strong agency, claiming their space as people to work alongside. They wanted to be seen as people of faith who were living out their call to love the planet and each other—they knew, in a place that was not yet their home—who they were called to be.

Because as dire as the situation is, the real crisis is not just what we do (which has led to the crisis) but who we are (our role in the crisis). We have forgotten who we are—who our family is—and what our vocation is in the world. And remembering our vocation, we are then accountable to act in response to the hurt of the world, to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Our present-day theological image of the human individual—that is, who we are—is formed, in part, by the creation stories in Genesis. We have sometimes interpreted the creation stories to place humans powerfully above the rest of the world, as “stewards” who have power over, not care with, a role that has shaped how we view the rest of our role in the story of the community of God.

But “Genesis is a book about beginnings, from the beginnings of the universe and various orderings of humankind to the beginnings of the people of Israel” and our beginnings as people of God, so it is appropriate to look toward Genesis to understand how our role has been shaped from the beginning.<sup>20</sup>

And so, at the very beginning, we learn who we are meant to be. The book of Genesis has two authors and two creation stories. The Priestly Writer wrote the creation story in Genesis 1 and the Yahwist wrote the creation story in Genesis 2. But the Yahwist wrote his version before the Priestly Writer, which means that Chapter 2 is older than

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<sup>20</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 1. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 321.

Chapter 1...yes, it's **that** confusing! But the point is this: the story of how God made us in Genesis 2 is the first way that our ancestors in faith described our origins.

It's the story of our beginning. And in the beginning, as God was in the business of creating, God was making the earth and the heavens. God started with the Earth. At the very start, God made Earth first. And then God took the topsoil—the healthiest, hardiest, best, and darkest soil<sup>21</sup>—and made a human. And God breathed God's breath into that first human.

The human came to life!

And then because that human needed a home and a task, God set the human down in a garden, with other plants and animals made later from the same topsoil— “the healthiest, hardiest, best, and darkest soil.” God set that first human down with the first human's family—family because they all came from the topsoil—and then God told the first humans to farm and care for the garden.<sup>22</sup>

I imagine God looked at those fresh-eyed, brand-new humans and said: “Make it your home. Make everything your family. Love it with your whole self, because you are made of the same stuff of the plants and animals around you.” And that was the first task of our first ancestors: love the earth and care for it.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>This language comes from an unpublished draft of a children's book by Ted Hiebert. See also the entry for “אדמה 1” in *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*: “orig. the red tilled soil, > cultivated ground, producing plants.” “arable ground.” Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* Vol 1 (New York: Brill, 1994), 15.

<sup>22</sup> In the Yahwist story, God makes the human at Genesis 2:15 and puts the human one in the garden (plants and topsoil and rivers were already created) and then makes other animals in 2:19.

<sup>23</sup> Here I am concerned with God's instructions to humans, in the context of humanity belonging in the rest of creation. In the Common English Bible translation, 2:15 is translated as “The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden *to farm it and to take care of it*” (emphasis mine.) This particular translation points to the Yahwist implication that the human ecological vocation is to know and care for the earth. It is often translated as “to till and keep” (NRSV). As I note in chapter 3, the Hebrew word *radah* points to a care-full ruling of the world.

And now: here **we** are—people of that same text, people of that same God.

And here we are reading the first and oldest story in Genesis, our origin story. It's the story that starts everything in the Bible, and it centers the world and its care. And it says that from the beginning God asked us to love and farm the very earth from which we came. To love our family. And if this is the beginning—the foundation—of the Bible, and the Bible is one of the foundations of our faith—well, then, our task to love and care for the earth is one of the core and beginning foundations of our faith. It's our task whether or not we are facing climate change and environmental destruction, though now we all are. It's our task even if we're not climate scientists or environmental activists. It's our task in the halls of power and our everyday lives. It is our task however close or far we find ourselves to the rest of creation. How we think about who we are in the world—in relationship to God, each other, and the earth impacts our understanding of our place in the system of creation. It is a web, woven around the love that God has for creation.

And so: if we love a God that loves creation (and the Bible tells us again and again that our God is a God that adores all of creation), we must also love creation.<sup>24</sup> And now I'm repeating myself. But it **does** need repeating.

Because we forget.

In a time when so much of the world is broken open from climate change and environmental devastation—we are also presented with a reality in which the centrality of the world has been pushed aside.

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<sup>24</sup> In this sermon, I'm using a little bit of exaggeration for preaching, based on the Genesis 1 refrain of "God saw that it was good." Theologically speaking, however, I believe the biblical tradition of God claiming all creation as it groans is a good indication of God's love for all creation.

Many of us have grown up in a culture that has divided the world and spirit. This division sees the world not through the lens of our original and foundational creation story—where we and all that exists are made from earth and spirit—

and instead, this division says the world is over *here*.

and the spirit is over *there* with a great big gap between the two.

And what's more: this division puts God on the side of spirit only... and wherever God goes in this division, there goes power too. So, we put people of color, women, people who are poor, people who are LGBTQ, [and people with disabilities] on the side of the world and say that they do not matter. And we put men and whiteness and money on the side of spirit and say that this is what matters in the world. But what the Genesis text of our creation tells us is that earth and spirit are bound up together in God's making of all things.

And in fact, there is no division. And so: matter—the Earth—matters, as much as spirit to bring all that is into the world. The Earth matters, so women matter. The Earth matters, so Black lives matter.<sup>25</sup> The Earth matters, so people who are LGBTQ matter. The Earth matters, so people who are poor matter. Everyone and everything are made up of God's breath and the topsoil—everything and everyone matters.

It means when we talk about a big inclusive love from God, we are saying that all kinds of life matter. That your life, my life, the life of refugees in Uganda, the life of the planet—each of these lives which are made out of the best and darkest and healthiest soil

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<sup>25</sup> Working to end white supremacy is not solely about the lives and liberation of Black folks. Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and other people of color who are targeted by racism deserve the end of racial profiling and the violence of white supremacy. In this sermon, I point to racism using “Black Lives Matter” because of the distinctly pro-police stance of much of Collin County, TX, in which this church engages in ministry.

and the breath of God—our lives are connected. That our pain and goodness—are all connected deeply. As the poet Mary Oliver says:

You do not have to be good.  
 You do not have to walk on your knees.  
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
 love what it loves.  
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
 Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 are moving across the landscapes,  
 over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 the mountains and the rivers.  
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
 are heading home again.  
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
 the world offers itself to your imagination,  
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting  
 over and over announcing your place  
 in the family of things.<sup>26</sup>

*The family of things.* The first time I read Nathaniel Rich's piece, I cried. I lost sleep. I despaired: If people with a lot of power couldn't change the tide of climate change, what could I do? The second time I read his *New York Times* piece, I threw myself into the grass on the farm where I was living. On my hands and knees, I tried to remember to breathe. I laid down and looked up at the sky: I let the earth hold me as I wondered—what to do? Are we too late to solve the problems of climate change and environmental destruction? Maybe.

And that does not release us from our *family*, from our task. And so, in this family, what's our major responsibility as Christians? When faced with that question, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus said

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese," in *Wild Geese*, (Eastbourne, United Kingdom: Gardner Books, 2004).

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands. (Matthew 22:38-40)<sup>27</sup>

Love God and your neighbor with your *whole selves*. Our spirit **and** topsoil selves. And in that wholeness, we are reclaiming, recovering, and reeducating ourselves in our original vocation to live out the greatest commandment to love one another. Our service today has already had reminders of some traditional ways in which care for creation and the world has seeped into our hymns and prayers—and emerged in all parts of the Bible. Phyllis led us in a call to worship based on Psalm 148 and we opened worship with “How Great Thou Art”—a hymn that is drenched in Earth imagery. And if you open the Bible to any section—the prophets and Psalms and wisdom teachings and the Gospels and Revelation—well, the Earth is just there at the beginning and center of our faith. And so, we need to return to our vocation, rooted in our faith to live out love. How do we do that?

At GreenFaith, we often talk about reclaiming our ecological vocation in three ways of building people-power as people of faith in the world: Individual, Institutional, and Systemic.

Individual power: what we do on our own to change the world and love it. We talk about this in terms of transportation, energy, and food. How can you change how you drive or travel? How can you invest in different energy technologies or use less energy? How can you eat less meat that’s not locally sourced?

Institutional power: what we do as communities, like churches. Building gardens, getting solar panels, etc. What else? How can we have conversations in the places we

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<sup>27</sup> The authors of Matthew are referencing Deuteronomy 6:5 for the first commandment and Leviticus 19:18 for the second.

congregate/ work about moving towards more sustainable ways of being and doing? How can we support one another in our moves toward sustainability?

Systemic power: demanding changes in culture or financing or policies that protect climate refugees. We do that from a place of supporting refugees, demanding global and national policies that protect and support people who are the most vulnerable in the face of climate change. Who are our local, state, and national elected public servants to contact regarding ecological issues? How can we invest in ecologically responsible ways? How can we join the voices for climate justice across our global family?

In each of these ways, we live out a love for God with all our hearts, all our beings, and all our minds.... And we love our neighbors— our families—our earth with that same love. All of our teachings, beliefs, and theologies are built upon that. And in living that love—we humans come to life. Amen.

## 2. A Place in the Choir: An Introduction to the Players



*These Facebook images represent just ten of the presbyteries that supported divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) in 2018, the year that forty presbyteries supported the overture. No single overture, on any issue, in the history of the PC(USA) has had that many presbyteries support it. abby mohaupt, digital art, <https://www.facebook.com/fossilfreepcusa/photos>*

### Introduction

In July 2022, Religion News Service released an article reporting on the decision by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) [PC(USA)] to divest from five companies: Chevron, Exxon-Mobil, Marathon Petroleum, Phillips 66, and Valero Energy.<sup>28</sup> The article briefly mentioned the PC(USA)’s decades-old commitment to move away from fossil fuels before turning to shareholder engagement and a larger divestment announcement by over thirty faith groups. The article quotes Darren Dochuk, a historian of religion and oil, saying that early oil tycoons were rooted in Presbyterianism and that American Protestantism had seen fossil fuels as a blessing. The article ends with quotes

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<sup>28</sup> Bob Smietana, “Presbyterians to Divest from 5 Oil Companies, including Exxon Mobil, After Years of Debate,” *Religion News Service*, Last modified July 7, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/07/07/presbyterians-to-divest-from-5-oil-companies-including-exxon-mobil-after-years-of-debate/>.

from Rev. Fletcher Harper, the Executive Director of GreenFaith, an international and multifaith non-profit that has supported faith-based divestment from fossil fuels globally, and Rob Fohr, who at the time was the director of shareholder engagement for the PC(USA). These white men were the voices that the reporter turned to in order to acknowledge the success (described as actual divestment from these five fossil fuel companies) of a nearly ten-year struggle in a social movement. The reporter missed the opportunity to speak also with any of the grassroots organizers who had worked for years for the vote to pass, though the photos of several of those activists accompanied the article. With its narrow focus, this Religions News Service article provides just a glimpse of how the PC(USA) arrived at this historic vote yet also provides an example of the default frame for environmentalism in the United States.

Many movements require unsung, invisible organizers and grassroots participants, many of whom are barely acknowledged because they are not the “right” actor for political, social, publicity, or ethical reasons.<sup>29</sup> This dissertation, then, seeks to tell the whole story of the Presbyterian 2022 vote by exploring the organizing, the history, and the struggle behind how the first mainline Protestant denomination in the United States divested as a denomination from fossil fuels.<sup>30</sup> Grounded in the theologies, tactics, and history of grassroots movements, this dissertation elevates the words of the organizers.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For example, Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama and was arrested for the act about nine months before Rosa Parks committed the same act of civil disobedience. Parks (as a middle-aged woman active in the NAACP) was a more strategic person around which to organize while Colvin was a teenager with fewer social and political ties. This is just one example of how individual actions do not change systemic issues without additional social movements (Margot Adler, “Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin,” *Weekend Edition Sunday*, last modified March 15, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin>).

<sup>30</sup> In the chapters that follow, I show how other denominations created funds that individuals and congregations could opt into.

<sup>31</sup> Other denominations (namely the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church) have voted in favor of divestment from fossil fuels. However, because of the governing structures of each of

This re-framing is important because it gives voice to individuals that campaigned for a denomination to center climate justice without public accolades. Studying and understanding the movements, tactics, and strategies that create social change in faith-based communities allows for future movements to take on and adapt tactics and strategies for future success.

What constitutes success in a social movement? Is it numbers of adherents? Legislative or policy change? Units of money raised or divested? Measurable public awareness? These are the questions that haunt social movements and the sociologists who analyze them. Questions of success are something that activists in social movements have often had to deal with, weighing both internal and external definitions of what success is, no matter the theme, location, or time frame of the movement, strategy, and target. Strategies have been evaluated by sociologists of religion through case studies and theories about the role of religion in social movements that often mention and explore the relationships between theologies, worldviews, and actions. Sociologist Richard L. Wood argues in his book *Faith in Action* that successful faith-based organizations are run by leaders who can do three things: 1) organize people, 2) articulate a moral vision, and 3) create the context for ongoing and sustainable engagement from grassroots leaders.<sup>32</sup> In a

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those denominations, they have not as a whole denomination actually moved funds in order to divest. I will explore these differences, and the impact of denominational polity on votes, in a later chapter. Michelle Carter, "United Church of Christ to become first U.S. denomination to move toward divestment from fossil fuel companies," *United Church of Christ*, last modified July 1, 2013, <https://www.ucc.org/gs2013-fossil-fuel-divestment-vote/>. Suzanne Goldenberg, "Episcopal church votes to divest from fossil fuels: 'This is a moral issue'," *The Guardian*, last modified July 3, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/episcopal-church-fossil-fuel-divestment>,

<sup>32</sup> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 162-3). See also Laurel Kearns, "The Role of Religions in Activism," and Ronnie D. Lipschutz and Corina McKendry, "Social Movements and Global Civil Society" both in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by John S. Dryzek et al, Oxford University Press, 2011.

movement where success has often been measured solely in dollar amounts, these questions are particularly acute.

**I argue in this dissertation that success in a particular faith-based movement to divest from fossil fuels can be measured through the denomination responding comprehensively to climate change, living out a biblical/theological ecological vocation, and pursuing systemic action. Understanding a particular strand of a religious tradition** as Wood says, is central to the success of a movement organizing for change within that tradition.<sup>33</sup> By this I mean organizers for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) presented and organized around the tactic in ways that resonated with the denomination as organizers were trying to shift the denomination from passive allies with climate justice into active allies.<sup>34</sup>

The urgency of determining what strategies work in social movements deepens as the climate crisis continues to worsen.<sup>35</sup> In 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—respected by scientists and global movements as an authority on the state of climate change—released a comprehensive report warning that the global human community had until 2030 to stop the steady increase of carbon emissions to escape the worst-case scenarios of climate change impact.<sup>36</sup> The next report (released in

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<sup>33</sup> Wood, *Faith in Action*, 163.

<sup>34</sup> See George Lakey for a spectrum of allies in *How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville Publishing House: 2018), 80. See Appendix D for how Fossil Free PC(USA) succinctly described the context and tactics of the movement.

<sup>35</sup> “Assessing the Global Climate in July 2023,” National Centers for Environmental Information, last modified August 14, 2023, <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/news/global-climate-202307>.

<sup>36</sup> D.R. Reidmiller, C.W. Avery, D.R. Easterling, K.E. Kunkel, K.L.M. Lewis, T.K. Maycock, and B.C. Stewart, “Fourth National Climate Assessment,” U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA. doi: 10.7930/NCA4.2018. However, other policy makers and scientists believe that we may be past the “tipping point” of being able to avoid climate change completely. See also Margaret Klein Salamon, *Facing the Climate Emergency: How to Transform Yourself with Climate Truth*, (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2020.)

2021) underscored the lack of sufficient action by governmental leaders to adequately respond; very few industrialized countries were on track to meet their commitments made in the Paris Accords (drafted in 2015 and signed in 2016).<sup>37</sup> As reported by a United Nations press release, the 2023 COP ended with an unprecedented agreement by 200 countries that included a

global stocktake [or record of what companies owns what stock] to ratchet up climate action before the end of the decade— with the overarching aim to keep the global temperature limit of 1.5°C within reach....The stocktake recognizes the science that indicates global greenhouse gas emissions need to be cut 43% by 2030, compared to 2019 levels, to limit global warming to 1.5°C. But it notes Parties are off track when it comes to meeting their Paris Agreement goals. The stocktake calls on Parties to take actions toward achieving, at a global scale, a tripling of renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency improvements by 2030.<sup>38</sup>

While this decision was widely supported as the first major commitment by countries to limit global warming, actual plans for action are not required by the agreement until the COP gathering in 2025.<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, island nations like Tuvalu are losing ground to rising sea levels and offered meager immigration rights to Australia that limit their sovereignty.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Climate Commitments Not On Track to Meet Paris Agreement Goals as NDC Synthesis Report is Published,” United Nations Climate Change, last modified February 26, 2021, <https://unfccc.int/news/climate-commitments-not-on-track-to-meet-paris-agreement-goals-as-ndc-synthesis-report-is-published>.

<sup>38</sup> “COP28 Agreement Signals ‘Beginning of the End’ of the Fossil Fuel Era,” United Nations Climate Change, last modified December 13, 2023, <https://unfccc.int/news/cop28-agreement-signals-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-fossil-fuel-era>.

<sup>39</sup> Valerie Volcovici, Gloria Dickie and William James, “Nations strike deal at COP28 to transition away from fossil fuels,” Reuters, last modified December 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/countries-push-cop28-deal-fossil-fuels-talks-spill-into-overtime-2023-12-12/>. As I note later, many COPs have included disproportionate number of representatives from fossil fuel companies.

<sup>40</sup> Michael E. Miller, “A sinking nation is offered an escape route. But there’s a catch,” The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/26/australia-tuvalu-deal-climate-change-pacific/>, 26 December 2023. The title of this article is misleading. While much of the article deals with the reality that Australia offers Tuvalu citizens the right to move to Australia (with the caveat that Tuvalu will not make any deals with Taiwan), embedded in the article is a startling truth about the real and immediate limitations of the agreement. Miller writes that the deal

Other responses to climate change in the secular world have included legislation for a carbon tax, United Nations negotiations for non-legally binding treaties (like the Kyoto or the Paris Accords mentioned above), a movement for a legally binding fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty, climate reparations, carbon tracking and offsets, investment management that screen for environmental concerns, and movements for simpler and more efficient lifestyles (including labeling energy-efficient appliances, LED light bulbs, hybrid/electric cars/scooters/bikes, and reducing red meat and dairy from diets), tree planting and land back movements, interventions in public transportation and global food systems, and discussions about family planning, including the number of children that are born into families.

Religious movements and institutions have responded to climate change through creating liturgy and prayers, retrofitting institutional buildings, theological and environmental education, making moral statements and passing resolutions in favor of climate justice, and joining some of the secular efforts above. Religious responses have come from both global leaders like Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and international leaders like Wangari Maathai who started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya (and leveraged both Christian and Indigenous spiritualities to do so), as well as from grassroots leaders around the world and across religious traditions and spiritualities

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would allow 280 people a year to move there. At that rate, it would take 40 years for all of Tuvalu's 11,000 current inhabitants to leave the archipelago, which sits halfway between Hawaii and Australia and covers only 10 square miles. Predictions about sea level rise caused by global warming suggest Tuvalu could become uninhabitable before that..... The treaty does not require Australia, one of the world's biggest fossil fuel exporters, to take more action on global warming — the root cause of Tuvalu's woes.

One might argue that the title of this article might better be "A Sinking Nation is Offered an Unhelpful Solution by One of the Nations Most Responsible for its Sinking."

taking on different strategies and tactics, like Nigerian Oluwatosin Kolawade mentioned in the opening sermon, Australian Thea Ormerod, and British Shanon Shah.<sup>41</sup> These responses to urgent scientific realities have been rooted in theological conviction and the practice of caring for and honoring the earth.

This dissertation explores one strategy—fossil-fuel divestment (or the selling off stocks in the fossil fuel industry), as it is used by the PC(USA) to articulate the denomination’s commitment to respond to climate change as a living out of what the denomination values and believes. I rely on an interdisciplinary analysis of economics, social movements, theology, and climate science. Specifically, I draw on the economic theory and practice that divestment is always a moral statement and an articulation of an institution’s values, as discussed by Vignola, Coyne and Wright, and Krull.<sup>42</sup> This economic definition also emerges in the history of other social movements where divestment has been used as one tactic among many.<sup>43</sup> Thus, I explore its use in responding to and dismantling apartheid in South Africa (particularly relying on the scholarship of Love and Massie) and in responding to the actions of the state of Israel as a way to demonstrate its use as a tactic. I argue that the PCU(USA) movement to divest from fossil fuels is rooted in faith commitments and teachings to care for the planet that have been echoed by people formed by Reformed Theology.

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<sup>41</sup> Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: Double Day, 2009). Give a few more examples of the grassroots leaders you mention?

<sup>42</sup> Leonard Vignola, Jr. *Strategic Divestment*, (New York: American Management Associations, 1974). John Coyne and Mike Wright, “An Introduction to Divestment: The Conceptual Issues,” in *Divestment and Strategic Change*, ed. John Coyne and Mike Wright, (Oxford: Philip Allan Publishers Limited, 1986). Peter Krull. *Presentation on Fossil Fuel Free Investments*, Walk for a Fossil Free PC(USA), last modified June 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tStI8jrBCic>.

<sup>43</sup> See Jonathan Lipman, “Invest-Divest 2021: A Decade of Progress Towards a Just Climate Future,” Global Fossil Fuels Divestment Commitments Database, last modified October 26 2021, <https://divestmentdatabase.org/report-invest-divest-2021/> and Robert Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years* (New York: Double Day, 1997).

While the Catholic Church and several Jewish and Muslim communities around the world have also used divestment as a tactic, I chose to focus on a historically majority white Protestant Christian denomination in the United States for a variety of reasons.<sup>44</sup> Because of their historical and systemic wealth (linked to the white supremacy, colonialism, and the privilege behind such wealth), majority white denominations in the U. S. have used divestment as a tactic when called upon by movements to use that economic wealth and prestige in solidarity with communities of color, who are the most impacted by climate injustice.<sup>45</sup> What I mean is this: because white Christians in the United States in particular have historically had more access to wealth (because of the systems of white supremacy that were built on colonization and slavery) and generational wealth, it is the responsibility of white Christians to unpack their/our complicity in wealth creation, and then to grapple with the implications of white wealth.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> According to the global divestment database, approximately 35% of the over 1500 institutions that have divested are faith-based. I unpack this percentage in a later chapter. (<https://divestmentdatabase.org/>) More about the larger divestment movements in the Catholic Church is available through Laudato Si' Movement (<https://laudatosimovement.org/divestment/>) and Trócaire, "Ethical Investments In An Era Of Climate Change: A Guide to Reviewing Environmental And Social Governance Of Catholic Investments," 2017. One Jewish divestment campaign has been All Our Might, through the organization Dayenu. More at <https://dayenu.org/ALL-OUR-MIGHT/>. One way that Muslims have organized around divestment from fossil fuels is through the issuing of fatwas (or legal rulings), one of which was released in 2019 (Saffet Catovic, "Historic Fatwa on Fossil Fuel Divestment," Parliament of World Religions, last modified November 4, 2019, <https://parliamentofreligions.org/blog/historic-fatwa-on-fossil-fuel-divestment/>.)

<sup>45</sup> For example, early proponents of divestment as a tactic in social movements were Leon Sullivan, a Black American pastor, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu; each called upon the United States as a historically wealthy nation (wealth built on the exploitation of people of color and Black people in particular) to use their wealth to be in solidarity with Black South Africans who did not have the economic privilege to divest from their own oppression. Divestment work in the PC(USA) has been criticized as being a "white" movement, and this criticism (and reflections upon that criticism) emerged in interviews conducted for this dissertation.

<sup>46</sup> In the introduction to her book *Black Womanist Ethics*, Presbyterian and womanist ethicist Katie G. Canon writes that "for more than three and a half centuries, 'a conspiracy of silence' rendered invisible the outstanding contributions of Blacks to the culture of humankind" (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 2. Future research could include the intersections between white Christian congregations investing in fossil fuel industries at their beginnings and the shift in the economies of the United States away from chattel slavery. This point in history (from the mid-1860s onward) is an example of why White Christians are the ones to do this grappling. I'm interested in exploring the work of confession that needs to be done by White Christians who supported and invested in the enslavement of

In this vein, it is the unique role of white Protestant denominations in the United States to divest from fossil fuels as a way to confess and repair the disproportionate responsibility that these denominations in the United States have had in developing and supporting the fossil fuel industry. In doing so, these churches live out a faithfulness to their original theological or biblical calling to love the Earth and each other. In this framework (which for the purpose of this dissertation builds upon the scholarship of Presbyterian theologians Jennifer Ayres and Anna Case-Winters and Presbyterian Biblical scholar William P. Brown), if these denominations remain unapologetically complicit in climate change (through funding the industry that has disproportionately created the product that has caused climate change), I argue that they fail to be faithful Christians.<sup>47</sup>

Climate change activist and author Bill McKibben comments that divestment from fossil fuels can give the fossil fuel industry

a black eye and begin to undermine their political power. That's what happened a quarter century ago when, around the Western world, institutions divested their holdings in companies doing business in apartheid South Africa. Nelson Mandela credited that as a key part of his country's liberation, and Desmond Tutu last year called on all of us to repeat the exercise with the fossil fuel companies.<sup>48</sup>

Here we see a direct line drawn between how the tactic has been used historically and how it has been used to respond to climate change and the fossil fuel industry. This

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Black folks and the extraction of their labor and then, when slavery was forced to end in the United States, how White Christians moved to support and invest in the extraction of oil from the land. This exploration requires nuancing and space beyond the scope of this dissertation, and it requires honoring the work of Black activists and freedom fighters whose witness and work continue into the present.

<sup>47</sup> See Jennifer Ayres, *Inhabitation: Ecological Religious Education* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019); Bill Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Bill McKibben, "It's Time to Stop Investing in the Fossil Fuel Industry," *The Guardian*, last modified May 29, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/30/fossil-fuel-divestment-climate-change>.

selling of stocks demonstrates a moral statement based on how companies have been shaped. Buying and selling stocks allow stockholders to, one, “remove the taint” or “support the beneficial practices of specific corporations” and, two, push for change in corporate practices.<sup>49</sup> Divestment, in this moral framework, is one way to engage in economic sanctions as a way to enact social change in solidarity with people on the frontline of oppression and suffering.<sup>50</sup>

Divestment has often been connected to climate justice and environmental justice movements. These justice movements are rooted in an understanding that communities that are most or first affected by climate change are not the communities producing the highest emissions or with the easiest access to the potential benefits of fossil fuels.<sup>51</sup> These same communities are often kept from the table to strategize about the next steps to mitigate climate change. One example of this (explored more below) is how grassroots, frontline communities were kept out of the 2021 and 2023 Convening of Parties, while the fossil fuel industry had more official participants than any single nation. With these dynamics, the influence of power is undeniable. The conversation on divestment and responses to climate change too often devolves into a discussion about “stewardship of money” and not stewardship of the Earth or people.<sup>52</sup> In turn, this erasure

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<sup>49</sup> Charles W. Powers, *Social Responsibility & Investments* (Abingdon Press, 1971), 88. In the context of Reformed theology (and for future research) and total depravity, one could argue that there is no taint-free money. Arguably, this is never a perfect process for anyone. Kerri Allen, who has held a variety of roles on the Mission Responsibility Through Investments (MRTI) Committee for the PC(USA) has articulated this by saying that “there is no pure money.”

<sup>50</sup> Gregory Gethard, “Protest Divestment And The End Of Apartheid,” *Investopedia*, last modified June 25, 2019, <http://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/08/protest-divestment-south-africa.asp>.

<sup>51</sup> Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). See also Raven Rakia and Aaron Mair, “My Neighborhood Is Killing Me,” *Sojourners*, June 2016, <https://sojo.net/magazine/june-2016/my-neighborhood-killing-me>.

<sup>52</sup> This devolution is not surprising based on larger religious contexts where, as Laurel Kearns, in her article “The Context of Eco-theology” suggests, Christian ecological activism can be divided into three categories: stewardship, eco-justice, and Christian spirituality. *The Blackwell Companion to Modern*

of voices exacerbates the economic, ecological, and racial injustices caused by the obtaining of fossil fuel-related wealth and the injustices caused by the fossil fuel industries at the focus of the investment. Simply put, when the communities most affected by climate change are not at the table, the status quo that privileges those who already have power will undoubtedly continue. Staying at that unjust table makes one complicit in injustice.<sup>53</sup>

In this dissertation, I explore how the members of the PC(USA), and eventually the denomination, have responded to global warming using the movement to divest from fossil fuels as a window to illuminate the theological, social, and political particularities of the denomination's relationship to climate change. I analyze the increased activity directed at a response to climate change (including, but not limited to, worship resources, theological education materials, lifestyle change resources, and investment screens that remove fossil fuels) to conclude that, by one measure, the denomination's comprehensive response to climate change has increased in number of resources and policies and therefore could be deemed successful.<sup>54</sup> It has also, in the vein of how Engler and Engler describe Gandhi's organizing success, required the opposition to divestment in the denomination to respond to the divestment movement as a legitimate movement.<sup>55</sup> This success means that while an institution might not divest from fossil fuels, the movement to do so may be a catalyst for increased actions overall in response to climate change.

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*Theology*, edited by Gareth Jones, (New York: Blackwell Publications, 2004), 477. That is to say, perhaps it is easier to talk about the stewardship of money on its own when there are multiple ways to talk about the intersection of Christianity and ecological activism. I discuss these three categories later in the dissertation.

<sup>53</sup> Fletcher Harper argued this point in his interview, as did Janet Cox, Gary Payton, and Pam McVety.

<sup>54</sup> See appendix C.

<sup>55</sup> Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Nations Books, 2016), 118.

Through interviews, document analysis, and historical and theological review using grounded theory and insider action research, I reflect on and analyze how theological ecological vocation and commitment that emerged in how activists called the PC(USA) to engage in divestment from fossil fuels.

## Concepts and Foundations

To think about how the movement in the PC(USA) to divest from fossil fuels has been a deepening of theological commitment or comprehensive reach, I rely on social movement theory and study. Conceptually, I rely on sociologist Sharon Nepstad's explanation of success in her study of the Plowshares Movement, in which she studied their overall success after years of organizing and actions that have not always accomplished stated goals. Based on her research through grounded theory, Nepstad argues that the power (and success) of movements can be marked by how much the status quo for an issue is changed, shaped, or challenged.<sup>56</sup> This culture shift is hard to quantifiably measure. Thus, I propose that in a religiously based divestment movement, success can be understood as an overall increase in a denomination's response to climate change through statements, programs, and campaigns—as well as divestment from the fossil fuel industry—thereby living into a theological ecological vocation.

Similarly, in her work *Waiting for a Glacier to Move*, Jennifer Ayres theorizes that the success of Presbyterian social witness (or how Presbyterians show their faith in the public world through activism in movements and on issues) deepens the activists'

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<sup>56</sup> Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

“theological well” (or the spiritual resources that sustain action) through connections to theological doctrine, confessions, and biblical understanding. By exploring the practices of the activists in long-term organizing and social witness that she interviews, she describes how the work is shaped and formed by a connection to the Presbyterian history of social witness and is connected to a sense of theological vocation of social justice.<sup>57</sup> Social witness means the living out of religious identity in the public square—what Butler *et al* describe as the place where the sacred transforms the profane—in ways that have changed over time.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the secularization of society has happened alongside more engagement with social policy from the religious right. Not all religious-based social movements that seek to change the world.

In this context, Ayres’ theory and conclusions about Presbyterians (in particular) and social witness (in general)—that social witness work is worth doing even though it is slow and that the work itself brings the church in line with its theological commitments—has helped guide my research and interviewing. My research interests are bolstered by sociologist Laurel Kearns’ research on the importance of religious leaders in the climate justice movement because of their moral authority and community connections, with particular attention to how religious communities frame their response to climate change and other environmental issues.<sup>59</sup> Her work pushes me to ask: How is Presbyterian work on climate change, and divestment in particular, framed, and with what audience in mind? Nepstad, Ayres, and Kearns provide frameworks for further analysis.

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<sup>57</sup> Jennifer R. Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Butler; Jurgen Habermas; Charles Taylor and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 122.

<sup>59</sup> Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier*, 415 and 419.

Finally, following the lead of Ayres and others, throughout this dissertation I explore how a Christian community is faithful to its biblical and theological vocation through its response to climate change. In conducting interviews, I have tried to listen to how the individual theologies and convictions of activists inform their activism. I connect the work of Presbyterian activists responding to the climate crisis through the fossil fuel divestment campaign to the ability to move the Presbyterian church into a larger conversation about fulfilling Presbyterian (in particular) and Christian (in general) ideas of ecological vocation that demand integrated care for the earth in a time of global climate crisis.

These ideas are deeply connected to Presbyterian and Christian responsibilities for both the beginning of the fossil fuel industry and the environmental movement as it has emerged in (white) U.S. history. The burning of fossil fuels is one of the largest contributors to climate change through carbon emissions, a fact that has been known in the industry itself.<sup>60</sup> Climate change has led to crises and emergencies that intersect with other social problems and systems of oppression. Jewish climate organizer Sara Shor said in her interview: “every other social inequity I care about is exacerbated by climate change.”<sup>61</sup> The crisis and the science of climate change itself must be understood to be responded to, so to the basics of climate change we now turn.

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<sup>60</sup> In their chapter, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright note how conservative think tanks and the fossil fuel industry (particularly ExxonMobil) “adopted the strategy of manufacturing ‘uncertainty and doubt’ in order to support climate change denial (in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by John S. Dryzek et al, Oxford University Press, 2011, 149.

<sup>61</sup> Sara Shor, in her interview with me, included this line in response to why and how she moved from immigration justice work to climate justice work. Sara is a mid-30s Jewish woman and works at GreenFaith, an interfaith and international environmental non-profit that convened many of the faith-based divestment conversations. Previously Sara worked at 350.org, one of the first organizations to organize and mobilize around divestment from fossil fuels. I interviewed her for a wider sense of faith-based connections

## Overview of Climate Change as a Problem

### *Global Scientific Issue*

This dissertation is situated in the context of global climate change, the culpability of the fossil fuel industry for climate change, and a range of potential mobilizations to respond. Scientists like James Hansen, well-known for his science-based advocacy about climate change since the 1980s, and evangelical climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe particularly point out how the fossil fuel industry has known that burning of fossil fuels contributes to climate change and has instead paid for misinformation campaigns about the reality of climate change.<sup>62</sup> Climate change, caused by the emission of heat-trapping gasses due to the overuse of fossil fuels, has been understood since the 1870s but that understanding gained traction in the mid-twenty-first century as people in developing nations noticed changes in land and water and sky.<sup>63</sup> Since little of significance has been done, and there has been much effort at denial, global warming continues to get worse,

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to divestment from fossil fuels and to add her perspective to how non-Presbyterians saw the Presbyterian movement to divest from fossil fuels as part of the global divestment from fossil fuels movement.

<sup>62</sup> There are other contributors to climate change (methane from factory farming which also uses a large amount of fossil fuels), for example) but according to Rich and Hansen, the fossil fuel industry is the largest contributor as well as a major funder in the misinformation campaign about climate change. Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth*, 2019. James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009). See also Justin Farrell, Justin, Kathryn McConnell, K. and Robert Brulle, "Evidence-based Strategies to Combat Scientific Misinformation," *Nature Climate Change*. 9 (2019), 191–195; Salamon, *Climate Emergency*, 2020. As spokesperson for the Union of Concerned Scientists, Hayhoe said, "Some of the richest companies in the world have invested in disinformation... they've invested in fake experts, they've invested in politicians, they've invested in people to basically deceive us and tell us that 200 years of science somehow isn't true" (Jamie Seidel, "Fossil fuel industry's 'climate deception' tactics challenged," *Cosmos*, September 27, 2021, <https://cosmosmagazine.com/earth/climate/fossil-fuel-industrys-climate-deception-tactics-challenged/>). Also, Hansen and Hayhoe are not the first or only activists of their kind- indeed there have been activists and organizers pushing against the fossil fuel industry since its beginning. See also Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (briefer version), edited by David M. Chalmers, NY: Harper and Row, 1966.

<sup>63</sup> Rich, "Losing Earth."

affecting all parts of human lives and the lives of all living things on the planet. In his article “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change,” Nathaniel Rich details how James Hansen and others went to Washington, D.C., in the 1980s to testify to Congress about the dire reality of climate change to come. Congress ignored them. Hansen writes a stirring account of that time in his book *Storms of My Grandchildren*, articulating his scientific methodology through the lens of his children and grandchildren and how our inaction on climate change will affect their generations.<sup>64</sup> In their lifetimes, storms would be greater, sea levels would rise, and droughts would increase. Even in the 1980s, climate science was clear: if we kept burning fossil fuels at the rate we were going, we would make the earth hotter—too hot to be inhabited. And we kept burning fossil fuels, at even higher rates. Hansen, and many other scientists, designed climate models, or ‘Mirror Worlds:’ parallel realities that mimicked our own. Nathaniel Rich describes how these “digital simulacra, technically called ‘general circulation models,’ combined the mathematical formulas that [describe] the behavior of the sea, land and sky into a single computer.”<sup>65</sup> Hansen’s climate models echoed what scientist Svante Arrhenius had determined in 1896 in calculations he did by hand. According to Arrhenius’ math, global warming “would become noticeable in a few centuries... or sooner if consumption of fossil fuels continued to increase.”<sup>66</sup> There are now over 25 “virtual earths:” models that are testing all the factors known to affect climate.<sup>67</sup> These factors include greenhouse gas emissions, energy from the sun, volcanos, weather

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> As quoted in Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Katherine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley, *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions* (New York: FaithWords, 2009), 43. They are models, meaning that they predict what could happen in a variety of climatic situations.

patterns such as *El Niño*, forest fires and their frequency, tree cover, and deforestation. The effects of each of these pieces are plotted on fine grids across these climate models.<sup>68</sup> In short, climate scientists are keeping track of how a variety of factors are already impacting or could in the future impact the global climate system. Models that include human actions, including the emission of greenhouse gases at the current rate, predict a climate that is hotter and more dangerous than the models without our emissions. The results of these models demonstrate that our impact on the climate system is much greater than natural variability. This science is how we know that humans are causing climate change. What scientists continue to find, however, is that their models are outstripped by reality.<sup>69</sup> That is, climate change is getting worse more quickly than models anticipated because most climate models are inherently conservative.

Since Arrhenius's time over a century ago, the actions of industrialized societies have indeed increased our burning of fossil fuels. In that time, the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal and oil, has increased the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). Changes in "atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gasses began in the late 1700s when we figured out how to burn massive amounts of coal, gas, and oil for energy."<sup>70</sup> When burned, carbon from fossil fuels combines with oxygen to form carbon dioxide. When we burn fossil fuels through industry, agriculture, electricity, and transportation to the degree that more gasses are added to the atmosphere than can be absorbed by plants, trees, and the oceans, then we fall out of balance from this natural state.<sup>71</sup> Plants, trees, and the ocean can all absorb carbon dioxide, but they

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>69</sup> Rich, "Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change."

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 31.

cannot absorb (and are not absorbing) it at the rate we are producing it, especially in contexts of deforestation.

When scientists review the records of the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, it has ranged between 200 and 300 ppm (parts per million), a range that is more conducive to life on Earth. As of April 2023, the concentration has passed 417 ppm.<sup>72</sup> There was a time when scientists thought rising temperatures would “trigger some other change that would cool the planet. Clouds, perhaps: as the atmosphere grew moisture with increased evaporation, more clouds might form, blocking some of the incoming sunlight.”<sup>73</sup> Instead, the clouds and the denser atmosphere that climate change produces trap more heat and make the world hotter. This feedback loop means that heat and atmosphere compound each other.

Climate change is a global phenomenon, though most individuals experience the effects on a local scale. All of creation lives in two types of climates simultaneously: local and global. It is easier to talk about climate on a local scale and easier to grasp the anecdotal evidence of everyday life for individuals, but the global temperature scale is our primary gauge for climate change and the state of the planet as a whole. These global temperature records are “the most reliable indicators of climate change” as it is actually happening and measure the human impact on the growing climate crisis.<sup>74</sup>

While the earth has a natural greenhouse effect (an atmosphere that keeps enough

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<sup>72</sup> According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), “The global surface average for CO<sub>2</sub> rose by 2.13 parts per million (ppm) to 417.06 ppm, roughly *the same rate observed during the last decade. Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is now 50% higher than pre-industrial levels.*” (“Greenhouse gasses continued to increase rapidly in 2022,” NOAA, last modified April 5, 2022, <https://www.noaa.gov/news-release/greenhouse-gases-continued-to-increase-rapidly-in-2022>, emphasis mine.) This data shows that all efforts to curb emissions are failing.

<sup>73</sup> Bill McKibben, *Falter* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019), 30.

<sup>74</sup> Hayhoe and Farley, *A Climate for Change*, 9.

heat on our planet to keep us warm, but not so much that we would boil alive), about one-third of the sun's rays are reflected to space. The natural state of our atmosphere and the presence of our ocean keep our planet within a livable temperature range.<sup>75</sup> The Earth's average temperature, however, has increased by almost 2 degrees Fahrenheit since the rise of industrialization during the 19th century and through the early part of the 21st century. Earth's climate record, preserved in tree rings, ice cores, and corals, shows that the global average temperature has been stable over much of the time of human civilization. Small temperature changes correspond to enormous changes in the environment. These temperature changes, for example, are not significant on a daily or monthly basis. Instead, "climate change is about whether any pattern can be seen over *thirty years or more*."<sup>76</sup> The global temperature changes over the last 2,000 years have been graphed by climate scientists on a graph that is called colloquially the "hockey stick curve." There has been a slow rise in the plot of temperature on the graph over most of the last two thousand years (the handle of the hockey stick). Then two hundred years ago, about the time of the beginning of the Industrial Age, global temperatures turned sharply upwards like the blade of the hockey stick.<sup>77</sup> The world is getting hotter, more quickly than ever before, and industrialization and our related burning of fossil fuels has caused it. These causes of climate change are global and based on collective, interactive systems that existed before anyone currently alive was born. To grapple with the nature of climate change theologically, we need a resource that can engage the consequences of collective sin that are not our own (as chapter four of this dissertation dissects more deeply.)

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 11, emphasis mine.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 19.

In 2007, when the fourth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment report began to persuade people that climate change is real, is caused by humans, and is unprecedented. Before the report, there was not widespread belief in a changing climate nor in a common human-made cause, though writers and scientists like Bill McKibben and James Hansen had been making those connections since the 1980s and denominations and environmental organizations, including faith-based ones, had been trying to educate their followers. Soon after that report, the United Nations Framework on Climate Change said that humanity would have “common but differentiated responsibilities” in response to climate change.<sup>78</sup> This alone signifies what an important role religious groups can play.

Climate change creates sacrifice zones, areas that will be more destroyed or altered as temperatures and sea levels rise, i.e. the effects of climate change are uneven. Naomi Klein’s description of those sacrifice zones includes isolated, impoverished places where “residents lack political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language and class.”<sup>79</sup> These are places and people that have been written off by privileged people, especially those with political and corporate/economic power, in North America and Europe as places that do not matter. Klein does not invoke the term environmental racism, but her definition of the inequity of climate change echoes Benjamin Chavis’ definition in terms of systemic lack of power and experience: that

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<sup>78</sup> James B. Martin-Shramm. *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 12. A synthesis of that ground-breaking report is available here: Larry Bernstein et al., “Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Plenary XXVII, November 12-17, 2007, [https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4\\_syr.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr.pdf).

<sup>79</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, 310. See the discussion of Tuvalu above as one example.

people who have been marginalized along categories of race, nation, and gender are more likely to feel the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, the fourth IPCC report includes a description of the ecological and human geographies—those places that are sacrifice zones—which will be hardest hit by climate change:

Some systems, sectors and regions are likely to be especially affected by climate change. The systems and sectors are some ecosystems (tundra, boreal forest, mountain, Mediterranean-type, mangroves, salt marshes, coral reefs and the sea-ice biome), low-lying coasts, water resources in some dry regions at mid-latitudes and in the dry tropics and in areas dependent on snow and ice melt, agriculture in low-latitude regions, and human health in areas with low adaptive capacity. The regions are the Arctic, Africa, small islands and Asian and African mega deltas. Within other regions, even those with high incomes, some people, areas and activities can be particularly at risk.<sup>81</sup>

Almost universally, race and poverty are interconnected by systems of oppression. But in these geographic areas, even wealth will not protect people in the sacrifice zones from experiencing climate change. And in the big picture, no one is “free” of the effects of climate change, it is just that some areas, and some people, are more able to adapt/protect themselves. Still, religious actors argue that this inequity requires something from communities of privilege—a response of solidarity and action, which is what some social movements enact. Naomi Klein points to how communities in developing cultures are impacted by the effects of global warming, poverty, and the need to end that poverty, and often the easiest way to respond is the burning of more fossil fuels. There have been some efforts at responding to the inequity and to creating solutions. The Greenhouse Development Rights were created by the Stockholm Environment Institute to “recognize

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<sup>80</sup> Richard J. Lazarus, “Environmental Racism! That’s What It Is,” *University of Illinois Law Review*, 255-274 (2000), <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1151&context=facpub>, 257.

<sup>81</sup> Bernstein et al., 72.

the West's greater responsibility for climate change.”<sup>82</sup> Such a treaty understands the lighter responsibility of countries that are not in the developed West or the oil-rich Middle East and begins to balance the political scales of global power. This concept of climate debt (or the unequal responsibility and cost of climate change) is intimately connected with global economic and political power, which Klein says is rooted in

two-hundred-odd years of accumulated emissions, that means that the countries that have been powering their economics with fossil fuels since the Industrial Revolution have done far more to cause temperatures to rise than those that just to get in the globalization game.<sup>83</sup>

It is important to note that countries and communities of color that are disproportionately experiencing climate change have discovered the challenge of telling their stories and having those stories be heard. The last part of Klein's definition of the sacrifice zones is that the “people who lived in these condemned places know they had been written off.”<sup>84</sup> They are invisible, with less access to information and policy making. They have to make people in places with power—places that will not be sacrificed in climate change—understand that their lives and stories matter too. The Maldives—a geographically tiny island country in the Pacific Ocean that will disappear as ocean levels rise—has created a variety of political stunts to capture the world's attention. In 2009, the President of the Maldives held a cabinet meeting underwater symbolizing that soon his whole country would be underwater before the United Nations Climate Change

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<sup>82</sup> Klein 417.

<sup>83</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 409. Another example of the inequity of climate vulnerability: in 2006, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States released a report called “Gender: The Missing Component of the Response to Climate Change.” At the end of the report, where they list the vulnerabilities and capacities of areas to respond to the effects of climate change, the authors do not even include North America and Europe.

<sup>84</sup> Klein 310.

Conference in Copenhagen.<sup>85</sup> Such creativity will need to be continuously engaged to capture global attention, as where do those of disappearing island nations/states go when the water levels rise, where do those from drought stricken regions, or where temperatures climb to over 120 degrees Fahrenheit go?

*Scientists Call on Religious Groups to Lend a Moral Voice*

There has not been a response to climate change that matches the needed urgency, as evidenced by rising temperatures leading to mass suffering throughout the world through heat waves, food shortages, and rising sea levels.<sup>86</sup> Scientists have thus looked to religious leaders and people of faith and to lend a moral voice and authority to respond. As the National Religious Partnership for the Environment articulates in its history,

By the mid-late 1980s, portions of the religious community had begun to create responses and programs to address environmental stewardship. In the 1990s, after an open letter sent from 32 Nobel laureates and other eminent scientists, senior religious leaders affirmed the need for theologically grounded, scientifically informed religious initiative. What followed was a formal consultation with senior religious leaders to lay the groundwork for such action. In October 1993, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment formally began its activities as an alliance of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, and the Evangelical Environmental Network.<sup>87</sup>

Notably, the religious response to climate change has come from a variety of faith and denominational traditions. Those responses continue to elicit publicity. Indeed, the Pope's response to climate and environmental destruction in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato*

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<sup>85</sup> Olivia Lang, "Maldives Leader in Climate Change Stunt," BBC, published October 17, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8312320.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8312320.stm).

<sup>86</sup> Brad Palmer, "Climate Change Is Speeding Toward Catastrophe. The Next Decade Is Crucial, U.N. Panel Says," The New York Times, Published March 20, 2023, Updated Sept. 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/20/climate/global-warming-ipcc-earth.html>.

<sup>87</sup> "About NRPE," accessed November 11, 2023, <http://www.nrpe.org/about.html>.

*Si* was hailed as a historic and powerful document that could reach people whom science had not. His religious authority as the head of one of the largest faith groups in the world was heralded as a powerful resource, and he and the team of writers for the encyclical consulted with scientists and climate experts. It did not evoke the response at the level hoped for. In the 2023 follow up letter, *Laudato Deum*, Pope Francis emphasizes how much the poor have been blamed for climate change, when the rich have the larger burden to respond. He writes about the need for engagement by companies and governments:

It is often heard also that efforts to mitigate climate change by reducing the use of fossil fuels and developing cleaner energy sources will lead to a reduction in the number of jobs. What is happening is that millions of people are losing their jobs due to different effects of climate change: rising sea levels, droughts and other phenomena affecting the planet have left many people adrift. Conversely, the transition to renewable forms of energy, properly managed, as well as efforts to adapt to the damage caused by climate change, are capable of generating countless jobs in different sectors. This demands that politicians and business leaders should even now be concerning themselves with it.<sup>88</sup>

Here we see how Pope Francis articulates how there is no escaping the economic impacts of climate change and the need for people with political and social power to respond.

This response to climate change must include religious leadership and communities. As sociologist Laurel Kearns writes in her article “The Role of Religions in Activism,” people of faith—particularly faith leaders—can mobilize groups of people, frame issues in moral terms, and offer hope when the problem seems hopeless.<sup>89</sup>

Religious institutions already have a “sheer number of listeners and actors” that can be

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<sup>88</sup> Pope Francis, “Apostolic Exhortation *Laudato Deum* Of The Holy Father Francis To All People Of Good Will On The Climate Crisis,” The Vatican, accessed November 11, 20223, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudato-deum.html#\\_ftn3](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudato-deum.html#_ftn3).

<sup>89</sup> Laurel Kearns, “The Role of Religions in Activism,” *Climate Change and Society*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg (Oxford University Press, 2011) 414.

organized to create cultural shifts.<sup>90</sup> Finally, religious groups have been working on responding to climate change and environmental crises for decades by now and bring moral legitimacy to the work through faith-based organizations, liturgy, and activism, just like religious leaders have done for other social justice movements. As is true in other social justice situations, and true in climate justice movements, religious traditions and people of faith bring with them unique resources to respond to pressing and debilitating circumstances.

People of many different faiths have also often been participants in or leaders of a variety of movements, from anti-war and labor movements to movements directed at racial, economic, gender and environmental injustice. Other people of faith and scholars have particularly explored how religious leaders and communities have shaped religious environmental action.<sup>91</sup> The participation of these communities/organizations can add moral and religious authority to these causes, and can help to change the conversations about climate change—or at least increase the moral pressure on policymakers and corporations to take action because it is the “right” thing to do. In later chapters, I explore examples of how faith communities have responded to apartheid in South Africa and genocide in Israel/Palestine. Religious leaders and their followers have shown up in other movements too; for just a few examples, in Gandhi’s response to the British colonization of India that relied on Hinduism to guide his nonviolent tactics, in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X’s organizing for civil rights in the United States, and in Rev.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>91</sup> See also Amanda Baugh, *God and the Green Divide: Religious Environmentalism in Black and White* (University of California Press, 2016); Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press, 2010); Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017); Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Sarah MacFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

William Barber II's and Rev. Liz Theoharis' work in the Poor People's Campaign in the United States.<sup>92</sup> Each of these movements have relied on a variety of strategies and tactics to pressure the status quo to change. One particular tactic that religious communities have used to add pressure has been divestment from what is harmful (in the case of this dissertation from fossil fuels). These religious communities have often turned toward the Bible for reassurance and to provide foundation for the work. In this dissertation, I argue that the biblical call for humans to care for the planet and all living things is one of the reasons why Christians have been part of the religious environmental movement. The following section explores that call and how climate change is a violation of our human vocation.

### *Climate Change as a Violation of Ecological Vocation*

In Genesis 2:15, God tells the human one to farm and keep, or take care of, the earth. This is a vocation—a task for the world. In that vocation, humans are meant to take care of the earth we have been given.<sup>93</sup> Many Protestant theologies suggest that when human beings reject that vocation, we act sinfully, disconnecting ourselves from

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<sup>92</sup> Theoharis is ordained in the PC(USA).

<sup>93</sup> "Farm and keep" occurs in the Common English Bible translation in Genesis 2:15, as the image of "farmer" used in chapter one evokes. The language of "farming" here is what can be interpreted, as Theodore Hiebert does in *The Yahwist Landscape*, as loving through the need to know the land in order to survive. Essentially, according to David C. Hopkins in *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age*, the land of the Yahwist was made up of a multitude of microclimates in relation to which farmers needed to negotiate subsistence farming. Thus, in order to survive, the farmer would need to have an intimate knowledge of the particular land one was in relationship with. I wonder about this as a kind of complicated knowing and loving that a parent might have for a child. That is, not every moment is wonderful or idyllic, but knowing a person or place very well is connected to loving them. See note 23 for more. David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1985). This language ("take care of the earth"), as I show in the following chapters on Presbyterian resources on caring for the planet, emerges in how Presbyterians talk about earth care.

God, the earth, and each other.<sup>94</sup> Part of that sin (that disconnection from God and the rest of the world) is embedded in how Christian theologies make sense of ecological crises. Anna Case-Winters writes in *Reconstructing a Theology of Nature* that attention to the theological foundations of the environmental crisis (noted most famously in Western Tradition in Presbyterian Lynn White's "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in *Science Magazine* in 1967) means theology must also have a voice in fixing that crisis. She goes on to say the theological and biblical studies' responses to White's article have fit into at least two different categories: first, that White is articulating a misuse of Christian Tradition (meaning, he is describing how Christianity has gotten Biblical interpretation incorrect), and second, an exploration of his exhortation that the theological underpinnings of the ecological crisis must be rethought and reinterpreted.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Case-Winters says that if even a *misinterpretation* of the human vocation to care for the earth has been the cause of the environmental crisis, then "the work of reconstruction [of Christian theology in response to that crisis] represents not just a responsibility, but a crucial opportunity to make a positive impact for the good of all creation."<sup>96</sup> Theologies grounded in an incarnate God must respond to the incarnate world.

But that contribution to the problem of climate change is not the only role of Christianity (which White also pointed to in his article, where he points to the role of stewardship in the vein of St. Francis.) Part of that response, according to Case-Winters, are "untapped resources at the heart of our tradition" (and here she is referring

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<sup>94</sup> Chris Doran, *Hope in the Age of Climate Change: Creation Care This Side of the Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017) 92.

<sup>95</sup> Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

particularly to Reformed traditions.)<sup>97</sup> What the science of climate change shows us is that we humans have failed to live into our vocation to love the world and to love God—disconnecting our actions from the rest of the world. That is, we have disconnected our burning of fossil fuels (which causes climate change) from our vocation to love the earth. Christian ecotheology points to that disconnection as sin, especially when it cuts us off from God, the earth, and each other.<sup>98</sup> I explore this ecological vocation for Christians more deeply in the next chapter.

## U.S. Protestants Involved in Fossil Fuel Divestment

In this dissertation, I focus on white Protestants, particularly white Presbyterians, because of their impact on the fossil fuel industry and religious environmentalism.<sup>99</sup> In his 2019 book *Anointed with Oil*, Darren Dochuk lays out how many of the original oil barons were grounded in Protestant theologies (sometimes as lay members and sometimes as religious leaders who were formed by the theological commitments of their churches) that saw material wealth as a sign of God's blessing and the use of the earth's resources as a part of human dominion of the planet. Ironically, other scholars have noted the history of Protestants who have been part of religious environmentalism in the US, noting how theologies of care, justice, and preservation have spurred on policies and movements, with historian Mark Stoll noting the particularly deep and early Presbyterian

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>98</sup> Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 146.

<sup>99</sup> Again, there is also clear data that there is a systemic economic wealth gap associated with whiteness that people who are white have more systemic and historical access to wealth. Christian Weller, "Racial Wealth Inequality Gradually Declines, But That Is No Reason To Celebrate," last modified January 18, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christianweller/2023/01/18/racial-wealth-inequality-gradually-declines-but-that-is-no-reason-to-celebrate/?sh=59518a3a4d76>

roots in his book *Inherit the Holy Mountain*.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Stoll notes that even the environmentalists who were raised in Presbyterian and Reformed traditions and then strayed, kept with them the theological themes of the tradition (like stewardship of creation) that shaped how they interacted with nature. This in-dwelling of Protestant values is true of both oil barons and environmentalists alike.

The whiteness of wealth and the solidarity possible in using wealth to respond to calls to work for justice through divestment is one of the reasons why I focus on Protestant uses of divestment from fossil fuels, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) specifically. In addition, there is very little literature about the specific roles of Protestant denominations in the divestment from the fossil fuels movement as a whole, where success (defined by the monetary amount of assets removed from the fossil fuel industry) has been dominated by secular actors. There are some studies of pan-denominational responses or responses by a variety of religious non-governmental organizations, but these are truncated or focus on a single denomination.<sup>101</sup> This dissertation seeks to explore these responses and to dig deeper into the case study of one denomination as I seek to close a gap in the literature.

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<sup>100</sup> See also Laurel Kearns, "The Context of Eco-theology," in *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Terra Rowe, *Toward a Better Worldliness: Ecology, Economy, and the Protestant Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> See Harper, *GreenFaith*, 2015, Barnes, Rebecca and Jessica Maudlin. "Environmental Racism & Justice." Presbyterian Church (USA). August 24, 2020. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment/environmental-issues/environmental-racism-justice/>; Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World*, 2018.

## Methodology

Throughout this dissertation, I rely in part on qualitative research, particularly grounded theory and participant observer research. I also rely on biblical, theological and historical materials, but it is the grounded theory approach that guides the dissertation. These theories guided the process of determining interview questions, selection of interviewees, the interviews themselves, and the finalization of the synthesis of research themes and findings through sampling, categorization, and coding. This methodology allowed for the assumptions I brought to the research as a participant observer to be critiqued or confirmed by interviewees, documents, and coding. Below, I define insider action research, grounded theory (and the processes of sampling and coding that my research entailed) and then note two similar projects upon which my work draws.

### Insider Action Research

Because my project explores a denomination in which I am an ordained leader and a social movement in which I have held significant (though not sole) leadership, I draw upon reflexive understandings of the relationship between the researcher and the topic being researched and employ insider action research methods. Insider action research, as defined by David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller, is done by someone “native” to an organization or movement while completing research.<sup>102</sup> There are many challenges inherent to this method (including striking a balance between familiarity with the organization to conduct research and a distance to allow for reflection; navigating

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<sup>102</sup> David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller, “Insider Action Research,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*, ed. David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014), 444.

dual roles; and managing organizational politics). There are also biases around wanting to make the institution look good and not being able to engage the research from an outside lens. However, it is possible for someone who is part of an organization to study that organization to better understand the dynamics and contributions of that organization and move that organization forward.<sup>103</sup> This is in part because an insider often knows how decisions are made, who makes those decisions, how institutional culture is shaped, and the implicit values of an organization (but not always the values of the people who make up that institution).

In my case, I bring almost twenty years of membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA), including four years of seminary training, successfully navigating the ordination process, the role and status of clergy, and participating in other movements in the denomination (organizing for ordination equality, for example.) This experience means I bring both informal and formal knowledge to how Presbyterian polity works, the experience of other Presbyterian social movements, and long-term relationships with many of the major players. I was able, for example, to interview two former moderators of the denomination, the highest level of leadership, because of those relationships. I also shared an implicit understanding of the white culture that shapes a majority white institution.

For insights into insider action research, I take inspiration from the work of theologian and ethicist Ada Maria Isazi-Diaz in *La Lucha Continues*, in which she reflects on the efficacy of *mujerista* theology, which she helped systematize (just as I will

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

be assessing the theologies and tactics of a movement I helped to generate).<sup>104</sup> I also draw inspiration from the work of Amanda Baugh in *God and The Green Divide*, in which she researched, participated, reflected on and interrogated an organization to which she was connected (noting that she was an intern), Jane Ellen Nickel who (as a chaplain in the United Methodist Church) researched and wrote about the United Methodist Church's struggle to ordain queer folks, and Daniel Apfel, who writes about the beginnings of the divestment from fossil fuels movement, noting that his experience as an insider gives him particular insight to the movement and players.<sup>105</sup> This experience and insider knowledge are two of the benefits of this method.

While there are some challenges to this research method in this case, I have sought to create balance by interviewing a variety of other key and strategic players in the divestment from fossil fuels movements (both in the PC[USA] and in other Protestant denominations in the U.S.).<sup>106</sup> I also draw upon grounded theory, which cautions against starting with a theoretical model and then looking for support, and querying my investigation.

Still, as much as possible, this dissertation is firmly committed to an examination of any preconceived theories and to consistently drawing on the data, themes, and experiences that emerged in interviews tell the full story of the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA). Specifically, my research seeks to understand and

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<sup>104</sup> See Ada Maria Isazi-Diaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>105</sup> Amanda Baugh, *God and the Green Divide*, 2016; Jane Ellen Nickel, *We Shall Not Be Moved: Methodists Debate Race, Gender, and Homosexuality* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014); Daniel C. Apfel, *Exploring Divestment as a Strategy for Change: An Evaluation of the History, Success, and Challenges of Fossil Fuel Divestment*, *Social Research* (Vol. 82: No. 4: Winter 2015), 917.

<sup>106</sup> Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, "Insider Action Research," 2014.

articulate how Protestant theologies about the relationship between humans and creation undergirded the grounding of the movement, how Presbyterian polity informed and transformed the movement, and how success in the movement has been defined by organizers and institutional powers. Each of these themes emerged in preparation for the interviews but were transformed by how interviewees responded to questions. I had ideas—as a participant observer—as to what themes and questions I thought had emerged since the beginning of the movement. What I didn’t fully know is how other organizers explained these themes, if they thought there were other themes, or even if these themes rang true for them. As I unpack in later chapters, the answers to questions about theology were particularly surprising to me. For example, as a clergyperson and religious educator, I had assumed that the creation stories of Genesis and Jesus’ call to love one’s neighbor would figure heavily into the theological convictions of the people I interviewed. I assumed this because of my experiences working in the field and conversations with other practitioners who relied on these teachings. These teachings did emerge but were overshadowed by the biblical teachings that “you cannot love both God and money” (Matthew 6:24) and that a “rich man will struggle to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23-26). In other words, economic themes emerged just as much as eco-theological ones. Another major assumption I brought to the research was that activists for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) were grounded in distinctively Reformed and Presbyterian theologies. What I discovered in my interview process was that they were not, and so I had to adjust my thesis to an argument for strong broadly Christian theological grounding, with some, but not distinctly, Reformed and Presbyterian theologies. This shift is an example of my grounded model of research where the content

of the interviews required me to change your beginning assumptions, and to the grounded theory I now turn.

## Grounded Theory

Grounded theory methodology was developed by nurse Anselm Strauss in the 1950s in the United States alongside Barney Glaser, who was a quantitative researcher in sociology.<sup>107</sup> The theory was created against what they called “armchair theorizing,” or research done without interacting with the field itself.<sup>108</sup> It emerged as a way to question the authority of established theories and to develop a theory that was relevant in a changing world.<sup>109</sup> At its core, grounded theory is an attempt to add rigorous inquiry to qualitative data to create a new theory.

Grounded theory is “the discovery of theory from data... that fits empirical situations” and is rooted in qualitative data and comparative analysis.<sup>110</sup> In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Strauss and Glaser argue that there are five jobs of theory in sociology: to explain and predict behavior, to advance theoretical understandings, to give the researcher control over the research, to give perspective and explanations for behavior/data, and to guide research.<sup>111</sup> Theory, thus, is what is understandable and what guides sociologists in meaning-making, and grounded

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<sup>107</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Second Ed (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 5.

<sup>108</sup> Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedure for Developing Grounded Theory* (California: SAGE Publications, 2015), 6.

<sup>109</sup> Ian Dey, *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), xiii.

<sup>110</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2012, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

theory is a theory that is deeply connected to the data on which it is based, which makes the data and theory more relevant.

As a researcher sifts through data, “generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at a theory suited to its supposed uses,” which means that instead of pressing data into a pre-imagined theory, a theory emerges based on the data.<sup>112</sup> There are several unique features of grounded theory. First: “concepts out of which the theory is constructed are derived from data collected during the research process and not chosen before beginning the research.”<sup>113</sup> Secondly, data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand, leading, in a cyclical process, to more data being collected.<sup>114</sup> This process meant that I held the questions and answers loosely, letting the interviewees’ answers surprise me.

Juliet Corbi and Anselm Strauss note that students who tend to use grounded research want to construct theory and are not afraid to draw on their own experiences while analyzing data due to “having rejected more traditional ideas of ‘objectivity’ that warned of the dangers of using personal experience.”<sup>115</sup> Here again, there is some overlap with feminist theory. This valuing of experience was particularly useful in my role as an activist in the movement trying to understand from a theoretical and broader perspective how and why the PC(USA)’s movement to divest from fossil fuels had not yet caused money to be divested from fossil fuels even though there were decades of educational resources, institutional policies, and liturgy that called on Presbyterians to love the earth. My experience in the movement (and the denomination as a whole) prepared me to

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>113</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 7.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 9.

understand the context of the interviews but not to shape the answers that were given or the bigger picture that emerged.

## Participant Observer

Qualitative research makes the “researcher as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data they provide.”<sup>116</sup> In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that a liberating way of knowing is one in which the teacher or guide respects the knowledge and experience of the learners. He suggests that a “banking” model of knowledge-sharing (in which one or two people are seen as the “experts” and the students are seen as empty vessels waiting for knowledge to be given to them) perpetuates a hierarchical mode of learning. Instead, Freire suggests a way of learning in which the teachers and students each bring something to the learning environment: no one is an empty slate, and everyone has biases and previous experience they bring to the learning. Later, in *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire writes that all educators have to keep their eyes and ears open in order to see any “hidden curriculum,” that is, any biases that may arise.<sup>117</sup> In the same way, participant action research assumes that every researcher brings some bias into the research question. Indeed, the researcher in this method is part of the community that is being researched, and the mode of inquiry into this research is based upon a researcher’s ability to reflect on a “deep description” and experience of the community and the research question. This is *qualitative* research because it pays attention to the types of information that is being accumulated, not just quantitative data

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>117</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 80.

that is compiled and analyzed in some objective way. The researcher imposes a series of reflective and contextualized analyses, adding layers of reflection with each iteration of the research.

I use grounded, qualitative theory to be held accountable to the people I interviewed and the communities to which the interviewees belong, especially since my research and interviews are done through participant action research.<sup>118</sup> This accountability helps set up a theory that is based on the data itself. Originally, I saw the research as a chance to define what “success” is in a particular social movement in a particular faith community, and the data would inform the theory. In the process of collecting the raw data through interviews and reading through primary/secondary documents, using the methodology of grounded theory as a participant researcher made me adjust my approach. In practice, this has meant that I drafted research questions based on my experience and knowledge of the movement and tactic(s), compared those questions to similar studies, and adapted questions as I interviewed practitioners.

This theory means that there cannot be what Glaser and Strauss call “exemplifying,” which is when a researcher “easily finds examples for dreamed-up, speculative, or logically deduced theory.”<sup>119</sup> This is to say that with such a theory, it is hard to start with

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<sup>118</sup> Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 52. My own role in the work brought both advantages and disadvantages to ethnographic research. My experience allowed me to craft questions based on the movement and gave me easy access to potential interviewees with a high probability that people would respond favorably to the request for interview and that their responses would be forthcoming and in-depth. A disadvantage, however, was that I brought very clear biases toward divestment and the process to the interviews. Every researcher brings bias into the research, and some of the interviews confirmed that my bias was not always present. For example, I assumed that interviewees would use the language of total depravity (a specific doctrine of Reformed theology that I will explain more in the next chapter) or ecological vocation when I asked about the theological foundations of the divestment movement in the PC(USA). Instead, many interviewees responded about anti-capitalism and care for the marginalized in their responses to questions about theological reasoning behind our shared work.

<sup>119</sup> Glaser and Strauss, 3.

the theory and find data to support it. Instead, one starts with the data and builds a theory from that data. This theory has been particularly helpful in reducing research bias in this particular dissertation.<sup>120</sup> For example, because I am so close to the movement to divest from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) as one of the original organizers and strategists, I assumed that I already knew the theological and spiritual groundings of the movement for everyone involved. Before the interviews, I assumed that everyone in the movement was operating from a particular theology of creation care (based on the creation stories of Genesis) and a deep sense of sin rooted in Presbyterian doctrine --the same theological understandings that shaped my participation.<sup>121</sup> I could come up with examples that supported this belief. However, the practice of interviewing a core sampling of other participants steered the theory in a different direction. Several of the ordained ministers I interviewed explained that they did not have a specific theology that guided their work around divestment, an admission that could feel at odds with their profession. Others were willing to be vulnerable and clear about their disappointment in and anger at the denomination because I had experienced the work alongside them. Still, I needed to find a balance of who I interviewed so that a range of responses was obtained, including some who were more skeptical about divestment. I found that balance by choosing a diverse sample of interviewees.

### Sampling for Interviews

Interview subjects were chosen as a way to obtain a range of perspectives, and to balance the perspective I brought to the interviews as a participant observer doing

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>121</sup> This expectation is one of the reasons why I explore the Doctrine of Creation in Chapter 4.

reflective research. My work in Presbyterian climate and environmental movements began formally in 2008 when I joined Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC), a parachurch organization that eventually co-sponsored an early iteration of Fossil Free PC(USA), the name of the movement that called for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA). In addition, at the time of the initial interviews (in May-July 2021), I was the last remaining original steering committee member on the Fossil Free PC(USA)'s steering committee, and I served as a moderator of the committee for the preceding six years (I stepped down in June 2022). As mentioned above, such a position has afforded me significant decision-making power as well as perspective on the movement. I remember the first conversations about divestment as a tactic in the movement, and I have been part of strategizing conversations ever since.

In participant action research, the researcher's experience and participation create a bias that can be respected.<sup>122</sup> My role and perspective have shaped some of the theories and themes that emerge in the following chapters. They are informed by other people from the original steering committee (who could speak to the beginnings of the use of the tactic in the PC[USA]), members of subsequent steering committees (who could speak to ongoing tactics and history), two moderators of the denomination (who could articulate the larger denominational context, particularly around polity), one staff person for shareholder engagement in the PC(USA) (Rob Fohr), several campaigners for divestment in other faith traditions, and the "father" of the divestment movement himself, Bill McKibben. In total, I interviewed nineteen people.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Steve Jordan, "Participatory Action Research (PAR)," *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. by Lisa M. Givens, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>.

<sup>123</sup> If I were planning interviews in 2024, I would have added interviews with a current member of MRTI and at least one former leader of the opposition to divestment. I did not include these voices in the

Initially, I had planned to interview only grassroots leaders of the movement to divestment because of my connections with these leaders. However, eventually the people I interviewed represented a cross-section of social power in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I chose these people to interview because they have been active in either the movement to call for divestment from fossil fuels and in the conversations in the Presbyterian Church (USA) around climate change, or both. I know them because we have been active in these conversations together. Several people held multiple roles or significance. For example, I interviewed Dennis Testerman for this research not only for his leadership in PEC but also for his leadership in co-authoring the first major document on eco-justice in the PC(USA), *Restoring Creation*. Multiple interviewees referred to this document, calling it one of the foundational resources for the church in its response to climate change. Rob Fohr, who provides one of the denominational staff voices, also

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interviews I did in 2021, because of schedule conflicts, particularly around parental leave for me, and because of the unstable place the relationship was between organizers in FFPC(USA) and MRTI at the time, primarily because of a loss of facetime due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The full list of people included: Bill McKibben, Rev. Colleen Earp (from FFPC[USA]), Dan Terpstra (a chemist and member of the original steering committee of FFPC[USA]), Dennis Testerman (former moderator of Presbyterians for Earth Care and one of the authors of *Restoring Creation*, a foundational document in the PC[USA] on ecotheology), Rev. Emily Brewer (who at the time of the interview was the Executive Director of Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, the parachurch organization that housed FFPC[USA]), Fletcher Harper (the Executive Director of GreenFaith, which facilitated a lot of the early faith-based actions on divestment from fossil fuels), Gary Payton (member of the original steering committee of FFPC[USA]), James Buchanan (a longtime activist for divestment from fossil fuels in a variety of Christian faith communities with Operation Noah), Janet Cox (member of the original steering committee of FFPC[USA] and ongoing organizer for divestment from fossil fuels in the state of California), Rev. Jenny Phillips (former organizer for Fossil Free UMC), Rev. Jim Antal (organizer for divestment from fossil fuels in the UCC), Rev. José Gonzalez-Colon (organizers for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC[USA], participant in the Walk to Divest, and host for FFPC[USA]'s visit to Puerto Rico), Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo (advisor to FFPC[USA]), Pam McVety (member of the original steering committee of FFPC[USA]), Rev. Rebecca Barnes (PC[USA] staff member for Environmental Ministry at the time of the first divestment from fossil fuels votes), Rick Ufford-Chase (former moderator of the PC[USA], participant in the Walk to Divest, and advisor to FFPC[USA]), Rob Fohr (former lead staff person for shareholder engagement in the PC[USA]), Dr. Robert Ross (strategist and former steering committee member for FFPC[USA]), Sara Shor (former organizer for 350.org and current organizer for GreenFaith), Rev. Dr. Susan DeGeorge (member of the original steering committee of FFPC[USA]) and Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri (former moderator of the PC[USA]).

represents the perspectives of people who did not advocate for categorical divestment from fossil fuels.

I also thought that organizers had a shared definition of what success in our movement and demands meant. Instead, responses or definitions ranged from “getting the PC(USA) to divest from fossil fuels” to “stopping climate change.” The variety of voices that emerged in interviews required sifting through answers, finding common themes, and moving key ideas and quotes into those themes.

### Coding and Synthesizing Themes

Researchers choose qualitative methods to “explore the inner experiences of participants” and “explore how meanings are formed and transformed.” To do so creates a “holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena.”<sup>124</sup> After many of the interviews were complete and the 2022 General Assembly of the PC(USA) had happened (an event that occurred almost a year after most of the interviews were done), I knew that I wanted to capture the story of a movement that had shaped my own life, and I knew from studying the movements in the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Church’s involvement in the divestment movement that there was something different about the PC(USA)’s process that had yielded different, but related, results. But there was not yet clear evidence as to what that story was beyond several tactical stunts (like a 200+ mile walk to the General Assembly, countless petitions, and a die-in at a General Assembly).

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<sup>124</sup> Juliet Corbi and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, California: SAGE Publications. 2015, 5.

One of the themes I particularly wanted to explore was the language of “success” for at least two reasons. First, the language of success (and what constitutes success) often permeates the way activists organize, especially in the context of creating small, winnable goals that encourage organizers in longer, more complex campaigns.<sup>125</sup> Second, the activists in Fossil Free PC(USA) had differing ideas about when the movement would be “complete,” a fact that was at first anecdotal and then recorded in how different activists had responded to my question about what success in the divestment movement would look like. Essentially, activists wondered “when can we stop organizing?” For this research, those questions were broadly written to respond to Nepstad’s assertion that successful social movements “change the conversation.”<sup>126</sup> This notion is one upon which Engler and Engler expand as they described Gandhi’s salt march that at the surface seemed to have failed because he did not get the British to allow for Indians to harvest their own salt. However, the salt march forced the British to address Indians and their concerns as human beings—a much deeper success.<sup>127</sup> For this research, I wondered, “What conversation changed? And why?”

Let me elaborate on the steps I took as a researcher. To start, I compiled a history of how the PC(USA) has responded to climate change in policy and theological statements, including its response to divestment from fossil fuels. In this compilation, I differentiated the period between 1990 and 2012 (when Bill McKibben first called for divestment as a tactic to respond to climate change), and 2012-2018 (when Fossil Free

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<sup>125</sup> As Mark Engler and Paul Engler note in their article “Rethinking ‘Rules for Radicals,’” an Alinsky model of organizing focuses on building organizations that can withstand long term fights. Mark Engler and Paul Engler, “Rethinking ‘Rules for Radicals,’” *In These Times*, last modified April 7, 2014, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/rethinking-rules-for-radicals-saul-alinsky>.

<sup>126</sup> See discussion of Nepstad above. See Appendix A for the full set of questions.

<sup>127</sup> Engler and Engler, *This is an Uprising*, 118.

PC[USA]) was in its campaign to get the PC(USA) to divest from fossil fuels. Then, I interviewed key participants. These interview subjects and questions are included in Appendix A. Together, this history and overview create a larger picture of how the PC(USA) has responded to climate change and engaged in divestment from fossil fuels in their contexts, a picture in which the PC(USA)'s response plays one part.

Using insider action research, I situated myself and my experiences in the movement as part of the research process (acknowledging and reflecting on my role as a white person interviewing mostly white people in a denomination that is mostly white, so we shared implicit and explicit share language and culture) and in relation to the analysis of active groups and policy documents of the PC(USA). I analyzed a collection of the policies and statements on climate change by the PC(USA) from 1990-prior to 2012 and, subsequently, from 2012-2018 to demonstrate any change. These resources include statements and overtures approved by the General Assemblies, programs offered by denominational staff, printed resources from denominational and para-church organizations, and workshop and programmatic resources. Based on my previous research on the PC(USA) and my participation in the denomination, I noted, and have observed, an increase in the number of resources and programs and a growing sense of urgency. While some of this increase can be explained by external factors (like who was President of the United States, the timing of climate change-exacerbated weather events, what other denominations were doing around climate and environmental justice, the organizing of Presbyterians for Earth Care or the increased awareness of climate and environmental injustices by Presbyterians because of secular news sources, or the

growing urgency of headlines and reports), many of those external factors are connected to the organizers and activists in Fossil Free PC(USA) and thus are not external.

As these interview questions and denominational resources suggest, this methodology relies inherently on transdisciplinary techniques and assumptions, engaging historical, sociological, and theological sources in the scientific context of global climate change. These participant interviews create the grounded methodology of inviting participants in a movement to tell the story of what happened and how, while also aiding in the assessment of any deepening of theological understanding. These interviews are supplemented by some of the literature of how mainline Protestants in the United States have responded to climate change. I also review of how the Presbyterian Church (USA) has engaged in eco-theology, advocacy, and worship resources, how the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and other Protestants have engaged in the divestment from fossil fuels movement, and historical studies of how Protestantism shaped John Muir, Rachel Carson, and other notable Presbyterians in the environmental movements in the United States.

Grounded theory “provides a tried-and-true set of procedures for constructing theory from data.”<sup>128</sup> It goes beyond a description of what is happening to explain *why* something is happening. Using content analysis, I searched for themes and common threads. In grounded theory, this search means that there are themes from one’s research that are connected to each other and then put together under a “core category.”<sup>129</sup> In my process, I constructed questions and then scheduled an initial round of interviews with subjects. As I asked these questions, I adapted to include follow-up questions and to

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<sup>128</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 11.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

follow relevant trails of thought. I recorded and transcribed the interviews. I returned to the data as I interviewed more people, highlighting in the notes phrases and ideas that repeated throughout the interviews. I transferred these phrases to sticky notes and grouped them by themes, some of which I had pre-determined (what success looks like, polity, theology) and some of which emerged in the course of interviews (such as the role of sin and the larger role of ecological resources in the PC[(USA)]).

Using content analysis (as articulated by Corbin and Strauss, 2015), I searched for themes and common threads from interviews and documents to identify some of the dominant theological groundings of the PC(USA)'s response to climate change as well as to create a thicker history of the PC(USA)'s policies and statements on climate change. As I created categories and derived a theory of just why and how the PC(USA) has been successful or not in responding to climate change, I utilized grounded theory practices of coding and analysis (guided by the methodologies outlined above.) In looking at the major themes in these interviews, I paid attention to how the denominational conversation around climate change has changed since 2012 and how there has been an increase in theological and political responses to climate change in denominational actions.

Through the course of interviews and research, I found myself following lines of inquiry that came up in interviews. In grounded theory, the research plan is flexible so that the researcher can follow up on data and with analysis.<sup>130</sup> For me, it meant taking seriously the stories and responses of people I interviewed, so that

It is not the event itself that is the issue in our studies; it is the meaning given to events as evidence in the action-interaction that follows. Each person experiences and gives meaning to an event in light of his or her own biography or experiences,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 9.

according to gender, time and place, and cultural, political, religious and professional backgrounds.<sup>131</sup>

I tracked sources and ideas (some of which turned out to be factually untrue, but still important to the larger story).<sup>132</sup> I compared the experiences of interviewees in the PC(USA) as well as their differentiated access to power in the denomination (which required an understanding of polity and how decisions are made in the denomination, and included structural contexts like whiteness and maleness). I wondered how to make as many of the stories come alive in this dissertation, a feeling that is echoed in *Basics of Qualitative Research's* note that “researchers become absorbed in the work and hope that the data has life outside the academy.”<sup>133</sup> Indeed, there were moments when I wondered just what the story of one divestment movement—even a story that analyzes tactics, history, and theology—might teach organizers, mobilizers, and academics in a world facing a global climate crisis. How could a dissertation move people of faith to action?

This dissertation is influenced by the grounded theory work by Jennifer Ayres and the ethnography work of Traci West. Ayres has researched how communities of faith see themselves in the North American context, particularly in the work of social witness,

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>132</sup> For example, one interviewee recounted how she heard a preacher engage a biblical text to support earth care in a way that energized her work. The interviewee said, “The line in Genesis about man having dominion over the earth (in the King James Version) was a direct response to the land movement in England led by Capability Brown to literally rebuild the landscape. “Dominion over the earth” was a response and validation of this movement from super rich people on the land.” I had never heard that interpretation. After the interview was completed, I reached out to William Brown, a Biblical scholar at Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary for advice on learning more. He wrote back to say, “The KJV predates Capability Brown by over a century, so one can’t make the claim as your interviewee framed it. Perhaps one can make the case with a broader stroke regarding the “land movement,” otherwise known as “encloser [sic] movement,” beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in England, which was designed to privatize land and increase its agricultural efficiency. Perhaps Gen 1:26ff was used to justify it at some point.” Essentially, there was a factual error in the information shared by the interviewee (either from memory or from the preacher the interviewee was quoting).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 10.

while West's work in *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality* explores women in the diaspora in response to racism, religion, and gender-based violence. While I do not discuss it in the chapter below, I'm also indebted to Laurel Kearns' chapter "Greening Ethnography and the Study of Religion," where she describes how her ethnographic research stretched her understanding of what religious environmentalism is, and how her own religious identity shaped others' responses to her in research settings.<sup>134</sup> This 2002 chapter also sketched a groundwork for the intersections of environmentalism with the discipline of the sociology of religion.

### Jennifer Ayres and Presbyterians for Social Witness

In her book *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness*, Jennifer Ayres studies how Presbyterians think about, respond to, and enact social witness as a religious or spiritual practice. In particular, she asks, "What sustains religious social action in the absence of large-scale support or success?"<sup>135</sup> During and after ethnographic research, Ayres developed a thesis that practitioners of social justice are informed by theological reflection that then sustains them for deeper practice.<sup>136</sup> In her study, she consulted a "wide range of sociological and philosophical theories, theologies, and lived experience," putting theory in "mutually critical conversation" with theology and lived practice.<sup>137</sup> Here she means that lived experiences (as articulated by participants via

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<sup>134</sup> Laurel Kearns, "Greening Ethnography and the Study of Religion," *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, Edited by James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire. New York University Press, 2002, 213, 219. Both Kearns and West are on my dissertation committee.

<sup>135</sup> Jennifer Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011, 1.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7

interviews) modified the theories that she brought to the research and shaped the theories around religious social witness that she created from the data. Indeed, this feedback loop is part of grounded theory's method of the-data-informing theory and letting the data have just as much "power" in the research as traditional theory. Ayres makes the methodological assertion that to understand social witness in the Christian church, one must talk with actual people engaged in actual practice.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, I argue that one cannot understand the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA) without talking to the activists and leaders who organized and mobilized in favor of divestment. From the activists and leaders in the movement, one can learn the theologies and cultures that motivated their work.

In her research, as in my own, Ayres included observations, interviews, and document analysis.<sup>139</sup> She describes how she used a snowball method to choose her sample of people to interview (each interviewee then suggested additional people to interview), documents to read, places to visit, and events to attend to gain more data.<sup>140</sup> Further, she says that she uses "post-positivist frames with a critical theoretical impulse," which means that she used existing theory to design the original research questions and then adapted her questions and theories based on encounters with interviewees and lived experience.<sup>141</sup>

One of the major questions of this particular study by Ayres—can theological reflection happen alongside social action?—came up in my research as well, especially when multiple interviewees told me that they did not think about theology as part of the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 193.

work we were doing.<sup>142</sup> I had assumed, perhaps because I had read Ayres' work (and worked with her), that sin would have a much more prominent role in the reflections of the people I interviewed. In particular, I reasoned like Ayres that "simultaneous to this witness to God's intention for human community is a witness to all that is wrong with the world: the reality of social dynamics of sin and injustice which serve both to cause suffering and to restrain Christian action in the face of such suffering."<sup>143</sup> She later writes that "an honest account of the impact of sin is essential to understanding the limitations and challenges of social witness practice, created by our individual sin and by systemic sin."<sup>144</sup> This theological reflection is what Ayres brought to the interviews and experiences, and they echo the complexities present in my research findings about sin and individual and collective responses to it.

Finally, Ayres argues that "an outside observer of the practice cannot evaluate its excellence by objective standards"—an effective researcher has to be from the inside.<sup>145</sup> This means that there is a certain amount of knowledge and understanding that comes with working from the inside—knowledge that cannot come from studying from the outside. In this context, is it possible to understand anything objectively? A feminist and sociological exploration would suggest that everything we can know and study is contextual and thus never objective. Thus while it may be advisable to some to have the success of Fossil Free PC(USA) studied by someone from outside of the denomination and the movement, it may be more accurate and clear for someone on the inside to study the movement—someone who has an intimate knowledge of the polity, theology, and

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 34.

social systems of the denomination. This requires intentional reflection on the theological, political, and structural aspects of the movement as well as participation in the practice.<sup>146</sup> Ayres' research models an insider's research of a particular group of Presbyterians taking on particular social witness actions, with several methodological and contextual similarities to my research.

### Traci West and Self-Reflexive Research

In her book *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality*, Traci C. West writes with an embodied methodological commitment to decolonizing goals—one that resists, as she says, heteropatriarchy and colonization Christianity.<sup>147</sup> In this context, her methodology, which demands a self-reflexive approach to research, reflects her activist stance against violence against women and girls. West is at once an activist, clergy, and researcher. She writes that “as I craft analyses of my encounters with the leaders I interviewed, I must critically acknowledge that I am part of the story. All scholars and researchers, whether they admit it or not, make subjective choices that interpret the subjects we study.” In doing so, “there is general agreement that there are certain responsibilities—we have to be willing to name what we bring into the study, our identities.”<sup>148</sup> In her book, West returns again and again to a place of self-reflection: how does her identity as a Christian impact the research and her findings? As a woman? As a Black woman? As an American? This methodological commitment keeps West in the foreground of the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>147</sup> Traci West, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Ending Gender Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 13.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 14.

research in a way that interrogates the filters and biases that West brings to the work and theory building.

Throughout the text, because she is a Black American woman interviewing African women, she acknowledges that she will not be able to understand all their cultural mores. She uses a sense of uncertainty as a way to combat arrogance that she knows everything, especially as an American studying African responses.<sup>149</sup> In my research, I shared most (but not all) social markers with the people I interviewed: class, religion, education, with some variety in race, age, and gender. In some ways this was helpful: I could assume some of the cultural markers of being Presbyterian in the U.S. (like shared white culture with some of the people I interviewed). In other ways, this could lead to bias and perhaps arrogance: I could assume too much. West's conscious articulation that she could not assume everything was a helpful reminder to me that I could not assume everything as I interviewed people, even the people I knew the best in the work.

## Roadmap for the Rest of the Dissertation

In order to understand the theological and social movement implications of the PC(USA) using divestment from fossil fuels as a method to increase the denomination's response to climate change, I will use an interdisciplinary approach to this subject, described below and then infused throughout the following chapters.

In conversation with the interviews, I construct a concept of Christian ecological vocation using Hiebert's biblical scholarship on ecology and human vocation and Ayres'

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 17.

work on human inhabitants of the world, with a particularity toward Protestant Christian understandings. At its core, this definition relies on the creation stories in Genesis and the theological commitments of Presbyterians (in chapter 3), nestled in the life-giving and harmful legacies of our ecological vocation and pointing to environmental and climate justice resources in the PC(USA) (in chapter 4). I review the content and framing of three key documents in the PC(USA) to articulate the ecological container in which Fossil Free PC(USA) organized (these documents are *Power to Speak Truth to Power*, *The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming* and *Restoring Creation*). I draw upon interviews of key players, PC(USA) statements and documents related to the divestment from fossil fuels movement, and my own participation and observation in the movement in order to sketch the history of the PC(USA)'s evolving response to climate change to analyze how the issues are framed, with particular attention paid to theological themes.

Then, in chapter 5, I review the use of divestment as a tactic in two social movements, noting how it has been used by communities with social power to build solidarity with people who have been marginalized, as called for by those marginalized people. Specifically, I chart a short history of divestment in response to apartheid in South Africa and in Israel/Palestine— and how activists in those contexts called for the use of divestment by people of faith.<sup>150</sup> I note in this chapter how the tactic was taken on by activists in the United States on behalf of the planet and frontline communities as marginalized communities. Here I also start to construct how divestment is used with other tactics and is necessarily used by people and institutions with economic privilege and power.

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<sup>150</sup> To be clear, the chapter on divestment from companies doing business in Israel was written before the genocide in Gaza that began on October 7, 2023.

In chapter 6, I review how divestment from fossil fuels has been used in the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the PC(USA), with some background on its use in colleges and universities. I analyze interviews with key participants in the beginning of the divestment from fossil fuels movement, looking for echoes and differences with other divestment movements, and to show how religious moral thought and theory connects to activist practice.

In chapter 7, I pull the biblical, cultural, and theological contexts of the PC(USA)'s ecological work into conversation with divestment as a tactic that had previously been employed by activists in the denomination to make change. Has the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA) been successful? I put this analysis in conversation with other actions taken by the PC(USA) and the activists behind those actions to discuss the faithfulness, or lack thereof, in each instance in order to determine how the tactic has been successful. Finally, I explore how—or if—a vote to divest from five fossil fuel companies can be called a successful end to the movement.

## Conclusion

The climate crisis—a calamity that is already on our doorsteps, demands our action and response. It is the reality that breaks open my heart as a pastor, as a teacher, as a parent, and as a movement leader and tugs at my brain to wonder why more people—both of faith and not—will have not struggled, nor will struggle, for a more just world. There are some basic assumptions about the world that emerge in the use of grounded theory, and the methodology assumes that the “researcher brings their many aspects of

self and experiences to the research process.”<sup>151</sup> And so I have brought my whole self to this project—academic, activist, clergy, parent. I have sought to be theoretically clear, theologically grounded, boldly dramatic in describing the demands of the movement, and careful about the implications of a faithful response to climate change through divestment.

How do we measure the success of social movements? In this dissertation, I argue that one way to measure the success of a particular religious social movement, specifically in response to climate change, is how much the movement shifts from the status quo (as articulated by the people I interviewed and the documents I reviewed), in this case, toward a comprehensive ecological vocation. To do this, I look at the big picture of climate change as a problem, the Christian theological underpinnings of environmental and climate justice work, the role of divestment as a social movement tactic in other movements, and how Fossil Free PC(USA) has engaged in environmental work in general and then divestment from fossil fuels more specifically. I use participant interviews, document analysis, and theological reflection as my methods, suggesting finally that divestment from fossil fuels has been a solidarity tactic used in the PC(USA) to respond to climate change.

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<sup>151</sup> Jörg Hecker and Neringa Kalpokas, “The Ultimate Guide to Qualitative Research - Part 1: The Basics,” accessed November 11, 2023, <https://atlasti.com/guides/qualitative-research-guide-part-1/reflexivity#techniques-for-practicing-reflexivity>.

### 3. Playing in the Right Key: Ecological Vocation and Climate Change



*I drew this web as part of the notes for a climate activism workshop. I was trying to get at how we humans are not in charge, and that we're "merely a strand" (a phrase often attributed to Chief Seattle, a Suquamish and Duwamish chief). We, with every other strand, hang together in delicate balance. abby mohaupt, crayon/ink, 2017.*

#### Introduction

When we go for walks together, invariably my daughter stops to look at a flower or a tree. She gets down on her belly to look at a bug sometimes, and she shrieks with delight when we pass a dog. Her father taught her how to catch leaves, and all three of us have a habit of picking up rocks that speak to us. We often wander to the lake near our house, walking down different streets to our local access to Lake Michigan and the beach,

trees, and park. When we decided that our daughter would be baptized in a certain congregation, we particularly liked that the ritual to remember God's claim on her life would take place in the lake. We wanted to remember God's love and care surrounded by creation—and after our pastor sprinkled our daughter with water, her father helped her jump joyfully into the waves.

I think of these connections when I think about our vocation as humans to be deeply connected to the planet; that we have to pay attention to and love the world around us. It is a living out of what farmer, poet, activist, and writer Wendell Berry says is our relationship to the planet, namely, “We have the world to live in on the condition that we will take good care of it. And to take good care of it we have to know it. And to know it and to be willing to take care of it, we have to love it.”<sup>152</sup> From a biblical perspective, we humans are of and in this world, and we are called to love it as the first commandment that humans are given by God.<sup>153</sup> This is the image of the human ecological vocation that

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<sup>152</sup> Wendell Berry said this quote in a segment of Bill Moyers, last updated November 29, 2013, <https://billmoyers.com/segment/wendell-berry-on-his-hopes-for-humanity/>. However, the full quote is originally attributed to Baba Dioum, a Senegalese forest engineer, at the General Assembly of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) held in New Delhi in 1968. Berry is one of the living saints/theologians that influences the farm owners who make an appearance in chapter 5, which is one of the reasons I quote him here.

<sup>153</sup> Genesis 1:26-28. Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Particularly, we are *adam* coming from *adamah*, the human made from the humus of the earth, just like everything else. Biblically, we are all part of what Mary Oliver calls the “family of things.” Moreover, the language of *radah* in the Hebrew for Genesis 1:26 has to be read in context with Gen 1:16, *rdh* where the sun and moon “rule” the day and night; they reign, but obviously do not subdue/exploit/oppress their realms! If anything, they serve in a kind of royal sense; “Rule” is a means of mediating God's blessings to those whom one rules. Thus, we are stewards of creation who act with love for creation. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, John J Scullion S.J., translator (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994. (Original 1974 by Neukirchener Verlag.), 159. I’m indebted to my colleague at Garrett and Hebrew Scriptures scholar Brooke Lester for support in this particular exegesis, particularly for calling Westermann to my attention as a source. Of course, not everyone has or would read this Genesis text through the lens of love, though Cynthia Moe-Lobeda describes our primary calling in life is to love other people and all creation with a Love that is ever-expanding. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 13.

I have encountered in the Bible that has shaped my worldview as an activist, pastor, and academic.

As part of arguing in this dissertation that Presbyterians organizing for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) were successful because that organizing was rooted in Presbyterian culture, history, and theology, I explore in this chapter the roots and understandings of ecological vocation rooted in biblical interpretation, and some of the legacies of those interpretations as seen through Protestant environmentalisms. In organizing, we understood and had experience in Presbyterian polity to make a change in the denomination, we had connections with and understandings of the history of the Presbyterian Church's resources on earth care and eco-theology (which I explore more in chapter 4), and we were steeped in Presbyterian culture (even if we could not articulate all the ways that that culture affects us), all of which take the Bible seriously and foundationally. Because we understood each of these pieces, and because scripture is central to being Presbyterian, we understood that we would have to rely on scripture to make our case in our overtures and resources. Some of us relied on our individual connections to ecological vocation rooted in the Bible, while others were rooted in the history of how the Presbyterian Church has viewed how the Bible talks about the human role in caring for the earth as a matter of stewardship and vocation.<sup>154</sup> In the interviews, I could, at times, (subjectively) hear the subcontext of faith and the Bible. Other times it was explicit. For example, Janet Cox, one of the original members of the Fossil Free

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<sup>154</sup> Note that I had assumed that everyone involved in the moment was like me and felt compelled by the Genesis stories, but that was not what the interviews surfaced. Many people did (as I will explore in this chapter) while others (like José Gonzalez-Colon and Rick Ufford-Chase) lifted up Biblical texts and theologies that speak to consumerism. In chapters 4, 6, and 7, I articulate the ways in which the PC(USA) has embraced stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality in its resources and policies.

PC(USA) steering committee said, “The way we manage our money is an expression of our values—you put your money where your values are.” Here, she is referencing Matthew 6:21 (“Where your treasure is, there your heart is also”) without explicitly naming the chapter and verse. These foundations are a theological commitment, as Ted Hiebert states, that “to be really, deeply religious in the biblical sense is to see our material world as every bit important to our faith as the world of the spirit, [and this conviction gives us] the moral and ethical urgency to respond to the crisis” we face.<sup>155</sup> But other people I interviewed were clear about their grounding in the Genesis texts. One of the former moderators of the PC(USA), Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, described how

I’m not a theologian but I remember reading *Restoring Creation* [one of the foundational ecological documents for the PC(USA) discussed later in chapter 4] and thinking about how we misinterpret our role in caring for creation in Genesis 1 [by] ruling over and dominion and thinking that we can do whatever we want. There are theologies around that are still saying we are over creation. There’s still a sector of my own family that believes that creation will take care of itself and at least 2 people in my family are climate change deniers, *not the Presbyterians*, but that misinterpretation of Genesis 1 has cost us a lot including a misguided understanding of our role in nature and caring for creation. This is also connected to how we see other people and ecosystems and how we treat other people and how we view ourselves. We think that we humans are the best but that’s not God’s view of us. We are all in this together. [emphasis mine.]

Here, Cintron-Oliveri reflects on how to understand the role of humans having dominion over creation through a lens of love and service. My interviews with others reinforce this centrality of grounding in the Bible. Thus, understanding these biblical texts is crucial as part of a study on the Presbyterian Church, which puts the biblical text at the center of its culture and training of ordained leaders.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 343.

<sup>156</sup> From the PCUSA’s Book of Order, see sections F-2.02, W-3.0301. Candidates for ordination as a minister in the PC(USA) (as Reformed Christians, one particular denomination that was born of the Reformation) must pass two exams on the Bible. One is an exegesis of a text that requires the candidate to understand both the original context of a text and its relevance to a modern-day circumstance, and the other

This is, of course, not the only way that people of faith in general, and Christians in particular, have seen the relationship between humans and the Earth. In the Christian tradition, there have been theologies based on biblical interpretations that have caused harm and theologies that have led to care, and historically these have been based on the Genesis creation stories.<sup>157</sup> These theologies have led to several questions about this human-nature relationship: Why should people of faith care about the planet? Or climate change? How do humans fit into the world, if at all? Are we meant to be loving caretakers of all that exists? Or are we gifted the planet for our use, with no expectation that we will have any boundaries on our use of it? These questions and these relationships are at the heart of how people of faith have engaged in larger climate justice movements. How Christians have answered these questions has guided Fossil Free PC(USA)'s divestment work. So, while these questions could be theoretical or impractical when contemplated generally, their answers have had real-world and practical implications for people of (Christian) faith when it comes to the relationship people have with climate change and the divestment movement.

In this chapter, I trace the ways some biblical scholars have approached just two of the biblical texts that connect humans to the Earth: the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and the creation story in Genesis 2:4b-3:24.<sup>158</sup> There are stories and teachings in each part of the Bible that make these connections between human and planet. I have

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is a content exam that requires recalling and understanding details of the text. I say more about the context of the Reformed concept of *sola scriptura* in the next chapter.

<sup>157</sup> In the introduction to *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet*, David Rhoads, one of the pioneers of modern ecological Lutheranism, writes that “the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. It comes as a result of our alienation from nature, our estrangement from the very ground from which life, indeed all of life, has emerged” (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007, xiv.)

<sup>158</sup> There are, of course, many ways that these texts have been interpreted. I will explore only a few interpretations that are relevant to the interviews I conducted and/or Reformed theological interpretations.

chosen these two texts because of their theological, historical, and social legacies, particularly how these texts have impacted our human ecological vocation, that is, our job in the web of creation.<sup>159</sup> As I note in chapter one, Theodore Hiebert says that these two stories, at the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures (and therefore important to Christianity which is one of the faith traditions that accept the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative), shape how we as Christians are meant to see the world and interact with it.

Many of the people I interviewed articulated a theology that refers back to the creation stories, as well as other Biblical texts, as what compels them to action on climate change—which is to say that how we interpret the Bible impacts our theological beliefs and then our social action. My theological groundings for nearly twenty years of ecological and climate justice work in the PC(USA) have been connected to an ecological vocation. The PC(USA) believes we are called by God in the creation stories of Genesis to love the earth and take care of it as a representative of God on the earth.<sup>160</sup> In *Restoring Creation*, this vocation is described in relation to the stories of Genesis.

The first two chapters of Genesis illumine the right relationship of human beings to their Creator and the nonhuman creation. God put man and woman, created in God's own image, in the garden "to till it and to keep it." "Tilling" symbolizes everything we humans do to draw sustenance from nature. It requires individuals to form communities of cooperation and to establish systematic arrangements (economies) for satisfying their needs. Tilling includes not only agriculture but mining and manufacturing and exchanging, all of which depend necessarily on taking and using the stuff of God's creation. "Keeping" the creation means tilling with care—maintaining the capacity of the creation to provide the sustenance for which the tilling is done. This, we now have come to understand, means making

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<sup>159</sup> See Jennifer Ayres, *Inhabitation: Ecological Religious Education*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019).

<sup>160</sup> *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, A Report Adopted By The 202nd General Assembly (1990) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 5. See also תְּלֵם (tselem) a "likeness"; "of a man as the תְּלֵם of God in Gen 1:26f..."man, God's likeness, God's image, e.g. he is God's viceroy, representative or witness among the creatures," (emphasis mine) in Koehler and Baumgartner *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol 3, 1028-9.

sure that the world of nature may flourish, with all its intricate, interacting systems upon which life depends. But humans have failed to till with care.<sup>161</sup>

Other interpreters of these Genesis texts have decided that—because of a particular reading of the first creation story that focuses on particular interpretations of the translated word dominion in Gen 1:26—the Earth is meant for human consumption.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, humans can do whatever we want to the planet. This first interpretation is used in theological defenses of fossil fuel extraction (described below) and other destruction of the planet.<sup>163</sup> For many Christians, this has been the default interpretation of the human relationship with the planet.<sup>164</sup> But other interpretations see the Earth as our common home, our family, and something for which we are to have great care, something of which we are a part.<sup>165</sup> This second interpretation has been used in defense of climate action by people of faith.

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<sup>161</sup> *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, 12.

<sup>162</sup> In his book *Hope in the Age of Climate Change: Creation Care This Side of the Resurrection*, Chris Doran notes that some Christians see the Earth through a utilitarian lens or through a lens that is other-worldly or more heaven-focused and that environmentalism is about nature worship. Further, he writes that there is a “perception outside of Christendom that American Protestant Christianity, in particular, cares mostly about how to get souls to heaven and very little about what is happening currently on or to our planet.” (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 10-11).

<sup>163</sup> In their article, “Ecology and Religious Environmentalism in the United States,” Rebecca Kneale Gould and Laurel Kearns argue that “twentieth-century responses to environmental degradation have inherited a legacy—particularly from Christianity—of both love for the natural world and a distanced, utilitarian anthropocentric stance toward that world. In its most extreme forms, that anthropocentric stance has given fuel to forms of technological dominance and hubris whose effects we are feeling evermore acutely today.” (<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.445>, Published online: 24 May 2018.)

<sup>164</sup> According to PRRI’s October 2023 report “The Faith Factor in Climate Change: How Religion Impacts American Attitudes on Climate and Environmental Policy,” “substantial majorities of Black Protestants (73%) and white evangelical Protestants (62%, down from 77% in 2014), as well as nearly half of Hispanic Catholics (49%), agree that natural disasters are evidence of the end of times.” That is to say, these populations see a connection between increased climate change and the return of Christ. (<https://www.prri.org/research/the-faith-factor-in-climate-change-how-religion-impacts-american-attitudes-on-climate-and-environmental-policy/>).

<sup>165</sup> The language of a common home is prevalent throughout the Catholic encyclical *Laudato Si*, the papal letter from Pope Francis written in 2015. In the letter, the Pope (named for the patron saint of the environment/ecology/earth care) makes the Catholic theological case for responding to the groaning of creation. Pope Francis. *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015.

Since French Protestant Reformer theologian John Calvin's teachings are part of the foundations for Presbyterian theologies and Reformed Theology, I explore how Calvin has interpreted these texts (in both harm-full and care-full ways) and how different theologians/theologies have interpreted his interpretations. I have focused on his explorations of Genesis instead of an overview of how many theologians of the reformation interpreted Genesis because interpretations of these Genesis texts have led to legacies of harm (through dominion and extraction) and care (through Protestant environmentalisms).<sup>166</sup> In the next chapter, I engage certain strands of Reformed Theology, the history of the PC(USA) doing environmental work, and the creation story of Fossil Free PC(USA). In these two chapters, I argue that the sense of ecological vocation that activists have in Fossil Free PC(USA) flows from a Reformed and Presbyterian interpretation of the Bible. (This is not to say that Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are the only Christians to draw on this sense of vocation, only that they are some of the Christians that do.) These two chapters are embedded in my larger understanding of the success of Fossil Free PC(USA) because organizers understood the tactic of divestment, the culture and history of the PC(USA), and the community that it wanted to change. Moreover, in this dissertation, I argue that because the PC(USA) had a long history of ecological work rooted in biblical and theological interpretation, activists calling for divestment from fossil fuels assumed that it would be an easy ask for the denomination.<sup>167</sup> The story of why it took so long, how activists kept

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<sup>166</sup> I would be interested in future research to interview climate justice activists on the specific theologians and theologies that guide them and how.

<sup>167</sup> This was apparent in interviews with Dan Terpstra, Rebecca Barnes, and Rick Ufford-Chase — representing grassroots, staff, and moderatorial leadership respectively — when each of them mentioned that they thought the call for divestment from fossil fuels would be easily passed by the PCUSA.

going in creative ways, and how the movement was rooted in the biblical, theological, and cultural realities PC(USA) unfolds in this chapter and the next.

## Two Biblical Stories

For many Christians, a theological image of the human is formed, in part, by the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, attributed to the Priestly and Yahwist writers.<sup>168</sup> Some interpreters of the Bible have seen the human one in these stories as powerful above the rest of the world with implications for everyday life.<sup>169</sup> Yet other interpreters see the human as a loving caretaker, dependent upon where humanity is placed in the system of creation.

One of the first roles of humanity in the world is that of caretaker or steward, set forth in the creation story in Genesis 1 (starting with verse 1), written by the Priestly Writer, so-called because the texts by this author (around 550 BCE) emphasize the needs and viewpoints of the priests in the Israelite community.<sup>170</sup> Note that it is written later than the second chapter of Genesis written by the Yahwist (around 950 BCE).<sup>171</sup>

Presbyterian eco-theologian Carol Johnston suggests that there are two different

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<sup>168</sup> The division between the stories is actually at 2:4b, not at the chapter break. I'm simplifying for readability and flow.

<sup>169</sup> One practical example of this theology is brought forth by Mark Stoll who writes in *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* that the "Biblical idea of human dominion over nature formed more a goal than an achievement" for peasants in the Middle Ages as they sought to clear farmland and make a living off of the land (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997, 5). See Dochuk for other examples of how dominion theology has played out in the destruction of the planet, as noted in chapter 2.

<sup>170</sup> Daniel Harrington, *Interpreting the Old Testament*, (Collegeville: MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 86. Both Fretheim and Harrington are writing in the early 1990s, when environmentalism was (re)emerging in mainline Christianities.

<sup>171</sup> The image of the Yahwist as a farmer in order to articulate the relationship between the author and the landscape around him, which in turn impacted how he articulated the role God gives to humans in his telling of creation is articulated throughout Hiebert's *The Yahwist Landscape*. The translation of this creation story in the Common English Bible similarly reflects this relationship through the use of "farm and keep it."

vocations for humanity introduced in these Genesis stories. In the first creation story in Genesis 1, humanity is made up of “enlightened rulers” over creation, and in the second creation story of Genesis 2, humanity is made up of “careful gardeners within the creation community.”<sup>172</sup> Some contemporary biblical scholars, such as Theodore Hiebert, suggest that the role of humanity in the world set forth in the second creation story in Genesis is that of a servant or farmer.

### The Priestly Writer’s Creation Story

In the first creation story in Genesis 1, God created the sky and planets, day and night, plants and animals, land and water before, as a final act, God created humanity and placed the rest of creation in human care. Where interpreters differ concerns the language of dominion, as the term *radah* is translated in verse 28:

“God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

In his book *Hope in the Age of Climate Change: Creation Care This Side of the Resurrection*, Chris Doran notes the myriad of ways that the environment has been associated with this dominion over the earth theology.<sup>173</sup> The dominant interpretation is that God places humanity in a role separate from and above the rest of creation. As noted above, the Hebrew word *radah* (translated here as “dominion”) means to have authority, power, and control over another. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the verb is used to

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<sup>172</sup> Carol Johnston, *And the Leaves of the Tree are for the Healing of the Nations: Biblical and Theological Foundations for Eco-Justice* (Louisville: Office of Environmental Justice, Presbyterian Church (USA), 2006), 2. This text influenced several of the subsequent theological treatises in the PCUSA, as explored in chapter 4.

<sup>173</sup> Doran, *Hope in the Age of Climate Change*, 10. He quotes philosopher Ludwig Feurbach saying that “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest in Christians” and points to how former Secretary of the Interior (and Christian) James Watt said that the earth was to be used up by humanity on the way to heaven. Ibid.

describe the power of kings over people—it's hierarchical and thus gives humans a unique status over the rest of the world.<sup>174</sup> This story and the language of the human having dominion over creation is one of the texts that fossil fuel executives in the 1860s, at the beginning of the fossil fuel industry, turned to in order to invoke the biblical imperative to command the earth and take advantage of it. These same teachings fueled the industry as it expanded.<sup>175</sup> To not take advantage would be to abandon the role of dominion and to be unfaithful to this interpretation of the human vocation.<sup>176</sup> This interpretation is still operative today in the writings of climate skeptics such as Calvin Beisner, who is also shaped by Reformed theologies, demonstrating that it is a complex arena.<sup>177</sup>

There are other ways to read and interpret the story written by the Priestly Writer. Theodore Hiebert calls this story an example of how the Priestly Writer is both a scientist and a poet.<sup>178</sup> The Priestly Writer is carefully laying out the cosmology of creation as his

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<sup>174</sup> Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 347. See also Theodore Hiebert, “Rethinking Dominion Theology,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum*, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://directionjournal.org/25/2/rethinking-dominion-theology.html>. The kings in the Hebrew Scriptures, however, cannot do whatever they want, however. Throughout the texts, the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures depict the kings as accountable to God.

<sup>175</sup> Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 486.

<sup>176</sup> Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 347.

<sup>177</sup> For example, in “An Open Letter to Pope Francis,” Beisner (a member of the Presbyterian Church of America, a denomination separates from the PC[USA]), and others call on the Pope to care for the poor by investing in and using fossil fuels, essentially because scientific climate models are in error (they claim). They write that “we believe it is both unwise and unjust to adopt policies requiring reduced use of fossil fuels for energy. Such policies would condemn hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings to ongoing poverty.” This letter (and other documents) lives on The Cornwall Alliance website, a clear reminder that climate denial— even in the service of the poor— is active in the recent past. “An Open Letter to Pope Francis, last modified April 27, 2015. <https://cornwallalliance.org/anopenlettertopopefrancisonclimatechange/>

<sup>178</sup> Theodore Hiebert, “God Saw How Beautiful It was: Creation in the Bible as Science, Art, and Theology,” *The Earth is the Lord's: Essays on Creation and the Bible in Honor of Ben C. Ollenburger*, edited by Ryan D. Harker and Heather L. Bunce (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2019), 4.

culture understands it, and in that writing, articulates God as a creator who calls creation good. For example,

God said, “Let the earth grow plant life: plants yielding seeds and fruit trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind throughout the earth.” And that’s what happened. <sup>12</sup> The earth produced plant life: plants yielding seeds, each according to its kind, and trees bearing fruit with seeds inside it, each according to its kind. God saw how good it was. (Genesis 1:17-18, CEB)

This text goes on to announce the first vocation of humans, and so I include three different translations to show how it has been variously interpreted:

Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they *may take charge* of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.” (Genesis 1:26, CEB, emphasis mine.)

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they *may rule over* the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (Genesis 1:26, NIV, emphasis mine.)

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and *let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:26, NRSV, emphasis mine.)

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and *let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:26, KJV, emphasis mine.)

As is clear from the different translations, the description of the role of the human is at best vague, and at worst, the foundation for harming the planet. The issue, then, is that many interpretations do not see that having dominion means loving the earth, rather they see it as having mastery/dominion over the earth. However, Walter Brueggeman, who taught at Columbia Theological Seminary in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and so influenced many Presbyterians, writes that dominion in this text as a whole does not allow for unlimited power. It does not allow for killing and eating animals for food (verse

29) nor does it allow for the limiting of the growth of other species (since all of creation, not just humanity alone, is commanded to “be fruitful and multiply”).<sup>179</sup> The first creation story sets humanity apart as separate from the rest of creation, but since all of creation is loved by God (see block quote below), humans should then love it also. *Restoring Creation* articulates this relationship of love as

The biblical-theological basis for restoring creation is very simple: The Creator is always also the Redeemer, and the Redeemer is always also the Creator. The God "who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them" is the one "who executes justice for the oppressed" (Ps. 146:6f.). Because God the Creator loves the whole creation, God the Redeemer acts to save the creation when it is bowed down and cries out. As Colossians 1:15-19 affirms, the crucified and risen Christ reconciles all things. The fundamental claim that the earth is God's creation means that those who acknowledge the claim are bound to relate to the natural world with respect and care.<sup>180</sup>

Here we see that part of our role as one of the created is to take care of the rest of creation. This caretaking marks our role in creation—accepting that role differentiates us from creation, allowing us to understand who we are in creation. Presbyterian theologian Carol Johnston, in her book *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations: Biblical and Theological Foundations for Eco-Justice* (published by the PC(USA)) argues that we were made to represent God on earth to the rest of creation.<sup>181</sup> Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim, in an authoritative series on biblical interpretation used by many, says that dominion in this text means “care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God on earth, human beings should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them.”<sup>182</sup> If humanity is made in God’s image in this creation story, and

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<sup>179</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>180</sup> *Restoring Creation*, 25.

<sup>181</sup> Johnston, *Leaves of the Trees*, 9.

<sup>182</sup> Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 346. Many other biblical scholars echo this reading, which is why his interpretation from 1994 remains relevant.

our power is made in imitation of God's power (one that is rooted in care and the goodness of creation), then our role is "to be God as God would be to the non-human, to be an extension of God's own dominion."<sup>183</sup> So it matters not just that we understand that humanity is set apart from the rest of the creation in the first creation story; we must also understand the significance of the role of dominion in our vocation and how God cares for creation. In *Restoring Creation*, the first major statement by the PC(USA) on eco-justice, the denomination settled on an interpretation of dominion:

Precisely because individuals and institutions have been relating to the natural order in ways that are so manifestly unsustainable that they put the future in grave jeopardy, sustainability gets at the heart of the practice and policy necessary for the stewardship of creation. Stewardship entails the incorporation of earth-keeping into earth management. The steward is a manager, charged with responsibility for tilling and keeping for the sustenance of the household. We humans can lighten our impact on nature, but we cannot eliminate it. Therefore, we must learn to manage wisely and humbly, remembering that "our property" is actually God's. *The steward is a responsible servant, whose model of "dominion" is the servant Lord.*<sup>184</sup>

This interpretation—that the role of the human in a relationship with the earth is through the lens of a God who acts with love and humility—permeates many of the documents of the PC(USA) on eco-theology. This interpretation also contextualizes stewardship and dominion as a relationship of care that has a preferential option for the marginalized, just as liberation theology argues that Jesus had a preferential option for marginalized communities in his ministry. As I show in Chapter Four, the PC(USA) articulates dominion through the lens of love.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>184</sup> *Restoring Creation*, 30. Emphasis mine. This is, of course, the foundation for the stream of environmentalism that is grounded in stewardship, which I will explore more in chapter 4.

## The Yahwist's Creation Story

I have already said much of what I want to say about the second creation story in the sermon that makes up chapter one of this dissertation. To review: the second creation story in Genesis is attributed to the Yahwist, so-called because of the name of God (*YAHWEH*) that the writer uses throughout his text.<sup>185</sup> Hiebert suggests that the Yahwist is a farmer, because the Yahwist is trying, in this creation story, to articulate how the first human is connected to all that is—and that connectivity emerges in the way that the human is depicted. Hiebert translates the material from which the human is made (in Hebrew “*adamah*”) as “arable land”—that is, land that can be farmed to sustain us. Johnston has argued that because we are created from the Earth and the Earth sustains us, we are deeply connected to it.<sup>186</sup> Johnston suggests that all of creation “embodies [God’s] spirit” (because each part of creation is created out of the breath of God).<sup>187</sup> This connected view “emphasizes our dependence on, rather than our dominion over, the earth.”<sup>188</sup> Biblical scholar Gerhard Von Rad echoes this sentiment when he emphasizes the “Old Testament” anthropology that the human one is just matter (only topsoil) until the breath of God is given to the human one.<sup>189</sup> Here, language again plays a part in

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<sup>185</sup> Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 350.

<sup>186</sup> According to Hiebert, this is the land that is farmable, this is the good soil that farmers actually cultivate. In the Common English Bible, Hiebert translates as scientifically as possible to say that the human is created from the topsoil of the arable land. Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 350. Hiebert explores this even earlier in his work in “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), 135-154.

<sup>187</sup> Johnston, *Leaves of the Trees*, 9.

<sup>188</sup> Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 351.

<sup>189</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 77. Von Rad is often referred to as the scholar who defended the Old Testament in Nazi-controlled Germany, in an academic setting he wanted to erase anything remotely Jewish. He was, as a member of the Confessing Church which resisted a state-led Christianity that supported antisemitism and Nazi Germany, a version of a scholar/activist. Bernard M. Levinson and Douglas Dance, “The Metamorphosis of Law into Gospel:

understanding our role. About this second creation story, Von Rad writes that “God forms humanity from the ground; the bond of life between man (sic) [adam] and earth [adamah] given by creation is expressed with particular cogency by the use of the Hebrew words.”<sup>190</sup> In this second story of creation in Genesis 2, Hiebert specifies that “the human being is not made in God’s image but, rather, out of the earth, in particular out of the *topsoil from the fertile land* Israel farmed for its livelihood.”<sup>191</sup> In this second story of creation, the writer emphasizes the interrelatedness of our species and the rest of creation.

According to this creation story, we are deeply connected to the rest of creation by origin, and so humanity is called to care for it, thus the language of “till and keep” and “to farm” (in Genesis 2:15). The specific role of humanity allows our species to know who we are called to be, while our placement among the rest of creation refuses to allow us to forget that we are connected in an ecological system. When we do forget, we fail to live out our vocation. Worse, when we as humans forget our theological/biblical role, we are apt to take advantage of the Earth, exploiting it. As I will explore below in the work of Darren Dochuk and Lynn White, this exploitation of the Earth is part of the Christian legacy.

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Gerhard von Rad’s Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church,” Symposium “The Old Testament and Modern Culture” on the occasion of Gerhard von Rad’s (1901–1971) 100th birthday, Heidelberg, 18–21. October 2001.

<sup>190</sup> Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” 351.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 350. Emphasis mine.

## Legacies of These Creation Stories

Well before biblical scholars read Genesis with the belief that there was more than one author of Genesis, John Calvin approached Genesis as a text written by Moses alone. Thus, he read the stories of creation as one long story of the beginning of the cosmos and the beginning of humanity. In his *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Calvin addressed what it means to be made in the image of God, what it means to have dominion over creation, and what it means to be made from the earth. I raise these commentaries as interpretations that continue to affect how Protestants have internalized the human vocation on the planet, and whose interpretations are echoed by several of the activists I interviewed.

For Calvin, the image of God in the first human (from the Priestly Writer's telling in Genesis 2) was lost with the fall of humanity, but Calvin argues that humans are "transformed into the image of God by the gospel."<sup>192</sup> Since the first sin of humanity, as depicted in Genesis 3, humans have struggled to recover the image of God in ourselves, and God's creation has struggled to fully live into its own nature. Calvin writes that "there is some deformity of the world, which ... proceeds rather from the sin of man than from the hand of God."<sup>193</sup> Even in Calvin's time, there was a disconnect between humanity and creation (one that Calvin railed against because God alone is separate from the rest of creation), and Calvin points to the sins of humanity as the cause of this disruption (a connection that emerges in many of the interviews I did with Presbyterian

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<sup>192</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 94-5.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

activists).<sup>194</sup> In doing so, Calvin points to the necessity of humility on the part of humanity. In that humility, Calvin tells his reader not to abuse the gifts of God's creation.<sup>195</sup> In his *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, Calvin sees limits to the power that humanity is given in our dominion; our power to use creation should be used to honor God's power that is made evident in God's creating.<sup>196</sup> Even though Calvin interprets creation as being placed under the power of the first humans and of their descendants in Genesis 2 to be stewarded, Calvin suggests we should "touch nothing of God's bounty but what we know he [*sic*] has permitted us to do."<sup>197</sup> In this view, God will provide what we need and we should not reach beyond those needs. Within these limits, God promises abundance. For Calvin, God gives us power over creation (within the limit of what we need) with the promise that we will always have enough.

Specifically,

No corner of the earth was then barren, nor was there even any which was not exceedingly rich and fertile: but that benediction of God, which was elsewhere comparatively moderate, had in this place poured itself wonderfully forth. For not only was there an abundant supply of food, but with it was added sweetness for the gratification of the palate, and beauty to feast the eyes....Moses adds, that the custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content *with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain*<sup>198</sup> [emphasis mine]

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid. See also Richard Shaull, *The Reformation and Liberation Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 80.

<sup>195</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 85. See block quote that follows.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 125.

So, while Calvin notes that humans have power over creation, we are to be careful and “frugal” with creation, treating it as a good gift created by and given to us by God, not as something to be exploited and used up.

Earlier in the commentary, Calvin considers how in Genesis 1:2, the text reads “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (KJV). The Hebrew participle *merahepheth* (which is translated in the CEB as “sweeping” and here in the KJV as “moved”) occurs again only in Deuteronomy 32:11, in the context of a poem that likens the Lord’s care for Jacob to the care of an eagle, shown by how the eagle hovers over her nest of young. Calvin points to this textual connection, noting that all creation is possible only with the Spirit of God.<sup>199</sup> This means that even if humans are at the top of a hierarchy, God is higher still. Furthermore, in Calvin’s view, God approves of creation and calls it good and necessary for the flourishing of the *whole*, even before humanity is created.<sup>200</sup> It is enough and good without humanity. God creates all that is with intention; God wants creation to be. This articulation by Calvin of the goodness of creation even before humanity is a helpful construction in the context of climate change because it calls humanity to acknowledge and care for that goodness, even though, many other interpreters of Calvin had not acknowledged that.

## Harmful Legacies of These Creation Stories

The legacy of the interpretations of these creation stories is woven with the harm done by the dominant interpretations of dominion. In this section, I continue to trace

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>200</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 83.

some of the ways that these creation stories have influenced how Christians have interacted with the planet, and in particular, I explore some legacies of harm in relation to the fossil fuel industry. These interpretations have affected the state of the planet and how activists who target the impact of the fossil fuel industry through their work on divestment have understood and developed their roles as faith-rooted activists.

There are two streams of harm, although there are others, that I want to follow in this section. First, I recount the argument that Lynn White, Jr. made about the harm done by Christianity and environmental issues (in which White points out how the creation stories have been interpreted to harm the planet), one that many after him would continue to make. I then review how the fossil fuel industry has used Christianity as a mechanism for expansion.

In his oft-cited 1967 article “The Historical Roots Of Present-Day Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White, Jr. (a Presbyterian elder) writes that “ever since man became a numerous species, he has affected his environment notably.”<sup>201</sup> While White also says that every species affects their environments (he points to coral and rabbits), he contends that the modern thinking of his day (and the mainstreams of Western thought) was influenced by what he calls Judeo-Christian ideology, particularly around the relationship between the human and the earth. White articulates an interpretation of the Priestly Writer’s creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4a as one in which “God planned all of [creation] for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.”<sup>202</sup> Thus, as White says, Christianity bears “a huge burden of guilt” for

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<sup>201</sup> Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967), 1204.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 1205. In the article, White collapses the two creation stories into one, without acknowledging the biblical scholarship of two authors.

the bulk of the environmental crisis.<sup>203</sup> While he goes on to say that there are alternatives to this view, White's article set off a flurry of investigations and writings about the relationships between Christianity and the environmental crises. These writings, according to Christopher Carter, "awakened Christian theologians to the fact that they had not taken issues of environmental concern seriously."<sup>204</sup> White's article is broad in his discussion of the environmental crisis and the Protestant influence of it. He is also not the only one to articulate the connection between a harmful reading of the Bible and the work of Christianity in the world; many eco-theologians had said something similar, and still do.<sup>205</sup> It was his condemnation, and way of articulating it that caught the attention of so many.

More recently, in his book, *Anointed with Oil*, Darren Dochuk describes in detail the impact of the interpretation that White highlighted as so detrimental. He tells of how early oil hunters attributed their success in finding oil to their faith and Biblical interpretations. The history of the fossil fuel industry—and specifically petroleum oil—in the United States is connected to Christianity from its beginning. They "embraced a high-risk, high-reward entrepreneurialism in hopes of achieving a prosperity that could signal their blessedness and allow them to save society in anticipation of the end times."<sup>206</sup> It wasn't just the "oil hunters" who saw themselves as blessed when they struck oil. When oil was found near a town, everyone in that town also saw themselves as

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 1206.

<sup>204</sup> Carter, "Soil," 54. Of course, Carter is not the first or only theologian to note this. See also Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature*.

<sup>205</sup> For example, see Joseph Sittler, Jr., "A Theology for Earth," *The Christian Scholar*. Vol. 37, No. 3 (September 1954), pp. 367-374. Catherine Keller, *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*, Ossining, NY: Orbis, 2021.

<sup>206</sup> Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 8.

blessed because of the “cascading fortunes” of economic prosperity.<sup>207</sup> This description echoes Max Weber’s description of the Protestant work ethic, which he characterized as the interpretation that more work and more profit, and thus more blessings, meant more of God’s favor and an assurance of salvation.<sup>208</sup>

That sense of economic security and spiritual safety was necessary during the early years of the oil boom when much of society felt unstable. Petroleum was first struck in the United States in Pennsylvania in the 1860s when the economic system of slavery was being dismantled in the shadow of the Civil War and Reconstruction in the Southern parts of the United States. Over time, the wealth of oil “bankrolled colossal cathedrals, schools, missionary organizations, and foundations, all determined to fashion the United States into a resplendent Christian commonwealth.”<sup>209</sup> As the South crumbled economically, and former slaves struggled for real freedom, the North—with oil rigs and oil towns—was growing economically. Thus, oil became one way to recover from the war. The Rev. S.J. Eaton wrote in 1866 that oil came directly from God, saying that it was “a salve for a society rent asunder by war,” arguing that the economic boom from oil would help heal the nation.<sup>210</sup> Eaton was just one of many religious leaders who attributed the newly emerging oil industry to God’s favor.

Christian faith showed up in the beginning of the oil industry in the U.S. in many places: through a religiously legitimated work ethic by oil workers and oil barons, in the recipients of oil wealth, and the received blessings from Christian communities and

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<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> Weber argues that Calvinism is the basis of much of the “spirit of capitalism.” See Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 9.

<sup>209</sup> Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 8-9.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

leaders. In particular, the “work ethic” that equated finding oil with divine favor permeated society in the early oil days. For example, Dochuk notes that Standard Oil founder John D. Rockefeller had a “bureaucratic outlook in keeping with the Protestant work ethic Max Weber would famously write about, which assumed godly capitalism would honor the principles of efficiency and control.... [Rockefeller] propagated a social gospel that called on Christians to construct a better society by way of their economic and political clout.”<sup>211</sup> This meant that Rockefeller implicitly tied his oil wealth to his faith. He “framed his newfound vocation as providential” and saw God’s grace in the blessing and “miracle” of oil itself.<sup>212</sup> In 1870, Rockefeller created Standard Oil Company after record profits, which he thought would “accentuate its [meaning the Standard Oil Company’s] godliness.”<sup>213</sup> That is to say, the more money the Standard Oil Company made, the more it reflected God’s favor. Oil drillers around the country were (and still are) sometimes driven by a millennialist theology—that it was necessary to extract as much as possible from the ground before the second coming of Christ, and in the meantime, it was the responsibility of Christians to guide and rule American society.<sup>214</sup> In a related vein, Lyman Stewart, a Presbyterian, fought in the Civil War and then invested in oil to make enough money to become a missionary. He spent his days looking for oil and his evenings preaching.<sup>215</sup> Dochuk notes that he “shared... an unassailable belief that God was guiding him toward earth’s bounty and an ordained future.”<sup>216</sup> This belief supported a theological worldview that the earth exists for the dominion of humans. That

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 23.

is, to be faithful to the biblical worldview of a Presbyterian like Stewart, one needs to be a good “steward” and find and drill as much oil as possible. Stewart, supported by his church as he went off to search for oil,<sup>217</sup> eventually became vice president of Union Oil Company of California, where he “would wield his authority... out of a desire to save a world he feared lost to monopolism and other worldly sins.”<sup>218</sup> As his oil company spread across the country and then the world, Rockefeller used his wealth to fund churches, schools, missions, and other programs.

By the 1890s, other places in the world were starting to drill for oil, but the United States led the industry which, in turn, solidified its status as an international economic leader. Dochuk points out that this caused some Americans to view their society as set apart and uniquely loved by God, building on the already existing mentality of the U.S. being the Promised Land, and of Manifest Destiny.<sup>219</sup> Meanwhile, the church and the oil industry stayed in close contact. For example, missionaries and oil companies worked together, with the church going into areas first to “open up regions, supplying the oil drillers with advanced knowledge of terrain and cultures.”<sup>220</sup> Dochuk points out that the extraction of petroleum was thus *blessed* by many faith groups.

Oil and Christianity have long been at the heart of American power and culture, though not everyone has seen oil as a gift.<sup>221</sup> Indeed, Dochuk comments that “countless Americans across time have viewed oil’s anointing as a threat rather than a grace.”<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 16. This particular thread has re-emerged in the years since James Hansen and others’ testimony before Congress in the 1980s, when lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry successfully argued for continued funding even as climate scientists and activists warned against the impending threat of climate change. (See Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth*, 2019.)

One of these early critics, Ida Tarbell, a freelance writer rooted in her Methodist upbringing, took on Rockefeller. She noted the “unequal working conditions of the oil industry” and the “devastation wrought by oil” on places where drilling happened.<sup>223</sup> But Tarbell wasn’t saying that fossil fuels should completely go away— instead, she thought the industry should be “cleaned up,” for the sake of workers.<sup>224</sup> Her critique led other social-justice-minded clergymen and scholars to push back on Rockefeller—but not about the Earth, but for the sake of people.<sup>225</sup> In the same way, Washington Gladden, a congregational preacher of the social gospel in the 1870s, thought that Rockefeller was undermining the New Testament by harming the collective social good (and thus Gladden is just one example of many in the social gospel movement who cared about the earth.) But even here Gladden was concerned about people, not the planet. He railed against his church taking “tainted money” from Rockefeller.<sup>226</sup> Perhaps Gladden is one of the first modern proponents of divestment from fossil fuels.

Since its inception, the oil industry has contributed significantly to the current climate crisis. According to Nathaniel Rich in his book *Losing Earth*, the industry spent decades lying to policymakers and the public about whether burning fossil fuels would cause global climate change and catastrophic suffering.<sup>227</sup> In the United States, Christianity legitimized the industry and put its moral authority behind it. This connection between blessing and oil extraction has continued, and the activists that I

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<sup>223</sup> Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 148.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. 152.

<sup>227</sup> Rich, *Losing Earth*, 2019, 6. This has been reported by many other sources including *Scientific America* (Shannon Hall, “Exxon Knew about Climate Change Almost 40 Years Ago,” *Scientific America*, last modified October 26, 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/>.)

interviewed understand that this “blessing” now requires our confession of our complicity, repentance, and a reclaiming of the biblical interpretation that names humans as caretakers of the planet. In the next section, I move from these Christian legitimizations to how Protestant environmentalisms engaged in the biblical texts and enacts environmental action as a living out of ecological vocation.

## Relationships Between Protestantism and Environmentalism

How can we imagine the relationship between Protestantism and the environmentalisms that have emerged in the United States, as an indicator of the eco-culture that informed the activists of Fossil Free PC(USA)? In her article, “Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States,” Kearns identifies three models of environmentalism in the United States: stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality. But she says that there are few clear divisions between the three.<sup>228</sup> Kearns also writes that there are at least three ways in which religious groups have organized around environmental issues in the U.S.: putting pressure on the national government to join international efforts, putting pressure on national and local governments to address environmental issues, and focusing on institutional and individual change.<sup>229</sup> I rely on these ways (stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality, at the institutional, national and international levels) to frame this section, in order to systematize the variety of Protestant contributions to environmentalism.

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<sup>228</sup> Laurel Kearns, “Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States,” *Sociology of Religion* (1996) 57: 56.

<sup>229</sup> Kearns, “The Role of Religions in Activism,” 418. Each of these levels of activism for the planet has also included people of other faiths and people of no faiths.

## Three Models of Religious Environmentalism: Stewardship, Eco-Justice, and Creation Spirituality

Dieter T. Hessel (a Presbyterian who was one of the writers of the *Restoring Creation* document) and Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argue that “ecothology first surfaced noticeably in North America through the Faith-Man-Nature Group convened by Philip Joranson in 1963 with support from the National Council of Churches (Protestant and Orthodox) as well as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the Port Huron Statement, both in 1962.”<sup>230</sup> This, of course, is a particular kind of ecotheology, one that reflected the influence of the dominant groups and culture in the US, even as it tried to critique the status quo. Evan Berry describes this model in his book *Devoted to Nature*, by saying that “the genealogy of American environmental thought... is predominantly concerned with the contributions of white, Protestant Americans, not because the environmental movement was racially or religiously monolithic but because the core logic on which the movement was founded was deeply wrapped up with the cultural commitments of white, Protestant Americans.” Stewardship was the dominant model of ecotheology that was acceptable to most Protestants (though elements of eco-justice also emerged early on.) Many of those white upper class Protestant Americans were making most of the mainstream political and cultural decisions in every facet of life in the 19th and 20th centuries (even as the fossil fuel industry was beginning to stake its

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<sup>230</sup> Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Introduction: Current Thought on Christianity and Ecology,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Harvard University Press, 2000), xxxiv. One might wonder what they mean by “noticeably” and to whom. How do we quantify ecotheology? The Faith-Man-Nature Group lasted for nine years (from 1963-1972) and sought to build relationships between church people and environmental scientists. Philip N. Joranson, “The Faith-Man-Nature Group And A Religious Environmental Ethic,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, June 1977, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1977.tb00306.x>.

claim on the planet).<sup>231</sup> At the same time, this emergence of this kind of environmentalism, in many of its forms, evolved from Emerson, Thoreau, romanticism and transcendentalism, and then the cultural implications of these practices were embedded in the 1920s and 1930s when “ideas and lifestyles advocated for by the Transcendentalists achieved widespread popularity and gave rise to many of the institutions and practices that are now collectively referred to as environmentalism.”<sup>232</sup> But as sociologist of religion Stephen Ellingson notes in his book *To Care for Creation*, environmentalism “is not another social movement, nor is it simply an effort to renew or revitalize religion, which is how scholars have historically treated religious social movements. It is a movement that attempts to renew faith and to mobilize the faithful to save creation.”<sup>233</sup> Although these authors point to the religious roots, what became known as environmentalism was more secular as it shifted into the “contemporary, politicized environmental movement [which] got started with Earth Day in 1970” when people all over the country focused on the need to repair the earth.<sup>234</sup> Ellingson notes that environmentalism has been a movement that was decidedly secular and intentionally avoided Christians that adhered to dominion theology, instead looking toward stewardship language.<sup>235</sup>

Protestants, and specifically Presbyterians, were also in the weeds, so to speak, in the beginnings of political movements to preserve and protect wilderness. John Muir, raised a Presbyterian and later one of the founders of the Sierra Club, relied on religious

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<sup>231</sup> Berry, *Nature*, 19.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>233</sup> Ellingson, *To Care for Creation*, 3.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

imagery in his writing and advocacy to protect wilderness areas. Berry notes that Muir's religious language was rooted in his culture. Specifically

His religious upbringing, his penchant for scriptural allusions, and his deeply spiritual engagement with nature are all common features of his era [the late 1880s and early 1900s].... All ordinary: Christian theology and biblical rhetoric were the standard means by which most Americans made sense of the natural world and framed their experience in moral terms [of his times].<sup>236</sup>

Later, in the 1960s, Rachel Carson, who also was raised Presbyterian, sounded the alarm on the hazards of pesticide use (specifically DDT) and testified to Congress, leading to the banning of DDT in the 1970s.<sup>237</sup> Carson is a good example of someone who was raised Presbyterian, is claimed by the PC(USA) as one of our heroes, and may not have publicly used her Presbyterian upbringing explicitly in her work. Still, Stoll describes Carson as someone who has “ceased attending church but retained a sense of the mystery of creation, of the interconnectedness of life, of the miracle of evolution.” He also describes her as teaching that “we have a choice... to choose to work in harmony with nature, using biological solutions based on understanding of living organisms and their ecological relationship, or to continue down the path of arrogance that leads to destruction of both nature and ourselves.”<sup>238</sup> One can hear echoes of the Genesis creation stories, as well as advocacy for the role of ecological stewardship, and warnings of the consequences of giving up our ecological vocation. Buzz Aldrin, a Presbyterian elder, administered communion to himself on the moon as he quoted from the Gospel of John. The images of earth from the Apollo 11 voyage to the moon transformed how people

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<sup>236</sup> Berry, *Nature*, 10.

<sup>237</sup> David Staniunas, “Rachel Carson: Care for Creation: Environmentalist’s Presbyterian roots go back generations,” Presbyterian Historical Society, November 7, 2023, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2023/11/7/rachel-carson-care-for-creation/>.

<sup>238</sup> Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 196, 198.

thought about planetary community.<sup>239</sup> Each of these individuals were part of the movements in the twentieth century that shaped the relationships between the American public and the earth; perhaps their Presbyterian upbringing may have shaped their attitudes toward the Earth, as Mark Stoll intuit.

In his work, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, which traces in particular the religious, and often Presbyterian, influence on how North Americans saw themselves in relation to the earth, Stoll mentions other Presbyterians working on the national level of environmentalism, including David Brower, long-time Executive Director of the Sierra Club, and nature writer John McPhee.<sup>240</sup> One of the United States' first and most prolific environmental ethicists, including religious ethics, was Holmes Rolston, who was also Presbyterian and provided leadership for Presbyterians for Earth Care.<sup>241</sup> Presbyterian ethicist William Gibson co-founded the Eco-Justice Project and Network based in New York and hosted conferences and trainings between 1974-1992. He also co-founded *The Egg: An Eco-Justice Journal*, which was edited for a time by Dieter Hessel.<sup>242</sup> Gibson described the journal as intentionally and consistently focused on eco-justice, with emphasis on the connection between ecological and economic components.<sup>243</sup> This rich legacy reflects the long history of care for the earth, and it has shaped the activists who have shaped the PC(USA) understanding. Folks like Gibson and Hessel went on to shape many of the scholars and activists that took the reins of the EJWG, with

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<sup>239</sup> Matthew Cresswell, "How Buzz Aldrin's communion on the moon was hushed up" *The Guardian*, September 13, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/13/buzz-aldrin-communion-moon>.

<sup>240</sup> Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 173.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>242</sup> William E. Gibson, *Eco-Justice: The Unfinished Journey* (SUNY Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 7.

its focus on eco-justice more than on stewardship, and thus shaped the emergence of the environmental justice movement, discussed in the next section.

## Religious Environmentalism at a National Level

One other important moment in the environmental movement has been the turn toward environmental justice throughout the movement in the United States, already hinted at in the formulation of eco-justice mentioned above, of which Bill Gibson was a part.<sup>244</sup> For example, in 1982, Black women and men in Warren County, North Carolina, most related to Black churches in the area, lay down in the road to stop the incoming shipments of toxic soil to a toxic waste dump in their community, led by Dollie Burwell (mentioned in the acknowledgement at the beginning of this dissertation). While it was not a successful campaign (because the toxic soil dump was still created), and over four hundred people were arrested, it was the first time people in the United States were detained while trying to stop a toxic waste dump.<sup>245</sup> In the years afterwards, the phrase “environmental racism” was attributed in 1987 to Rev. Dr. Benjamin Chavis, activist, former Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and former Executive Director of the Commission For Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ when it released the “Toxic Wastes and Race Report” in 1987.<sup>246</sup> The term encapsulates how pollution-producing facilities are placed in marginalized

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<sup>244</sup> Environmental justice and eco-justice are two different things. In his article, “Whose Ecological Justice?” Dimitris Stevis writes that environmental justice is concerned with how environmental risks are placed on people who have not been the main cause of those issues. Ecological justice is concerned with this injustice as well as how to protect the natural world. *Strategies*, Vol. 13: 1, 2000.

<sup>245</sup> Lazarus, “Environmental Racism! That’s What It Is.” 257.

<sup>246</sup> See also Bullard, R., Mohai, P., Saha, R., & Wright, B. *Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007: A Report Prepared for the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries*. United Church of Christ, 2007.

communities, how those communities lack important political connections and resources to afford lawyers or fight back, as well as lack of access to information.<sup>247</sup> This Commission hosted the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, DC, in 1991, where over 1000 people came together. One of the major outputs of this event was the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice. The Preamble includes these words defining the work ahead:

re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression.<sup>248</sup>

Each of these historical moments is an example of people of faith (and no faith) engaging in eco-justice work, work that requires an understanding of and integration of all people and all parts of the planet.

There were other actions happening in parallel. Soon after the protest in Warren County, the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group (NCCEJW) was founded in 1983 to support Protestant and Orthodox Christians' work on a "simple lifestyle and on responding to the acid rain crisis" as its heir, the Creation Justice Ministries, describes it.<sup>249</sup> The group was made up of denominational representatives from mainline and historic black Protestant Churches and Orthodox Christianity. The Presbyterian Church (USA) was part of this work, and PC(USA) staff have long played a

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<sup>247</sup> Skelton and Miller, "The Environmental Justice Movement."

<sup>248</sup> "Principles of Environmental Justice," United Church of Christ, [https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/principles\\_of\\_environmental\\_justice/](https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/principles_of_environmental_justice/)

<sup>249</sup> "History of Creation Justice Ministries," Creation Justice Ministries, <https://www.creationjustice.org/history.html>.

key role on the board of the organization. Laurel Kearns notes that grassroots organizers and the NCC-EJWG gave birth to the eco-justice movement in the United States, the more distinctively religious formulation of environmental justice, and a form that was/is not always as tied to understandings of racism.<sup>250</sup> It started with news articles on the need to care for the earth and organized with farmworkers about pesticide exposure, and in 1986 it “publishe[d] a statement affirming belief in God's purposeful creation and in the unique responsibility of humans to care for creation” (showing both an eco-justice and stewardship model of Protestant environmentalism).<sup>251</sup> In the following years, the organization committed to working across denominations and support of eco-justice work, including holding hearings around the country to listen to the environmental voices of people of color, and subsequently sponsoring the first two National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summits, although many of its members, as white representatives of predominantly white institutions, were understandably not invited to attend.<sup>252</sup> This commitment led to advocacy efforts and action days at the state and national level, the collection of signatures in support of the international Kyoto Accords in 1997, as well as creating and distributing worship and liturgy resources, more aimed at institutional and individual change. The NCC-EJWG also provided staff people to gatherings, and members' churches (including the PC[USA]) collaborated on policy statements and programming.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Kearns, “Greening Ethnography and the Study of Religion,” 213.

<sup>251</sup> “History of Creation Justice Ministries,” Creation Justice Ministries, <https://www.creationjustice.org/history.html>.

<sup>252</sup> Vernice Miller-Travis, “Social Transformation through Environmental Justice,” *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Harvard University Press: 2000), 566.

<sup>253</sup> William Somplatsky-Jarmen, “Partnership for the Environment Among U.S. Christians: Reports from the National Religious Partnership for the Environment,” *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking*

Another significant moment in environmentalism and religious leadership happened in 1990 when “thirty-two Nobel laureates and other eminent scientists issued ‘An Open Letter to the American Religious Community’ in which they called on all faith traditions and religious bodies to join in the fight to stave off the growing environmental crisis brought on by global warming.”<sup>254</sup> In doing so, these scientists were acknowledging what former Dean of the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies at Yale Gus Speth had concluded:

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy... to deal with those issues we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists do not know how to do that.<sup>255</sup>

One of the organizations that formed to take up this call was the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), which includes in their letter from their current board that they do this environmental work because they currently feel “Called to be the Creator's special stewards, human beings have a unique responsibility for the rest of creation.”<sup>256</sup> The Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) emerged in 1990, and other organizations emerged in response to the open letter, including the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) and the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), which were two of the four organizations that made up the NRPE; the other two were the NCC-EJWG, and the United States Council of Catholic Bishops.<sup>257</sup> In the wake

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*the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Harvard University Press: 2000), 575.

<sup>254</sup> Ellingson, *To Care for Creation*, 45.

<sup>255</sup> Gregory E. Sterling, “From the Dean’s Desk,” *Reflections*, 2019, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/crucified-creation-green-faith-rising/dean-s-desk>.

<sup>256</sup> “About NRPE,” National Religious Partnership for the Environment, accessed November 11, 2023. <http://www.nrpe.org/about.html>.

<sup>257</sup> “Religious Environmentalism Timeline,” Chesapeake Quarterly, accessed March 5, 2024, <https://www.chesapeakequarterly.net/V15N3/online2/>.

of the “Open Letter” and the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, many groups were founded by those who had attended the Summit, such as GreenFaith, founded as an interfaith environmental non-profit based in New Jersey, and led by an Episcopal priest, Rev. Skip Vilas. Current Executive Director of GreenFaith Rev Fletcher Harper, also Episcopal, describes (in his interview) this founding as an evolution “from trying a lot of types of things as institutions and moving to a progressive social movement organizing approach.”

Over time there has been growth in the movement and an intensification of religious communities’ efforts.<sup>258</sup> Other faith-based organizations, often related to denominations, have emerged to respond to climate and environmental issues: for example, the separate Presbyterians for Earth Care (the work had been housed only in the denominational organization prior to this) was started in 1995 to “help the denomination educate and energize church members to address environmental concerns” and Lutherans for Restoring Creation started in 1997.<sup>259</sup> These parachurch organizations allowed for grassroots organizing and nimbleness about funding constraints. In 1998 Episcopal Power and Light began in San Francisco to gather Episcopal churches together to purchase renewable energy, as one way to respond to climate change. By 2000, it evolved into Interfaith Power and Light, with a more ecumenical and interfaith focus, with

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<sup>258</sup> He went on to say that GreenFaith has shifted to Advocating for and investing in frontline communities and stopping fossil fuel industry and deforestation, pressing in high incomes countries and communities for lifestyle change related to climate, and then twelve years ago started on divestment because it was a strategic campaign to get involved in. At the time it was extremely cutting edge, it seemed inconceivable to divest from fossil fuels.

GreenFaith has since (in the last twenty years) expanded from a regional organization to a national to an international movement.

<sup>259</sup> Presbyterians for Earth Care, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://presbyearthcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PEC-2023-brochure-hi-res3.pdf>, “About Us,” Lutheran Restoring Creation, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://lutheransrestoringcreation.org/about-us/history/>.

chapters all over the United States focused on many different state campaigns, but particularly around energy issues.<sup>260</sup> These chapters include Faith in Place in the Midwest and Earth Ministry in Washington. The Forum on Religion and Ecology (led by scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm) came out of an effort to curate academic understanding of the resources in different religious traditions in relation to environmental issues. It was formed in 1998 based at the Center for World Religions at Harvard in and now resides at Yale Divinity School and University since 2006.<sup>261</sup> Faith in Place was founded in Chicago in 1999 with a focus on building sustainability in six Christian congregations, and it has now expanded to over 300 faith communities focused on environmental justice in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana.<sup>262</sup> In 2010, Green the Church was founded by Ambrose Carroll to resource and support churches that are related to diverse Black experiences in caring for the earth, with a particular focus on climate change.<sup>263</sup> In 2016 many Protestants, and religious organizations such as GreenFaith, in the U.S. joined efforts to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) in the Dakotas pipeline at Standing Rock (led by Indigenous water protectors). This included responding to a call for clergy to come to the river, where over 500 clergy members converged to

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<sup>260</sup> <https://interfaithpowerandlight.org/about/>

<sup>261</sup> “About the Forum,” Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://fore.yale.edu/>.

<sup>262</sup> Elena Canler, “Looking Back on the Early Days with Rev. Dr. Butterfield,” Faith in Place. Last modified August 29, 2019. <https://www.faithinplace.org/post/looking-back-on-the-early-days-with-rev-dr-butterfield>, Butterfield, who founded Faith in Place, noted in personal communication that between 2000 and 2010, most of the new religious environmental groups became chapters of Interfaith Power and Light.

<sup>263</sup> “Our Start,” Standing at the Intersection of the Black Church and the Environmental Movement, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.greenthechurch.org/our-mission-v2>. The National Black Church Initiative Environmental Initiative was founded in 2012 as another organization to support people who identified as being part of the Black Church to care for the planet. “National Black Church Initiative Environmental Initiative,” accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.nalblackchurch.com/environment/index.html>.

learn and lead and risk arrest in opposition to DAPL, as discussed in more detail later.<sup>264</sup>

Around this same time, Protestant denominations were also beginning, finally, to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery (see footnote for discussion).<sup>265</sup> In 2019, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ affirmed the Green New Deal (a resolution introduced into Congress to cut emissions and create jobs in the renewable energy sector), and Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, a youth and young adult organization founded in 2012 as a parachurch organization adjacent to some of Protestantism's most traditionally conservative denominations, praised what it called the Green New Deal's 'biblical principles' and pledged to work 'toward translating these ... into viable, bipartisan bills.'"<sup>266</sup> As this section shows, there is wide variety to how

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<sup>264</sup> The United Church of Christ released a statement saying "As Christians, we, the undersigned clergy, are conditioned by the gospel to stand on the side of the persecuted and the jailed. As such, we are compelled by our faith to stand with the water protectors of Standing Rock, who have pricked the conscience of a nation and the world." See "Standing Rock: A Clergy Call to Action," United Church of Christ," accessed March 8, 2024, [https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/standing\\_rock\\_a\\_call\\_to\\_action/](https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/standing_rock_a_call_to_action/). Many other Protestant denominations released similar statements.

<sup>265</sup> As early as 1452, when Pope Nicholas V justified the killing of indigenous peoples and taking their lands, and as late as 2005, when the US Supreme Court decided against the Oneida Nation of Indians, the Doctrine of Discovery has been used to oppress Indigenous peoples and confiscate their lands. Essentially the doctrine states that people indigenous to a land lose their rights to sovereignty with the arrival and "discovery" of that land by European (and later American) colonizers. That is to say, "with permission from the church, the European colonists completely ignored, dismissed and eradicated the existence of Native people in the land, saying that it was "an empty land" — and that if there are people here, they are not noteworthy." (Paul Seebeck, "PC(USA) leaders continue their work dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery," Presbyterian Church (USA), last modified November 22, 2021, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pcusa-leaders-continue-their-work-dismantling-the-doctrine-of-discovery/>.) This mentality led to hundreds of thousands of children taken from their homes and tribes in order to be indoctrinated and tortured in boarding schools. The PC(USA) organized and supported some of these schools. In 2016, the 222nd General Assembly voted to "confess its complicity and repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery." This meant that the national decision-making body that is representative of the denomination admitted its role in supporting the doctrine and confessed that it was an unfaithful witness to the Gospel. This vote came after years of organizing by indigenous communities and their allies. As detailed later in this chapter, the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship sent a delegation in support of Standing Rock. (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/racial-equity-womens-intercultural-ministries/gender-and-racial-justice-ministries/doctrine-of-discovery/>)

<sup>266</sup> Alexander C. Kaufman, "The Green New Deal Picks Up Major Christian Endorsements," Huffington Post, last updated Jul 16, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-new-deal-christian-support\\_n\\_5d2ccf10e4b08938b0994486](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-new-deal-christian-support_n_5d2ccf10e4b08938b0994486).

Protestants have engaged with and on ecological and environmental issues on a national level.

## Religious Environmentalism at an International Level

As is apparent even in this brief overview, in the early 1990s through the 2010s, mainline Protestant interest in programming and action around faith and the environment on a national level was building.<sup>267</sup> This resulted in a greater diversity of foci, such as environmental and ecological justice, land management, and policies, but efforts primarily evolved toward a more central focus on climate change. Out of these efforts, the divestment movement has been a unique movement because of its international scope, but it is not the first time that people of faith and especially Protestants have organized for the planet at an international scale. On an international level, the World Council of Churches has been at the forefront of international ecumenical ecological work. The World Council of Churches, which is the largest ecumenical body in the world, was founded in the 1930s by over one hundred churches. The PC(USA) is a member of this international body. Its sustainability work is rooted in a sense of stewardship (with clear attribution to the second creation story in Genesis 2.) In the years since the 1992 UN gathering in Rio, the WCC has released statements calling for climate justice and the need for staying under a 1.5 degrees Celsius warming of the planet, and it has continued to play a role at COPs.<sup>268</sup> It has also been a supporter of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation

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<sup>267</sup> See Appendix B for a fuller timeline.

<sup>268</sup> Wesley Granberg-Michelson, a respected eco-theologian of the Reformed Church of America, was Director of Church and Society for the World Council of Churches from 1988-1994 and served for 17 years 1994 to 2011 as General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America. See “About Wes,” accessed April 30, 2024, <https://www.wesgm.com/about-wes>.

Treaty, as one of the institutional signers of the faith letter in support of the Treaty. It has supported the development of a Season of Creation, in which people of faith and churches honor and support sustainability, climate justice and environmental justice. Finally, the WCC has been at the forefront of the faith-based divestment from fossil fuels movement and the larger climate finance movement. It was one of the early adopters of divestment from fossil fuels when, in 2014, it affirmed that it would remove fossil fuels from its investments and encourage its members to do the same.<sup>269</sup> Since then, WCC leadership (specifically Henrik Grape and Frederique Seidel) have been part of global organizing efforts to get more faith communities to divest from fossil fuels. Seidel, as the program executive for Child Rights, also co-authored the WCC's climate finance report "Cooler Earth - Higher Benefits."<sup>270</sup> In doing so, the WCC has modeled how to engage climate justice in a variety of programming areas, and is one of the contexts in which members of the PC(USA) have been exposed to divestment from fossil fuels.

As Fossil Free PC(USA) emerged in 2013, we entered into a larger ecosystem of Protestants and other people of faith who had been looking for ways to galvanize people to take action, partly out of concern that previous efforts were insufficient because emissions were still rising. This larger ecosystem included Protestants who have been part of organizing at the U.N. Conference of Parties (COP) since 1992, and the international gathering of water protectors at Standing Rock, and the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, which benefited from global Protestant support from 2022 through the present.

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<sup>269</sup> "Investment in fossil fuels is off the table for the WCC," July 17, 2014, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/investment-in-fossil-fuels-is-off-the-table-for-the-wcc>.

<sup>270</sup> Frederique Seidel, Emmanuel de Martel, and Eric Begaghel, *Cooler Earth, Higher Benefits*, WCC Publications, 2022.

The COP meetings have been a focal point of Protestant involvement on climate justice on an international scale, as previously indicated. Denominations have participated in protest actions and educational programming at COPs and have acted as educators about and witnesses to the decisions that unfold at these global events. As noted earlier, a significant COP occurred in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, called the Earth Summit, which ended with a call for sustainable development for all people. Many organizations coalesced around responding to climate and environmental issues, which emerged in the Kyoto Protocols.<sup>271</sup> In following COPs, parties, governmental representatives determined how to live out this call. In Paris in 2015, governments signed onto the Paris Accords, which was a non-legally binding agreement to lessen greenhouse gases. The United States was initially a signer, before retreating from the agreement in 2017 under former President Donald Trump. The US rejoined in 2021 under President Biden. Many Protestant denominations spoke up about this exit. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America released a statement as the U.S. left the Paris Accords, saying

“People of faith showed up in unprecedented numbers for the climate talks in Paris, because we believe that this moment includes a moral obligation to our most vulnerable neighbors, to future generations, and to all of God’s creation to act on climate change,”

Which is to say that the ELCA did not just release a statement, but Lutherans participated on the ground to demand action by the international COP and to insist that the US join these efforts. The PC(USA) released statements, including a piece that highlighted the

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<sup>271</sup> “A New Blueprint For International Action On The Environment,” United Nations, Conferences: Environment And Sustainable Development, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>.

voices of many Presbyterians, including Rebecca Barnes, articulating a Presbyterian environmentalism:

Presbyterians are engaged in their personal and congregational lives to care for God's creation. They also engage in local, state, national and even international public policy advocacy. They ask for strong climate and energy policies—including the United Nations' climate talks, such as those that resulted in the Paris Agreement. It matters to Presbyterians that public officials demonstrate responsible, moral leadership in our time. Also, it matters that we use the power and voice we have as American citizens to create a better world for future generations.<sup>272</sup>

In particular, this larger COP context impacted Fossil Free PC(USA) because it created a context that showed that Presbyterians care about ecological, moral decisions by the PC(USA). More broadly, these actions were joined by people of all kinds of faith. This response has been repeated with other COPs and meetings of the United Nations.

Faith communities have also played critical roles at the COPs themselves. At the 27th COP in 2022 in Egypt, the UN Environmental Programme reported that “faiths have ensured that their voices are heard by organising 40+ side events, meditations, interventions, and actions to raise ambition and raise awareness for our common home.”<sup>273</sup> These side events and actions have been avenues for people of faith and—most relevant to this chapter—U.S. Protestants in particular, to insist not only that the U.S. government engage climate and environmental justice on a global scale, but also to put pressure on other governments. These are also examples of eco-justice, because they demand that we care for all parts of creation.

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<sup>272</sup> “PC(USA) Supports Paris Agreement on Climate Change,” Eco-justice Blog, June 5, 2017, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/2017/06/05/pcusa-supports-paris-agreement/>.

<sup>273</sup> “Faith-based Engagement at COP27,” UN Environment Programme, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.unep.org/events/conference/faith-based-engagement-cop27>.

Another example of faith-based environmental work on an international scale is how water protectors and their allies gathered at Standing Rock. In early 2016, as mentioned earlier, hundreds of Indigenous nations gathered together at the Sacred Fires in what is now called North Dakota to pray, organize, and rise together in the shadow of a pipeline to be built through unceded Indigenous territory. Transfer Partners (the company that commissioned the pipeline) was forced to relocate their pipeline because residents in the majority-white city of Bismarck demanded that the company reroute the pipeline away from their lives and land because of the risk of a pipeline leak.<sup>274</sup> Consequently, the pipeline was planned to be built just outside of what is now recognized by the U.S. government as the Standing Rock Sioux Indian reservation, home to Lakota and Dakota Sioux nations but passing through land that the Sioux claim as unceded land. Just like the residents of Bismarck, the Lakota and Dakota nations did not want the pipeline to be built near their lives and land, and the main source of drinking water for them and the region. The Lakota and the Dakota nations organized a sacred fire to call people together and to pray. People traveled from around the world to join the water protectors, as they called themselves. Then the tribes particularly invited religious leaders to come to camp in solidarity with the Lakota and Dakota demands that the pipeline be abandoned. Fossil

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<sup>274</sup> The builders of the Dakota Access Pipeline continue to argue that the pipeline is safe and does not violate any one's rights. It also argues that the pipeline is better for the environment than truck or train transportation. Specifically, it notes too that

This Dakota Access Pipeline crosses almost entirely private land, often already in use for other utility easements. The pipeline does not cross the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, even at the portion of the pipeline that was the subject of dispute at Lake Oahe. In developing the route, the United States Army Corps of Engineers had hundreds of contacts with dozens of tribes regarding the Dakota Access project. In addition, the U.S. Army Corps reached out to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe nearly a dozen times to discuss archaeological and other surveys conducted before finalizing the Dakota Access route.

Notably, the Dakota Access Pipeline uneventfully operates along the same path as (but much deeper underground) the Northern Border Pipeline, which has functioned safely beneath the lake for more than 35 years.

See "About," Dakota Access Pipeline, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://dapipelinefacts.com/About.html>.

Free PC(USA) and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship responded to a call to support Indigenous leaders and water protectors in North Dakota around Thanksgiving, while denominational leaders responded to a call to arrive in early November.

In response to these calls for accompaniment, Robert Ross—at the time a member of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Activist Council—emailed the leadership of Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF) and Fossil Free PC(USA), asking if PPF planned to respond to the call by sending a delegation.<sup>275</sup> Emily Brewer noted in her interview that “divestment is a tactic in a much larger movement and we need all of it, including [actions like the] delegation to Standing Rock. The end goal is climate justice, the end goal is not divestment.” So, after a period of discernment, PPF sent a delegation (of which I was a part) to the camp the week of the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday, arriving the day after militarized police used water cannons on water protectors.<sup>276</sup> Anyone who arrived at camp was required to attend an orientation, with the intent to instill respect for native leadership and ways of being. There were daily prayer times, common eating spaces, and clear guidelines for what could and could not be photographed.

Many of the people in the Presbyterian delegation were part of Fossil Free PC(USA) specifically, and all were intending to be in solidarity with the tribes’ demands for tribal sovereignty to be respected.<sup>277</sup> We were at the camp for four days, and much of

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<sup>275</sup> One of the emails that Bob sent to the leadership included language from Indigenous voices saying, “If you live on this earth and you need water to live, this is your fight too.” The words echo much of the ethos of the human vocation articulated in Genesis.

<sup>276</sup> *As Long as Grass Grows*, Dina Gilio-Whitaker, 7.

<sup>277</sup> By this point, Fossil Free PC(USA) was a project of Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (essentially a working group or committee of the whole). The delegation included people from Fossil Free PC(USA), Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and people from the Living Traditions Community that was based at the time at Stony Point Center, a PCUSA-affiliated conference center where Rick Ufford-Chase was co-director. In her interview, Colleen Earp noted that activism by PPF and the PCUSA to be in solidarity with Indigenous people at Standing Rock was part of the way she saw the PC(USA) responding to climate change.

our work focused on helping in the common kitchens and being present for several demonstrations. On the day that many of us would usually be observing Thanksgiving, the Indigenous women leaders called the camp to the river for ceremony and prayer. From the river gathering, many of the group went to another part of the camp to peacefully demonstrate, and to come face-to-face with the militarized police. There were threats of raids by the police, and it was hard to connect with the outside world due to limiting media access and disrupting cell service. This purposeful isolation made it difficult to share live up-to-date information about the reality of the camp in opposition to the so-called environmental care of Energy Transfer.

Our Presbyterian group was folded into this movement.<sup>278</sup> While we did our own prayers while we were en route to the Dakotas (and I anointed our people the day the camp was raided, as an act of Christian ritual), we mainly followed Indigenous prayers and rituals. We were oriented to the language of protector rather than protestor, to prayer rather than protest, to strength and witness rather than aggression. For me, it was a moment of recognizing the difference between mainstream environmentalism and other kinds of connections with and struggle for the planet, such as those of Indigenous people who were at Standing Rock, especially understanding the pervasiveness of all that is part of the natural world is all our relations.<sup>279</sup> Dr. Randy Woodley, Christian theologian,

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<sup>278</sup> This delegation was nearly all white and completely non-native, and it was made clear that non-native, white folks were required to take direction (both related to direct action and any aspect of camp life) from Indigenous leaders, because it was part of the rules of the camp.

<sup>279</sup> Siham Drissi, Programme Management officer at the Ecosystems division at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), writes that Indigenous “knowledge is often embedded in a cosmology that reveres the *one-ness* of life, considers nature as sacred and acknowledges humanity as a part of it. And it encompasses practical ways to ensure the balance of the environment in which they live, so it may continue to provide services such as water, fertile soil, food, shelter and medicines.” (Siham Drissi, “Indigenous Peoples and the Nature They Protect,” UN Environmental Programme, last updated September 19, 2023, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-and-nature-they-protect>.)

farmer, and enrolled Cherokee writes about the difference between Christian and Indigenous relationships to the earth, saying in “Earth Rights Statement,” that

We MUST decolonize the Western worldview that is so destructive, full of Platonic dualism, hierarchies (like anthropocentrism and White Supremacy), false categorizations, false binaries, utopianism, and so on, and begin to realize that the earth and the whole community of creation are our relatives. We have a reciprocal relationship with every living organism on our planet. Every tree, every plant, every animal, every fish, every insect, every microbe and bacteria, every fungus, *ad Infinitum*...They are all, our relatives!<sup>280</sup>

This decolonizing thinking emerges in the work of theologian George Tinker (a member of the Osage Nation) writes that

Indigenous peoples tend to think of themselves as part of creation rather than somehow set apart from the created whole as a species with special and particular privilege over against the rest of creation. We are part of creation and in relationship with every other part of the created whole.<sup>281</sup>

This ethos has been present in how Indigenous communities have responded to the planet. The camp at Standing Rock has been one moment among many in which tribes have had to navigate an environmentalism that is so often rooted in disconnection and white supremacy, in order to reclaim a public connection to the earth (by which I mean a relationship that the dominant culture could recognize as earth care.)<sup>282</sup> There are clear places of intersection between Indigenous spirituality and care for the rest of the world and the kinds of Christian ecological vocation I have depicted throughout this dissertation, and indeed, indigenous spiritualities have been so attractive to those Christians with an environmental concern to the point of needing to issue warnings about cultural appropriation. The delegation from PPF went to Standing Rock in response to the

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<sup>280</sup> Randy Woodley, “Earth Rights Statements,” Eloheh, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.eloheh.org/new-page>.

<sup>281</sup> George E. “Tink” Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. 2008), 40.

<sup>282</sup> See also Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1973).

Indigenous leaders calling for people of all faiths to come to the camp, as well as in response to the need to live out an ecological vocation based on the Genesis creation stories. Many people who went on the delegation to Standing Rock got more deeply involved in Fossil Free PC(USA) and went on the Walk to Divest. One participant, Rev. Benjamin Perry, wrote a lengthy article for one of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s digital magazines on the need to be in solidarity with Standing Rock as Presbyterians.<sup>283</sup> That article was tagged with “divestment” in order to link it to the larger divestment from fossil fuels movement.

Another focal point of Protestants working on climate justice at an international scale has been the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. This treaty, called for by people in the Pacific Islands, would be legally binding for countries that signed onto it. The faith letter that called for this treaty (in solidarity with secular organizers) begins with a clear reference to the stewardship model that Kearns has noted, saying

We have been granted a gift, an earth created in all its diversity, vitality, and abundance, for which we are called upon to be stewards. But this role of stewardship has been overshadowed by neglect, exploitation, and unsustainable consumption that threaten the natural balance, social harmony, and existence of life on earth.<sup>284</sup>

And then it goes on to include language that calls on eco-justice:

We call on governments to urgently commence negotiations to develop and implement a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, laying out a binding global plan to:

1. End expansion of any new coal, oil or gas production in line with the best available science as outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Environment Programme;

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<sup>283</sup> Benjamin Perry, “Government Response to Standing Rock: An Affront to Religious Freedom,” Unbound: The Intersections Between Faith and Justice, last modified December 9, 2016, <https://justiceunbound.org/government-response-to-standing-rock-an-affront-to-religious-freedom/>

<sup>284</sup> Note here the clear “stewardship” language being used in this document.

2. Phase-out existing production of fossil fuels in a manner that is fair and equitable, taking into account the respective dependency of countries on fossil fuels and their capacity to transition;
3. Ensure a global just transition to 100% access to renewable energy globally, support dependent economies to diversify away from fossil fuels, and enable all people and communities, not least the Global South, to flourish.<sup>285</sup>

This multifaith effort has been supported by many Protestant organizations including the Alliance of Baptists, the American Friends Service Committee, the Eco-Stewards Program (which is Presbyterian), and the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness. Both the work in relation to COP and around the Treaty have included efforts by people of faith (including mainline Protestants) to get the US to be part of international efforts to respond to climate change.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed interpretations of the human vocation to care for the planet and the rest of creation as depicted in the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. The legacies of these stories led to harming the planet in many ways, including the extraction of fossil fuels. But these stories have also invoked the imperative to serve the Earth and take care of it. In this dissertation, I argue that one of the strengths of the movement to divest from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) is the movement's Presbyterian-ness, both implicitly and explicitly. These specific Biblical interpretations and interpretations have influenced how the PC(USA) has articulated our particular response to climate change and undergirded the work toward systemic action through divestment

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<sup>285</sup> "Faith Leaders Make The Moral Case For A Global Just Transition Away From Coal, Oil, and Gas," Fossil Fuel Non Proliferation Treaty, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://fossilfueltreaty.org/faith-letter/#signatories>.

from fossil fuels, as becomes clearer in the next chapter. In the next chapter, I explore some of Reformed Theology's contributions to sin-talk and ecological vocation, as another foundation for the activists I interviewed for this dissertation. These theologies and the resulting environmentalism are undergirded by these biblical interpretations, perspectives that spurred the movement to divest from fossil fuels in the PC(USA).

## 4. Fugue: Reformed Theologies and Presbyterian Resources<sup>286</sup>



*The table for worship before the Walk to Divest began. Each walker was anointed in oil and reminded of their baptism. The beloved rock came with us on the journey and lay on the table for worship each night. abby mohaupt, photo/digital art, 2018.*

### Introduction

At one point when I was editing this chapter, my email inbox was filled with news articles about the 2023 United Nations' Convening of Parties (COP) that took place November 30-December 12, 2023, in Dubai. The headlines of these articles are startling:

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<sup>286</sup> According to musicologist Alexandra Amati-Camperi, a fugue is “the most complex polyphonic musical form, involving imitation among the parts,” and the multiple parts of the fugue repeat and interlock with each other. (“What is a Fugue?” San Francisco Bach Choir, 2009, <https://www.sfbach.org/what-is-a-fugue/>.) In this chapter, I am holding multiple overlapping voices together in order create a complex story about Presbyterian environmentalisms in relationship with Protestantism in the United States, secular environmentalism in the United States, and their influences on each others, as well as the impact of some parts of Reformed theology on how the PC(USA) has responded to that larger cultural context and the climate crisis.

No place in the U.S. is safe from the climate crisis, but a new report shows where it's most severe<sup>287</sup>

World's richest 1% emit as much carbon as 5 billion people, report says<sup>288</sup>

Upsetting report reveals governments are acting contrary to 2030 promise: 'We need credible commitments'<sup>289</sup>

World stands on frontline of disaster at COP28, says U.N. climate chief<sup>290</sup>

These articles collectively illustrate how suffering from climate change impacts is getting worse, and affecting more people than ever before, that it is caused by the most economically privileged, and that governments have failed to live up to their previous commitments. The titles of these articles also collectively create a sort of existential dread: disaster is coming, and no one is safe. Indeed, we are all affected, though not in the same ways. The “good” intentions of the world’s governments have not been enough to stop the devastating realities of climate change, in part, because they have not followed through on their commitments.

I have been immersed in this story of climate change for the last twenty years since I became interested in the relationship between religion and ecology during college. This interest has intensified in the last decade, when I started seminary, pastored a church and worked with GreenFaith and Faith in Place and began my professional career, always looking through the lens of a theological vocation to care for the earth. In the last three

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<sup>287</sup> Ella Nilsen, CNN, last modified November 14, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/14/us/national-climate-assessment-extreme-weather-costs/index.html>.

<sup>288</sup> Li Cohen, CBS, last modified November 21, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/worlds-richest-carbon-emissions-climate-change-report/>.

<sup>289</sup> Tina Deines, The Cool Down, last modified November 25, 2023, <https://www.thecooldown.com/green-business/the-production-gap-fossil-fuel-energy-sources/>.

<sup>290</sup> Fiona Harvey, The Guardian, last modified November 24, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/nov/24/un-top-climate-official-simon-stiell-cop-28-dubai>.

years particularly, the lens of parenthood has added another layer of urgency. The headlines, and their content have gotten worse over the years. The impacts have gotten worse. Glimmers of hope like the Global Climate Strikes<sup>291</sup> shutting down business as usual, the Papal encyclical *Laudato Si* calling for all people of good will to work for our common ecological home, the UN Paris Accords creating a way for governments to commit to act—each of these (and so many more policies, movements, actions, etc.) have not been enough.

Increasingly, it has been attractive to give up. Why take action to stop climate change, when everything anyone has tried so far has been futile? How can we possibly do anything effectively if everything we do has a carbon footprint? What is the point of being part of a global ecological movement if banks, asset managers, and the fossil fuel industry will just keep funding and extracting fossil fuels? For example, the coalition that created the Banking on Climate Chaos Report notes that

Despite clear and dire warnings from climate experts, the world's biggest banks – including RBC, JPMorgan Chase, Citi, Bank of America, Scotiabank, MUFG, and Mizuho, among others – continue to pour billions of dollars into fossil fuel expansion. In 2022, the world's largest 60 banks provided \$150 billion in financing to the world's top 100 companies leading the expansion of oil, gas, and coal. This included \$10.1 billion to TotalEnergies, \$12.8 billion to TC Energy, \$8.4 billion to ConocoPhillips, and \$8.9 billion to Saudi Aramco, four of the world's most aggressive fossil fuel expanders.<sup>292</sup>

With that kind of money against us, do our actions matter? How do we manage when we are on the brink of disaster? As an activist, academic, and theologian I believe that we

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<sup>291</sup> Somini Sengupta, “Protesting Climate Change, Young People Take to Streets in a Global Strike,” The New York Times, last modified September 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/climate/global-climate-strike.html>.

<sup>292</sup> This report is released annually. Rainforest Action Network, BankTrack, Indigenous Environmental Network, Oil Change International, Reclaim Finance, Sierra Club, and Urgewald, “Banking on Climate Chaos,” April 12, 2023, <https://www.bankingonclimatechaos.org/>, 7.

can start with faith. Reformed theologies have a gift to give the world of organizing for climate justice. Some of that, as I note below, is the theological concept of total depravity rooted in the concept of original sin (because it is a doctrine that can be translated to being about existing when everything we do has a little sin in it and thus can translate into a world where everything we do has at least a little bit of carbon emissions). But, more importantly, the willingness to wrestle with sin is part of the complicated gift that Protestants have been engaging with the world and earthly issues from the beginning of the Reformation. There are 500 years of history of reformed and always reforming theologies that ultimately sets a precedent for the Presbyterian Church to shift its perspective on things, including climate change. The Presbyterian Church (USA) started to reform by producing materials and policy changes, discussed below. But it also needs to keep reforming: meaning it takes 10 years to do a thing that seemed like it would be easy. Essentially, in this chapter, I argue that the Presbyterian Church was a fitting context in which a sub-movement for divestment from fossil fuels could take shape, based on how Sharon Erickson Nepstad describes the need for pre-existing support for action before it can be successful.<sup>293</sup>

Chapter three discussed some of the biblical foundations of ecological work in the PC(USA). It also covered how the creation stories of Genesis evoke an ecological vocation for humans, demonstrating how interpretations of the Genesis texts have undergirded various Presbyterian relations to the Earth, albeit in contrasting ways. This chapter explores some of the Reformed theological foundations and consequences of those biblical foundations. Throughout this chapter, I'm braiding several lineages

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<sup>293</sup> Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

together: Reformed and reformation theologies and Presbyterian ecological work in this chapter with Biblical interpretations and Protestant environmentalism in the United States.<sup>294</sup> Specifically, I trace the roots of Fossil Free PC(USA) through Reformed Theology and then provide an overview of PC(USA) resources on environmentalism to shed light on the context of the denomination and the themes from which Fossil Free PC(USA) emerged. In the final section of this chapter, I review how the PC(USA) in particular has engaged in environmentalisms. These entwined histories have informed how activists in Fossil Free PC(USA) expected the PC(USA) to respond to divestment from fossil fuels as a tactic to respond to climate change, and I argue that this expectation was one of the reasons why a successful vote on divestment was possible. Finally, this chapter sets the scene for the story of Fossil Free PC(USA) to unfold, claiming the biblical, theological, and cultural commitments of the denomination in service of the success of a movement.

There are several questions which shape my framing of this history. First, what do academics and practitioners mean by *environmentalism*? Historian Mark Stoll calls environmentalism “an ardent love for nature” and traces its origins through white

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<sup>294</sup> Here I’m indebted to the Indigenous wisdom of Robin Wall Kimmerer and the playful observance of my dear friends, Eden and Simon Lehn. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer writes about a “braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world. ... it is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story” (x). Kimmerer brings the earth, Indigenous wisdom, and western science together to tell stories about the planet and her (our) place in it. In preparing for this chapter, I struggled through how to center Black, Indigenous, and Latinx contributions to environmentalism in the PC(USA), while also rooting in Reformed Theology and the particular and fraught relationship that Protestants have with the planet and fossil fuels. How to hold these three things together to tell a story? Eden and Simon (elementary schoolers) pointed out to me that as long as they could remember, my hair has been worn in a braid, mostly to keep it from getting tangled or pulled by my daughter. One needs at least three sections in order to braid, just as we need at least three sources for the explorations of this chapter. Their revelation pointed me back to Kimmerer. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015).

Protestantism.<sup>295</sup> Sociologist Robert Brulle, for example, notes twenty different kinds of environmentalisms in his chapter “The U.S. Environmental Movement,” including wildlife management, preservation, deep ecology, and ecospiritualities.<sup>296</sup> In chapter three, I explored environmentalism (*a la* ecological vocation) through the lens of biblical interpretation—a sense that humanity is meant to have a caring and connected relationship with the rest of the world. This is a definition that welcomes and requires a widening of who is recognized for their love of nature. Stoll notes that environmentalism as he defines it emerged in the same countries that also developed factories and industrialization.<sup>297</sup> Movement leader Leah Thomas, in her intersectional environmentalism framework, does not define environmentalism *per se*, except to say that the work has to be for both the planet and people.<sup>298</sup> In this context, I write with a conception of environmentalism that rejects a historical narrative of white Protestants as the first to care for the land that is now the United States and to tie it to legal and social rules. Instead, I embrace environmentalism as a relationship with and alongside the earth, its systems, and the people who call it home, tend their relationships with it, and seek to protect it. This framing comes specifically from solidarity work at Standing Rock.

Second, my Standing Rock experience demands that we identify whose voices/actions are included in the history of faith-based environmentalism. At issue is how histories of religious environmentalism are framed. In his book, *Place, Ecology, and*

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<sup>295</sup> Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>296</sup> Robert Brulle, “The U.S. Environmental Movement,” in *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology* (Oxford Press, 2009).

<sup>297</sup> Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 30.

<sup>298</sup> Leah Thomas, *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People and Planet* (New York: Voracious/Little Brown and Company, 2022).

*the Sacred*, British theologian Michael Northcott places the beginning of environmentalism in the 1800s, as industrialization began to push workers from the land and into the cities (this is similar to Stoll's timing.) The less-inhabited green spaces became havens for rest. In a U.S. context, this timeframe demands, at the very least, an acknowledgement that the system that forced Black people into chattel slavery, often enslaved to cultivate land, was well entrenched.<sup>299</sup> Their care for the land was not valued, even though their care and productivity allowed white folks to begin to envision an ethic care for the earth that emerged as setting aside wild spaces as part of the conservation and preservation movements.<sup>300</sup> At the same time, Indigenous communities were continually being forced from the lands where their ancestors had dwelled for millenia, as policies like the Removal Act of 1830 were written into law.<sup>301</sup> For example, in order to “purify” Yosemite to prepare it to become a national park and then continue to preserve it as a recreational space, the Ahwahnechee were systematically contained to smaller and smaller areas of the park, forced to pay rent, and excluded from jobs within the park. In the 1960s, all remaining Indigenous housing was burned by park officials in order to deter Ahwahnechee residents from returning.<sup>302</sup> This environmental context matters.

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<sup>299</sup> See Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>300</sup> Michael Northcott, *Place, Ecology, and the Sacred* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

<sup>301</sup> Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019).

<sup>302</sup> See Allie Patterson, “Indian Removal from Yosemite,” *Intermountain Histories*, <https://www.intermountainhistories.org/items/show/339>.

## Reformed Histories and Tenets

Broadly, the Reformation emerged from struggles around power between church and state.<sup>303</sup> Historian Andrew Pettegree notes that toward the end of the fifteenth century, the Catholic church had influence over much of human existence in Europe through landownership and political connections.<sup>304</sup> At the same time, it was increasingly easy for laity to purchase indulgences (or the practice of “pious donations against the hope of mercy”), which in turn paid for priests to move into positions higher up in the church hierarchy.<sup>305</sup> Luther’s protest against the Catholic church while himself a Catholic priest (most public when he posted his theses against the Catholic church in 1517) sought to curtail this practice (though of course, this was only one issue among the many he raised.)<sup>306</sup> The Reformations took multiple forms: Erasmian, Lutheran, ‘radical’ and Anabaptist, Reformed, Anglican, and Catholic. The focus is on the Reformation tradition called “Reformed,” associated with Ulrich Zwingli, Katherine Zell, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, John Knox, and a chorus of others. This tradition took doctrinal shape through confessions, catechisms, municipal pronouncements, and polemic exchange particularly in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Westminster Confession (1646). Each of these documents responded to the political and social realities of the time, and social witness and response continue to be a mark of Reformed theology.

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<sup>303</sup> This section is indebted to years of conversations with Christian Historian Ken Sawyer who teaches at McCormick Theological Seminary, the Presbyterian Church (USA) seminary in Chicago.

<sup>304</sup> Andrew Pettegree, “Reformation and Counter-Reformation,” *A World History of Christianity*, ed Adrian Hastings (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 238.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>306</sup> I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1988), 5.

Each of the Reformation traditions took up the articulation of the brokenness of creation (like original sin and total depravity), **and** how God's grace would or could respond. For example, in her book, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought*, historian Margaret R. Miles explains that Luther's commentary on the book of Romans covers many of his most foundational points. He wrote that the Gospel requires Christians to be open-hearted in the world and to God and willing to meet the law of the Gospel with love. However, no one, according to Luther, is capable of doing that on our own; it is God's grace in us that makes us want to fulfill the law in gratitude for that divine work.<sup>307</sup> Similarly, John Calvin also saw humans as being unable to willingly turn toward God. We need, according to Calvin, God's grace and glory to even point toward what is possible. Miles writes that this possibility is a process of "sanctification" which is a slow and interrupted process of repentance of what is wrongly coupled, with gratitude for the astounding possibility of new life in Christ.<sup>308</sup> Much of this work was based on Augustine's theological conviction that God is bigger than we can understand, that humans are broken beyond their recognition and abilities, and that divine grace has the final say.<sup>309</sup>

As noted in chapter three, there is no simple set of tenets and commitments that defines Reformed theologies, the family of theology from which several denominations (including Dutch Reformed, Presbyterianisms, Congregational, and Anglican traditions), including all the different streams of Presbyterianism, emerge. Instead, like all Protestant

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<sup>307</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 252.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-2. A future project could explore the slow process of divestment from fossil fuels (or any social movement) and the slow process of sanctification. See also Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, trans. Henry Cole (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1858).

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

theological traditions, Reformed theologies are an ongoing wrestling with theological lineages and doctrines that speak to people of faith in this time and place, a living out of the church always being reformed. These perennial wrestlings have produced provisional statements: historical and theological status reports articulated in confessions that are adopted by faith communities in Reformed traditions.<sup>310</sup> For example, the five *solas* of the Reformation, which has distinguished Reformation theologies from Catholic teachings, include

*sola scriptura*: (Scripture alone is the only source for church doctrine, and must be accessible to all).<sup>311</sup>

*solus Christus* (Christ alone is the mediator between humans and God. There is no need for priests to forgive sins or speak for God to humans.)

*sola fide* (faith alone -- only faith in God can justify someone or make someone sinless, not works.)

*sola gratia* (grace alone-- only God's grace can save),

and *solus Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).<sup>312</sup>

Each of these teachings emerged to articulate beliefs and commitments of Reformation theologies, which sought to proclaim an unmediated relationship between God and humans. This relationship as well as the conviction that individuals can interpret the Scriptures and are not reliant on priests (or other authorities) in order to interpret Scripture as individuals/a movement) informed how Fossil Free PC(USA) approached the work of divestment. For example, Pam McVety said that we (as Presbyterians) need to

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<sup>310</sup> Hesselink, *Reformed*, 9.

<sup>311</sup> Indeed, Hesselink points out that "the stress on the unique authority of the Word of God is the foundation of the Reformed tradition," and this foundation is one of the reasons why chapter three was concerned with scripture. Hesselink, *Reformed*, 10.

<sup>312</sup> "The Five Solas," The Presbyterian Foundation, <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/The5Solos.pdf> The Presbyterian Foundation is one of the agencies of the PC(USA), and staff at the Foundation created this resource as part of the celebration of 500 years after the Reformation. It was also the first agency to create a fossil free option for Presbyterian investments. See also Hesselink, *Reformed*, 90-92, for grace and the solas.

repent from supporting fossil fuels because we cannot both invest in fossil fuels and love our neighbors; this is an interpretation of the Gospel that Pam could make (and then bring to her organizing work) because of the Reformed theologies that undergirds our tradition (meaning she as an individual can interpret scriptures herself). There is freedom of identity in this. In the next section, I explore how Reformed theologies and teachings emerged in the work of Fossil Free PC(USA) to respond to climate change, while noting that these doctrines were and have been held in conversation with contemporary theologians like Ayres (mentioned in the second chapter) and Migliore below.

## Reformed Doctrines

In *Faith Seeking Understanding*, contemporary Reformed theologian Daniel Migliore writes that the understanding of sin in the Reformed Tradition must acknowledge the fact that humans are originally created in God's image and eventually redeemed by God's grace.<sup>313</sup> In this section, I consider the Reformed doctrines of creation, original sin, and total depravity because they were the doctrines I imagined would emerge in interviews as foundations for the work. I compare and contrast some

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<sup>313</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 139. While this book is thirty years old, it is still taught in Presbyterian seminaries to prepare students for ordination exams in reformed theology. I have excluded from here an exploration of a Reformed explanation of salvation for two reasons. First, the concept of salvation did not come up in any of the interviews I did with activists. This is not particularly surprising since (especially since the break from more conservative Presbyterianisms) people in the PC(USA) are hesitant to talk about atonement theories and salvation lest it devolve into a conversation about sexuality or face reprimanding by the denomination. For example, in November 2000, the PCUSA reprimanded Rev. Dirk Ficca, at the time the Executive Director of the Parliament of the World's Religions, for saying that Christianity was not the only path to salvation. As reported by the Los Angeles Times, the denomination said, "Christians must treat members of other religions with respect and charity, but said, "How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say." Future research could include how God's grace and human action on climate change intersect.

interpretations of Reformed theology as I seek to lay out some of the unique resources that Reformed theology offers to an understanding of climate change and an ecological vocation, especially in a context of climate change that often feels hopeless. I argue that these resources supported the work of Fossil Free PC(USA)’s creation and the frameworks that emerged in order to organize for divestment from fossil fuels in the denomination.

## Doctrine of Creation

Historian Mark Stoll notes that Calvin revered nature, honoring “Creation in far greater measure than any Christian theologian of his era. In the opening chapters of the *Institutes*, he argued that nature was the most important source of knowledge of God outside the Bible.”<sup>314</sup> This connection is one of the reasons Reformed Christians (and thus Presbyterians) revere science and the studies of the Earth. Stoll notes that Calvin went so far as to say that “nature is God.”<sup>315</sup> Stoll continues that “Reformed Protestants could find evidence of the being and attributes of God everywhere from the wide heavens to the smallest blade of grass.”<sup>316</sup> These teachings and the creation stories in Genesis explored in chapter three point to the doctrine of creation. At its core, a distinctly Reformed doctrine of creation articulates how God is separate from creation and God made all that is. God is the Creator. The stories of Genesis define God’s creativity at the beginning of all things—when things were brought into the world—such that everything was good. God made things in goodness and connection. In that act of creating, as

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<sup>314</sup> Stoll, *Inherit*, 21.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 24. Technically here Stoll is referring to the Providence of God, in which God is caring for all parts of the universe, both big and small. But this doctrine is connected to God’s creating of all things.

Presbyterian biblical scholar Bill Brown notes, God binds together all creation and calls it good, with “intrinsic value as beheld by God.”<sup>317</sup> In short, all that is created was created by God and called good. Susan De George, one of the original members of the Fossil Free PC(USA) steering committee, articulated this doctrine by talking about how

Our theologies in the overtures have been about being complete beings and inter-beings. We all live on this earth, created by God, and it’s a much more grounded theology that’s grounded in caring for beings and incarnation.

Rick Ufford-Chase also articulated this doctrine by saying that “all of creation is co-inhabiting the world.” More personally, Dan Terpstra noted that while he is not a theologian, he said “my personal relationship to God is embedded in my relationship to the created world. I feel most connected when I’m in the created world (outside the human-constructed world) and can recognize the beauty and symmetry.”

This Reformed understanding and deployment of a doctrine of creation means that if we take God seriously, we must take creation seriously, and because God made us, we must take our place and actions in creation seriously as well.<sup>318</sup> Because we have not taken care of creation, we Christians need to confess that we are responsible for climate change (as Pam McVety said in her interview.) And because we have not taken care of creation, we need to confess actions that continue to disconnect humans from the rest of creation or that contribute to ecological suffering through climate change or environmental destruction (as these violate our ecological vocation). Our human action

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<sup>317</sup> Bill Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 45. Everything is good at the creation as depicted in the Genesis stories. Original sin, explored below, notes that we now inherit sin and according to total depravity, are not all good. There is tension between these doctrines.

<sup>318</sup> By “seriously,” here I mean to reference how Marcus J. Borg challenges his readers to take the Bible “seriously,” that is to let it shape our identity, imagination, and relationship to God while also acknowledging and naming the identities we bring to it. We must wrestle with our relationship with Scripture because it points us to God, and in the same way, we must wrestle with our relationship to the rest of Creation because it is made by God. Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously, But Not Literally* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 34.

must simultaneously uphold the connections between the goodness of our relationality with God, earth, and each other, which acknowledges our multiple complicities. In that vein, when I asked Robert Ross about the theologies he saw undergirding the work of Fossil Free PC(USA), he said,

Certainly some kind of creation theology is the heart of it, meaning love of and stewardship of creation. And I think [this is a call to] love your neighbor and loving the least of these. It's a theology of life, in terms of the planet and ultimately human life and loving our neighbor(s). We should care about climate change because it's killing our fellow humans... and we shouldn't need a theology in order to do something about that but my morals and principles are rooted in Christianity.

Each of these activists also point back to the Genesis stories of creation, connecting the stories of how God made all things to present-day action. These activists also noted how we simply and conclusively have not done enough in reflection, resolve, or response.

This lack of action is an indication that the doctrine on its own is not enough. Susan DeGeorge referred to this “moving away from what makes everything/everyone whole” is so significant as to be named for what it is: sin. This doctrine was part of the foundation upon which Fossil Free PC(USA) could organize with the expectation that we would win, because we could agree on a shared understanding of who created all that is (and thus how we are all accountable to all that is.) In the next two sections, I explore more about how sin has been articulated in Western Christian theologies (original sin and total depravity) and how some of the activists I interviewed engaged these doctrines.

## Original Sin

The concept of original sin is the doctrine that all humans are in personal and social solidarity with one another, for good and for bad. All have inherited sin from

Adam and Eve. Migliore argues that this concept comes from the “biblical stories of the Garden of Eden and the fall of humanity (Gen. 2-3) [which] are also imaginative portrayals of the goodness of creation and the universality of sin rather than historical accounts of sin’s origin.”<sup>319</sup> The doctrine of ‘original sin,’ and reflections on both Genesis stories, are meant to explain why all of humanity is stuck in sin and cannot do better. This doctrine tries to make sense of pain and suffering in the world, by declaring that even the very best of human efforts and achievements still need divine grace and mercy. This recognizes that even the best motivated reformers are imperfect and needful themselves of reform! Reformed theologians have tried to explore the origin of sin and how it impacts humanity in our particular times and places, and this doctrine is one that shaped how organizers for Fossil Free PC(USA) talked about human failure to respond to climate change.

In his work, Jonathan Edwards (Reformed theologian in the 18th century) describes how our original sin came from Adam’s corruption that was passed down to the rest of humanity.<sup>320</sup> Edwards tries to explain this descending of sin by using the metaphor of a tree—that the root of the tree is diseased and therefore so are the branches.<sup>321</sup> Likewise, in his sermon “Of Sin,” Heinrich Bullinger, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Swiss reformed theologian writing around the same time as Calvin, points to our parents in faith (by which he means Adam and Eve) as those whose actions were against God’s command

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<sup>319</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 155.

<sup>320</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin,” in *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, ed. William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 150. My mom, who is a lifelong gardener, pointed out to me that this metaphor of sin is incomplete because disease that goes from roots to branches does not *descend* from roots to branches, but moves up and out. Edwards seems to be more interested in “family” trees than actual trees.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 151. He’s not saying here that trees are sinful.

and who brought punishment onto us all. Sin is thus embedded in all of us, in our social relations and institutions, in our politics, ideals, and biases. We were made good, and then by the sin of our first parents, we have sin by nature in ourselves. We simply inherit the desire to sin, just as we inherit brown eyes (though of course, Bullinger would have noted that sin causes pain and brown eyes do not.) Bullinger goes on to say that we are slow to do the good and quick to do what is evil.<sup>322</sup> Even the best do not do the good we know we should.

Certainly, this doctrine has resonated with many in the Western tradition. Reinhold Niebuhr declared original sin to be the only empirically verified doctrine. This declaration of brokenness resonates with the human ability to respond to climate change as we know we should. Colleen Earp said, “We’re still lacking in big policies that would hold us *accountable*” (emphasis mine). Here we hear an interpretation of how original sin is used to connect us to our sin, even if we have only inherited it. But it is hard to change an institution, hard to change systems/sin that is embedded in our culture. Reformed theology can be a resource and encouragement against hubris, cynicism, and despair. Reformed theologians often refer to original sin as the fall of humanity (though all creation groans), and there is indeed a communal and familial quality to it.<sup>323</sup> It is the sin we inherit and it is both “radical (affecting every aspect of human life) and universal (affecting all human beings)”<sup>324</sup> Thus, sin is unavoidable and an act for which we are responsible in all that we do, both what is bad and in what we think is good. It is in the

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<sup>322</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, “Of Sin,” in *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, ed. William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 146 and 148.

<sup>323</sup> Balserak, *Calvinism*, 94.

<sup>324</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 155.

person and the collective structures of our lives.<sup>325</sup> Different parts of humanity and creation have experienced sin in different contextualized ways, but conceptions of original sin form the basis for how Reformed and Protestant theologies explain the sin we inherit as human beings.<sup>326</sup> In the next section, I explore sin and Protestant and Reformed theologies even more deeply.

### Total Depravity

The concept of total depravity is embedded in the systematic world of Reformed theologies as a way to explain why the world is not as good as it could be. Proponents of the doctrine of total depravity (like Calvin) teach that everything is touched by sin, nothing is without sin.<sup>327</sup> We cannot completely or finally or effectively “fix” ourselves or our socio-political problems, because when we try, our depravity—the taint of sin—continues to infect the good we try to do. We inherit that taint of sin by virtue of our human condition. Contemporary analysts will use terms like self-interestedness, but brokenness or sin still works well. Calvin says that sin is “imputed upon us”—which is to say that sin is not natural to our state of who we are made to be.<sup>328</sup> In chapter three, I explored the Genesis stories of how God created humanity and all that is and God called it good. Christian interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve use it to explain the origin of the sin that is then passed on. The Augustinian tradition, much of the Reformation traditions, and Reformed Christians in particular believe that we are born with sin we did

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<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>326</sup> Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 221.

<sup>327</sup> John Calvin, “Institutes II.1.9,” in *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, ed. by William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 153.

<sup>328</sup> Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 101.

not create, and it taints all that we do—all of us in a collective human identity-- like an inheritable disease. This is the concept of “structural sin.”<sup>329</sup> We are born into a situation we did not create but that now affects everything, in different ways for different people. This shared concept of total depravity is embedded in a larger theological structure that reminds me that each of us are not alone—there is God and there is each other. This concept allows us to stand at the edge of disaster—the totality of our sin which keeps us from God—and continue toward grace.

Total depravity emerged as a doctrine to describe why humans could not change their/our state of sin. At the Synod of Dort from 1618-1619, church leaders gathered to reject the idea that humans can choose to sin, aligning with Calvin’s teaching over that of Dutch Reformed minister Jacob Arminius who had asserted that our human sinfulness is only an inclination to sin. There are several complicated parts to this doctrine. First, everything we do has a taint of sin in it, even the good we try to do and thus, “no part of our being is untainted by self-interest.”<sup>330</sup> Second, that taint of sin is something we receive just by being born—that is, it is inherent in our being and in the social structures we create for our benefit. (These first two parts of the doctrine are rooted in Original Sin.) Third, we cannot get rid of the taint of that sin. It is not that we (people in general) are all bad. It is not that we (individuals specifically) are all bad. Rather, that, at our best, we are often not good enough to overcome the social inertia of what we benefit from. Because we are not the worst we could be, nor are we all sinful to the same extent, it would be

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<sup>329</sup> See Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

<sup>330</sup> John L. Thompson, “A Conversation with the Reformation Confessions,” in *Conversations with the Confessions*, ed. John D. Small (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2005), 39. See also “The Synod of Dort,” in *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, edited by William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith, 155-156 (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

theologically incorrect to suggest that all humans are equally bad. (How could we, for example, suggest that a mass murderer is as equally depraved as a child who tells a lie?) The concept of total depravity is not a reflection of our individual badness, but the acknowledgment that we, collectively, are just never all good, nor all bad or ever, truly, good *enough* to proceed without divine grace. Thus, as humans, we are sinners who—on our own and in the collective—often cannot discern which parts of ourselves are good and which are bad.<sup>331</sup> Because of this intermingling of good and bad, Calvin’s point in his *Institutes* is that we—on our own—are broken and bruised creations. We cannot fix ourselves, because if we try, our depravity—the taint of sin—continues to infect the good we try to do. We need God’s grace.

How humans have responded to climate change and the fossil fuel industry mimics this interconnection between sin, trying to do good, and the inability to get away from the bad on our own. Like climate change, those of us who are alive now were and are born into a situation we did not create but that now affects everything, in different ways for different people. Many of us continue to benefit from the structures of the current energy paradigm. The fossil fuel industry, which has disproportionately created climate change, is intertwined in our ways of living. This connection is troubling, according to Fossil Free PC(USA) activist Gary Payton, who said that it was sinful that “we [meaning the PC(USA)] are all still tethered to the fossil fuel industry.” To try to dismantle some his own tethered-ness to the industry, Gary has formally left the PC(USA), though he continues to stay in touch with the work of Fossil Free PC(USA) and how the PC(USA) has attended climate change through the annual United Nations

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<sup>331</sup> Calvin, “Institutes II.1.9,” 153.

COP gatherings. Still, even though Gary has left the PC(USA) and is therefore no longer tied to the denomination's investments in fossil fuels, his everyday life—just by living in the United States—is still tied to fossil fuels and the destruction of the planet. This is not a critique of Gary as an individual, but rather, how he recognizes that this is a description of how every person is complicit in climate change. We, individuals on our own, cannot shift this systematic dependence on a destructive industry.

I suggest that relying on a concept of total depravity can take away part of the sting as more information about “just how bad the oil countries really are” emerges.<sup>332</sup> And it is quite bad. As Bill McKibben wrote in an article about the oil countries and their talking points about fossil fuels just before COP began:

The new documents, which really must be read to be believed, perform the same essential task as the revelations almost a decade ago about Exxon's climate lies. *They end any pretense that these countries are engaged in good-faith efforts to wind down the industry*—instead they're hooking up with car manufacturers to make cheap vehicles that would keep demand for their crude pumping on.<sup>333</sup>

If one operates from the expectation that there are no pure actions and that there is sin in all that we do, it can be a little easier to handle these types of revelations. What I mean to suggest is this: if you believe in total depravity—that everything we do has at least a glimmer of sin in it—it becomes easier to expect and face when that sin is glaringly obvious.

This understanding of total depravity showed up in interviews; Rev. Emily Brewer explained how total depravity can be a gift of God's grace:

Calvin talks about how we don't know who is saved and who is not so everyone should act like they're saved. And that looks like loving others and other parts of creation—and we're all interconnected....total depravity doesn't mean that God

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<sup>332</sup> Bill McKibben, “A Corrupted COP,” November 28, 2023, <https://billmckibben.substack.com/p/a-corrupted-cop>.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

has given up on us, so why would we give up? If it can't be perfect, it's not worth anything? Is that what we're saying? ... living through this time of political and ecological collapse—people are very despairing, and often people with layers of privilege are the ones who are giving up... trying to show people that “hope is a practice” and we're not called to despair. When we despair, we give up on God. We cultivate hope by taking action with people. We don't fix all the things, we just save what we can, including ourselves. We're not saviors, it's a hope practice. We collaborate with God in that work.

Rev. Colleen Earp referenced the doctrine by name, after commenting that God put the human in the garden to serve and preserve it, and that this (meaning the Biblical vocation of stewardship) is the theological basis for how resources are there for us to use but not to waste them. In that context, she described sin and climate change by saying that

As Presbyterians, we believe that we are totally depraved. There's wrong in everything we touch and we are not perfect, we are not Christ. We are going to make mistakes. Because of our propensity to sin, we really need to set some boundaries and to give us some space to stay away from sin.... To help us do what is right and to practice what we preach, and what we proclaim to follow.

She went on to say that as a “church, we're a mess, but we are the community of the church together, we're remembering that there's something much greater than us.” Emily and Colleen, quoted above, were two of the interviewees who pointed to the larger context of loving the Earth as Christians in general and Presbyterians in particular.

In this section, I have suggested how Reformed doctrines of creation, original sin, and total depravity are reflected in activists' understanding of their experiences working for divestment from fossil fuels. I argue that these doctrines provide strands in the braid that made up organizing by Fossil Free PC(USA), strands that--taken with the other strands--have added to the strength of the movement. In the previous chapter, I reviewed how many Protestants and other people of faith have worked on the environment, sustainability, and climate justice at local/denomination, national, and international levels. This is another strand in the braid that made the organizing work of Fossil Free

PC(USA) strong and successful in working for divestment from fossil fuels. It shows how Fossil Free PC(USA) was organizing in alignment with and from a lineage of other Protestants acting in support of environmental and ecological justice, and that they/we were acting within a larger context.

## Presbyterian Resources for Environmentalism

In the previous section, I reviewed the historical legacy of institutional change. In this section, I review specifically Presbyterian resources (by which I mean, prayers, liturgy, teachings, policies, statements, educational materials, and other collateral), as opposed to broader Protestant, recognizing that some of these have been mentioned previously. The PC(USA) website describes the commitment to lead on environmental stewardship and justice by rooting the work in “prayer, education, advocacy and other forms of direct action to glorify God in our care of creation.”<sup>334</sup> The resources I explore below have been created by national denominational staff based on General Assembly policy, the passing of Presbyterian policy (via overtures or resolutions at General Assembly), in fulfillment of mission directives for an agency or a program area, and/or by parachurch organizations like Presbyterians for Earth Care, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and Fossil Free PC(USA).

In this section, I lay out the breadth of those resources as part of the denominational context of the movement to divest from fossil fuels, particularly

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<sup>334</sup> “Blessed Tomorrow: Commitment to Act on Climate Change,” Presbyterian Church (USA) Presbyterian Mission, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment/blessed-tomorrow/>. The PC(USA) was re-organized in 1983 from the Presbyterian Church US and the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the resources I look at below were created after this re-forming of the denomination in order to reflect the commitment of the denomination to the planet.

highlighting how the doctrine of creation and doctrines of sin are reflected in these materials. I explore educational resources (that is, resources that teach about environmental or climate issues, build skills or develop thinking), and worship resources (that develop the spirituality of Presbyterians, either individually or corporately). Additionally, I review the materials related to activism or policy changes (that either create a more sustainable or environmentally just denomination or push the secular society to enact policy), and to lifestyle changes (both individually—through diet or energy use—or institutionally—through building or purchasing power).

In our interview, Rob Fohr, the lead staff person for MRTI from 2016-2023, referred to the collection of resources on earth care in the PC(USA) as an indication of the denomination working to be the body of Christ. As PC(USA) pastor and Fossil Free PC(USA) activist José Gonzalez Colon noted in his interview, “we’ve been thinking about climate change in a silo, but it’s connected to everything,” and so the denomination has moved toward an interconnected resourcing in response to climate change and the environment.<sup>335</sup> Perhaps what is most noteworthy about this collection of resources is how the sum indicates an ecological identity of the denomination. Rebecca Barnes articulates this as a shift, saying that

It used to feel like a radical thing 20 years ago and now I hear language about environmental care from most sources in the PC(USA), and I think it really has spread out. It is connected to other things and environmental and climate justice comes up more as an intersectional issue. It's more recent that things feel part and parcel of each other. There's coming to be more understanding of intersectional issues, and now it touches [everything]. The new directory of worship has more

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<sup>335</sup> One of the things that is apparent in these resources is how the organizing and leadership of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people have impacted PC(USA) policy. These impacts are especially evident through commitments to divestment as a tactic and the Civil Rights movement, organizing to repudiate the doctrine of discovery, and boycotts in solidarity with farmworkers. In this section, I review those impacts and then some of the other resources that emerged in interviews with activists. In doing so, I hope to center the idea that Presbyterian ecological work is implicitly and explicitly indebted to people of color.

resources and the Book of Order [part of the constitution of the PC(USA)] changed so that caring for creation is a mark of membership.

By creating this review of resources and policies, I show that the work toward divestment from fossil fuels has included the development of robust financial, educational, worship and Bible study resources. The divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA), then, is contextualized in a denomination that has already been enacting the biblical call to love creation in many ways.

## Foundational Teachings

Outside of the Bible and the Confessions, there are three major documents that have impacted how the PC(USA) has responded to climate change and environmental issues: The first is the 1981 document *Power to Speak Truth to Power* (written for Presbyterians in the U.S. before the reunification of the PC[USA] in 1983). The second is its reaffirmation, called “The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming” approved by the 218th General Assembly in 2008, which was a reaffirmation and update of *The Power to Speak Truth to Power*. The third is *Restoring Creation*, to which I will return.

I start here with *The Power to Change*, because it was the update of the earliest energy policy for the PC(USA), and I will engage these two documents together. *The Power to Change* statement was drafted and presented to the General Assembly by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, based on a 2002 overture to revise the PC(USA)’s response to energy and climate change. It begins with a brief history of the denomination’s response to climate change in the overture’s rationale written by the Stated Clerk at the time Gradye Parsons, including how *The Power to Speak Truth to*

*Power* has been an “important social policy document for the church that has rooted Presbyterian ecological ethics in *justice, sustainability, sufficiency, and participation*.”<sup>336</sup> Parsons follows up this call to confession with a focus on the need to support aggressive emissions reductions and a variety of climate finance tactics (cap and trade, subsidies to renewable energies, etc.) In this introduction alone, the history and commitment of the PC(USA) to comprehensive environmental and climate justice work is apparent. Parsons notes the need for the denomination to support legislation and finance that minimizes climate change, including fewer fossil fuels. The recommendation in the document calls for Presbyterians to use their purchasing and investment power to respond to climate change and to enact environmentally friendly practices in Presbyterians congregations, camps, conference centers, and other facilities. The recommendations are comprehensive, and specifically include sections on investments in renewable energy.<sup>337</sup> It sets a clear tone, from both 1981 and 2008, that Presbyterians support comprehensive responses to climate change at all levels. Re-reading the document eleven years after the divestment movement in the PC(USA) began, I cannot help but remember how easy we thought the call to divest would be to respond to, with such a policy in place. It is, perhaps, a universal problem: you can have all the right policies in place, but if they are not enforced, or if people don't know about them, it means nothing because nothing changes.

Falling between the two documents described above is the 1990 *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, completed between the 1981 and 2008 versions of the PC(USA)’s energy policy. The *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice* report was a

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<sup>336</sup> Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), “The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming,” (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2008), 2. Emphasis mine.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

review of previous PC(USA) policies and statements on the environment and was completed by a taskforce over the course of four years.<sup>338</sup> It begins with a call from the earth:

Creation cries out in this time of ecological crisis.  
     —Abuse of nature and injustice to people place the  
 future in grave jeopardy.  
     —Population triples in this century.  
     —Biological systems suffer diminished capacity to  
 renew themselves.  
     —Finite minerals are mined and pumped as if  
 Inexhaustible.  
     —Peasants are forced onto marginal lands, and soil  
 erodes.  
     —The rich-poor gap grows wider.  
     —Wastes and poisons exceed nature's capacity to  
 absorb them.  
     —Greenhouse gasses pose a threat of global warming.<sup>339</sup>

This litany goes on to say that Presbyterians are called to care for the Earth in a comprehensive way because the earth belongs to God (arguing out of a doctrine of creation and a stewardship model of ecological vocation.) It roots its call to action in faith saying that Presbyterians “—draw upon all the resources of biblical faith and the Reformed tradition for empowerment and guidance in this adventure of restoring creation.”<sup>340</sup> It ends with a brief look at each part of the denomination, recommending a course of action that centers eco-justice (a different framing than what emerged in the Collaborative Agenda noted below that was completed in 2016, which focused on more individual actions). The authors ask much of the reader in the context of the coming turn of the millennium: “major societal changes lie ahead, and the effort to shape these

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<sup>338</sup> *Restoring Creation*, 80.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. It really is formatted this oddly, and I retain the formatting in respect for the liturgical aspect of the document.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. It is formatted with the em dash at the beginning.

changes in accordance with God's call for earth-keeping, justice, and community will demand much of faithful people.”<sup>341</sup> It was—and remains—a call to action by and to the PC(USA) that roots the work in liturgy, science, and policy. Dennis Testerman, one of the consultants for and writers of the document, said “I remember all of us talking about the fact that a natural outgroup of this policy statement would be a grassroots response and it took five more years for PEC [Presbyterians for Earth Care] to be born,” which he thought was longer than he anticipated.

One of the things that the two documents *The Power to Change* and *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice* make clear is that the Presbyterian Church has decades of experience in connecting faith to environmental work. Many of the people I interviewed suggested that it would be normal that the denomination’s investments match the church’s commitment to responding to and lessening the devastating impacts of the fossil fuel industry in climate change as evidenced in these documents. In such a context, divestment should not be considered a radical act, except that it touches on a competing system of value, and that is the primacy of the dominant economic ethos of capitalism. Opposing that is often considered radical. Yet, there is all this precedent and groundwork for divestment so it seems reasonable to assume that the denomination would divest from fossil fuels, in part because it had supported divestment in the past. And yet it did not. Still, each of these documents point to the Presbyterian reliance on the Bible and theology, the need for a clear articulation of environmental science, and the need for a comprehensive response—all of which created a context for the denomination to divest

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 80.

from fossil fuels from the point of view of the participants in FFPCUSA. Each of these documents has been foundational for broader work in the PC(USA) on the environment.

## Educational Resources

Presbyterian resources related to environmental work and learning range from pamphlets to whole websites. These resources have been developed by the Presbyterian Hunger Program, the PC(USA) Office at the United Nations, the Office of Public Witness, as well as Presbyterians for Earth Care and the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and Presbyterian Camp and Conference Centers.

Presbyterian Hunger Program, for example, has resources to view or download that cover book lists on hunger, poverty, and ecology (as in what books, like *Leaves of the Trees* by Carol Johnston, to read to understand the connections between these concepts), information about the causes of hunger and how to stop them, curricula on faith and food, a resource on money and the environment, guides for communicating with people of faith on environmental and climate issues, and food movements in general. There are also collections of facts about hunger—both in the United States and around the world.<sup>342</sup> Some of these resources were created in response to denominational policies, while others were created by staff for the office. The Presbyterian Hunger Program also houses all of the resources created by the now-defunct Environmental Ministries Office.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> For example: “Alleviating Hunger and Eliminating Its Causes,” Presbyterian Hunger Program, accessed March 9, 2024, [www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/).

<sup>343</sup> According to Jessica Maudlin who is the Associate for Sustainable Living and Earth Care Concerns for the PC(USA), Bill Somplatsky-Jarman was both the staff person for environmental ministries and MRTI. In 2008, Presbyterians for Earth Care pushed for a re-establishment of the office for environmental ministries and MRTI got its own office. In 2013, the position was moved into Presbyterian

The PC(USA) Offices at the United Nations have released several resources guides, including one on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>344</sup> This resource reviews how each of these goals are related to the work of the PC(USA), noting, with pride, that

As we at the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) started examining the Goals and their targets for achievement, we realized that this is work that the Church has been engaged in for centuries. From eradication of hunger and poverty to treating the earth with respect, our church has been working to achieve these Goals since before their existence! <sup>345</sup>

There is also a resource for learning how to become involved in advocacy, including in support of climate and “all creation.”<sup>346</sup>

The Office of Public Witness is currently housed in Washington, DC, and it is the office of the PC(USA) that advocates for and helps Presbyterians advocate for the perspectives and policies of the General Assembly with the federal government. This work is rooted in theology; for example, the website for the office includes the following: “Reformed theology teaches that because a sovereign God is at work in all the world, the church and Christian citizens should be concerned about public policy.”<sup>347</sup> It is one of the offices of the PC(USA) to host annual advocacy days, which includes teach-ins on policies and issues for Presbyterians to learn about before engaging in action or lobbying

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Hunger Program because of lack of funding and the role became focused only on environmental ministries. (Jessica Maudlin, text message to author, February 25, 2024.)

<sup>344</sup> There are seventeen goals that were adapted in 2015 by UN member states in order to connect peace, education, economic prosperity, and climate justice. “The Seventeen Goals,” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

<sup>345</sup> “Study & Devotional Guide for the Sustainable Development Goals, 2nd edition,” Presbyterian Church Mission Agency Resources, last modified September 23, 2019, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/study-devotional-guide-for-the-sustainable-development-goals/>.

<sup>346</sup> “Young Adult Advocacy Guide,” Presbyterian Church Mission Agency Resources, last modified January 24, 2023, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/young-adult-advocacy-guide/>.

<sup>347</sup> “Office of Public Witness,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/washington/>.

members of Congress, and the D.C. office has also hosted an internship program that has supported ecojustice initiatives.

Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC) has created many different resources on earth care, with a particular emphasis on educational webinars. These webinars have covered topics like the science of climate change, water and land pollution, and food waste.<sup>348</sup> Other educational materials available on their website include recordings from panels on divestment from fossil fuels, resources on the state of climate change in New Mexico and the Southwest, and information on how to teach about the Doctrine of Discovery in adult Sunday School.<sup>349</sup> These resources are created by members or friends of Presbyterians for Earth Care and shared for free on the organization's website. Presbyterians for Earth Care also hosts the William Gibson Eco-Justice Award to honor individuals who have advocated, educated, organized, and connected Presbyterians around environmental justice, with scholars like Patricia Tull honored for their lives of service to Presbyterian ecological work. It is named for Bill Gibson, a founding member of Presbyterians for Earth Care, the former editor of the *Egg: A Journal for Eco-Justice*, a member of the NCC EJWG, described earlier, and author of numerous books and articles, including *Eco-Justice, An Unfinished Journey*, which offers a snapshot of the early parts of the U.S. mainline Protestant environmental movement.<sup>350</sup>

Presbyterian Peace Fellowship's educational resources on the environment and climate change include how peacemaking and climate justice work are connected, how to

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<sup>348</sup> "Events," Presbyterians for Earth Care, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://presbyearthcare.org/EVENTS/>.

<sup>349</sup> "Education," Presbyterians for Earth Care, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://presbyearthcare.org/education>.

<sup>350</sup> "William Gibson," Presbyterians for Earth Care, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://presbyearthcare.org/william-gibson/>.

organize in the PC(USA) for changing denominational strategies, and information about fossil free options for the Presbyterian Pension system. These resources take the form of webinars, handouts, and curriculum, and they have often been created by the leadership of Fossil Free PC(USA).

Presbyterian Camp and Conference Centers have educational resources for camp contexts. These resources have included information on native planting (like at Stronghold Summer Camp and Conference Center in Illinois, and Massanetta Springs Conference Center in Virginia). Stony Point Center in New York has information about composting, heat saving measures, and lighting throughout their buildings. These resources demonstrate that all parts of the denomination have included teaching about the environment in their work.

Other educational resources produced by the denomination cover solar power (panels for which are covered by a low-interest loan from the Presbyterian Foundation) and include references to climate injustice: “We recognize now that burning fossil fuels is causing irreparable harm to God’s earth and God’s people, especially those of us who can least afford to bear the burden.”<sup>351</sup> There have also been national conferences that have offered teach-ins through Ecumenical Advocacy Days. These teach-ins have included information about fast fashion and the implications for environment and climate justice. Each of these is an example of how institutions connected to the PC(USA) have created educational resources about caring for and being in relationship with the environment, providing a broad platform of potential support, and lifting up the policies that have been determined by the General Assembly.

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<sup>351</sup> “Blessed Tomorrow,” <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment/blessed-tomorrow/>

## Worship Resources

Resources on connecting worship and environmental care/climate justice encompass many parts of worship and spirituality, such as resourcing for the seasons of Lent and Advent and the inclusion of earth care in hymns. For Lent, a staff person in the Presbyterian Hunger Program (which houses the Environmental Ministry Office of the PC(USA) for budgeting reasons) regularly publishes a Lenten devotion on lightening carbon footprints. In the introduction to the 2023 calendar, there was a focusing in on the relationship between individual action and collective action in relationship to spirituality:

Because some of our collective choices have led to a changing global climate, which translates to warmer temperatures, rising sea-levels, and severe storms, we use Lent as a time to recommit to treading lightly on God's Earth.<sup>352</sup>

The theological framing of the actions for 2023 was through the lens of “serve and preserve God's world” (an articulation of stewardship and the doctrine of creation).<sup>353</sup> Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC) has released devotions for Lent and Advent almost every year since it began in 1995.<sup>354</sup> These devotions have typically been based on the lectionary readings for the year, with individual members of PEC writing the reflection and prayers. PEC embeds these devotions with other worship resources like suggested scripture, sample services, and hymns. Some of these hymns are also included in the Creation and Providence section of the most recent Presbyterian Hymnal, *Glory to God*. Some of the hymns in this section include “For the Beauty of the Earth” (#14) and “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (#39), two songs that echo the doctrine of creation, and are

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<sup>352</sup> “Tread Lightly for Lent: 2023 Daily Action/Reflection Calendar Starts Today!” Presbyterian Church (USA) Presbyterian Mission Discipleship, last modified February 22, 2023, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/2023/02/22/tread-lightly-for-lent-2023-daily-action-reflection-calendar-starts-today/>.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> “Worship and Devotions,” Presbyterians for Earth Care, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://presbyearthcare.org/devotional-and-worship-aids/>.

frequently used by many denominations.<sup>355</sup> When this hymnal was released in 2014, one of the introducing documents about the hymnal articulated a stewardship theology by reminding everyone that faithful caretaking of God's creation "at this present and precarious moment in history, we would do well to begin with basic biblical principles of stewardship."<sup>356</sup> One Presbyterian minister, Carolyn Gillette, has written many hymns on the relationship between faith and care for the planet, many of which rely on the language of God as creator of all things and the need for humanity to confess harming the planet.<sup>357</sup> These resources come alongside resources for Earth Day Sunday that are released annually by Presbyterian Hunger Program.<sup>358</sup> All of these provide support for congregations and worshiping communities to include care for the earth throughout their worshiping experiences.

## Lifestyle Change

Individual lifestyle change (acknowledging that the resources above are in part directed at individual theological and spiritual change) is a tricky part of ecological work, because climate change is a systemic issue, but many organizations focus on changing individual behavior, often deflecting attention from the role of corporations and the economic sector and what their responsibility is. For instance, Colleen Earp noted that "I believe in the power of individual action to stay motivated in order to lead to big action that will fix things." Similarly, Emily Brewer said that "individual action is where I had

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<sup>355</sup> David Gambrell, "Creation Care in Glory to God," *The Presbyterian Leader*, 2014.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>357</sup> "Caring for God's Creation," Hymns by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, accessed March 9, 2024, [http://www.carolynshymns.com/lect\\_earthcare.html](http://www.carolynshymns.com/lect_earthcare.html).

<sup>358</sup> "Earth Day Sunday," Presbyterian Mission Agency, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment/earth-day-sunday/>.

control -- still important but more impactful is cultural shift.” Resources around lifestyle changes have included a treefund for offsetting air travel, where people can voluntarily contribute to a fund that is used to plant trees.<sup>359</sup> During Lent, the Presbyterian Hunger Program created and shared a Tread Lightly for Lent resource that is available on the PC(USA) website and shared particularly with Earth Care Congregations. This resource encourages actions like turning off or changing out light bulbs, buying fair trade coffee and chocolate, and investing in eco-palms for Palm Sunday.<sup>360</sup> Many of these actions overlap with the resources identified in the sections above, and they are, as Colleen Earp says, practices that model “who we are in our theological bones” as people who believe in God the creator and in the biblical call to care for the planet.

There exist many resources for changing lifestyles at the congregational level as well. The Earth Care Congregation certification was first created in 2008 as a way for congregations around the country to “level-up” in their commitments to earth care in a variety of ways in their lives of faith. It covers worship, education, outreach and facilities.<sup>361</sup> Churches start the process by taking a pledge. As of November 2021, there are around 300 Earth Care Congregations in the PC(USA).<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> “Presbyterian Tree Fund,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/presbyterian-carbon-tree-fund/>.

<sup>360</sup> Presbyterian Hunger Program, “Tread Lightly for Lent.”

<sup>361</sup> “Earth Care Congregations,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment/earth-care-congregations/>.

<sup>362</sup> Jessica Maudlin, “Becoming an Earth Care Congregation,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, last modified March 8, 2022, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0322-earth-care/>. The push for people of faith to respond to the needs of the environment has also included a focus on changing the attitudes and actions at the level of the institution (meaning denominational and houses of worship) and the individual, indeed, perhaps too much so in a world in which individual action has only so much impact on climate change. At the institutional level, churches can be certified. This commitment has often looked like certifications for institutions (at least in the PC(USA), ELCA, UCC, and for seminaries that sought certification through the Green Seminary Initiative, and in an interfaith context through Interfaith Power and Light, Faith in Place, and GreenFaith. These institutional certifications often involve calculating energy use with the goal of reduction that leads to changing light bulbs and HVACs, adding community gardens and motion detectors, and adjusting how the space is used, and installing solar panels. They also often

On reflecting on the resources with those I interviewed, several things emerged. First, a lot has changed in the denomination around environmental work in the last two decades. As noted earlier, Rebecca Barnes pointed out that over the last 20 years, there has been a value shift to be more intersectional, and there is the sheer volume of resources that exist now. For example, the Collaborative Agenda (a document that was supported by the General Assembly in 2016) was created by representatives of the six agencies of the PC(USA). The text begins with biblical references to the Psalms and the creation stories of Genesis, as well as the Westminster Catechism, leaning into the language of “the Earth is the Lord’s” and the need for environmental stewardship.<sup>363</sup> In doing so, the writers of the Collaborative Agenda point out an ecological vocation that undergirds the work of the PC(USA): “There is no more visible way for us to glorify God than in caring for the creation we see all around us, and of which we are a part.”<sup>364</sup> Furthermore, the document was “designed to call attention to ongoing efforts by the PC(USA) to confront the underlying causes of climate change, and to resources available through the six agencies to congregations, mid councils, and other mission and ministry groups wishing to join in the effort.”<sup>365</sup> The document gives an overview of how each of the six agencies (or legal entities of the denomination) define their environmentally friendly policies, without critique or interrogation of whether those strategies are

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include incorporating more native/local plants, ecological prayers and concerns, and ecojustice initiatives into worship and the life of the community, as well as removing Styrofoam and single-use plastics. These institutional commitments also extend to personal lifestyle changes. One example of this initiative is GreenFaith’s Living the Change campaign, which advocated for changes in energy, food, and transportation in individual lives as well as the Tread Lightly for Lent lifestyle challenge from the Presbyterian Hunger Program.

<sup>363</sup> “PC(USA) Collaborative Agenda on Environmental Stewardship,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, last modified February 10, 2020, <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/pcusa-collaborative-agenda-on-environmental-181178/>.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

effective in stopping global climate change. Some of these policies include global reach, such as members of the Presbyterian Mission Agency participating in every meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change or COP. Other policies focus on an ongoing commitment to limit paper waste. While the Collaborative Agenda was created and shared with the General Assembly in response to growing numbers of overtures on the environment and climate change, it does not reflect a unified sense of urgency to act together, and most actions are the work of individuals (again, like going to meetings or lessening paper use). It emphasizes how different parts of the denomination had been working on different environmental issues, and the document served to tell the story of all different parts in one place for that time.

It does not, in my estimation, match the urgency that is needed in our time to respond to climate change. Those I interviewed expressed reservations also; Dan Terpstra, who was on the original steering committee for Fossil Free PC(USA), wondered if we have fallen prey to navel-gazing, and Neddy Astudillo, who is a globally well-respected Presbyterian eco-theologian and organizer and who advised Fossil Free PC(USA), said we do not speak loudly enough about climate change. We are past the point of changing out lightbulbs, a frequent and easy suggestion to reduce energy consumption, according to Janet Cox. Each of these interviewees pointed out the need to have policy and systemic change in the denomination alongside personal action that engages an ecological vocation of stewardship of the Earth, a sense of eco-justice, and an engagement with creation spirituality. This section, in conclusion, has reviewed some of the resources that the PC(USA) has created and shared in relation to an ecological

lifestyle, as well as the need to engage with more urgent action to respond to the climate crisis at hand.

## Policy Advocacy

In the Presbyterian Church (USA), advocacy and policy changes in the denomination happen through overtures, which are resolutions that come from presbyteries and commissioners to General Assemblies. These policy changes--like denomination-wide divestment for the pension and the foundation-- require that at least two Presbyteries (or regional bodies of elders from groups of congregations) bring the matter to the national biannual gathering, General Assembly. This means that first there needed to be two congregations (one each in two different presbyteries) that needed to propose a policy change (“overture”) to their governing bodies (the session). So, an overture needed to be written, approved by a session, sent to and approved by a presbytery, and then approved by another presbytery. Then the overture would go to the General Assembly for discussion and a vote by the national body (composed of elders sent from each presbytery.) This is the process that was followed when the PC(USA) was discerning whether it would ordain anyone who was called to be clergy regardless of sexual orientation, or whether to support marriage equality, and whether to participate in other divestment movements (like from the State of Israel or for-profit prisons); these three processes were all happening around the same time that Cool Planet went to hear Bill McKibben speak. The people who have populated the steering committee of Fossil Free PC(USA) have understood how to use the polity of the PC(USA) in order to make changes. Susan De George, who also organized for queer inclusion in ordination and marriage, said that “if you don’t know how [the system works] the system stays the

same... who gets to the floor first and who makes a motion? We've been able to use the system to our advantage, we've been connectional."

The use of overtures to create policy changes around the environment and climate change has increased significantly since 2012 (see Appendix C for specifics). In 2014 (the first year there was an overture on divestment), there were 3 overtures on the environment (representing 17 presbytery votes to send these overtures to GA). In 2016, there were 10 overtures/pieces of business on the environment that required 60 presbyteries to vote on these overtures, plus every agency of the denomination to collaborate on the environment. Many of these overtures were responding to the divestment movement, most notably an overture that changed the Book of Order to expand the role of ministry to include care for creation. In the rationale, it uses both Reformed theology through the Confessions and the Bible to support this addition. In 2018, there was a committee devoted solely to the environment, with 12 overtures/pieces of business, representing 95 presbytery votes to send these overtures to GA, plus multiple national committee votes (MRTI and ACSWP). Some of these overtures were responding to or creating alternatives to the divestment movement, or to change other environmental policies for the denomination. Also, part of the twelve were an overture on environmental racism and one on the use of Styrofoam. In 2020, all environmental overtures were referred to 2022 because of the pandemic. In 2022, the General Assembly voted to divest from five companies in support of the MRTI report (a report that continues to include criteria that is likely to lead to more divestment from fossil fuel companies). After ten years of organizing around climate change (using divestment as the strategy around which to organize), there has been a measurable increase in the number of overtures

about climate change and environmental issues and the amount of attention directed to those overtures. This measurable increase happened in a denomination that has a history, theology, and culture of responding to the Earth with care and connection. In the next section, I explore some of the history and tenets of Reformed theologies that can help hold the Presbyterian use of the strategy of divestment in response to climate change, and that encouraged activists in Fossil Free PC(USA) to organize for divestment from fossil fuels.

One of the things that emerged in my interview with Pam (and was echoed in other interviews) was that getting business done at the General Assembly is important but needs staff follow-up, and it is easy to hide behind the political processes of our denomination. Pam went on to say that there are at least six things that would measure a successful Presbyterian response to climate change:

1. We have to take it seriously for Presbyterians to go carbon neutral. We've got to do it together as a denomination.
2. Divestment has to happen. Our money is funding an industry that's hurting people, that's hurting me and my family, with clear intersections with environmental racism for other people. [Pam is white.]
3. Our mission of caring for creation has gotten lost in our denomination and those of us who work on this issue know that it's important but it's hard to find climate change on the organization chart of the PC(USA).
4. Lowering emissions across the board.
5. Monitor our progress (and need a survey to track).
6. Pray. We need to pray for forgiveness for the pain we're causing.

The scope of activism and policy change supported by the PC(USA) in relation to the environment intersects with the international, national, and institutional levels that I used

above to identify and organize Protestant environmentalism. At an international level, the PC(USA) has sent delegations to COP meetings to witness the proceedings. At the end of COP in 2023, PC(USA) COP28 delegate Christina Cosby, domestic policy representative in the Office of Public Witness noted that Presbyterians have to

embrace the tension between the present reality and our hopeful aspirations. We feel disappointment as leaders prioritized politics over people and the planet. Simultaneously, a glimmer of hope emerged today as policies shift from wide inclusion to phasing out fossil fuels, a primary contributor to the rising temperature of our planet.<sup>366</sup>

While Presbyterians have gone to the COP meetings and reported back from the proceedings, Presbyterian delegates to COP have access to the proceedings but not voting rights to the decisions made at COP, which means there has been little access to direct policy change.

Another way that the PC(USA) has sought to affect policy on a national level (in addition to lobbying in Washington, DC as noted above) is through shareholder engagement.<sup>367</sup> Mission Responsibility Through Investments (MRTI) has been doing advocacy work on behalf of the PC(USA)'s Presbyterian Mission Agency around Nestle and Wendy's, especially on their ill-treatment of workers and lack of investment in just wages and ecological care (each of these campaigns have been successful). MRTI started in the 1980s, and the committee's website notes that

In recognition of the church's unique opportunity to advance its mission faithfully and creatively through the financial resources entrusted to it, MRTI implements the General Assembly's policies on socially responsible investing (also called

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<sup>366</sup> "COP28 Wrap Up," Presbyterian Mission Agency, last modified December 13, 2023, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/2023/12/13/cop28review/>.

<sup>367</sup> Other ways include support of carbon dividends, supporting Climate Strikes and People's Climate March, and engaging with other national religious bodies around environmental care, as well as mobilizing the DC office for actions.

faith-based investing) by engaging corporations in which the church owns stock.<sup>368</sup>

It is composed of representatives from other committees of the PC(USA), as well as representatives of the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Foundation, two other agencies of the PC(USA).<sup>369</sup> Important to note, it does not have anyone on it from the Presbyterian Hunger Program, the arm of the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) that oversees environmental ministries and concerns in the PC(USA). MRTI sees its work to “express faithful stewardship of investment resources in three arms/pillars of faith-based investing: screening, shareholder advocacy, and community investing.”<sup>370</sup> MRTI (as discussed more below) has been tasked with doing shareholder engagement with five fossil fuel companies based on criteria that MRTI approved in 2018.<sup>371</sup> It follows the divestment strategy approved by the General Assembly in 1984.<sup>372</sup>

Another environmental policy that the denomination has supported has been more just conditions for farmworkers, as referenced above. The PC(USA) has long supported the work of Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a collective of Latinx farmworkers based in Florida who have organized around fair treatment and fair pay. CIW described the relationship between the denomination and CIW on the occasion of the PC(USA) voting in favor Worker-Driven Social Responsibility as “marshaling Presbyterian muscle built through its participation in the Campaign for Fair Food since the earliest years of the

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<sup>368</sup> “Office of Faith-Based Investing and Shareholder Engagement,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/mrti/>

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> PCUSA Office of Faith-Based Investment and Corporate Engagement, “Guideline Metrics,” last updated October 30, 2019, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-UPDATED-FINAL-MRTI-Guideline-Metrics-with-annotations-weights.pdf>

<sup>372</sup> “The Divestment Strategy: Principles and Criteria,” (New York, NY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1984).

Taco Bell boycott seventeen years ago.”<sup>373</sup> This commitment to food justice and worker justice—with clear intersections with ecological and climate justice—is rooted in the labor and organizing of Latinx grassroots leaders. The PC(USA) has funded and provided additional support to the CIW organizing, but the grit and know-how has come from farmworkers themselves.<sup>374</sup> This organizing and solidarity is in the same lineage of Presbyterians supporting farmworkers organizing to boycott lettuce and grapes in order to demand better wages.<sup>375</sup> This intersection-- of food, land, labor, and people-- is one more area of social and ecological justice that has set the stage and provided moral formation for the PC(USA).

## Contemporary Activist Interpretations

I have used doctrine in Reformed and Christian theologies as a foundational example of how many Biblical theologians have engaged the biblical texts about the creation of the world, humans, and the relationship between the two through the human’s ecological vocation, while also relying on how dominion theologies have led to many Christians exploiting the planet. However, I am also interested in how Fossil Free PC(USA) activists interpreted the Genesis stories as a precursor to that exploration. Issues of lament of a failed vocation, deep connections to the planet, and living out the

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<sup>373</sup> “Presbyterian Church (USA) becomes first mainline denomination to endorse the principles of Worker-driven Social Responsibility!” Coalition for Immokalee Workers, last updated October 4, 2018, [https://ciw-online.org/blog/2018/10/PC\(USA\)-wsr-endorsement/](https://ciw-online.org/blog/2018/10/PC(USA)-wsr-endorsement/).

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> David Staniunas, “The UPCUSA and La Causa: Cesar Chavez Speaks at the 1974 General Assembly, PCUSA,” last modified July 5, 2022, [https://www.PC\(USA\).org/news/2022/7/5/upcusa-and-la-causa-cesar-chavez-speaks-1974-gener/](https://www.PC(USA).org/news/2022/7/5/upcusa-and-la-causa-cesar-chavez-speaks-1974-gener/)

Genesis creation stories through the lens of the Gospel are all themes that emerged in the interviews.

José Gonzalez-Colon, one of the Presbyterians who walked across the Midwest to raise awareness of the need for the denomination to divest from the fossil fuel industry and who supported divestment as the moderator of the Synod of Puerto Rico, wondered how best to present the lament for being unable to fulfill our Genesis-based vocations. Several times in our interview, Gonzalez-Colon wondered how we could frame the divestment movement through our human vocation to care for the planet through the lens of caring for people who are marginalized, saying that “money has to follow the ethos of our faith.” He later said, “We have a religion of consumption and capital and social stratification.... And we have to start facing this hand in hand with how we address climate breakdown. We need to look at the people who are oppressed and where they are on this matter and they have been bringing prayers and rituals of lament.”<sup>376</sup> Lament and ecological vocation, for Gonzalez-Colon, go together, particularly wondering how we can connect to frontline climate communities and hear from them.

Connections, albeit different ones, were also important to Gary Payton, a longtime Presbyterian, former PC(USA) missionary, and original member of the Fossil Free PC(USA) steering committee. He articulated how even “from a secular lens, those [Genesis] passages speak of the nature of interconnected ecosystems and biomes, and how everything is connected. And instead of acknowledging that as people of faith, we’ve offended the earth.” In a Presbyterian context, language about offense invokes the

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<sup>376</sup> Here Gonzalez-Colon raises an eco-justice framing, another one of the streams of environmentalism I will explore in Chapter 4.

need to confess. Don McKim, retired Presbyterian Minister and writer, is one of many Presbyterians to write a prayer of confession around climate change, praying in part

Forgive us, O God, for damaging and defiling your creation. Forgive us for using what you have given without regard for the effects of what we do upon your whole earth and its peoples. Forgive us for using resources in careless and reckless ways that do harm to your good creation. Forgive us for not caring strongly about our climate, our natural resources and the practices that will damage the gift of our earth and its environment.<sup>377</sup>

Here one can see the interconnections between lament and the need to confess.

And those interconnections extend to biblical interpretation. Dr. Robert Ross (a professor of geography, former steering committee member, and strategist around organizing in the PC[USA], with a history of work around divestment as a tactic in several movements) particularly talked in our interview about how the commandment to love our neighbor is so intrinsic to Christian life and is connected to the creation theologies of Genesis (even as he said that as a geographer, he did not have much to say about theology), pointing particularly to the second story of creation. Rev. Emily Brewer, who at the time of our interview was the Executive Director of Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, specifically pointed to the first creation story noting that the destruction of the world is an example of how the first story of creation has put people at the top, which she said is an erroneous interpretation that people are allowed to do whatever they want with the world. These interviews echo some of the central tenets of Reformed Theology (original sin, total depravity, creation). Still, despite these more positive interpretations, there are mixed legacies of how these creation stories are interpreted, to which we now turn, before some final reflections from activist interviews.

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<sup>377</sup> Don McKim, “Prayer for the Climate Change Crisis,” The Presbyterian Outlook, updated May 13, 2022, <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/09/prayer-for-the-climate-change-crisis/>. This prayer is just one example of creation spirituality, the third stream of environmentalism I explore in Chapter 4.

There are other stories and perspectives that emerge, however. In 2018, four years into the movement for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA), thirty people from Fossil Free PC(USA) walked more than 200 miles from Louisville, KY—where the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is located—to St. Louis, MO—where the General Assembly of the denomination was to meet in an attempt to bring attention to the need to divest. The Walk to Divest journey took ten days, sometimes in 100+°F temperatures, crossing highways and traveling through small towns. The group—of which I was a part—stayed mostly on church floors and ate communal meals. Almost everyone got sunburned and blistered and sore; one walker from a frontline community of climate change in Florida had to leave the walk early because of extensive blisters on her feet. Each morning started with prayer and singing (amid packing up sleeping bags and food) and each day ended with a teach-in. People joined the teach-ins in person and via Zoom so that anyone interested in following the walk could. These were mostly Presbyterians with around 20 people at each online teach-in. The teach-ins included climate change (taught by New Jersey’s State Climatologist David Robinson), eco-theology that particularly engaged Genesis 1 and 2 (taught by Theodore Hiebert), environmental racism (taught by leaders from the New Poor People’s Campaign, Presbyterian Mission Co-Worker in Peru Jed Koball, and leadership from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, activist and Presbyterian Elder Abby Brockway), and divestment from fossil fuels (taught by financial advisor Pete Krull and activist Bill McKibben) before worship. Over the course of the walk, three songs were written, and banners, flags, and other artwork were made for the entry into the General Assembly. Many letters and emails (invoking Genesis, environmental justice, Presbyterian history, and overtures)

were sent by walkers and participants in the teach-ins to commissioners to the General Assembly, asking them to support the overture to divest from fossil fuels, a measure that had the largest number of presbyteries (or regional bodies) in support than any other overture (or church policy) in the denomination's history but had faced strong opposition from institutional leaders in the months preceding the assembly.

We arrived in St. Louis, celebrated communion, and marched into the convention center. Over the next week, walkers and other organizers met with commissioners and institutional leaders. The committee tasked with deliberating on the overture agreed to support the overture. The assembly as a whole voted against the measure, however, voting instead in favor of ongoing shareholder engagement with companies in the fossil fuel industry. We organizers staged a die-in outside the plenary session to highlight the fact that 10 million people would die from climate change-related causes by the time the next General Assembly gathered in 2020 (making a story out of a statistic that on its own would be ignored), capturing the attention and story of the General Assembly as a whole.<sup>378</sup> But, to close this chapter, I want to focus on how the walk used the Bible as an audible sign of faith. The commitment of being faithful to biblical teachings and theological vocations whether or not there is a climate crisis (as noted by Clare Butterfield in the introduction to this dissertation) marks another kind of success. The faithfulness of those who walked was apparent in the daily worship services, of course, but also in the singing of songs together as we walked. At the heart of the walk were two songs. One was a song that was written in response to a sermon I preached in the first few days of the walk at one of the churches that hosted the walkers. Matthew Black, a

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<sup>378</sup> The image of the die-in in 2018 is what Bob Smietana used in the article that he wrote about the vote in favor of divestment in 2022. Smietana, "Presbyterians Divest."

Presbyterian singer-songwriter, was one of the activists walking, and he used texts from Matthew (the same text that Janet Cox referenced in her interview) and Deuteronomy, the two texts that I had chosen for the sermon that I preached. Here's what Matthew said about the process:

The idea to write a song for the walkers to sing emerged as soon as I was invited to participate. I met with some of the organizers in early February to discuss the action and our messaging around divestment, both to inform what songs we might sing throughout the action and to focus on a song I hoped to compose. The first result was a song called "In the Beginning," in which the congregation sings the words "Lord, have mercy" while a soloist sings the creation story from Genesis 1, a juxtaposition that acknowledges humanity's failure to care for God's good creation. I was pleased with the song, but it was too wordy to be sung while we were walking. I wanted a song that was simple and pithy, like a good protest song would be. *Using scripture was important— it's fundamental to how we make arguments for change in the church and how we ground our actions in our core beliefs and values.* I kept trying to work with the great commandments, and modifying them slightly to include divestment. "You shall love the Lord with all your money," that sort of thing. But it didn't work. It felt too preachy and too much of a rhetorical jump. And weeks went by and I still had nothing when it was time for us to begin the walk.

It finally clicked for me on the first Sunday during the walk, when rev. abby mohaupt preached during a visit to a local church. Her texts for the sermon were the great commandments paired with Jesus teaching that "you cannot love both God and money," and I realized that simply placing those two scriptures next to each other encapsulated the whole argument for divestment, no extra commentary or modification of the scripture text was needed. And in the next couple days, as we were walking, I began singing to myself and putting the words "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be" to a walking tempo. I imagined a call-and-response song, and I walked a bit behind the main group so I could record my breathless singing and sing along with myself as I walked to figure out how a call and response would work. I began teaching it to the group at a lunch break on the side of the road, when it was still just an idea and I didn't really know how it all fit. In a couple more days it evolved to four vocal parts, and the group loved singing it.

The lyrics that emerged (and then were sung over and over, in a call and response of each line) are:

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be

You cannot love both God and money  
 You shall love the lord with all your heart  
 You shall love the lord with all your soul  
 You shall love the lord with all your mind  
 You shall love the lord with all your strength<sup>379</sup>

These were the words we sang as we entered into the General Assembly, as we gathered for worship, and as we continued to discern our way forward. It is noteworthy that this is a song about our ecological vocation that does not include any of the “traditional” ecological biblical texts (not just Genesis creation stories, but also Psalm 148, Romans 8, and Job 40, for example). Instead, it was and is a recurring reminder of the biblical foundation of the work for divestment from fossil fuels in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

There was another song that Matthew Black wrote for worship. “In the Beginning” was written before the walk began. The lyrics are in two parts. The first part is simply the words from the creation story of Genesis 1. The second part is a repetition/chant of a confessional plea: “mercy, mercy, Lord, have mercy” that shifts into “you are made in the image of God.” This piece was sung at most of the services and teach-ins. Each of these songs were written for us, for the moment we were in with the targets we were hoping to move with our particular tactics. The walk and our entrance into the General Assembly as we sang were visible signs of faith erupting into the everyday ordinariness of the world (both the towns and along the highways where we walked and the convention center that hosted the General Assembly.) These were moments that echo what Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* calls the sacred

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<sup>379</sup> From Matthew 6 and Deuteronomy 6. A recording of the walkers singing the song is here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10107053587930103&id=6221542](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10107053587930103&id=6221542)

manifesting itself as something completely different from the ordinary, the profane.<sup>380</sup>

They were moments of remembering our vocation.

## Conclusion

Still, even after almost 50 years of the PC(USA) building on Protestant efforts in environmentalism and responding to climate change and environmental issues—even in our little part of the universe—the status of climate catastrophe was not improving. In 2012, there was a sense that climate change was worsening and that faith communities were not responding with the urgency needed to stop the crisis. In “Global Warming’s Terrible New Math,” Bill McKibben wrote around this time that we were losing the battle, and badly.<sup>381</sup> Essentially, all the different pieces of ecological work were not happening at the scale needed to stop global climate crises. In that context, activists sought to ratchet up organizing and increase pressure to focus as a denomination on responses to climate change. This context of failure to do enough was the final part of the context out of which Fossil Free PC(USA) emerged.

In this chapter I have explored several forms of environmentalism that invoke “earth care” as it has been lived out by Protestants in the United States. Throughout this chapter and the last, I have woven lineages together: Protestant environmentalisms in the United States, Reformed and Protestant theologies that undergird these

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<sup>380</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1963), 10. Eliade’s bifurcation between what is holy and what is not is problematic in a dichotomy that suggests that that which we call sacred has power (and is often aligned with social markers like white, male, human) and that which is ordinary is powerless (and is often aligned with social categories like black, female, nature). In future work, I want to explore how organizers can harness the emergences of the sacred in the profane as a way to bring attention to what is wrong alongside an ecofeminist critique of this dichotomy.

<sup>381</sup> McKibben, “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math,” *Rolling Stone*.

environmentalisms, and Presbyterian ecological/environmental work and stories of the emergence of Fossil Free PC(USA). In doing so, I set the stage for how and why Fossil Free PC(USA) assumed that the Presbyterian Church USA was a target that could be moved to divest from fossil fuels. In the following chapters I explore the tactic and strategy of divestment and how it has been used in other Protestant denominations in the United States.

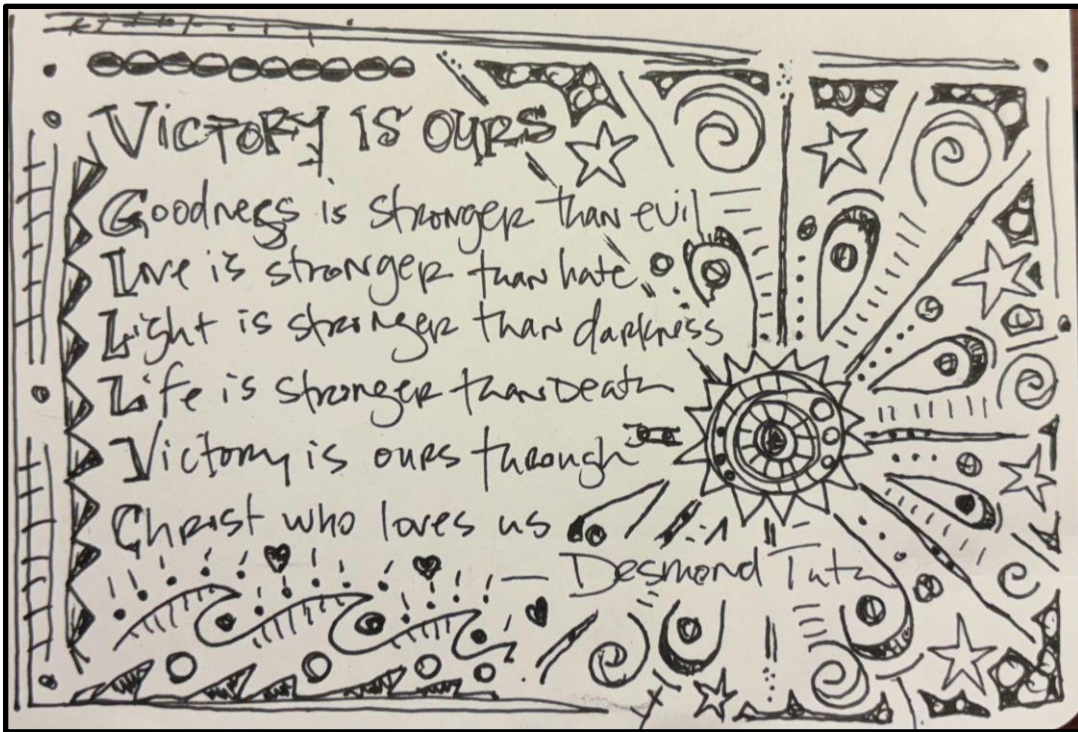
Essentially, this dissertation makes the claim that the divestment from fossil fuels movement was a major catalyst for moving the denomination to respond more to climate and environmental justice. As evidenced by the above, Fossil Free PC(USA) was not the only one doing the work. However, the increased numbers of overtures around environmental care and climate change are evidence that Fossil Free PC(USA) moved others to do the work too. In his interview, Rob Fohr notes that

we have to change people's minds and Fossil Free PC(USA) has done such a great job of getting climate change in front of the church as the issue of the time to determine how we faithfully respond? Without that activism and pressure, I don't think it would be on the radar of Presbyterians.

This activism and pressure inspired responses from Presbyterians all over the country and created a sense of success at having shifted the conversation of the denomination (strategically and systemically) to have a focus on environmental care. As I will explore in a later chapter, that success took distributive organizing by a grassroots group of people, who relied on the biblical, theological, and social commitments of a denomination that had a history of caring about the earth as well as the invocation of a strategy that had a history of working in other movements. In the next chapter, I explore the use of divestment as a tactic and strategy in other global movements in order to

understand why Bill McKibben and others called for its use against the fossil fuel industry to stop climate change.

## 5. The Melody: Divestment as a Tactic



*The words in this drawing come from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's prayer, "Victory is Ours," which was published in 1995 in An African Prayerbook, soon after Tutu supported the negotiation of the end of apartheid after the presidential elections in 1994.<sup>382</sup>*

### Introduction

In 2019, three of us were sitting around the table making a shopping list for the next big project on the farm where I lived at the time. One of my farmmates said, "Make sure you go to Lowes. We don't spend our money at Home Depot because of how they spend their money [in support of right-wing politics]." In just that sentence, my farmmate articulated how we at the farm tried to enact the ethical principles of what we believe in and what we support by how we invest, what we buy, and what we refuse to purchase or

<sup>382</sup> Bryan Black, "History of Hymns: 'Goodness is Stronger than Evil,'" Discipleship Ministries, the United Methodist Church, last modified April 7, 2021, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-goodness-is-stronger-than-evil>.

invest in. Leaders of institutions or the institutions they represent and lead, make similar decisions, relying on mission statements and business models to articulate the beliefs they enact in what they produce for the world, though arguably sometimes marketing materials overstate the values and mission of an institution. Institutions and individuals also create their identities through the ownership of stocks (through investment) and the giving up of some stock (through divestment), although many leave these decisions up to someone else, a portfolio manager, and thus have little sense of what their investments are. While some argue that the value of money is the ability to make more money, sociologists would add that money often plays a key role in meaning- and identity-making. These two definitions of money, of course, are not mutually exclusive. Christian biblical traditions affirm this in the Gospel of Matthew saying that “where your treasure is there your heart is also” (Matthew 6:21, New International Version). As such, investments and spending show what issues and concerns are important to investors. Economists and activists alike refer to this as a moral economy: “in which citizens use the power of their purse to inject ethics, reciprocity, and care into global neo-liberal markets.”<sup>383</sup>

One of the ways a moral economy emerges is through divestment. Divestment deploys an economic mentality that uses the selling of investments and products as a way to hone corporate profits and mission and emphasizes the meaning-making role of money in social movements and religious communities.<sup>384</sup> In this dissertation, I have been

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<sup>383</sup> Frank Trentmann, “Consumer Boycotts in Modern History: States, Moral Boundaries, and Political Action,” in *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, ed. David Feldman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 30.

<sup>384</sup> “Divestment” has been described as both a movement and a tactic (that is, a part of a larger strategy). In this paper, I use it as a “tactic,” understanding that both critics and proponents of divestment suggest that it is most effective as part of a larger strategy. In fact, as I explore more below, divestment is a

arguing that part of the way that Presbyterians seek to live out their ecological vocation is through divestment from fossil fuels, and that this tactic has been successful because it has been led by people who understand the history and use of the tactic. To explore that effort, the heart of this chapter explores how divestment as a social movement tactic has been used by people on the frontlines of dismantling apartheid in South Africa and genocide in Israel. This chapter particularly focuses on how leaders of these movements have called upon Protestant Christians in the United States to be in solidarity with frontline experiences through the use of divestment, and I note how the Presbyterian Church (USA) has responded.

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, divestment has been used in social movements as a nonviolent tactic to apply public pressure to organizations, corporations, and nations to align investments with beliefs, to drive conversation, and to draw attention to social injustices. Individuals and institutions practice divestment by removing their investments in a company from their stock portfolios, doing so alongside public statements about why they no longer will profit from stock of that particular company or industry. It mimics the economic ideology that uses divestment to “help identify and highlight the boundaries of an organization.”<sup>385</sup> Corporations have long used divestment as a means of focusing on corporate mission (and economic decisions are thus moral decisions.) Similarly, social movements have used divestment to name and shape the values and commitments to which a particular group of people adheres (or does not). It is one way for people who do not live in the context of oppression to stand with those

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tactic used to draw international attention to and conversation about a particular injustice – not always as the dismantling of the injustice itself.

<sup>385</sup> Vignola, *Strategic Divestment*, xi.

who do. Since the financial market and institutions are global entities, it is also a way to insist that the international community pay attention and insist on liberation. It is one way to live into an understanding that the humanity of one part of the world is bound up in the humanity of all others.<sup>386</sup>

Divestment does at least two things in a movement: first, it calls on institutions and individuals to align their values and their money, in a framework in which money is more than just capital or currency but rather also reflects an individual or institution's values, as a way to show where support for values or beliefs lie. Second, it supports the momentum of the larger movement of which divestment is a tactic, essentially becoming a spotlight to shine light on an issue. Thus, engaging in divestment shows the opinion of an individual or institution about a particular social justice issue.

Divestment was a tactic (among many others) in social movements used on an international scale in the 1980s-1990s to force the dominant white South African government to end its system of apartheid.<sup>387</sup> The decades-long struggle led by exiled, banned, imprisoned, and frontline Black Africans and allies called upon universities, companies, churches, and others (both individuals and other organizations) to show their support by taking their investments out of companies based in South Africa. This call was used to escalate pressure on the apartheid government, adding to demands from athletic boycotts, sanctions by the United Nations, and in-country protests to show that the

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<sup>386</sup> Based on Desmond Tutu's words: "My humanity is bound up in yours and we can only be human together." Allister Sparks and Mpho Tutu, *Tutu Authorized* (Auckland, New Zealand: PQ Blackwell Limited, 2011), 339. Similar language is lifted up in the WECANWE divestment report (<https://www.wecaninternational.org/divestment-report/>).

<sup>387</sup> Boycotting has been used for centuries (more below) but the practice of disinvestment and divestment as a particular boycott of stocks was first used in response to a call by South Africans. Divestment as an economic strategy was first reported on in the 1970s, but used before the 1950s. Vignola, *Strategic Divestment*, 2.

international community supported the anti-apartheid movement. In addition, the fact that Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one of the major voices and faces of the call for divestment from South Africa added to the moral impact of that call and every subsequent use of divestment in movements.<sup>388</sup> This includes the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movements that targets the State of Israel and the global divestment from fossil fuels movement. Hundreds of institutions have responded to these calls for solidarity.

This chapter focuses on the practices of Protestant Christian denominations (mostly in the United States) of using divestment as a tactic in response to apartheid in South Africa and as part of the BDS movement in Israel, to set the stage for how Presbyterian Church (USA) in particular has historically used divestment to make a moral statement. Essentially, this chapter explores the history of divestment as a tactic to create justice and meaning by first, defining the tactic (its possibilities, limits, and history). Second, I examine divestment's use in two movements (as part of the international call to end apartheid in South Africa and the fight for human rights for Palestinians in the State of Israel)—and pay particular attention to how the PC(USA) has participated in these movements. Third, I explore the use of divestment as a way of responding to climate change in secular contexts. This third section sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how other faith groups have used divestment from fossil fuels

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<sup>388</sup> Desmond Tutu, "We need an apartheid-style boycott to save the planet," *The Guardian*, April 10, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/divest-fossil-fuels-climate-change-keystone-xl>. McKibben also included in his interview that when it was time for 350.org to consider divestment as a tactic, McKibben wrote to Tutu for permission, a clear indication that Tutu's leadership and authority was respected and acknowledged. Another movement that relied on Tutu's authority, as will be seen below, is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in which Palestinians and their allies call for international solidarity through BDS in order to make the world pay attention to the unjust reality of Palestinians in the state of Israel. Tutu's role as a faith leader in South Africa is also explored in more detail in John Allen, *Desmond Tutu: Rabble-rouser for Peace* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

which comes in the following chapter. Because of this history, the organizers in the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA) could hypothetically expect the tactic to be successful in using divestment as a tactic because it has worked before in global movements.<sup>389</sup>

## The History of Divestment as a Tactic in Social Movements

Even before the anti-apartheid movement began in the 1970s in South Africa and the BDS movement began in the 1990s, investments have been used to establish meaning; money is never neutral. In fact, Charles Powers in his work on the “ethics of investment” commented that divestment, “the concept, if not the term, is responsible for the fact that the portfolios of many institutions (especially [some] churches) have never included stock ... from tobacco or liquor.”<sup>390</sup> That is to say, corporate institutions with endowments have long operated with considerations about the ethics of where their money is and how they make it matter. In the same way, faith-based institutions have long interpreted their Christian public witness as impacting their financial stewardship,

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<sup>389</sup> *A note about the timing of this chapter:* I wrote the first drafts of this chapter before the October 7, 2023, bombing of Israel by Hamas. I edited this chapter in the winter of 2024, in the weeks after South Africa brought a case to the United Nation’s International Court of Justice, arguing that Israel was committing genocide of Palestinians. In doing so, the South African government drew a connecting line between their struggle for liberation from apartheid with the struggle of Palestinians. It was reported that President Cyril Ramaphosa said, “Our opposition to the ongoing slaughter of the people of Gaza has driven us as a country to approach the ICJ. As a people who once tasted the bitter fruits of dispossession, discrimination, racism and state-sponsored violence, we are clear that we will stand on the right side of history.” (Raffi Berg, “What is South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the ICJ?” BBC News, last modified January 30, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67922346>.)

<sup>390</sup> Charles W. Powers, “Case Studies in the Pursuit of Ethical Criteria for Social Investment Activity,” in *People/Profits: The Ethics of Investments*, ed. Charles W. Powers (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1972), 51. Powers is one of the students at Union Theological Seminary who successfully organized the “Banks Campaign,” the movement to get ten US banks to stop lending money to the apartheid government in South Africa (see Robert Ross, “Moving the Mountain of Apartheid: The 1966-1969 Banks Campaign and the Rise of Economic Tools to End South African Apartheid, Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies, 22:4, 303-329).

spending, and investments. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is just one example of a Protestant denomination that has made investment choices (including excluding tobacco and liquor from its investments), and then later divested from companies doing business in apartheid South Africa and Israel.<sup>391</sup> This framework of money as meaning-making and public witness emerges in social movements through economic sanctions, which include boycotting, shareholder engagement, and divestment.

Divestment as a social movement tactic was preceded by divestment as a business and economic tactic that was also about meaning making. In 1974, American financial manager Leonard Vignola wrote that a “company lives by expanding and contracting, by growing and changing, by acquiring and divesting. These are the actions of a healthy, vital company.”<sup>392</sup> That is to say, like many of the financial managers of his time, Vignola asserted that divestment—the selling of stocks or parts of a company—has long been part of business models and economics for stable companies. Although Vignola and others were writing about divestment as a strategy for corporations, it was not until the 1980s, that “a disproportionate amount of attention was given to the growth and development of companies by merger and acquisition [and] little attention was given to the decision to sell.”<sup>393</sup> Researchers of business management (including the use of divestment for economic means) John Coyne and Mike Wright point out in their book *Introduction to Divestment* that the “decision to sell is an equally important decision in

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<sup>391</sup> Vernon S. Broyles III, “When Stewardship Is an Act of Public Witness,” Presbyterian Church (USA), last modified September 10, 2014, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/9/10/when-stewardship-act-public-witness/>.

<sup>392</sup> Vignola, *Strategic Divestment*, 8. I lift up here the writings and philosophies of financial experts writing about divestment around the time that activists were considering the use of divestment as a movement tactic. Later in this dissertation, I lift up Peter Krull, a financial advisor who was writing around the time that the PCUSA was considering divestment from fossil fuels.

<sup>393</sup> Coyne and Wright, “An Introduction to Divestment,” 1.

the realization of a company's objectives."<sup>394</sup> As the 1980s continued, companies turned to divestment as a "powerful tool for dealing with organizational and industrial restructuring as a means of adapting to change."<sup>395</sup>

In business and economics, there are lots of different ways to divest, but at the center of the process is the selling off of parts of a company in order to hone its mission and increase profitability. According to Coyne and Wright, "before embarking on an action designed to achieve growth, a company determines its corporate strategy, which *compares where the firm is at present with where it wants to be*, to indicate what needs to be done to meet its objectives."<sup>396</sup> For example, in 2014, the leadership of General Electric decided to divest its financing arm by selling shares of Synchrony Financial on the New York Stock Exchange."<sup>397</sup> This allowed General Electric to focus on core business objectives and build a company based on energy options. In doing so, this action, and others like it in the day-to-day business processes of companies, allows for corporations to define themselves and respond to the world in a time of lagging profit, inadequate sales, excess resources, increasing need to respond to governmental action, a *shift in objectives*, and a technological change.<sup>398</sup> Since the rise of socially responsible investing (in the 1980s), however, Vignola suggests, "the single purpose of divestment is to sever a firm's involvement in an activity... and can free resources that may then be channeled into new opportunities."<sup>399</sup> All of these standards and options point toward the

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<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>396</sup> Coyne and Wright, "An Introduction to Divestment," 5, emphasis mine.

<sup>397</sup> Akhilesh Ganti, "Divestment," Investopedia, last modified Apr 12, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/investopediadivestment>.

<sup>398</sup> Vignola, *Strategic Divestment*, 15.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

processes of divestment and reinvestment in the framework of making money, as well as identity definition.

But in the making of identity, does the “stockholder of a publicly owned corporation have an obligation to press for corporate practices that are intended to improve social welfare?” Such is the social question that begins Charles Powers’ introduction to the 1972 volume, *People/Profits: The Ethics of Investments*, followed by the assertion that economic and social institutions will collapse without the “legitimizing assent upon which they depend” as symbolized by the investments of the people.<sup>400</sup> The selling of investments as a way to name and demonstrate one’s values is rooted in the ways in which companies have shaped their own identities, that is, economic choices are moral and meaning-making choices.

There are several ways of implementing economic sanctions on a particular company or country. Boycotts usually involve refraining from purchasing physical products from or doing other kinds of business with a particular person, company, or institution. The term “boycott” was coined in 1880 when Irish tenant farmers and townspeople banded together to refuse to work with or associate with Captain Charles Boycott when he delivered eviction notices to the tenant farmers who could not pay rent in a depressed Irish economy.<sup>401</sup> Similar collective economic action happened in the Revolutionary War in the US, for example, when colonists refused to buy British tea.<sup>402</sup> Other boycotts have included “the boycott of Nazi Germany that was promoted by some

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<sup>400</sup> Charles W. Powers, “Introduction,” in *People /Profits: The Ethics of Investments*, ed. Charles W. Powers (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1972), xi.

<sup>401</sup> David Feldman, “Boycotts: From the American Revolution to BDS,” in *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, ed. David Feldman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 7-9.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Jewish organizations following the German elections in March 1933” which was “an early example of a boycott that was aimed at a state on account of its policy of racial discrimination.”<sup>403</sup> Each of these examples demonstrates how boycotts have to be selective because boycotts “have been promoted by social movements and subaltern groups with limited resources and capacity.”<sup>404</sup> Indeed, the fact that the people who organize boycotts have limited power in comparison to the economic entity they seek to change is one of the reasons that they must organize and mobilize through a shared, targeted tactic.

The ethos of shareholder engagement is based on the concept of staying at the table to shape the company, whereas the ethos of divestment is based on the idea that staying at the table suggests that those at the table approve of the work of the company and if one disapproves, then they should leave the table. Shareholder engagement uses the ability of anyone who holds stock in a company (and thus has a voice and vote at shareholder meetings where decisions about the company are made) to vote on, and potentially pass, resolutions about the identity and the business model/plan of that company. Shareholder engagement was used for the first time in the anti-apartheid movement in 1971 by Paul Neuhauser and the Episcopal Society for Cultural Racial Unity (ESCRU) in partnership with other faith communities that created the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility.<sup>405</sup> This was because the South African government

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>405</sup> On the history webpage of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, they describe their founding as a commitment “to employ a more direct strategy by using their financial stake in some of the world’s most powerful companies to promote a corporate response to the human rights abuses occurring under the racist apartheid system in South Africa.” (“Our Origin Story,” Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.iccr.org/mission-history/>.)

was ignoring the sanctions, embargoes, and protests against them (more below), and companies operating within South Africa were participating in apartheid through discriminatory employment practices. Neuhauser believed that ESCRU—as a stockholder in General Motors, the largest employer of Black South Africans—could make a demand that General Motors change their practices.<sup>406</sup> In response, Reverend Leon Sullivan, a civil rights leader in the United States, was elected to be the first African American on the board of General Motors whereupon he developed the Sullivan Principles, which were first adopted at General Motors and then by other corporations that had operations in South Africa. These guidelines called for better employment practices like equal pay and the end of segregation in whatever corporation signed onto the principles. Part of the principles included, as Behar points out in *The Shareholder Action Guide*, an escape clause: “if these actions did not bring about the end of apartheid in ten years, Sullivan called for all companies [who had agreed to the principles] doing business in South Africa to divest their operations in the country, thereby putting a time limit on the process of reform for these companies.”<sup>407</sup>

Divestment (as part of a larger movement) is a way to push a particular identity and value system into the world. While there are financial implications for either the company/industry or the stockholder, the primary point of divestment in a movement is often to make a moral statement, not necessarily to affect the bottom line of a company, industry, or country. Divestment is an affirmation that the institution creating a problem

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<sup>406</sup> Andrew Behar, *The Shareholder Action Guide: Unleash Your Hidden Powers to Hold Corporations Accountable* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2016), 18-19. Resolutions by shareholders need to be voted on by shareholders and only resolutions that receive the majority of votes change policy.

<sup>407</sup> Behar, *The Shareholder Action Guide*, 19. Sullivan himself eventually thought these principles were too conservative.

cannot continue business as usual, that slow reformation is not enough, that boycotts can only go so far, and that deliberation or negotiation can dilute ethical commitments.<sup>408</sup> But how does divestment as a moral witness happen? In *Social Responsibility and Investments*, Charles W. Powers outlines three possible ways to make owning and selling investments match the beliefs and values of an organization. He divides them into negative sanctions: “a decision to sell stocks in protest over practices or products...” and “a decision not to buy stocks in such companies until particular practices are discontinued or initiated,” as well as incentive investments: “a decision to look with special favor upon the stock of [some] corporations.”<sup>409</sup> Institutions and individuals that seek to divest can do so in two broad ways: categorical and company-by-company. Categorical, which has been used in the divestment from fossil fuel campaign, means that there are no funds invested in any company in the fossil fuel industry (as a whole sector). A company-by-company strategy (used in both the calls for divestment from South Africa and the state of Israel) means that investors look at each company on its own and decide if they want to sell or keep holdings in the industry.

There are, of course, structural reasons (like a history of colonization and white supremacy) why white people and Global North institutions have access to wealth and assets and have then been targeted to use that structurally unfair access to wealth to be in solidarity with communities that have been marginalized or are calling for solidarity through divestment. This particular kind of privilege is unique to white Protestants in the Global North. It is to be expected, then, that Global South countries would not participate in divestment campaigns in the same way as Global North countries—the wealth

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>409</sup> Powers, *Social Responsibility & Investment*, 88.

distribution is different. Global wealth inequality is rooted in the history and current reality of colonization. In the U.S., divestment has been a vehicle for majority white denominations because of their historic wealth (linked to the white supremacy, colonialism, and privilege behind such wealth noted above). They have thus been called upon by movements and grassroots leaders to use that economic wealth in solidarity. These grassroots movements have often been communities of color, who are the most impacted by injustice, demanding that white communities do something in response to that injustice.<sup>410</sup> Divestment from social injustice (and subsequent re-investment in just funds) is thus a strategy that uses capital to articulate values and reallocate funds.

## Divestment as a Social Movement Tactic in Particular Movements

The economic tactic of divestment inherently creates an identity of the institution buying and selling stocks in its portfolio (in doing so creating an identity and meaning about the institution about what it values or believes in based on what it is putting stock in). As outlined in the previous section, divestment has been taken on by activists in social movements to organize targeted institutions to define themselves *vis-a-vis* their divestment from unethical governments and industries. Below I specifically explore the use of divestment as a tactic to dismantle apartheid in South Africa and Israel. Each of these countries is an example of an unjust and racist system that required external and global organizing to help dismantle. Thus, the turn to external moral pressure and the

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<sup>410</sup> For example, early proponents of divestment as a tactic in social movements were Leon Sullivan, a Black American pastor, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu; each called upon the United States as a historically wealthy nation (wealth built on the exploitation of people of color and Black people in particular) to use their wealth to be in solidarity with Black South Africans who did not have the economic privilege or infrastructure to divest from their own oppression.

withholding of resources that could support the internal oppressive government through divestment was seen as one of the most effective tactics. What follows is a briefly articulated history of apartheid, as well as some of the other tactics used to dismantle apartheid, and the role of divestment itself. Then I hone in on how religious communities responded to the call for divestment. In doing so, I show one way, through the divestment of funds, how (mostly) white Protestant Christians have demonstrated solidarity with the historical struggle to dismantle apartheid in both South Africa and Palestine. In each case, people of color in each location have led the call for institutions that are majority white to leverage their economic power to make systems more just.

## Apartheid in South Africa

The origins of apartheid—the codified racial system of laws that dehumanized “coloreds,” Blacks, Asians, and other non-white South Africans—lie in the 17th century when settlers from the Netherlands arrived on the land that became South Africa and forced Indigenous tribes into labor.<sup>411</sup> Over time, the Dutch language of the colonizers was transformed into Afrikaans and Dutch settlers into Afrikaners, and their Dutch Reformed Theology infused all parts of the culture. These settlers claimed their whiteness and power through colonization, and Reformed Theology became one of the resources for doing so. When they lost to the British army in the Boer War in the late 19th century, for example, one of the terms of the peace treaty was that Black Africans would have no

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<sup>411</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, xii. The Population Registration Act of 1950 legalized the hierarchy of races that was often confusing and complex. (See also “A History of Apartheid in South Africa,” South African History Online: Toward A People’s History, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa> for an overview of other laws through the lens of popular history, another way to bring voices of activists and person into the academic record.)

vote.<sup>412</sup> This was the first of many laws that discriminated against native Black Africans. In 1914, Boer War General H.M. Hertzog founded the Nationalist Party, a party that won a majority rule on a “racist platform that played on white fears of the so-called black threat and promised to establish strict ‘apartheid’ or separate development policies to counter” those fears.<sup>413</sup> The 1918 Natives Land Act forbade Black farmers and sharecroppers from owning land except in already overpopulated areas.<sup>414</sup> In 1924, Hertzog became prime minister and established the Colour Bar Act, which gave preferential options for skilled jobs to whites.<sup>415</sup> In 1926, South Africa received autonomy from the British Crown, which gave the South African government more power and less oversight. Then, in 1927, Hertzog approved the Native Administration Act which allowed the white government to rearrange tribal boundaries and control Black labor.<sup>416</sup> In the ensuing years, these policies shaped the political landscape of South Africa. In 1948, the whites-only Parliament in South Africa was still run by the Nationalist Party, when it passed a law that “classified every South African by racial origin and extended bans on interracial sex and marriage.”<sup>417</sup> Other laws required Black South Africans to carry passbooks (or legal papers that articulated their color and rights) with them at all times and that people of “like races” live together.<sup>418</sup> To achieve this segregation, Black Africans were forcibly resettled in slums.<sup>419</sup> It was, as Archbishop

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<sup>412</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, xv, xxiii.

<sup>413</sup> Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans Against Apartheid, 1946-1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 4 and 9.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>417</sup> Allen, *Desmond Tutu*, 55.

<sup>418</sup> *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?* Connie Field, director (2010 Clarity Films).

<sup>419</sup> Allen, *Rabble-rouser*, 56.

Desmond Tutu described, “a systematic and devastating violation of all sorts of human rights,” and the Dutch Reformed Church supported this system of oppression.<sup>420</sup>

Opposition to these apartheid policies was organized by a variety of different groups, including the African National Congress (ANC), the All African Convention, the Non-European Unity Movement, and the Pan African Congress (PAC); much of the leadership of these groups were banned or sent into exile.<sup>421</sup> In 1960, the PAC organized a protest at a police station in Sharpeville, in which hundreds of people were prepared to give themselves up for arrest for not carrying their passbooks. The police opened fire on the protestors, killing 69 people, most of them shot in the back as they fled. In response, protests erupted around the world and the United Nations passed a resolution in opposition to the brutality.<sup>422</sup> Protests continued in countries around the world against apartheid measures, but to little effect. International outrage was again prodded when, in 1976, a large group of schoolchildren in Soweto (a rural town in South Africa) protested the mandatory use of Afrikaans as the language of education. Thousands of children took to the streets. In response, the South African police force opened fire on the protesters, killing 58 children and injuring over 700 more.<sup>423</sup> The violent deaths of children and youth and the subsequent international attention threw new light on the systems of oppression that governed the lives of Black South Africans and galvanized that attention into action. I have highlighted only a few moments of a movement long in the making. According to Massie, in the decades of struggle the “anti-apartheid movement [was] a multiracial, worldwide movement consisting of governmental and nongovernmental

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<sup>420</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 17.

<sup>421</sup> Massie, *Loosing*, 30.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-7.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 397-8.

actors operating at international, national, and subnational levels in an attempt to end racial oppression in southern Africa.”<sup>424</sup>

By the time the official apartheid government in South Africa fell in 1994, activists had been forced to try a variety of strategies and tactics. The anti-apartheid movement was based on the belief that “people can effectively use institutions locally available to respond to international issues.”<sup>425</sup> Those years of struggle required perseverance by activists and required them to think about and engage in a variety of strategies, including divestment. A call for divestment to show solidarity through financial investments was part of global sanctions to which some Protestant Christians in the United States responded. Divestment as a tactic was called for in the larger context of sanctions, protests, United Nations policies, international speaking tours, and sports boycotts. It was a call for colleges/universities, municipalities, faith communities, and individuals to align their money and investments with the work for liberation from apartheid in South Africa.<sup>426</sup> It is in this larger context of a decades-long movement to dismantle apartheid that the call to divest was made, and responses were in solidarity with the heart of the movement: people in the resistance in the region itself.

In the 1980s, the ANC, along with many other in-country organizations, articulated and organized varied strategies to respond to the consolidation of white power and the implementation of apartheid. These approaches, which were already in process in

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>425</sup> Janice Love, *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement: Local Activism in Global Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1985), 245.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid. As noted above, there were many organizations mobilizing in South Africa. In this chapter, the ANC is in focus, primarily due to space constraints. Indeed, there were many women’s groups that emerged as organizing entities, for example, the ANC Women’s League, Federation of South African Women, and the Black Sash (“Women and the Struggle Against Apartheid,” South African History Online, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/women-and-struggle-against-apartheid>). This source highlights the grassroots activists of the movement in their own words.)

the resistance before they were systematized, became known as the Four Pillars of Struggle.<sup>427</sup> The ANC developed this four-pronged strategy to dismantle apartheid, understanding that it would take many different people doing many different things to create liberation. Liberation would take

1. Mass internal struggle of the oppressed South African People;
2. The underground political network;
3. armed resistance, and
4. international boycott and solidarity.<sup>428</sup>

Internal struggle was led by organizations in-country and by banned, jailed, and/or exiled Black South Africans (like Oliver Tambo, the ANC president who lived in exile for thirty years). The underground network of these individuals and organizations provided resources of “intelligence, refuge, food, transports, and recruits.”<sup>429</sup> The ANC preferred nonviolent means of protest from their beginnings in 1912 until the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 when an armed guerilla wing of the ANC emerged, though violent tactics remained second to mass mobilizations and protest.<sup>430</sup>

Finally, the call for the international movement included divestment along with political sanctions, cultural sanctions, and other economic sanctions. Those sanctions had begun decades before the Four Pillars were established. In 1946, “the campaign for international sanctions was launched by India and the [Council on African Affairs] at the first United Nations General Assembly meeting in London.”<sup>431</sup> Other Black African nations called upon the United Nations to support sanctions against South Africa for as

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<sup>427</sup> Ronnie Kasrils, “Boycotts, Bricks, and the Four Pillars of the South African Struggle,” *Generation Palestine: Voices from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement*, ed. Rich Wiles (New York: Pluto Press, 2013), 18.

<sup>428</sup> Kasrils, “The Four Pillars,” 19.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 19,20.

<sup>431</sup> Nesbitt, *Sanctions*, 6.

long as the system of apartheid remained. While the majority of nations in the United Nations supported these processes, different members of the Security Council (including the United States) would routinely veto the decision, and thus stop them. In 1986, the United States Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, overriding then-President Reagan's veto. The act banned new loans and the sale of technology to South Africa and imposed fines and jail time as punishment for violators. The Act came on the heels of the United States and Britain voting against sanctions in the United Nations, demonstrating the tensions that existed in the U.S.<sup>432</sup> Still, as other countries imposed sanctions, the global movement to isolate South Africa from the rest of the world was an opportunity to educate people around the world about the apartheid regime and its racist policies.<sup>433</sup>

Cultural isolation and sanctions continued in a variety of venues for decades. Across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, students at colleges and universities staged protests and demonstrations. Daniel Armstrong, the lead student organizer of the movement to get Columbia University to divest by 1983, determined that the "best approach would be to educate students on the facts of apartheid and the role divestment could play to effect change. Informational flyers, prominent speakers, films, and leafleting were the central focus to raise awareness on apartheid and Columbia's investments" in South Africa.<sup>434</sup> As more people around the world learned about the horror of apartheid in South Africa, other groups of people joined in, targeting, for example, athletics. Some athletes from around the world began to boycott South Africa,

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>433</sup> Kasrils, "The Four Pillars," 21.

<sup>434</sup> Daniel Armstrong, *Free South Africa. The Columbia University Divestment Movement: A Personal Perspective* (Los Angeles: Find a Tree, 2015), 9.

with organizers successfully arguing that South Africa should not be allowed to participate in the Olympics if they only allowed white athletes on their Olympic team.<sup>435</sup> South Africa was thus banned from participating from 1964 until 1988.<sup>436</sup> Eventually, athletes from South Africa were completely isolated and banned from playing other countries in rugby, as the international community demonstrated and protested at games.<sup>437</sup> These athletic sanctions and ongoing educational campaigns responded to the call to solidarity with the struggle in the anti-apartheid movement.

At the same time, economic sanctions were being imposed by several groups in the international community. In 1959, the first call for a boycott and economic sanctions against South Africa was made by Julius Nyerere (who later became the president of Tanzania) by asking people in the United Kingdom to refrain from supporting apartheid by not buying products made in South Africa. Soon boycotts included food staples like potatoes and fruit that were shipped through companies based in South Africa. As people gave up these and other ordinary items, they registered their resistance to apartheid.<sup>438</sup> Later these economic sanctions included individuals boycotting products and corporations (like Kodak) and enforcing embargos, as well as Chase and Barclays Bank refusing new loans to South Africa.<sup>439</sup> These campaigns were just some of the tactics that made up the larger strategy of which divestment was a part. They signaled the importance

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<sup>435</sup> Sara Hagstrom, "The Sports Boycott," The African Letters Project: Quandaries in Digital Humanities and Epistolary Research, last modified May 2, 2022, <https://africanlettersproject.tulane.edu/2023/09/13/the-sports-boycot/#:~:text=the%20racially%20restrictive%20laws%20of,to%20reform%20their%20oppressive%20policies>.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*

<sup>438</sup> Kasrils, "The Four Pillars," 18, 23.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 23.

of economic resistance and how many different people engage in resistance in many different ways.

## The Use of Divestment to Dismantle Apartheid

Divestment was used in the anti-apartheid movement as a way for the international community to organize in support of and solidarity with the South African leaders in exile and the tactics happening in-country. The tactic was employed as anti-apartheid activists became frustrated by ongoing apartheid, and as a way to garner more diverse support for the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>440</sup> Since many universities and faith communities have large investment portfolios, and also have values-based identities, activists pushed them in particular to divest from companies that refused to stop doing business in South Africa. This call was with a larger goal: to “increase the sense of responsibility among people so they could look for ways where they too were responsible and could act.”<sup>441</sup> Just as boycotting (or not purchasing products from South Africa) let individuals articulate support and solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement, so too did divestment become a moral witness of solidarity through an economic process. However, the process of divestment in a movement was not primarily an economic (or profit-driven) strategy. In 1984, Desmond Tutu (when he was the Anglican Archbishop-elect of South Africa) publicly spoke out to investors, saying, “We’re not asking you to make a political decision. We’re not asking you to make an economic decision. We’re asking you to make a *moral* decision.”<sup>442</sup> And so, in the movement to divest from companies

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<sup>440</sup> Gay W. Seidman, “Divestment Dynamics: Mobilizing, Shaming, and Changing the Rules,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Volume 82, Number 4, Winter 2015, 1020.

<sup>441</sup> Stanford student Amanda Kemp in Field’s *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

working in apartheid South Africa, the aims of the movement were not just about causing those companies to lose money, but rather to demonstrate that they were immoral. This tactic and other sanctions were employed to raise the global consciousness of all people about an end to racism and apartheid in South Africa.<sup>443</sup> Companies, universities, and faith communities all responded to Tutu and others by divesting as a moral tactic of solidarity. By taking their investment out of the powerful financial institutions that upheld apartheid, the people in these campaigns invested in the world that the oppressed in South Africa believed was possible.

At colleges and universities around the world, students and their allies staged protests, sit-ins, and other demonstrations to demand that their institutions divest from holdings in South Africa. The first university in the United States to divest was Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1977, and “soon after, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst also withdrew its complete stock, and other colleges around the United States followed suit.”<sup>444</sup> Columbia was the first Ivy League school to divest in the United States after significant pressure was placed on the institution by students and the larger public.<sup>445</sup> In the end, the administration sided with the students, and thus the cause of Black South Africans. This happened when Michael Sovern, president of Columbia University, realized that

it was becoming more and more clear that the government of South Africa was becoming more and more oppressive... I called Desmond Tutu, and his position was very clear: that divestiture was the course that Black South Africans wanted Americans to follow.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Love, *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement*, 54.

<sup>444</sup> Samia Abbass, “Hampshire College Students Win Divestment from Apartheid South Africa, U.S., 1977,” *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, last modified September 19, 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/hampshirecollegeSA>.

<sup>445</sup> Armstrong, *Free South Africa*, epigraph.

<sup>446</sup> Field, *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*

Other universities followed suit. In her book *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement*, Janice Love notes many of the schools that were divested by the mid-1980s (the time of the writing of her book). Some notable institutions included: Boston University (1979), Tufts (1979), and Yale (1979?), Oberlin (1980), Harvard (1981), Michigan State (1981).<sup>447</sup> Like Columbia, these universities and colleges divested in response to what Black South Africans were calling for: Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid solidarity. Each divestment vote added moral support to the call to end apartheid.

One of the first companies to be targeted with a call for divestment from economic engagement in South Africa was Polaroid. The South African government had contracted with a subsidiary of Polaroid to make the photos in passbooks. Two Polaroid employees made this discovery and asked Polaroid to cease this relationship. The end of the business partnership didn't occur until 1977, despite Polaroid trying to pay more fair wages for Black employees and brokering an agreement that its South African affiliate would cease doing business with the South African government. Instead, the affiliate broke the agreement, and Polaroid acknowledged that the reforms they had put in place had not changed the systemic issues of apartheid.<sup>448</sup> Stockholders joined in this call for

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<sup>447</sup> Love, *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement*, 32. Note: The date for Yale given by Love is factually incorrect. While Love says that Yale divested in 1979, protestors on the ground saw it differently. In particular, Traci West notes that "I happen to know that there were differing degrees of corporate divestment. Some made fairly symbolic gestures. I was an activist anti-apartheid protestor at Yale in 1979. So, I also know that the Yale corporation did not feel solidarity with Blacks in South Africa. They responded to non-stop protests and bad publicity (in the New York Times) that resulted with many years of stalling tactics, but they did not divest in 1979. The protests continued into the 1980s with some feeble resolution from the Trustees about partial divestment around 1986." The difference in story making between Love's book, which may reflect "official" Yale pronouncements, and West's activist insider experience gives weight to the ongoing need to document the perspectives and stories of activists on the ground, which is part of the larger goal of this dissertation. See also Paul Bass, "Mixed Results in Apartheid Actions," New York Times, April 20, 1986, Section 11CN, Page 15.

<sup>448</sup> Nesbitt, *Sanctions*, 95.

divestment from companies like Polaroid doing business with the apartheid government, which was in direct solidarity with the protests in South Africa.

Along with company divestment from South Africa and the divestment campaigns at colleges and universities around the United States, many faith communities emerged in solidarity with the other pillars of the struggle to end apartheid. The role of certain activist religious leaders in the movement to dismantle apartheid South Africa was present from the very beginning, starting with religious leadership in South Africa and encompassing the response and support of religious institutions around the world. Communities of faith provided moral authority and support, as well as legitimization of activists and calls for support from the frontlines.<sup>449</sup> There was very little change in the divestment campaigns until, according to Tim Smith of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, “religious organizations began to put their morals and ethics on the same table as their money.”<sup>450</sup> In the United States, Protestant churches attempted to respond to the call to divest from apartheid in South Africa.

Several Protestant denominations released statements and confessions in solidarity with the call to support the end of apartheid. Church organizations were among the first organizations to actively pursue shareholder engagement in regard to South Africa (as evidenced by Paul Neuhauser and the Episcopal Society for Cultural Racial Unity (ESCRU) in 1971).<sup>451</sup> The World Council of Churches divested from banks that

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<sup>449</sup> This is not at all to say that all religious communities supported the end of apartheid in South Africa. Indeed, I hope to deepen future research into how specifically the Reformed Church in South Africa helped lay the foundation for and supported the continued existence of apartheid in South Africa as a history in conversation with how other Reformed traditions have supported or resisted other oppressions theologically, with particular interest in the work of Allan Boesak.

<sup>450</sup> Field, *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*

<sup>451</sup> Love, *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement*, 22.

loaned to South Africa in the mid-1980s,<sup>452</sup> and Janice Love notes that Protestant churches in the U.S. “provided the bulk of human and material resources to sustain both the movement and many of the national organizations.”<sup>453</sup> Many Protestant churches made divestment decisions in response to calls to act. In 1979, the United Church of Christ partially divested from banks making loans to South Africa. In 1980, the United Methodist Church “established a policy that UMC agencies should not do business with or invest in banks making loans to South Africa.” In 1981, the United Presbyterian Church (a precursor to the Presbyterian Church [USA]) “began a policy of divestment from financial institutions ‘insofar as practical.’”<sup>454</sup> As these denominations discussed the role of apartheid in South Africa, they discussed too what their moral identity, made through their investments, should be. For example, in 1965, years before they divested from companies doing business in and with South Africa, Presbyterians voted to condemn the violence of apartheid and to study and teach about the anti-apartheid struggle. The statement noted that apartheid is “gravely inimical to the present and future life, work, and witness of the Christian church because its ruthless deeds are blasphemously perpetrated in the name of Christ.”<sup>455</sup> Such a statement connects theological reasoning to the support of the anti-apartheid movement.

Twenty years later, the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference in 1986 announced that their role to provide pastoral care demanded a clear articulation of the Gospel for a world in conflict. They went on to say that theirs was a prophetic calling to

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 26-7, with additional faith communities listed there.

<sup>455</sup> “Presbyterians, Apartheid, and Divestment,” *Presbyterian Historical Society*, last modified December 16, 2013, <https://www.history.pcusa.org/blog/presbyterians-apartheid-and-divestment>.

“make a direct intervention in the affairs of our country” in the light of the “horrificing spectre of escalating violence” that has led to the suffering of the people. In this statement, they supported economic pressure on the South African government, even if it added suffering for the people because “the purpose of economic pressure is to change our society so that the present sufferings may be removed.”<sup>456</sup> This call by Southern African Catholic Bishops added to the myriad voices of churches who continued to provide theological and moral witness to the need to respond to apartheid. Their in-country voice and witness called for churches in the United States and elsewhere to act, pray, and invest in solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle. The U.S. Catholic Conference responded in 1987, divesting \$5.3 million in firms doing business in South Africa.

Apartheid state policy as it existed from 1948 onward ended in South Africa in 1994 with the release from prison and subsequent election of Nelson Mandela as president. The international divestment movement in which universities, companies, and faith communities took part was part of this dismantling, as South Africa faced increased isolation, shame, and economic hardship. It was a tactic that worked alongside other tactics. In this chapter, I am arguing that Presbyterians could believe that divestment would be a successful tactic in making social change, based on its contribution to social movements in other movements, like ending apartheid. I’m also arguing that Presbyterians could believe that the PC(USA) would join the divestment movement because it was a tactic that the PC(USA) had previously supported (and indeed Rick Ufford-Chase used this rhetoric at the General Assembly in 2014). For example, the

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<sup>456</sup> *Divestment, Disinvestment and South Africa: A Policy Statement of the USCC Administrative Board* (Washington, DC: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1986), 17.

172nd General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., one of the precursor denominations of the PC(USA), declared deep concern about apartheid after the Sharpeville Massacres in 1960. In 1971, the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) was created to engage in shareholder engagement and then “issued resolutions to the Ford Motor Company, Citicorp, General Electric and Exxon urging divestment from South Africa.”<sup>457</sup> When the committee took on this action in the 1970s and 1980s, the committee was setting a precedent for the PC(USA) to use divestment as a tactic to respond to social issues as a denomination. In the next section, I outline the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement and the PC(USA)’s response to it as another example of precedence for divestment being used by the PC(USA).

## BDS in Palestine/Israel

Since 2005, divestment has been used in the struggle to dismantle colonization and oppression in the state of Israel, as part of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions Movement (BDS) after years of organizers using other tactics. In the following sections, I briefly describe the history of oppression in Palestine/Israel, note many of the other tactics used in the movement, and hone in on how divestment from the state of Israel has been incorporated. In doing so, I note how some Protestant Christians engage in the tactic of divestment to respond to the call for solidarity with the struggle of Palestinians and their allies on the frontlines of suffering and the liberation struggle. In particular, I lift up how the PC(USA) joined the BDS movement, as part of my argument that organizers for divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) could reasonably expect that the

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<sup>457</sup> Staniunas, “Presbyterians, Apartheid, and Divestment,” Presbyterian Historical Society.

commissioners at PC(USA) General Assembly could understand the tactic, its use, and its effectiveness. As noted previously, the reality of Gaza has changed significantly since the initial writing of this chapter. On October 7, 2023, members of Hamas (an armed resistance group in Palestine) attacked Israelis, killing 1,400 people.<sup>458</sup> This violent uprising echoed the intifadas (uprisings against Israeli occupation of Palestine that started in 1987).<sup>459</sup> The state of Israel, with backing from other global governments including the United States, has responded with violence, killing more than 34,000 Palestinians (as of April 2024), as well as destroying homes, schools, medical facilities, limiting food and medical supplies, electricity and water. In this genocidal context, calls for divestment from companies that profit from the oppression of Palestinians continue, escalating to hunger strikes like those at Brown University and encampments in universities around the United States and world.<sup>460</sup> At the same time, it has also led to some state legislatures forbidding any boycotting related to state funds with regard to Israel.<sup>461</sup>

One of the leaders of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, Omar Barghouti, uses the language of apartheid to describe the experience of living under the policies of the state of Israel, appealing to the fact that Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, and Michael Ben-Yair Israel have “described Israel as practicing apartheid against the

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<sup>458</sup> “What is Hamas? A simple guide to the armed Palestinian group,” Al Jazeera, October 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/8/what-is-the-group-hamas-a-simple-guide-to-the-palestinian-group>

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Adam Gabbat, “Students on Hunger Strike Call for Brown University to Divest from pro-Israel Companies,” *The Guardian*, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/07/brown-university-palestine-hunger-strike-israel-divestment>.

<sup>461</sup> One such example is in Illinois, where former governor Bruce Rauner signed an anti-BDS law in 2015. “Governor Signs Historic Anti-BDS Law in Illinois,” Illinois.gov, last modified July 23, 2015, <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.13202.html>.

indigenous Palestinians.”<sup>462</sup> In Israel, apartheid takes the form of the construction of a dividing wall, Israelis constructing new settlements, separate but unequal education and health care systems, more than 600 check points that obstruct Palestinian movements, the seizing of land, attacks on civilians, jailing of political prisoners, and razing of homes.<sup>463</sup> In 1948, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to flee from their homes as the newly constructed state of Israel displaced and dispossessed Palestinians from their land during the *Nakba*.<sup>464</sup> In 1967, lands in the Gaza Strip were occupied by Israel after the Six-Day War. In 2010 the Israeli Defense Force attacked a flotilla of international aid to the Gaza Strip, galvanizing international support to dismantle Israel’s apartheid policies.<sup>465</sup> (These indicators of Israeli aggression toward Palestinians pale in light of attacks on Gaza since Oct 7, 2023, but these indicators demonstrate the pattern.) In this context of occupied lands, citizenship is given to Jews, not to Palestinians, and only citizens can own land.<sup>466</sup> Access to power is systematically in the hands of only part of the population, creating an imbalance of power and the proliferation of oppression.

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<sup>462</sup> Omar Barghouti, “Palestine’s South Africa Moment Has Finally Arrived,” *Generation Palestine: Voices from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement*, ed. Rich Wiles (New York: Pluto Press, 2013), 218.

<sup>463</sup> Omar Barghouti, *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggles for Palestinian Rights* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 176. I use the term apartheid here less to argue for similarities between apartheid South Africa and Israel, and more to emphasize the ways that organizers have sought to compare the struggles for liberation.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>465</sup> Abigail B. Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban, “Israel/Palestine, South Africa, and the ‘One-State Solution’: The Case for An Apartheid Analysis,” *Politikon* 37(2-3), (December 2010), 336.

<sup>466</sup> Yousef Munayyer, “Not All Israeli Citizens Are Equal,” *The New York Times*, last modified May 23, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/24/opinion/not-all-israeli-citizens-are-equal.html>.

## Tactics Used to Dismantle Palestinian Oppression

In response, the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in support of the Palestinian liberation movements began in 2005, with a specific commitment to human rights and opposition to racism and inequality.<sup>467</sup> It was launched by “170 Palestinian unions, refugee networks, women’s organizations, professional associations, popular resistance committees, and other Palestinian civil society bodies.”<sup>468</sup> In that launch, they invoked the movement to end apartheid in South Africa:

*Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, the Palestinian BDS call urges nonviolent pressure on Israel until it complies with international law by meeting three demands*

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall,
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality,
3. Respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.<sup>469</sup>

These three demands are rights-based, and the three-pronged strategy emulates the four-pillar strategy of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in its variety of tactics.

BDS calls for the boycott of the purchase and use of products made by Israeli companies, the divestment from companies that do business in Israeli settlements, and the sanctions of the state of Israel, with responders and activists employing these tactics in contextualized ways. The movement has included both Jewish and Palestinian activists,

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<sup>467</sup> Feldman, “Boycotts: From the American Revolution to BDS,” 1.

<sup>468</sup> “What is BDS?” *BDS: Freedom, Justice Equality*, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds>.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

as well as secular and religious organizations that are Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic.

Cultural boycotts (meaning boycotts of academic, artistic, and social events) against the state of Israel have been diverse. A cultural boycott by academics in 2009 gained 500 endorsements.<sup>470</sup> In 2010, 150 US and British theater, TV, and film stars released a statement in support of a cultural boycott.<sup>471</sup> United States academic and cultural leaders such as Judith Butler, Alice Walker, and Elvis Costello have all endorsed the boycotts and have participated in cultural sanctions.<sup>472</sup> These boycotts mean that performers and artists will refuse to make money from working in the state of Israel (which means a loss of tourism and other economic incentives), living out a framework that money is not just money, but also is part of shaping one's identity and morality.

Political sanctions against the state of Israel have been harder to come by, for as Bishop Tutu commented in 2013, “It is breathtaking how the Israeli government can thumb its nose at the international community with impunity.”<sup>473</sup> And so, according to Palestinian activist Omar Barghouti

much remains to be done to reach a tipping point whereby the complicity by world governments, led by the U.S., in maintaining and protecting Israel’s system of oppression is more than outweighed by effective, broad grassroots movements that turn Israel into a shunned and economically hemorrhaging pariah.<sup>474</sup>

That is to say, the struggle for Palestinian liberation continues with an ongoing ask from an oppressed people for the world to show solidarity with them. Divestment is one of the many tools the world can use.

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<sup>470</sup> Barghouti, *BDS*, 19.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>472</sup> Barghouti, *Generation Palestine*, 220.

<sup>473</sup> Tutu, *Generation Palestine*, xiii.

<sup>474</sup> Barghouti, *Generation Palestine*, 223.

## Divestment

Divestment, in the larger context of BDS, has been less about the financial implications of buying/selling stocks in companies doing business with the state of Israel, and more about drawing attention to Israel's flouting of international human rights laws.<sup>475</sup> It has become a way of engagement of "direct action of ordinary people [which is] vital for the success of the Palestinian struggle for justice."<sup>476</sup> While "divestment is supposed to strike at the economic bases of occupation and colonization," it is used as a moral witness that it is immoral to profit from the suffering of Palestinians.<sup>477</sup> This suffering is real and specific, and activists make the connection to the business of particular companies. For example, the tactics used against Caterpillar (a company that makes construction vehicles) have included demonstrations, sabotage, boycott, and divestment, as a response to their continuing to do business with the Israeli government, including selling bulldozers to the government to raze Palestinian homes.<sup>478</sup> In this context, divestment is the tactic that international allies can participate in as a mark of solidarity.

Some divestment decisions have included: LO (an organization of trade unions in Norway) called upon the Norway state pension to divest from all Israeli companies, and Evergreen State College called on their trustees to divest, just as Hampshire College (the first college to divest from companies doing business with and in apartheid South Africa)

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<sup>475</sup> Barghouti, *BDS*, 25.

<sup>476</sup> Tom Anderson, Georgia Clough, Therezia Cooper, Jack Curry, Pete Jones. *Targeting Israeli Apartheid: A Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Handbook* (London: Corporate Watch, 2011), II.

<sup>477</sup> John Chalcraft, "The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy," in *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, ed. David Feldman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 307.

<sup>478</sup> Barghouti, *BDS*, 119.

also divested from the Israeli occupation.<sup>479</sup> Each of these decisions put these institutions in solidarity with Palestinians and their allies on the frontlines.

Protestant faith communities in the United States have joined the BDS movement as well, including parts of the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church.<sup>480</sup> In 2018 and 2019, the Episcopal Church adopted investment screens against Caterpillar, Motorola, and Israel Discount Bank. One of the leaders of the Episcopal Church, The Rev. Canon C.K. Robertson, said at the time, “The Church does not want to make profits from companies that contribute to the suffering of others.”<sup>481</sup> These statements connect the decisions to divest with moral commitments of solidarity—underlining how economic decisions are moral decisions. At the same time, in response to the call for divestment, a group of Palestinian Christians released a theological statement called the Palestine KAIROS Document. Part of it includes

We declare that *the military occupation of Palestinian land constitutes a sin against God and humanity*. Any theology that legitimizes the occupation and justifies crimes perpetrated against the Palestinian people lies far from Christian teachings.

We urge the international community to stand with the Palestinian people in their struggle against oppression, displacement, and apartheid.

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>480</sup> As of 2018 the following churches had participated, to some degree, in the BDS movement: the Alliance of Baptists, Church of the United Brethren in Christ, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Mennonite Church USA, Presbyterian Church (USA), various orders in the Roman Catholic Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, as well as the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Meanwhile, many evangelical Christian communities continue to support the State of Israel, particularly through the theological lens of Israel as fulfilling biblical prophecy. Steven Sellers Lapham, “Ten U.S. Churches Now Sanction Israel—To Some Degree, and with Caveats,” Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, March/April 2019, last modified February 12, 2019, <https://www.wrmea.org/2019-march-april/ten-us-churches-now-sanction-israel-to-some-degree-and-with-caveats.html>.

<sup>481</sup> Episcopal Church Office of Public Affairs, “The Episcopal Church joins ecumenical partners in addressing human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” *Episcopal News Service*, last modified October 21, 2019, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/the-episcopal-church-joins-ecumenical-partners-in-addressing-human-rights-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territories/>.

We hold a clear position that non-violent resistance to this injustice is a right and duty for all Palestinians, including Christians.

*We support Palestinian civil society organizations, international NGOs and religious institutions that call on individuals, companies and states to engage in boycotts, divestment and sanctions against the Israeli occupation.*<sup>482</sup>

Through this document and other calls for solidarity, many Protestants in Palestine call for the church in the rest of the world to be in solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian liberation through divestment and other sanctions. By linking the theological to the call to divest, the document leverages moral language and witness to the call to divest.

In this chapter, I have been arguing that Presbyterians organizing for divestment from fossil fuels could believe that divestment would be a successful tactic in making social change, based on its success in other movements, like building support for Palestinian liberation. In July 2004, the Presbyterian Church (USA) started a process of phased divestment in companies doing business in Israel, with full divestment from Motorola, Caterpillar, and Hewlett-Packard happening in 2014 following organizing by several affinity groups like Jewish Voices for Peace and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.<sup>483</sup> This vote came with a statement from the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, a Presbyterian affinity group that pushed for divestment, noting that after engaging with the three corporations for a decade, the companies “have failed to modify their behavior and continue to profit from Israeli human rights abuses and non-peaceful pursuits.”<sup>484</sup> Organizers from both IPMN (especially Robert Ross) and Presbyterian

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<sup>482</sup> “About Us,” Kairos Palestine, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/>, emphasis original.

<sup>483</sup> Bethany Daily, “By slim margin, Assembly approves divestment from three companies doing business in Israel/Palestine,” Presbyterian Church (USA), last modified June 21, 2024, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/6/21/slim-margin-assembly-approves-divestment-three/>.

<sup>484</sup> Doug Stanglin and Niraj Warikoo, “Presbyterians Divest Holdings to Pressure Israel,” *USA Today*, last modified June 21, 2014,

Peace Fellowship (especially Emily Brewer and Rick Ufford-Chase) became instrumental in the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA). Their expertise was one of the through lines of the movements in the PC(USA).

## Divestment as a Success-Building Tactic

In the movement to divest from companies working within the South African system of apartheid, the movement's purpose was not about causing those companies to lose money, but to create a moral witness, one that contributed to the success of the dismantling of apartheid. As noted previously, as the divestment from fossil fuels movement was beginning, Bill McKibben specifically went to Desmond Tutu to ask permission to use the tactic of divestment. Tutu, who has since written in support of an "apartheid-style divestment movement" told McKibben that climate change is the moral issue of our time.<sup>485</sup> Tutu pointed out the dire need to see that climate change, like apartheid, requires people to rise up in moral indignation and that divestment is an effective tool to show that indignation. He wrote that "during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, using boycotts, divestment, and sanctions, and supported by our friends overseas, we were not only able to apply economic pressure on the unjust state but also serious moral pressure."<sup>486</sup> He used the language of urgency and responsibility to

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<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/06/21/presbyterians-israel-holdings-divestment/11207459/>

<sup>485</sup> Interview with Bill McKibben, 2021.

<sup>486</sup> Tutu, "We Need Apartheid-style Boycott to Save the Planet," 2014.

respond. In fact, he used the language of justice, saying that “people of conscience need to break their ties with corporations financing the injustice of climate change.”<sup>487</sup>

Sharon Erickson Nepstad writes that “one of the primary purposes of any social movement is to provoke a response, to challenge people to reconsider status quo assumptions.”<sup>488</sup> Indeed, this change in assumption is what Tutu and others in the ANC called for from the international community: to reconsider and stand with the people in South Africa as they dismantled the assumptions that apartheid was necessary. As a religious leader, Tutu called for the world to show where their hearts were by showing where their treasure would be.

The South African-led call for divestment, which was meant to shine the spotlight on the struggle in South Africa, was a success in itself because it reignited and re-energized the struggle after decades of work. In the struggle for Palestinian liberation, the call for boycotts, divestments, and sanctions has been used to start a new conversation and to galvanize a global movement as international peace talks and violent responses have failed to move the Israeli government to extend human rights to Palestinians and end the increasing genocide.

In South Africa, divestment added an international moral perspective of resistance to their national anti-apartheid movement. As each of the Four Pillars of the struggle (mass internal struggle, underground political network, armed resistance, and international boycott and solidarity) played out in the movement, more people could

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<sup>487</sup> Emma Howard, “A Beginner’s Guide to Fossil Fuel Divestment,” The Guardian, last modified June 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jun/23/a-beginners-guide-to-fossil-fuel-divestment>.

<sup>488</sup> Nepstad. *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement*, 4. In subsequent chapters, I explore other ways to measure movement successes.

participate in the conversation and respond to the call for justice. In “Sanctioning Apartheid: Comparing the South African and the Palestinian Campaigns for Boycotts, Disinvestment, and Sanctions,” Lee Jones writes that “in South Africa, BDS was a *supplemental* tool used by a powerful, strategically led and mass-mobilized liberation struggle. In Palestine, BDS is partly intended to *create* such a movement, following the liberation struggle’s ruination.”<sup>489</sup> (In the divestment from fossil fuels movement uses divestment as a radicalization tool (see last chapter) in the context of other methods of action.) The conversations about liberation were in different places when the international community responded with divestment. Still, as faith communities in particular join the conversation by showing solidarity through divestment, they add their moral opinion that part of the purpose of money lies in meaning and identity making—and in solidarity—in addition to being an economic tool for financial gain.

In the same vein, it is necessary to remember that sanctions were not the most crucial element in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, but they were the most public to the international world.<sup>490</sup> It is similar in Palestine: the BDS call builds support and mobilizes the public, almost as a prop or tool to use in organizing and educating about the liberation struggle. International campaigns for divestment draw attention to the movement work of activists and the plight of a particular people in a particular part of the world and also enable people around the world to do something.

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<sup>489</sup> Lee Jones, “Sanctioning Apartheid: Comparing the South African and the Palestinian Campaigns for Boycotts, Disinvestment, and Sanctions,” in *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, ed. David Feldman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 199.

<sup>490</sup> Alsheh in David Feldman, ed. *Boycotts Past and Present: From the American Revolution to the Campaign to Boycott Israel*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 194-5.

Divestment, then, is one way for people of faith (and people of no faith at all) around the world to respond to a particular crisis by identifying how their money and investments can be aligned with their beliefs and theologies. In doing so, people and institutions that divest join a larger movement for liberation. While this chapter has focused on only two examples of how divestment has been used, it provides background on the history and success of divestment as a way to delegitimize oppression and invest in liberation. In this framework, it becomes clear that how we spend our money, whether it is in everyday purchases or institutional investments, is a moral decision that compels those of us with whiteness and wealth into solidarity.

As a member of the United Nations Security Council and a longtime public ally of the State of Israel, the United States government has supported the apartheid governments of South Africa and the government of Israel. Furthermore, the history, especially of white Protestant and American, support of racism and apartheid, the State of Israel, and the creation of the fossil fuel industry makes eventual white/American resistance to each of those systems of oppression more critical. Many Protestant churches in this political landscape have chosen to participate in economic sanctions as a theological commitment. In doing so, they were acting in solidarity with in-country calls for solidarity. Divestment from companies historically in South Africa and currently in Israel happens in the framework of other tactics done by many different people and groups, just as divestment from fossil fuels is one of many.

In this chapter, I have laid out the role of divestment as a tactic in the struggles for liberation in South Africa and Israel/Palestine. I have done so not just because these struggles are important globally for the liberation of people (though certainly they have

been and are.) I have done so also because, one, they show that divestment has worked as a tactic in terms of garnering attention to the struggle), and two, the PC(USA) joined these movements and divested in response to these calls for divestment. I argue throughout this dissertation that one of the reasons that divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA) was eventually successful was because organizers and the denomination as a whole were familiar with the tactic of divestment as a social witness. They (and the architects of the larger divestment from fossil fuels movement) understood this history and understood that the denomination they were trying to move had been previously convinced about the tactic's efficacy in enacting faithful justice in the world. In the next chapter, I review how three denominations used divestment as a tactic to respond to climate change from 2012-2016 and how the PC(USA)'s use of the tactic was unique.

## 6. Other Movements in the Symphony: Secular and Faith Communities Divest from Fossil Fuels

“We are United Methodists who believe it is wrong to profit from wrecking God's creation. The United Methodist Church calls its people to care for those who are hungry, sick, or in need. Our investments in fossil fuel companies undermine our ministries with the most vulnerable among us.”

Fossil Free UMC

“It is the moral course of action to cease investing in companies whose core business model exacerbates climate change.”

Fossil Free UCC

“If we are called to love one another, then it is morally and theologically wrong to profit from the destruction of creation, destruction that causes more suffering.”

Fossil Free PC(USA)<sup>491</sup>

### Introduction

Taking its lead from movements to dismantle apartheid in South Africa, the divestment from fossil fuels movement explicitly asked permission from and used Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a resource and example in their movements. This lineage meant that, from the very beginning, faith leadership was implicit in the movement. The first institutions to divest from fossil fuels, however, were colleges and universities, followed by municipalities, and finally faith communities.<sup>492</sup> In this chapter, I highlight some of the major secular divestment actions and then, focus on how some of the faith commitments to divestment emerged. Much has changed in the movement since it began.

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<sup>491</sup> Each of these statements came from the divestment movement websites from around 2018. None of the original websites are still live. I include these statements as reminders of how temporary statements can be.

<sup>492</sup> “The Future of Divestment” *Challenges in Sustainability*. Swarthmore College was the first educational institution to organize for divestment from fossil fuels, though they have not yet divested.

For example, as Rev. Fletcher Harper said, “[In 2013], it seemed inconceivable to divest from fossil fuels; [now] there’s going to be a shift from moral to financial necessity in terms of divestment as a tactic.” Harper, an Episcopal priest and the Executive Director of GreenFaith, organized in 2014 to get the Episcopal Church to divest from fossil fuels. As Harper commented, the “Episcopal Church said yes right away [to divest] and then did nothing, which means that there’s more than one way to be frustrated with church bureaucracy.” The Episcopal Church voted in favor of divestment in 2015; per Harper, it is not clear or public whether funds were actually moved.<sup>493</sup> GreenFaith is one of the major conveners of faith groups that have called for divestment from fossil fuels. His words mark how the economic importance of fossil fuels has changed so that it is often increasingly financially prudent—not just morally right in the eyes of the movement—to divest from fossil fuels. In his article, “The Case for Fossil Fuel Divestment,” David Carlin—who runs the United Nations’ Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures for banks and other financial institutions—summarizes the economic effect of divestment:

The divestment movement changed the conversation around fossil fuel finance. Investors and banks are increasingly questioning the long-term viability of the entire sector. Divestment seeks to stigmatize fossil fuels and raise uncertainty around their continued use, to reduce the financial desirability of fossil assets.... Proponents of divestment may seek to starve fossil fuel producers of capital, but they are also making a savvy business decision. Over the past decade, the fossil fuel supermajors (e.g., Exxon, Chevron, Shell, BP) have tumbled from their perch as the planet’s largest companies.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> See also Goldenburg, “Episcopal church votes to divest from fossil fuels,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/episcopal-church-fossil-fuel-divestment>.

<sup>494</sup> David Carlin, “The Case for Fossil Fuel Divestment,” *Forbes*, Feb 20, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidcarlin/2021/02/20/the-case-for-fossil-fuel-divestment/?sh=25d91a7476d2>. This shifted some in the months after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, which is why organizers in Ukraine founded Razom We Stand, a movement to end investments in Russian fossil fuels. (The founder is Svitlana Romanko, a former organizer with 350.org and La udato Si Movement focused on divestment from fossil fuels.)

From the very beginning, however, the economic impact has been only one of the major motivations or marks of success for the movement. Instead, activists have focused on revoking the authority of the industry to do business as usual and marring the reputation of the industry through divestment by drawing attention to the industry itself and its immoral business model.

The divestment movement uses the strategy to insist that institutions need to move their funds out of fossil fuels investment portfolios and into more climate-friendly or climate-neutral ones as a moral witness to the urgency of climate change and the fossil fuel industry's responsibility for the crisis.<sup>495</sup> In this chapter, I trace the origins of the divestment movement by providing an overview of how divestment from fossil fuels sub-movements emerged and the stated goals as articulated by a variety of activists. Then, I examine individual case studies of the sub-movements in the United Church of Christ (UCC), the United Methodist Church (UMC), and the Presbyterian Church (USA). I identify common themes and current obstacles in each sub-movement's success. Later in this chapter, I argue that different denominations have different ways of measuring success because of their particular polities, or the rules that govern each denomination/institution. Thus, paying attention to denominational polity, and actual actions, affects how we judge the sub-movements to be successful. Through that lens, I begin to explore the idea of "success" in religious institution divestment from fossil fuels movements. Further details about the different polities are included in the case studies about their sub-movements.

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<sup>495</sup> Julie Ayling and Neil Gunningham, "Non-State Governance and Climate Policy: The Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement," *Climate Policy*, 2015, Taylor & Francis, 1-15, 2.

Throughout the chapter I interweave the perspectives of the organizations and activists who made possible the movement to divest from fossil fuels. These interviews were mostly with activists in the PC(USA), but they also included Bill McKibben (a Methodist) and James Buchanan, the divestment coordinator for Operation Noah, a Christian non-governmental organization in the United Kingdom, who convened a multi-organizational and international group of campaigners for divestment for many years. I also include data from interviews with James Antal from the United Church of Christ, and Jenny Phillips from the United Methodist Church, both leaders in their denomination efforts.<sup>496</sup> Several other denominations have made statements about divestment from the fossil fuel industry, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church. In addition to the PC(USA), I have chosen the UCC because it was the first denomination to make a statement, and the UMC because its 2018 vote took place about a month before the PC(USA)'s most 2018 vote. While I will very briefly mention more about the Episcopal Church's vote below, I exclude it from a case study because it has been a very small movement that has been virtually dormant since the vote in favor of divestment from fossil fuels in 2015. I expand on these reasons below. In this chapter, I use the language of "sub-movements" to identify different ways people of faith used a similar tactic to respond to the same target, as part of a larger movement.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Some of my interviews were with people who have or now worked for the denominations they had once been organizing in. Some of my interviewees spoke with me while working for these denominations. None of the interviews should be construed in such a way that would indicate a conflict of interest by these parties. In a later chapter, I will explore the intersections of capitalism and theology; indeed, the fact that some people I interviewed (though not all) worried that their jobs might be impacted by organizing or supporting a movement in their denomination emphasizes the potential conflicts between being faithful and being employed. A full exploration of this struggle as it related to this aspect of capitalism is outside the scope of this dissertation, but it is a question that has been explored elsewhere by other theologians, activists, and sociologists.

<sup>497</sup> Further data comes from interviews done by researchers Luis E. Hestres and Jill E. Hopke, who interviewed fourteen divestment activists between 2017 and 2018, using a snowball method and then

The goal of divestment, according to Jim Antal of the UCC, was to raise awareness that from the “practical perspective, 80 percent of the known fossil fuels reserves... would need to be left in the ground [because of the devastating impact on carbon emissions if those reserves were extracted and burned]. From a moral perspective, the divestment movement would revoke the moral license of the fossil fuel companies need to continue ‘business as usual.’”<sup>498</sup> Antal points out that the movement has been based on the conviction of the American economic system that “ownership equals responsibility.”<sup>499</sup> That is, if we, or the institutions of which we are a part, own stock in a company, we are also accountable to and for the actions of that company. At its heart, this chapter seeks to create a context for the way the PC(USA) joined the larger movement in its unique way, while relating some of the history of the rest of the movement. In doing so, I begin to argue that the theology and polity of the PC(USA) helped shape the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the denomination (which I will explore in more depth in the following chapter).

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coding transcripts. The interviews lifted up the social power of the fossil fuel industry in the global society, especially how the industry has contributed to misinformation about the relationship between fossil fuels and climate change. The interviewed activists tended to see the industry as unredeemable because of this power and the industry’s history of being an “obstacle to executing climate solutions at the necessary scale” through blocking legislation and UN decisions. That sense of power and its presence as an inescapable problem echoes some of the theological foundations (like total depravity and the inability to be fully sinless) explored in chapter two. Luis E. Hestres and Jill E. Hopke, “Fossil Fuel Divestment: Theories of Change, Goals, and Strategies of a Growing Climate Movement,” *Environmental Politics*, 2020, Vol 29, No. 3, 371-389, 377. This same power is visible in the role of the industry at UN COP meetings, where the industry was given more delegates than any other industry or country at COP 26. Matt McGrath, “COP26: Fossil Fuel Industry Has Largest Delegation at Climate Summit,” BBC, last modified November 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-59199484>.

<sup>498</sup> Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 146.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

## The Beginning

As mentioned in a previous chapter, McKibben published the article “The Terrifying New Math” in *Rolling Stone* in 2012 to make a clear and accessible call to the general public to take action on climate change in a moment when other actions and strategies seemed to be failing to do enough, fast enough. In short, the article said: a) that we must stay below adding two degrees Celsius to our global temperature, b) to do that we can put only 565 more gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and c) in 2012, there were 2,795 gigatons of carbon in the known reserves of fossil fuel companies. McKibben thus painted a bleak future caused by human-made climate change, a portrait rooted in science and what he called “our precarious—our almost but not quite finally hopeless—position.”<sup>500</sup> In the U.S. tour that followed the article, McKibben called for divestment from fossil fuels, using the language that “if it is wrong to wreck the planet, then it’s wrong to profit from that wreckage.” This language of wreckage was taken from “The Terrifying Math” and incorporated into the messaging of all three sub-movements (as will emerge below), and it connects moral witness and financial investments. McKibben writes that the point of divestment is to make a moral statement, not to affect the bottom line of the fossil fuel industry:

“The idea is not that we can bankrupt these companies; they’re the richest enterprises in history. But we can give them a black eye and begin to undermine their political power. That’s what happened a quarter century ago when, around the Western world, institutions divested their holdings in companies doing business in apartheid South Africa. Nelson Mandela credited that as a key part of his country’s liberation, and Desmond Tutu last year called on all of us to repeat the exercise with the fossil fuel companies”.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> McKibben, “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math”  
<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-188550/>.

<sup>501</sup> Bill McKibben, “Playing Offense: It’s Time to Divest from the Fossil Fuel Industry,” *The Christian Century*, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-12/playing->

The role of divestment in dismantling apartheid in South Africa has been important in legitimizing it as a tool to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable for climate change. Soon after the article was published, McKibben asked Desmond Tutu for permission to use the tactic, as mentioned in the last chapter, as a nod of respect to how it was used in South Africa.<sup>502</sup> McKibben used divestment's effectiveness in the fight against apartheid as historical precedence in "The Terrifying New Math," adding to the weight of the article in the eyes of sub-movement organizers, with references to it coming up again in the work in at least the UCC and PC(USA) sub-movements.

McKibben's call for divestment was about moving climate organizing from reducing demand for fossil fuels, to focusing on the supply side of fossil fuels and climate change. McKibben was quick to say in "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math" that previous strategies to work with the fossil fuel industry failed to adequately mitigate climate change, and thus environmental activists needed to see the industry for what it is: the enemy.<sup>503</sup> Anyone who cared about the planet, and anyone who was dependent upon the planet had to turn the sense of the enemy into anger—and then into a movement.

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[offense](#). Other people have argued for an economic impact of divestment. For example, from the "Future of Divestment" article: "The divestment theory of change is two-fold, encompassing both direct and indirect impacts. Directly, divestment actions can increase a firm's capital costs by generating uncertainty and risk around its core business model, thus leading to increasingly restrictive financing conditions that make it difficult for extractive projects to continue [19], even sometimes resulting in declines in share price [9]. Indirectly, divestment campaigns work to change public discourse around the legitimacy of a harmful industry by reframing norms of acceptability and serving as 'moral entrepreneurs' in order to politicize and stigmatize extractive activity. The goals of divestment are inherently political, with the overarching goal of removing an industry's social license to operate. The powerful combination of direct and indirect impacts makes divestment a tactic that could be useful in other environmental justice campaigns."

<sup>502</sup> Interview with Bill McKibben.

<sup>503</sup> McKibben, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-188550/>. McKibben uses "enemy" rhetoric in several places in his work, saying that "We need to view the fossil-fuel industry in a new light. It has become a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth. It is Public Enemy Number One to the survival of our planetary civilization." Todd Schifeling and Andrew J. Hoffman, "How Bill McKibben's Radical Idea Of Fossil-Fuel Divestment Transformed The Climate

This movement has been rooted in decades of action in the United States and elsewhere. In March 1989, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* hit a reef and released about eleven million gallons into the ocean outside of Prince William's Sound in Alaska.<sup>504</sup> Exxon was forced to pay billions of dollars in damages for miles of coastline damage and destruction of wildlife. In response, environmental activists galvanized to act, and companies like the Pew Foundation (funded by oil) and individuals like Stephen Rockefeller (from Standard Oil money) publicly committed to the conservation of and responsibility for the planet. Bill McKibben's book *The End of Nature*, which argued that humans had altered nature through climate change that we now held the responsibility as the largest force in the world (and that there were moral implications for how we should act), was released in 1989 as well, and the publication thrust him into the public eye and set him in conversation and activism with other environmental and climate activists.<sup>505</sup>

To review, McKibben's 2012 article "The Terrifying New Math," widely cited by activists I interviewed—was not the first articulation of divestment as a tactic to mobilize people to respond to climate change. Divestment has been a tool in climate movements since at least 1993 when Greenpeace used it as a tactic to convince insurance companies to invest in renewables instead of the fossil fuel industry, which they argued was too big of a financial risk for insurance companies.<sup>506</sup> In their research for their article, "Fossil

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Debate," The Conversation, last modified December 11, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/how-bill-mckibbens-radical-idea-of-fossil-fuel-divestment-transformed-the-climate-debate>

<sup>504</sup> This event led to the Valdez Principles, based on the Sullivan Principles. These ten principles were developed by environmental activists and investment managers in 1989. They are voluntary standards for corporate environmental responsibility, including care for the biosphere, risk mitigation, and worker compensation. These principles became the CERES Principles and are still used by investment and pension managers. Rajib N. Sanyal and Joao S. Neves, "The Valdez Principles: Implications for Corporate Social Responsibility," *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 10, No. 12 (December 1991), pp. 883-890.

<sup>505</sup> Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 540-1.

<sup>506</sup> Ayling and Gunningham, "Non-State Governance and Climate Policy," 2.

Fossil Fuel Divestment: Theories of Change, Goals, and Strategies of a Growing Climate Movement,” Luis E. Hestres and Jill E. Hopke interviewed activists in the movement in order to “expand scholarly knowledge on fossil fuel divestment as a poorly understood phenomenon through the words of activists themselves” and to show how the tactic is related to other tactics to respond to climate change.<sup>507</sup> They write of the frustration of climate activists after the UN climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009 seemed to fail and after the United States failed to pass meaningful legislation on carbon emissions.<sup>508</sup> Not enough victories were emerging in the struggle against oil.

In 2011, students in North America began to push for divestment from coal. It began when students at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania who had been in relationships with miners in West Virginia approached Daniel Apfel, “the Executive Director of the Responsible Endowments Coalition, an organization advocating for responsible investing by colleges and universities.”<sup>509</sup> Local anti-coal mining activists in West Virginia encouraged the students to use the prestige of Swarthmore to act in solidarity with the West Virginia activists.<sup>510</sup> Divestment emerged in this context with a clear homage to the use of the tactic (as one of many) in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, especially since Swarthmore had been a leader in colleges divesting from corporations doing business in South Africa. The student-led divestment movement, actively supported by the theologian and ordained Presbyterian faculty member, Mark Wallace, put the “core business model on trial” and highlighted, in particular, the hypocrisy of colleges and universities—institutions with missions to prepare young adults

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<sup>507</sup> Hestres and Hopke, “Fossil Fuel Divestment,” 372.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>509</sup> Apfel, “Exploring Divestment as a Strategy for Change,” 914.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

for the future—investing in an industry built on the destruction of that future.<sup>511</sup>

McKibben’s article in *Rolling Stone* elevated the movement and brought into focus all publicly traded fossil fuel companies, not just coal.<sup>512</sup> While the divestment from fossil fuels movement began at Swarthmore, Swarthmore did not (and still has not, despite continued organizing) divest; the first school to vote in favor of divestment was Unity College.<sup>513</sup> Other schools followed suit, making up more than fifteen percent of global divestment commitments.<sup>514</sup> Union Theological Seminary (the first seminary to do so publicly) divested in 2014.<sup>515</sup> Harvard divested in 2021. Harvard’s president Drew Faust previously had said that the issue of divestment was too political, while students and faculty in favor of divestment said that not divesting was itself a political act.<sup>516</sup> Still, according to the Divest-Invest Report:

Following nearly a decade of pressure from student activists, alumni, and faculty, Harvard, the world’s wealthiest university, announced [in 2021] that it has nearly entirely divested its \$42 billion endowment from fossil fuels and will bar any future investments in coal, oil, and gas. It was quickly followed by a divestment announcement from fellow Ivy League university Dartmouth and follows progress in divestment campaigns at other prominent Ivy schools, including Brown, Columbia, and Cornell.<sup>517</sup>

Between the official launch of the movement in November 2012 and mid-2014, over 300 college campuses and 100 municipalities and faith institutions began divestment

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<sup>511</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 354.

<sup>512</sup> Ayling and Gunningham, “Non-State Governance and Climate Policy,” 3.

<sup>513</sup> “Unity College Celebrates Decade of Divestment,” accessed March 9, 2024, <https://unity.edu/about/reinventing-college/sustainability-science/divestment-from-fossil-fuels/unity-college-celebrates-decade-of-divestment/>. Christiana Figueres, a Swarthmore graduate, had just been appointed Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in July 2010 when the movement began.

<sup>514</sup> Global Fossil Fuel Divestment Commitments Database, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://divestmentdatabase.org/>.

<sup>515</sup> “Union Theological Seminary in The City Of New York Votes Unanimously to Divest from Fossil Fuels,” last modified June 10, 2014, <https://utsnyc.edu/divestment/>.

<sup>516</sup> Ayling and Gunningham, “Non-State Governance and Climate Policy,” 7.

<sup>517</sup> Lipman, “Invest-Divest 2021,” <https://divestmentdatabase.org/report-invest-divest-2021/>.

campaigns.<sup>518</sup> By 2024 this campaign has represented over 40 trillion dollars divested from the industry, representing about 1550 institutions. Of these, 35.3% are faith-based institutions and 16.4% are educational institutions.<sup>519</sup> These campaigns and monetary gains represent a diverse movement and perhaps represent a fulfillment of many of the goals of the movement. Now, we turn to how activists have described those goals, with some overlap.

## The Goals

Divestment is rarely the goal itself in any campaign; instead, it is a mechanism to shame an institution or bring attention to an issue or to call for urgent action.<sup>520</sup> However, the point of the movement is not just about the amount of money that is removed from the industry. Naomi Klein says that the strategy is powerful because it divests the moral and social license of the industry and mars its reputation.<sup>521</sup> In his book, *Climate Church, Climate World*, Antal writes that the goal of the divestment from fossil fuels movement is to bring awareness to the urgency of climate change and the fossil fuel industry's responsibility for the crisis—and that progress in this movement could be measured by the number of dollars divested from fossil fuel companies.<sup>522</sup>

There are several goals of the divestment from fossil fuels movement, according to Apfel. Divestment is a public act that is less about “purifying” investments themselves

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> <https://divestmentdatabase.org/>. Other institutions include pension, for-profit, healthcare, governmental, and cultural. The database was still measuring at \$40.63 trillion as of February 24, 2024.

<sup>520</sup> Seidman, “Divestment Dynamics,” 1016 and 1029.

<sup>521</sup> Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 2014, 354-5.

<sup>522</sup> Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 147.

but more about creating a statement about the company or industry those stocks represent.<sup>523</sup> Apfel articulates the overarching goals of the fossil fuel divestment movement as:

1. Use investments to make a strong statement about the need to end the fossil fuel industry and to in turn insist on changes in global and economic policies
2. Bring a spotlight to the impact that fossil fuel extraction has on the climate and on communities,
3. Insist on economic policies that consider the climate in terms of investments
4. Drive capital to renewable and cleaner forms of energy<sup>524</sup>

These four themes are evident in how other activists in the movement describe the goals.

McKibben, as recounted in Seidman's "Divestment Dynamics," describes the goals as "shifting public opinion, stigmatizing the fossil fuel industry, and mobilizing pressure on community leaders and politicians."<sup>525</sup> Interviewees in Luis E. Hestres and Jill E.

Hopke's study and the people I interviewed agreed that divestment is not a tactic meant to financially bankrupt the industry. Instead, it is a symbolic tactic meant to make it harder for companies within the industry to continue as usual.<sup>526</sup> Indeed, the tactic has to be used with other tactics to "advance one strategic goal: diminishing the reputation and moral clout of the fossil fuel industry in the eyes of the public."<sup>527</sup> In short, several goals work together to make divestment a tactic that works with other tactics to destroy the reputation of the fossil fuel industry and fund a fossil-free future.

These goals, and the ability of lots of people to engage in a variety of places with a variety of institutions, makes the movement "target rich," which is to say it makes it easier to organize around and toward. That is, as Apfel wrote and Bill McKibben has

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 917.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid., 924.

<sup>525</sup> Seidman, "Divestment Dynamics," 1015.

<sup>526</sup> Hestres and Hopke, "Fossil Fuel Divestment," 382.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid., 384.

said, almost everyone with a bank account has an institution they are connected to which can be pushed to divest from fossil fuels.<sup>528</sup> This important aspect of divestment as a social movement tactic is that it gives many people all over the world an opportunity to do something on an issue.

## Accessibility

The movement to divest from the fossil fuel industry is larger than other divestment campaigns because the fossil fuel industry is “an enormously powerful industry whose fundamental existence underlies much of the global economy.”<sup>529</sup> It is also not specific to a country, as in the previous two cases. As I argue elsewhere in this dissertation, it is nearly impossible for an individual to disengage from fossil fuels; indeed, someone might need to disengage from society itself to do so (which is, of course, nearly impossible). With a target so large, it is easy for activists and individuals to find a place in which to engage; on the flip side, it has been easy for their opponents to argue that it won’t make a difference, and for many to believe that.

One of the things that came up repeatedly in interviews with activists was the sentiment that divestment as a tactic is something that gives all different kinds of people a chance to organize or participate in a social movement. For example, in our interview, Bill McKibben said explicitly that “most people don’t have an oil well, but everyone is close to a money pot” via a college, city, or faith community. He went on to say that the divestment movement also made the climate crisis come closer to home. Janet Cox, one

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<sup>528</sup> Apfel, “Exploring Divestment as a Strategy for Change,” 925.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid, 918.

of the original organizers for Fossil Free PC(USA) and now a lead organizer in Fossil Free California, commented that “movements have to be broad so people can jump in; [for divestment and in a time of climate change] we have to do all that we can,” and we have to make it accessible to everyone. Just the very fact that Cox has been organizing with both a very large state-wide/based team and a denominational team shows how the divestment movement is adaptable for different contexts.

This adaptability and accessibility make it even easier to engage as a movement, for anyone with access to an institution with investments. Robert Ross, a college professor who has been active in divestment movements in both the PC(USA) and in BDS, shared that “I can contribute to social change by working through an institution; the PC(USA) is the one I’m attached to.” In our interview, he went on to say that “divestment is a tool to get people involved, and it has made the fossil fuel industry dance a little bit *because of divestment*.” Indeed, because almost anyone can get involved in the movement, the fossil fuel industry has to pay attention to many different sectors of activists. In their research, Hestres and Hopke raise how college campuses have an avid community of young adults who want to be able to do something about the climate crisis—and this emotional pull makes them more willing to engage in the campaign.<sup>530</sup> The tactic also allows for “many local targets” for action—meaning that activists spread out geographically can take the tactic and adapt it for their local context.<sup>531</sup> As the climate crisis becomes more and more present in more and more regions, divestment can also involve the ability to respond more locally, in many places, right where people already are organizing.

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<sup>530</sup> Hestres and Hopke, “Fossil Fuel Divestment,” 380.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

As those I interviewed made clear, getting involved in divestment actions brings people in. Gary Payton, one of the original steering committee members of Fossil Free PC(USA), observed that “divestment is an attention getter and device for mobilization.” That mobilization has shown up around the world. James Buchanan of Operation Noah said in our interview “that divestment has been really effective in the sense [that it has] identified the cause of the problem— finance going to the wrong companies—and it’s identified the clear and obvious solution. It’s been really good at emphasizing the moral and ethical arguments and the financial arguments.”<sup>532</sup> The tactic, according to Buchanan, “removes the social license of the fossil fuel industry, through national/international press/attention” to divestment announcements. Operation Noah has facilitated several global divestment announcements since 2016, announcements that have highlighted statements from faith institutions from around the world.<sup>533</sup>

Each divestment strategy for each institution is unique. The next section of this chapter focuses on three movements in three particular Protestant institutions.

## The Case Studies

While McKibben initially targeted universities and municipalities, faith-based organizations and denominationally-affiliate groups joined the divestment movement to add their moral and religious voices. Their particular focus was to assert that profiting

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<sup>532</sup> Future research could explore how capitalism as a whole may be at fault.

<sup>533</sup> For example, James Buchanan managed an announcement of 72 faith institutions announcing their divestment commitments before COP 26. “Ahead of COP26, 72 Institutions Make Largest-Ever Faith Divestment Announcement,” Operation Noah, last modified October 26, 2021, <https://operationnoah.org/tag/operation-noah-global-divestment-announcement/>. This press release includes statements of support from religious leaders from around the world, including Rev. Evan Morgan of the Presbyterian Church in Wales who said, “Our General Assembly passed a resolution to divest from fossil fuels this year as part of our new green environmental policy as a denomination. We realise time is running out and to safeguard the planet and fulfill our role as stewards of God’s creation.” This Presbyterian leader is pointing to the Genesis 2 ecological vocation to act as stewards of the earth.

from the industry that has been the largest contributor to the creation of climate change was against their theological and biblical beliefs. As noted previously, divestment is an economic tactic that has taken on a moral dimension—and an identity-building one. While the Bible articulates this connection in Matthew 6:21 (“Where your treasure is, there your heart is also”) financial managers like Peter Krull of Earth Equity Alliance describe it as a kind of karmic reality, that what we put into the world or support in the world impacts our identity and life.<sup>534</sup> In the following examples, I will explore how three sub-movements take the religious foundations of divestment seriously and put it into practice. The United Church of Christ was the first denomination in the United States to vote to divest in 2012. The United Methodist Church has staged several campaigns for divestment, and it is currently (as of spring 2024) pursuing other options to respond to climate change. I chose to focus on the divestment from fossil fuels sub-movements in the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the United Methodist Church (UMC), in addition to the one within the PC(USA), for three reasons. First, this choice allows for a diversity of denominational polity. The UCC uses congregational polity, meaning that congregations hold final decision-making power for the denomination (and that annual meetings of the denominations cannot mandate congregations to take action). The UMC uses a connectional form of government that places power on bishops for much of its decision-making. The PC(USA) uses a form of government that places power in regional bodies (presbyteries). Second, each of these sub-movements calls itself “Fossil Free,” similar to Fossil Free PC(USA). This naming connects the denominational movements

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<sup>534</sup> Krull, Presentation on Fossil Fuel Free Investments, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tStI8jrBCic>.

publicly.<sup>535</sup> Below, I will also start mapping some of the contexts of Fossil Free PC(USA), though a more thorough investigation into this case study will take place in the next chapter.

Why would McKibben and secular environmental activists want the voices of churches and faith communities to join them? As Laurel Kearns reminds us in her article “The Role of Religions in Activism,” people of faith—particularly faith leaders—can mobilize groups of people, frame issues in moral terms, and offer hope when the problem seems hopeless.”<sup>536</sup> Religious institutions already have a “sheer number of listeners and actors.”<sup>537</sup> Their religious voices also bring into focus the possibility of a fossil-free world. Finally, religious groups have been working on responding to climate change and environmental crises for decades and bring moral legitimacy to their work.

In my conversations with the founders of Fossil Free UCC, Fossil Free PC(USA), and Fossil Free UMC, each pointed to McKibben’s article in the August 2012 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, and subsequent “Do the Math” Tour as a catalyst for the movement in their denominations. Jim Antal said that to him, McKibben “sounded like a trumpet blast from Ezekiel.” Antal and McKibben had been arrested twice at the White House protesting the Keystone XL pipeline—an oil pipeline running through the United States and Canada that was commissioned in 2010. The three days they spent in jail further clarified for Antal that “God is calling the church to a new vocation” in response

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<sup>535</sup> In the beginning of Fossil Free PC(USA), we were named Divest PCUSA. We felt the name did not adequately delineate our work, because there was a movement in the PCUSA to divest from three companies that were working in Israeli settlements. We chose Fossil Free PC(USA), then, to create our own identity within our denominational context. In future iterations of this research, I will explore with other leaders about the history of naming and if it matters that we three sub-movements have the same prefix. It would be interesting to know, too, which denomination took the name first.

<sup>536</sup> Kearns, “The Role of Religions in Activism,” 414.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 415

to the reality of climate change. Likewise, Dan Terpstra, one of the founding members of Fossil Free PC(USA), said that the work of Fossil Free PC(USA) started with McKibben's "Do the Math" tour:

About the time the Do the Math stuff was starting up, the University of Tennessee Knoxville campus assigned *EAARTH* [McKibben's 2010 book on climate change] to all freshmen and he was going to speak and I immediately asked him to come to [my church in] Oak Ridge. I told him I was coming to the Forward on Climate March for Feb 2013 ... it was at that rally that I attended a breakout meeting at an Episcopal church and one of the conversations was on divestment and I said that I wanted to work on exploring getting the Presbyterian Church to divest.

For Jenny Phillips, the founder of Fossil Free UMC, the article was a catalyst for more conversations. She was struck that the article was clear in naming the enemy, saying that "the enemy is the fossil fuel industry, and we should divest." She goes on to say that:

I remember thinking "Wow, the church should do that" and I sat with it for a while and tried to incorporate it with the work I was doing and that didn't get traction and then literally started talking with people around my kitchen table and then trying to figure out where our church money is and was stunned that so much of our (the UMC) money was in fossil fuels.<sup>538</sup>

Each of these conversations was initially isolated in its denominational context. Soon after the article's publication, GreenFaith helped create faith-based language for the movement. Its Executive Director, Fletcher Harper, convened several conference calls, wrote a white paper for use by sub-movements and 350.org, and oversaw the creation of comic books to creatively resource the movement from 2012-2016. The key, though, was those conference calls, which, according to Harper, allowed a variety of voices to come

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<sup>538</sup> Jenny Phillips left the leadership of Fossil Free UMC because church leaders elected her to the board of Wespeth—the pension board of the United Methodist Church. Currently, she leads the UMC mission agency's environmental program. Because of the variety of her roles and the fiduciary responsibility she has to the UMC, she spoke with me on the condition that any phrasing that risked that responsibility were attributed to me. It is concerns like this that are behind granting every interviewee the opportunity to look over the manuscript.

into the conversation with their gifts, expertise, and perspectives. In our interview, Harper said that there were:

people like Bob Massie, an Episcopal priest who was active in the apartheid movement and had really close relationships with the ICCR (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility), as well as Tom Van Dyck, a financial advisor at the Royal Bank of Canada, who was the first fund manager to make a strong and principled case for divestment. They added a level of financial credibility [that] you can and should do this, and you should fire your manager if they say you can't do this.

By collecting these voices, GreenFaith and Harper hoped to create an ecosystem of voices that could make the case from a variety of different backgrounds. Harper and GreenFaith provided a lot of the groundwork for the beginning of a movement that reached across denominational lines. GreenFaith sought out people who would be able to speak to the questions that came up around divestment, and they, in Harper's words, "established the credibility of the argument."

At about the same time in 2012, Terpstra decided to call Rebecca Barnes, the staff person for Environmental Ministries for the PC(USA). She connected Terpstra with several other people across the denomination, working to create networks of like-minded people. Some of those people were from First Presbyterian Church in Palo Alto, where I was pastoring. Members of that church had been to a Do the Math speech in October 2012 and had begun the process of writing an overture, the mechanism in Presbyterian polity to change denominational policy.<sup>539</sup> Terpstra said, "Rebecca Barnes pulled in several of the 'right people,' identifying people with similar interests, and one of the people was Fletcher Harper at Green Faith." Harper was on early planning calls for Fossil

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<sup>539</sup> I was part of this Palo Alto group, and in fact, was the one who explained what an overture is to that Palo Alto group.

Free PC(USA), and he eventually attended the PC(USA) General Assembly for its first vote on divestment from fossil fuels in 2014.

All of these conversations were happening in the larger context of the secular movement to divest from fossil fuels. In that context, which had begun to gain momentum in college campuses and municipalities from 2012 onward, these denominations were crafting specifically faith-based language.<sup>540</sup> By 2013, when the UCC voted to divest, over three hundred universities and one hundred cities had divestment campaigns.<sup>541</sup> At this point, it is helpful to tease out the stories of each of the denominations that have been working on divestment from fossil fuels, specifically looking at the individual stories of their movements.

### *The United Church of Christ*

As noted in a previous chapter, the UCC was part of the beginnings of the environmental justice movement, the Toxic Waste and Race Reports, and supporting environmental justice gatherings. This is the tradition out of which Benjamin Chavis came, and it is the denomination that includes Trinity UCC in Chicago, which has been a huge advocate for ecological justice. This history of embracing environmental justice

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<sup>540</sup> From my interview with Jim Antal: “Early on in the divestment movement at Harvard [there were those] who were very vocal about Harvard’s moral responsibility to divest and then in 2014 there were 120 faculty who wrote a letter to the president urging the president to listen to the students and President Drew Faust wrote a statement that was embarrassing, in which she made her case that the investment of Harvard must be blind to moral concerns. It’s so dramatic—the letter from the faculty was so morally articulate and the letter from the president was shockingly immoral. By the end of 2015 rumor had it that Harvard’s investment managers had purged Harvard of fossil fuels but didn’t want to put in some sort of future bind that they had paid attention to the wishes of students and faculty.” (More information about Harvard’s divestment is available Oliver Milman, “Harvard ‘Pausing’ Investments in Some Fossil Fuels,” *The Guardian*, accessed March 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/apr/27/harvard-university-pausing-investments-in-some-fossil-fuels>.) Harvard officially divested from fossil fuels in 2021.

<sup>541</sup> Klein 2014, 354

made the denomination a clear candidate for divestment from fossil fuels movement-building. In our interview, Antal talked about how he wanted the movement in the United Church of Christ to be both a success story and a model for other denominations. Indeed, it is often faith communities that can “take the risk of new behavior, and its success becomes the story to be told to others.”<sup>542</sup> In June 2013, less than a year after McKibben’s article appeared, the UCC voted to support divestment from fossil fuels, the first denomination in the United States to vote in favor of divestment from the fossil fuel industry.<sup>543</sup> Antal writes that

I wrote the resolution so it could be presented to our national UCC Synod in July 2013. In the six months prior to Synod, I convinced 10 additional UCC Conferences to endorse the resolution.<sup>544</sup>

Two weeks later, the vote was ridiculed by opponents as hypocritical because many of the people who voted for divestment had traveled to the vote via fossil fuels (a common enough frame for the opposition that was one of the impetuses for Fossil Free PC(USA) to walk to General Assembly in 2018). Antal argues that this criticism ignores the systemic constraints of the world in which we live as people of faith.<sup>545</sup> That is, fossil fuels so pervade our society that individuals have no choice but to use fossil fuels. For Antal, voting in favor of divestment revokes the ability of the fossil fuel industry to

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<sup>542</sup> Kearns 2011, 415. One could, of course, argue that faith communities are sometimes the last to move, as evidenced by faith communities being slow to welcome queer folks or to open their doors to Black Lives Matter protests.

<sup>543</sup> Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World*, 94. See also Celeste Kennel-Shank, “UCC Investment Fund Will Be Free of Fossil Fuels,” *Christian Century*, Vol. 131 Issue 21, (October 15, 2024), 15.

<sup>544</sup> Jim Antal, “Synod 2023 Divestment Hearing Panel,” last modified July 3, 2023, [https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Antal-2023\\_Synod-Divestment-Hearing-Panel-Final.pdf](https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Antal-2023_Synod-Divestment-Hearing-Panel-Final.pdf). See also United Church of Christ, “Divesting from Fossil Fuel Companies and Shareholder Activism,” [https://www.ucc.org/divesting\\_from\\_fossil\\_fuel\\_companies\\_and\\_shareholder\\_activism/](https://www.ucc.org/divesting_from_fossil_fuel_companies_and_shareholder_activism/). Getting multiple regions to support a resolution is a common organizing practice in the UCC (as well as the PCUSA).

<sup>545</sup> Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World*, 70.

continue to operate as usual, which in turn will lead to systemic alternatives for fossil fuels that individuals can then engage in.

UCC divestment work has been deeply tied to McKibben's work, as noted on the Fossil Free UCC website:

On Dec. 10, 2012, the Massachusetts Conference Board of Directors voted to bring a *Resolution urging divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies* to the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in July 2013. In early January, Bill McKibben's article in *The Christian Century*, "Playing offense: It's time to divest from the oil industry," mentioned our vote and plans.

While Antal wrote the first resolution on divestment, between the Massachusetts vote on the resolution December 2012 and the General Synod vote on the resolution in July 2013 ten other conferences voted either to co-sponsor or endorse the resolution. The work of organizers was rooted in theological, biblical, and scientific rationales that supported an ecological vocation that is embedded in generally accepted science.<sup>546</sup> Antal preached on divestment and organized several conferences (or regional bodies) to support the resolution. As noted on the Fossil Free UCC website, when it passed, the successful vote got international attention. Fossil Free UCC specifically lifted up the connection to the divestment movement to end apartheid by quoting on their website that "Archbishop Desmond Tutu also sent his congratulations and added, "We hope others will follow your splendid example."<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Conferences are the regional bodies of the United Church of Christ. According to Antal, "In response to the 2013 divestment resolution, our United Church Funds began to figure out how to create a fossil fuel free fund. And create it they did! By 2015, churches were given the option of investing their endowments in the groundbreaking "Beyond Fossil Fuel Funds." And soon thereafter, our Pension Board introduced the Northern Trust Global Sustainability Index Fund (GSIF) option for pre-retirement participants." Antal, "Synod 2023 Divestment Hearing Panel," [https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Antal-2023\\_Synod-Divestment-Hearing-Panel-Final.pdf](https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Antal-2023_Synod-Divestment-Hearing-Panel-Final.pdf).

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

On their website, Fossil Free UCC proclaimed: “From the beginning, we wanted this resolution to be a model for other religious groups. We were bold to believe that people of faith actually have the power— in concert with other political and popular forces— to bend the arc of justice.”<sup>548</sup> Antal said that part of the point of their work to get the UCC to divest from fossil fuels was to change the conversation about climate change and that their work has been a success: “History will be absolutely clear that the divestment movement was utterly essential in pivoting society.”

Since that vote in 2013, the United Church of Christ has been part of the rest of the movement and has developed options for fossil free investments for congregations and individuals. Individual congregations have divested, and the denominational leadership has been vocal in favor of divestment.<sup>549</sup> The polity of the UCC, however, means that the denominational vote could not insist that all congregations divest. Antal noted in his interview that divestment work has now become part of the work of the office of Environmental Ministries for the denomination and that he has often had an intern specifically for divestment work. The polity of the UCC, however, means that the denominational vote could not insist that all congregations divest. This is one of the limitations of UCC polity.

### *United Methodist Church*

Like the UCC and PCUSA, the UMC’s environmental justice commitments go back to the Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches. Jenny

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<sup>548</sup> The phrase “bend the arc of justice” is originally attributed to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

<sup>549</sup> The full list of congregations in the UCC that have divested is here: <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/divesting-from-fossil-fuel-companies-and-shareholder-activism/>

Phillips rooted the beginning of Fossil Free UMC in the Do the Math tour and the subsequent secular divestment campaigns. Many of those secular campaigns were asking governing boards to divest from the Carbon 200 list.<sup>550</sup> Phillips and others realized that they wanted to frame their movement around religious values. So, Phillips and other Fossil Free UMC activists drafted a resolution to their General Conference that mimicked the demands of university campaigns but included faith-based language. In 2014, four annual conferences (the yearly meetings for regional bodies in the UMC) studied the resolution and in 2015, twelve annual conferences (out of fifty-six in the United States) voted on whether to bring the resolution to the General Conference. Eleven of the conferences affirmed the resolution and one ended up not voting. In 2015, Phillips worked with activists in the twelve conferences to prepare them for the General Conference, and “prior to the 2015 votes, [they] put together a campaign that people took to their conferences to educate people who would be voting on it to dispel myths and do all the FAQs and it was good practice for those of [them] doing the hard push at General Conference.”

In return, Fossil Free UMC faced significant resistance. Phillips said that when they began their outreach to delegates to the General Conference, Wespath, the pension board for the UMC, began to push back, saying that as a pension board they “didn’t want to be constrained.” (A similar thing happened with the PC[USA]’s Board of Pensions). Phillips attributed Fossil Free UMC’s ability to quickly respond to their nimbleness when facing Wespath’s negative responses, which included a publicly available (at the time)

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<sup>550</sup> The Carbon Underground 200 is also referenced in the first overture that Fossil Free PC(USA) wrote. It is “an annually updated listing of the top 100 public coal companies globally and the top 100 public oil and gas companies globally, ranked by the potential carbon emissions content of their reported reserves.” (“Fossil Free Indexes,” n.d.)

video opposing divestment.<sup>551</sup> Philips noted that Wespath is “managing huge sums of money and has to be slower, whereas I could write a blog post and post it the next day—we were a campaign rather than an institution trying to hang on to control.” Wespath’s responses are an example of the sociological phenomenon that Sharon Nepstad articulates about how institutions that feel threatened by activists create obstacles.<sup>552</sup>

In 2016, the UMC General Conference voted against divestment and soon after (in 2017) Wespath set up fossil free options in response to the demand demonstrated by the Fossil Free UMC campaign. The decision to use these funds has been left to individual retirement plan participants, UMC annual conferences, agencies, foundation, and other denominational investors.<sup>553</sup> Phillips has moved out of leadership of Fossil Free UMC, and the sub-movement is planning to bring another resolution to the 2024 General Conference, calling for divestment from fossil fuels at a denominational level, under the leadership of Sharon Delgado, who has written several books on Methodist faith and climate change.<sup>554</sup> The new website leverages biblical language, saying

The hope of an earth free of harmful fossil fuels is right in front of us. Our 2024 effort calls United Methodists to divest from fossil fuels at every level. Let us be righteous. Let us be a Just and Fossil Free people.” Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. – Matthew 6:21<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> This video is no longer publicly available.

<sup>552</sup> Nepstad, *Plowshares*, 9. See also Tamara Audi, “United Methodist Pension Fund Revises Investment Guidelines,” *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified January 22, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/united-methodist-pension-fund-issues-new-guidelines-1421945354>

<sup>553</sup> “United Methodist Church Rejects Divestment,” Divestmentfacts.com, last modified May 23, 2016, <https://divestmentfacts.com/united-methodist-church-rejects-divestment/>. In 2016, the UMC was also struggling through a schism around the full inclusion of queer folks, which made it difficult for other social justice movements to find success.

<sup>554</sup> See Sharon Delgado, *Love in a Time of Climate Change: Honoring Creation, Establishing Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2017).

<sup>555</sup> Fossil Free UMC, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://fossilfreeumc.net/>

Here we see a clear call to action (“divest at every level”) with Biblical references (explicit in the Matthew verse, but implicit in the “Just” and “righteous” language). Still, the struggle is not continuing in a vacuum. Like the PC(USA), the UMC has been focused on issues of LGBTQ+ inclusion that have led to a split in the denomination. In 2024, the UMC will face denominational votes on LGBTQ+ inclusion, social values and regionalization that will shape the future of the UMC’s membership and structure. These decisions will impact how the denomination can grapple with other issues.

### *Presbyterian Church (USA)*

As noted already in this dissertation, the beginning of Fossil Free PC(USA) was decidedly a grass-roots effort (as opposed to the UCC staff-led effort by Jim Antal). Rebecca Barnes, who in 2012 was the national staff person for Environmental Ministries in the PC(USA), describes the beginning of the sub-movement in the PC(USA):

I was impressed that this was the first time in a long while that individual, previously unconnected Presbyterians from different parts of the country and different circles were self-organizing around a new idea and issue—without staff help, they were setting up phone calls, taking notes, offering leadership, setting goals.

In Barnes’ description, we see parallels with Nepstad’s description of movement emergence, as detailed in the next chapter. There must be a favorable political climate for the activists to perceive that they will be successful (which we see in Barnes’ description of the energy and non-controversial identity at the beginning of the movement). There has to be a pre-existing organization to support the movement (which we see in Barnes’ institutional support of the movement by convening phone calls and connecting people). Nepstad writes that when people “no longer consider the status quo legitimate, they

begin demanding change, and they believe that they have the power to alter the situation.”<sup>556</sup> This last condition emerged in the PC(USA) after years of ineffective shareholder engagement with fossil fuel corporations—it was time for people power to emerge differently.

Indeed, in the PC(USA) the shareholder engagement committee Mission Responsibility for Investments (MRTI) holds the institutional power in the denomination related to investments; in that sense it is different from the UCC. According to Rob Fohr, who was the lead staff person for MRTI from 2016-2023, MRTI’s work in creating faith-based shareholder engagement in the early 1970s revolutionized how churches and faith communities worked with corporations because it brought denominational representatives into shareholder meetings with corporations. (This happened under the leadership of Bill Soplansky-Jarman, who was the lead staff person for MRTI from 1984-2016). In those meetings, representatives from denominations could lobby corporations based on their theological and ecclesial commitments. MRTI responded to the divestment overture in 2014 by saying that categorical divestment would undercut the engagement (in general) that they had been in the process of doing for several decades, i.e. they worried that the passage of this divestment overture would lead to divestment anytime the church did not like something.<sup>557</sup> “Divestment” as a concept was also associated with the movement to divest from three companies that were working in Israeli-occupied Palestine, and that conversation had created deep wounds in the denomination. Barnes remembers, “I

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<sup>556</sup> Nepstad, *Plowshares*, 5.

<sup>557</sup> Leslie Scanlon, “Fossil Fuel Divestment Not Recommended by MRTI,” The Presbyterian Outlook, last modified January 28, 2016, [pres-outlook.org/2016/01/fossil-fuel-divestment-not-recommended-by-mrti/](https://www.pres-outlook.org/2016/01/fossil-fuel-divestment-not-recommended-by-mrti/)

realized that it was going to be more complicated with MRTI—they felt that in order to be at the table, we needed to be clear that we weren't undercutting their work.”

The work, then, needed to understand how Presbyterians are related through our polity or form of government, which is also the collective structure of the denomination to govern, as well as the use of *Robert's Rules of Order* (a parliamentary procedure that requires a knowledge of voting and processes) to make decisions.<sup>558</sup> It is the system that activists in Fossil Free PC(USA) inherited, or any activists, and it is an imperfect system.

For example, José Gonzalez Colon said in our interview that Presbyterian governance is set up to protect that status quo, which is to say that using Robert's Rules takes time to learn and master and when the denomination's General Assembly is composed of elders who change every two years, it is the staff (those who have been part of many assemblies) who know the most about process and can maneuver the process. Indeed, the process laid out in *Robert's Rules of Order* have been used to manipulate meeting outcomes, as noted by Gary Payton, who described “Robert's Rules as a straitjacket [for organizers]. Substitute motions hijacked the movement [multiple times] and the process and silenced a lot of people. And at the same time, MRTI felt constrained to find a decent and in order process/criteria to judge the industry on a two-year cycle (not any faster).” Here Gary is pointing to both how the committee tasked with responding to the overture needed to overcome internal opposition (through the minority report brought as a substitute motion) to call for divestment from fossil fuels. Mission

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<sup>558</sup>The Book of Order requires that all meetings of more than twelve people be managed by the most up to date version of *Robert's Rules of Order*, an actual handbook which is over 700 pages long. It articulates proper procedures for meetings, voting, and other decision making. Jim Slaughter, “Who Was Robert and Why Do His Rules Rule?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, updated May 10, 2023, <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/05/who-was-robert-and-why-do-his-rules-rule/>.

Responsibility Through Investments (MRTI) could only recommend a moderate approach to divestment (with nothing to change between General Assemblies) because of the limited scope of work and institutional power it has. In other words, MRTI could not make decisions that were in opposition to General Assembly rulings because that would be outside the scope of what they can do as a committee of the denomination. I will expand upon this in Chapter 7.

Likewise, the denomination's use of overtures to propose denominational changes has limited the scope of a movement's influence. Activist Pam McVety suggested that the polity of the PC(USA) "is why overtures keep failing because staff have unlimited time on the floor while advocates do not, and inherently, staff are committed to protecting their own roles." This came up most "scorchingly" (her word) in the interview with Fossil Free PC(USA) activist Janet Cox, who said in response to the question about how Presbyterian polity and governance has shown up in the divestment work in the PC(USA):

It seems to me from observations at the two general assemblies I went to—Detroit and Portland—that the denomination gave over to the people who perpetuate the fossil fuel industry. Part of it was commission (how it was managed by people who did not know the system/polity well). Part of it was omission (by not setting up the relevant committees with the sort of leadership that could not be mowed down by fossil fuel interests on committees). In this context, polity and the effectiveness of *Robert's Rules of Order* and other accepted norms: these only work if the people who are running the show are competent.

A fair assessment of the impediments to change could conclude that the deck is stacked against anyone trying to change the status quo of the denomination.

However, it does not mean that it is impossible to make change. Similar to the UMC Wespath's response, the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Foundation created fossil free options for individuals, congregations, and presbyteries to use starting

in 2016. Fossil Free PC(USA) has dedicated part of its work in following years to recruiting people and institutions to those options (which essentially means that organizing people to use the options has been left to grassroots, non-paid leaders). In 2016, the Synod of the Northeast became the first regional body to actually divest as a regional body. (In Presbyterian polity, it was possible to support the overture to the General Assembly in favor of divestment without actually voting to divest as a regional body.) In addition, MRTI started work on criteria for negotiating with companies in the fossil fuel industry: if a company does not meet those criteria, MRTI would recommend divestment (this would be a company-by-company process, not categorical). In other words, investment options with certain companies would not be available but churches and the denomination could still invest in, and thus profit from, fossil fuel companies as a category.

Between 2016 and 2018, Fossil Free PC(USA) organized 40 presbyteries in support of an overture that called for categorical divestment from fossil fuels, the largest number of presbyteries to support a single overture in the history of the denomination. In that same time period, Fossil Free PC(USA) became part of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, a para-church organization that had been part of organizing to get the PC(USA) to divest from three companies doing business in Israel. As a statement against the use of fossil fuels, and as a way to get attention and educate Presbyterians, members of Fossil Free PC(USA) and the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship started organizing a 260-mile walk from the PC(USA) headquarters in Louisville, KY, to St. Louis, MO, where the General Assembly would be held. A fuller account of the strategy behind this walk is in the last chapter. Meanwhile, MRTI finalized the criteria for shareholder engagement

with several companies and proposed that criteria to the General Assembly at its gathering in 2018. The body voted to support the MRTI criteria, although the committee tasked with deliberating on the overture and the criteria had recommended divestment, but the General Assembly could and did vote it down. In response to the vote, Fossil Free PC(USA) staged a die-in (a non-violent direct action that includes activists lying on the floor to bring attention to an issue), and Mark Eakin, a climate scientist who is also an elder in the PC(USA), went on record to say that in between the 2018 and 2020 General Assembly (the opportunity the church would have to adopt another change) 10 million people would die from climate change-related causes.

## The Successes

Have these sub-movements been successful? The answer depends on a few factors. Seidman writes that the divestment movement has allowed grassroots organizers to engage in an issue (climate change) that felt too abstract or big. It gives students and people of faith something to do in the face of a global environmental crisis, a way to confess complicity with the suffering of other people and the planet and a way to take action.<sup>559</sup> As each institution divests—or debates the possibility of divestment—an opportunity for more debate and more action on climate change emerges. This ability to engage can be seen as a success because it means the movement is growing. The longer the fight for divestment goes on, the longer the climate crisis is in the public eye, which is a success in itself.<sup>560</sup> At the same time, the movement communicates that people can

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<sup>559</sup> Seidman, “Divestment Dynamics,” 1031-2.

<sup>560</sup> Apfel, “Exploring Divestment as a Strategy for Change,” 913.

make a difference. Institutions, which are made up of people, have a role in facilitating change, particularly in the church, through more than individual actions. Even people who are not interested in joining a divestment movement may be pushed to think about their relationship to fossil fuels and climate change. Still, McKibben's original call was for categorical divestment from the fossil fuel industry. If we define success as responding positively to this call, all three of these sub-movements fail. None of these groups has successfully lobbied its denomination to divest from the whole industry.

So, if we define success for each denomination in terms of the organizing group's ability within their polity constraints, the answer is more complex. All three denominations now offer options for congregations and pension holders for fossil fuel-free funds, but whether or not those funds constitute a success is up to the denominations. Fossil Free UCC considers their current status a success, because offering the option was the most they can do within the governing polity of the UCC. Antal said: "The way the Pension board is set up, every individual determines how their pensions are invested... Each person decides how it's funded. And we were asking the Pension board to offer an option." The Annual Conference cannot require individuals and congregations to use the fossil-free investment options in congregational polity.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) now offers options both for individuals, through the denomination's Board of Pensions, and for congregations and presbyteries, through the Presbyterian Foundation. Activists in Fossil Free PC(USA) do not see this as a full success because the denomination's General Assembly still has the power and ability to mandate that all investments be fossil-free, and it has not yet done so. In addition, when the Board of Pensions and the Foundation offered these options, they did not make a

statement about the moral implications of climate change or the fossil-free options—they just expanded consumer choices.

The UMC also offers options for fossil fuel divestment from Wespeth, the denomination's board of pensions. Because the connectional form of government, however, would allow the General Conference to categorically divest on moral and religious grounds, the fact that there are only options for individuals who choose to opt in shows that there is still room to grow.

If we continue to define success through Nepstad's definition as "changing the conversation and the institution" all three of these sub-movements have been successful, meaning that the goal has been to make some kind of change. Indeed, Rebecca Barnes remarked that the divestment movement in the Presbyterian Church "has been successful in raising awareness, creating dialogue, and just how serious we are in working on climate change as a denomination." And Dan Terpstra said that "we were pretty effective in getting this in front of people and getting people to discuss it at all the levels of the denomination." Indeed, since the divestment conversation began in the PC(USA), all six national offices of the PC(USA) have begun to consider environmental concerns in their work, as the review in Chapter 4 shows. The vote on divestment from fossil fuels in the UMC took place at the same General Conference meeting that argued about the ordination of LGBTQ+ people called to ministry, and where support for ordination was turned down.<sup>561</sup> Such a controversial conversation could have totally overtaken the General Conference (and, indeed, it was the focal point of the gathering). Still, Phillips says that divestment from fossil fuels "became one of the larger issues at General

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<sup>561</sup> The General Conference in the UMC happens once every four years and is an international gathering of delegates elected by annual conferences.

conferences (if you weren't talking about sexuality, you were talking about this) and it felt powerful that we broke through that."

As dialogues about climate change and divestment have happened in a variety of sub-movements, it has been important to continue to frame those conversations in terms of moral and religious language, not just economic vocabulary. From the beginning, McKibben has followed Tutu's lead to say that divestment is not an economic issue, but a moral issue. That moral language has been key in each of the sub-movements in this chapter. Each of these sub-movements has raised the level of dialogue in its denomination about the urgency of climate change and about the fiduciary responsibility of denominations to respond morally and responsibility. Toward the end of our interview, Antal said,

With South Africa apartheid, there was huge resistance on the country's part to say they'd been economically pushed into a corner and the same thing is happening now.... The divestment movement has gained so much traction that society will soon be regarding them [that is, fossil fuel companies] as pariahs.

Although divestment is not just about economics (and money is always about morals), in 2016, the Center for International Environmental Law wrote in their "Trillion Dollar Transformation: Fiduciary Duty, Divestment, and Fossil Fuels in an Era of Climate Risk" report that "it is increasingly clear that climate change and climate risk are already reshaping the investment landscape, and that these effects will grow dramatically in the years ahead."<sup>562</sup> The report goes on to say that money managers needed to include climate change in their assessment of risks. The conversation has changed—removing

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<sup>562</sup> Steven Feit, Amanda Kistler, Carroll Muffett, and Lisa Hamilton. "Trillion Dollar Transformation: Fiduciary Duty, Divestment, and Fossil Fuels in an Era of Climate Risk." Center for International Environmental Law, last modified December 2016, <http://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Trillion-Dollar-Transformation-CIEL.pdf>.

funds from the fossil fuel industry is no longer just a conversation for environmental and religious activists.<sup>563</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed how three different mainline Protestant denominations have used divestment from fossil fuels as a tactic to respond to climate change. I argue that while each of these movements began around the same time in response to the same article, the leaders of these movements had differing results because of the polity constraints of the denominations. Success depends on the target, and sometimes success in a social movement is a qualitative measure, not a quantitative one. Indeed, sometimes the movement takes so long, and the struggle for a win in the struggle for climate justice is so hard, that Hestres and Hopke write that “we also find that divestment fulfills some affective needs, including the need to feel efficacious during times of relatively little progress on climate policy at the U.S. Federal Level.”<sup>564</sup> Each of these sub-movements in the UCC, UMC, and the PC(USA) have used divestment as a tool to respond to climate change as Christian denominations. While there is more work to be done, on many levels, changing the conversation—and bringing the urgency of climate change to the forefront of these denominations—is key to responding to climate change with our whole selves. In the final chapter of the dissertation, I move to a more detailed exploration of how the divestment from fossil fuels movement succeeded, and failed, in the PC(USA), arguing that attention to the theological, cultural, and historical

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>564</sup> Hestres and Hopke, “Fossil Fuel Divestment,” 385.

realities of the denomination allowed for the PC(USA) to divest from fossil fuels. I also acknowledge that the work to divest from fossil fuels is more than just a question about success in a movement; it is also about faithfulness.

## 7. Finale: Divestment from Fossil Fuels in the PC(USA)



This photo is the only inclusion of Fossil Free PC(USA) in the Religion News Article that announced that the PC(USA) had voted to divest from fossil fuels. Photo by Danny Bolin.<sup>565</sup>

### Introduction

As noted in the previous chapters, the beginning of Fossil Free PC(USA) was decidedly a grass-roots effort, with Presbyterians from around the country getting together on conference calls.<sup>566</sup> The beginnings of the movement echo Sharon Erickson Nepstad's description of movement emergence. She says that first there must be a favorable political climate for the activists to perceive that they will be successful.

<sup>565</sup> Bob Smietana, "Presbyterians to Divest from 5 Oil Companies, including Exxon Mobil, After Years of Debate," *Religion News Service*, Last modified July 7, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/07/07/presbyterians-to-divest-from-5-oil-companies-including-exxon-mobil-after-years-of-debate/>.

<sup>566</sup> While the movement began in the grassroots, it quickly drew support from several places of power within the denomination (as evidenced by support from multiple former moderators of the denomination.)

Second, there has to be a pre-existing organization to support the movement. Third, it is necessary for people to “no longer consider the status quo legitimate, [so that] they begin demanding change, and they believe that they have the power to alter the situation.”<sup>567</sup> The picture of the die in at the beginning of the chapter illustrates this. This framework informs my conclusions on how and why activists were successful in employing divestment from fossil fuels in the PC(USA).

This framework overlaps with some of my expectations as a participant action researcher. As I noted in earlier chapters, when I started the interviews with key members of the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA), I anticipated that a couple of key biblical themes would emerge: first, a call to love creation based in the Genesis creation stories (or ecological vocation, as noted in chapter 2). Second, a sense of sin from failing to live up to the biblical vocation (as noted in chapter 4). Third, a theological commitment to put money in the same place as theological commitments (based on previous conversations with activists). Fourth, a commitment to stand with people who are suffering. Some of these themes did emerge in interviews, but a major theme that emerged unexpectedly was a theologically based distrust of capitalism. I don’t see any of these as specifically Presbyterian, just that activists who are Presbyterian found these themes to be in alignment with their motivations.

Similarly, as I started interviews, I thought success in responding to climate change would be around changing the conversation around divestment or a clear and measurable increase of PC(USA) resources on climate change. Instead, interviewees indicated that they set the bar much higher, and straightforwardly named success by

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<sup>567</sup> Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

FFPC(USA) as limiting carbon emissions, stalling climate change, and divesting from fossil fuels. This kind of success (a measurable impact on climate change) is something that everyone in the denomination could work toward. McKibben said in our interview that one of the gifts of divestment as a tactic was that the story and problem of climate change became accessible to everyone and anyone: “while not everyone has their own pile of money, most people are adjacent to investments through an institution.”<sup>568</sup>

In this final chapter, I build upon the realities of climate change and the context of reformed theology to show how Fossil Free PC(USA) emerged and used the tactic of divestment in the Presbyterian Church as a denomination with a history of environmental work. To do so, I marry Nepstad’s framework with activist interviews about success and theology. I argue that whatever success Fossil Free PC(USA) had in responding to climate change has been rooted in an understanding of the target they are seeking to move in elements of Protestant environmental history, Presbyterian culture (like polity and overtures), and Reformed and biblical theologies. In addition, we had a clear vision of success. Throughout this chapter, I continue to employ a method of centering the voices and ideas of the activists I interviewed, letting academic resources frame and support those ideas. Laurel Kearns notes that it is important to frame the problem in moral and ethical ways, a frame that tells why the issue is a problem, who is responsible, and what needs to be done.<sup>569</sup> Kearns notes in her chapter with Veronica Kyle in *Grassroots to Global* that the work of faith-based eco-Justice is rooted in the realities and

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<sup>568</sup> There is, of course, a classist assumption being made here. While perhaps “most” people are connecting to some larger pot of money, through a church, college, or municipal fund, we cannot assume that these funds are invested. I wonder, for future research, how the whiteness and economic classes of the people I interviewed impacted their responses and perspectives.

<sup>569</sup> Kearns, “The Role of Religions in Activism,” 415.

contexts of the practitioners.<sup>570</sup> This contextualization requires the kind of framing that José Gonzalez-Colon articulates in his interview: a willingness to see the fossil fuel industry as being as evil as tobacco companies, i.e. companies that are responsible for the harm of people. In turn, this requires a church that will let its money follow its ethos, not just at the national level but at every level, thus no longer supporting the wrecking of the planet and people. This was the kind of success that the movement called for, a total alignment between theology and money. In short: an effective response to climate change demands this kind of theological faithfulness that has practical, financial implications.

## Favorable Political Climate (or Pre-Existing Support) for the Work

What would a favorable political climate, as Nepstad outlines, for work to divest from fossil fuels look like in the PC(USA)? That is, to expect that a movement could be successful, the cultural reality of the target (in this case, the PC[USA]) needed to be viewed by activists as movable.<sup>571</sup> Indeed, some of that context was laid out in Chapter 4: all of the policies, statements, and actions around climate change and the environment that had been part of the PC(USA) for over 30 years. But other factors in play also made the PC(USA) a movable target. For example, the divestment movement came at the end of the successful movement to ordain LGBTQ+ people who were called to ministry. Many churches left the denomination after the votes to include queer ordinands passed. One could argue that the loss of more conservative congregations due to this acceptance

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<sup>570</sup> Veronica Kyle and Laurel Kearns, “The Bitter and the Sweet of Nature: Weaving a Tapestry of Migration Stories,” in *Grassroots to Global: Broader Impacts of Civil Ecology*, ed. Marianne E. Krasny (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 42.

<sup>571</sup> Another way that movement activists have used to talk about this is through a “spectrum of allies” process. “Spectrum of Allies,” Beautiful Trouble, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/spectrum-of-allies/>

of queer folks in the clergy was a positive step in creating a favorable climate for divestment from fossil fuels to pass (and several of the activists working for divestment from fossil fuels were previously part of the movement for full LGBTQ+ inclusion). However, this sentiment was not voiced in interviews, so I leave this connection mostly for future research, while also acknowledging the decades of organizing work by many, many people to build a more just denomination. In this section, I focus on the PC(USA) joining the BDS movement, and the role of MRTI, and then review the growing environmental sentiment—pieces that showed up in interviews with activists.

In 2014, the PC(USA) voted to divest from HP, Motorola, and Caterpillar, all companies that were working in the state of Israel.<sup>572</sup> Robert Ross, who had worked on that campaign along with many other people and organizations like Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, lifted the context of divestment as a tactic that had been previously supported by the denomination. He said that when he joined Fossil Free PC(USA),

I was working on divestment from Israel. Divestment from fossil fuels was in parallel and I was feeling some emotional solidarity. I remember thinking naively that I might be able to help with it because I have experience in the legislative process in PC(USA). It's a lesson in cross-movement solidarity and this is also a movement for justice and liberation and creating the world we want to live in and what we want our children to live in and solidarity with other people in the world. In this season of my life, it seemed like a sense of call.

Similarly, Emily Brewer, who, at the time of our interview, was the Executive Director of Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF), noted that PPF had worked in coalition around divestment from three companies in Palestine. She said, “We came to fossil fuel

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<sup>572</sup> Daily, “Assembly Approves Divestment.” 2014 is the first year that an overture on divestment from fossil fuels was brought to the General Assembly, so these movements overlapped for one General Assembly.

divestment through the logistical knowledge from working on a different divestment campaign.”

Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) was part of that BDS divestment campaign as well. But key differences in understanding emerged. Rob Fohr, who worked with MRTI for many years, said in his interview with me that he felt that

in many ways a decision to divest is an admission of failure of the shareholder engagement process. It is essentially saying, ‘We don’t think any further engagement will yield a positive result.’ When that occurs, the last option is to divest, which effectively ends the shareholder engagement process,

which is the main purpose of the committee. Dan Terpstra said of his first encounter with the committee that he was very impressed with much of what they were doing, but that he was frustrated with their reliance on shareholder’s initiatives:

We had to figure out this whole part of the church, and to see them [MRTI] opposing [divestment from fossil fuels] so vehemently...they were so ossified ... they became enamored by their own ability to get meetings with these companies, that they couldn’t see that the companies weren’t responding to any of the calls for change. I realized that I had deeply offended Bill [Bill Somplatsky-Jarman] because it could have sounded like I was denigrating his work for 20 years and that ended up damaging my relationship with MRTI from that time forward ... I still have respect for many of the people on the committee.

Dan noted the life work of Bill Somplatsky-Jarman, who was the long-time staff person for MRTI, and before that, was the first staff person to have environmental justice included in his scope of work, starting in 1988. As its website notes: MRTI “was created in recognition of the church’s unique opportunity to advance its mission faithfully and creatively through the financial resources entrusted to it.”<sup>573</sup> The precursors of the committee were created in 1971 and 1976, some of the earliest examples of mainline denominations putting their values and money together. It goes on to add that the “1976

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<sup>573</sup> “Office of Faith-Based Investing and Shareholder Engagement.” Presbyterian Mission Agency.

foundational policy established a socially responsible investing policy and declared ‘no investment is neutral.’”<sup>574</sup> Thus, the divestment from fossil fuels movement, which relied on the recognition that investment and money represent the values of the denomination, benefited from a political climate that included MRTI, and its long history that established that context, even though MRTI was one of the denominational opponents to categorical divestment from fossil fuels.

There was also increased awareness in the PC(USA) about environmental issues, starting from the early 1990s with the publication of the *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice* document that was completed in 1990 (as noted in Chapter 4). Despite that history, Rebecca Barnes describes the gradual shift in awareness as

It used to feel like a radical thing 20 years ago and now I hear [about the connection between faith and earth care] from most sources and I think it really has spread out, connected to other things and environmental and climate justice comes up more as an intersectional issue... it’s more recent that things feel part and parcel of each other. There’s coming to be more understanding of intersectional issues, and now it touches [everything]. The new directory of worship has more resources and the Book of Order changed so that caring for creation is a mark of membership.<sup>575</sup>

Here we see just how the culture has changed.

Presbyterians are not only tied by culture but also by a shared polity, or way of being organized and making decisions. My interviews with Presbyterians aided in telling the story of the process—of understanding the ins and outs of the denomination and the places in which the denomination has stopped following through on policy. Just knowing

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<sup>574</sup> “Responsible Investing in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.,” Presbyterian Mission Responsibility Through Investment, last modified March 1, 2023, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Responsible-Investing-in-the-PCUSA-March-2023.pdf>

<sup>575</sup> See also Rebecca Barnes, “Climate Change and the PCUSA,” Presbyterian Church (USA), last modified August 24, 2020, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/climate-change-resources/>.

the history and the polity of the denomination does not mean that a movement will be successful. To tie this context together, I now want to offer an in-depth example of how one climate change-related policy has been passed by the PC(USA), while noting that it misses a key piece of the puzzle. It is a case study for how people in the denomination have organized in ways that have not always created results, even if the overture around which they organized passed.

In looking at the overtures that have passed into policy since 2012, one of them included support for carbon pricing, which essentially puts a tax on carbon emissions, making it more expensive to put emissions into the atmosphere. This overture was brought to the 2018 General Assembly by one of the presbyteries in Texas that has vehemently opposed divestment from fossil fuels, as an alternative that the PC(USA) could support instead of divestment (note that the PC[USA] cannot enact carbon pricing, but it can enact divestment of its funds). Each overture includes a recommendation for action and a rationale for why this action should take place. The recommendation for this action included “working with interfaith environmental organizations including Interfaith Power and Light and GreenFaith.”<sup>576</sup> This demonstrates how overtures can be made to sound appealing, but there are at least two problems with this overture, despite the perceived value of it coming from a region of the country that has opposed divestment but was offering another way to speak out against climate change and the fossil fuel industry. First, the denomination has not enacted a program that organizes Presbyterians around the country to press for national legislation for carbon pricing. Essentially, the policy was passed without any plan for enforcement or enactment. Second, it is not clear

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<sup>576</sup> New Covenant Presbytery, “On Supporting Carbon Pricing,” 223rd General Assembly (2018), <https://www.pc-biz.org/search/3000325>.

if the writers of the recommendation intended to imply either that they were already working with Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) and GreenFaith or that they were planning to. When I brought this policy to the attention of Fletcher Harper, the Executive Director of GreenFaith, he noted that he was not aware of this policy and hadn't been approached about organizing around it. In other words, it is a policy without teeth, without a base of supporters or allies with which to do the work, that makes it look like the denomination was doing something, and that divestment wasn't needed. It is a policy to try to divert attention, to make it seem that something had changed when it hadn't, and it is perhaps not a surprise that it came from Texas, where so many oil companies still thrive.

In his groundbreaking work *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky notes that organizing and winning social movements requires slow base-building. He theorizes that action happens in building coalitions and garnering support from cultural stakeholders.<sup>577</sup> Only when people feel connected to the outcome of the work, do things change. What does it mean for the organizing realities of the PC(USA) that a policy was passed without significant relational organizing with one of the stakeholders mentioned in the policy itself? Or without there being any connections to existing PC(USA) programs? First, there is a financial reality that the PC(USA) does not have the programmatic staff to ensure that all policies are put into practice.<sup>578</sup> Second, there's also an organizing reality to this: how can such a policy possibly be enforced if the key players for the policy were not consulted in the creation of the proposal or the policy itself? Indeed, GreenFaith may well have argued that divestment from fossil fuels was a better moral witness as a

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<sup>577</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (Vintage: 1989), 184.

<sup>578</sup> Pam McVety mentioned in her interview that she thinks it's time for organizing to happen around recreating a dedicated climate change and environmental degradation office.

denomination than working for carbon pricing. Since GreenFaith has spent years organizing and advancing divestment as a clear and effective tactic for people of faith around the world but has spent very little time working on carbon pricing, it would not have been surprising if GreenFaith had refused to be part of such organizing. Thus, it appears that mentioning GreenFaith was an attempt at “greenwashing.”

The passage of this policy without relational organizing with a key stakeholder is one of the failings of Presbyterian polity. Indeed, as Susan DeGeorge (a former member of the FFPC[USA] steering committee whose role was specifically to advise on polity issues) noted in her interview, *Robert's Rules of Order* (the meeting technique that governs General Assemblies) is more egalitarian if everyone truly understands how it works (though she also notes that other things like organizational bylaws and standing rules, for example, may still make it less than egalitarian). She goes on to say that it also privileges those who are already on the inside and doesn't allow for new voices to be heard. Someone from GreenFaith, for example, would not have been allowed to speak on the floor of the General Assembly unless they were explicitly given a voice by the plenary. (Indeed, FFPC[USA] organizers did bring GreenFaith spokespeople to the 2014 and 2018 General Assembly to speak in favor of divestment and they were not allowed to speak in committee because they were not chosen by the lottery used to choose who would have a voice). Why didn't someone on the floor of the General Assembly ask to have someone from GreenFaith or IPL speak about the practical realities of the overture since they were named? This example also could suggest that there is a trust in the good intentions of those bringing the overtures, which, as in this instance, can also mean that

the process can be used with less than good intentions. Unfortunately, the discussion of these pieces of business on the floor of the plenary is no longer public.

The rationale for this overture is also striking. It argues that each Presbyterian is called to care for creation, pointing to Genesis (it says: “Ecology and justice are implicit in the story of creation itself: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *till it* and *keep it*” (Gen. 2:15, emphasis added)” as an indicator of an ecological vocation for all people.<sup>579</sup> In particular, it lifts up the Yahwist’s creation story. What do the writers of this overture think about the relationship between humans, God, and the earth? Is there a connection between a Texas sensibility of the positive benefits of oil and ecology that emerges in this? At the core, however, is the striking reality that a presbytery that had opposed divestment from fossil fuels instead brought an overture that was aimed at responding to climate change, even though oil and gas give billions of dollars to Texas’ economy.<sup>580</sup> The overture points to pre-existing and overall support for responding to climate change, albeit using different tactics. This overture calls for support for carbon pricing, which passes the responsibility to act on to the government, instead of demanding that the denomination change its/our behavior to demonstrate the connection between faith and action, and to build on previous efforts within the denomination.

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<sup>579</sup> 223rd General Assembly (2018), “On Supporting Carbon Pricing.”

<sup>580</sup> Kyra Buckley, “Texas Oil and Gas Pulled In Nearly \$16 Billion In Taxes And Royalties Last Year As The Industry Recovers From Pandemic Downturn,” Houston Public Media, last modified January 12, 2022, <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/energy-environment/2022/01/12/417022/report-texas-oil-and-gas-sent-more-than-15-billion-to-the-state-in-taxes-and-royalties-last-year-as-industry-recovers-from-the-pandemic-downturn/#:~:text=Texas%20oil%20and%20gas%20industry,the%20Texas%20Oil%20%26%20Gas%20Association>. It’s also not fair to say that Texans are anti-environment based on this same article. It’s also clear, based on the language included in the rationale for the overture, that this overture was part of the larger organizing effort of Citizens Climate Lobby (“An effective method of pricing is a Carbon Fee and Dividend as developed and advocated by Citizens’ Climate Lobby.”) 223rd General Assembly (2018), “On Supporting Carbon Pricing.”

Essentially this case study shows how even the best intentions within our polity still require effective organizing in order to create effective policy.

## Status Quo is Not Legitimate

This pre-existing support, however, was also intertwined with dissatisfaction by Presbyterians with the status quo on how change is made on climate change in several cases. What the interviews with activists and staff surfaced was a sense that the shareholder engagement process, the particularities of Presbyterian polity (through Robert's Rules and the overture process), and the overall inadequacy of the response to climate change by the denomination were no longer appropriate ways to respond to climate change.

The movement to divest from fossil fuels emerged in the PC(USA) after decades of shareholder engagement with corporations. Before the movement emerged, the majority of Presbyterian engagement with companies was done through Mission Responsibility through Investment (MRTI). As noted in a previous chapter, that committee spearheaded the PC(USA)'s involvement in divestment from South Africa and divestment from three companies in Israel. Each time, these actions were directed by an action by the General Assembly. Initially, the fledgling Fossil Free PC(USA) believed that MRTI would be open to and supportive of conversations about divestment. Founding moderator of Fossil Free PC(USA) Dan Terpstra however, remembers significant pushback on categorical divestment once the movement officially asked for divestment through the Presbyterian political process via an overture. His perception resonates with Nepstad's assessment that as a movement gains strength, it might be seen as a threat, so

people in power raise the stakes.<sup>581</sup> And inarguably, MRTI has more institutional power than Fossil Free PC(USA) because of it being situated within the denomination as an agency of the church. The MRTI committee has a budget and staff people and access to all the agencies of the denomination, as well as an ability to weigh in on overtures. And as multiple interviewees noted, including then-PPF Executive Director Emily Brewer, MRTI gets unrestricted time in committee and plenary discussions. As a committee of the denomination, it obviously has more power and access to people in the denomination. Hence, the fact that staff and committee members of MRTI saw supporting categorical divestment as undermining the shareholder engagement process and the (objectively) long history of MRTI would be known to many, and because a vote by the General Assembly plenary for categorical divestment would bypass the MRTI process, MRTI had plenty of privilege to bring that up.

While I have been discussing how Presbyterian polity in particular stymied grassroots organizing, it is not peculiar to the PC(USA); Fletcher Harper noted that many activists, and not just Presbyterians, have felt that “church institutions have undermined grassroots leaders and spurned the ability to do something brave.” Instead, church institutions have often relied upon old systems of parliamentary procedure and systems of government that are often slow. One of the key ways that the PC(USA) runs is through the processes laid out in *Robert’s Rules of Order*. It creates a polity (or way of doing things) that at its best helps people be heard (by following delineated rules about who gets to speak and make motions when and how) but, according to Colleen Earp, has been weaponized in the process to get divestment overtures passed in General Assemblies, by

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<sup>581</sup> Nepstad 2008, 9.

which she meant that it was overly used to guide the process.<sup>582</sup> Robert Ross describes this weaponization as a process that is only accessible to a few people, people who have time to learn the processes or people who have been in the Presbyterian world for a long enough time to learn how the processes work. Pam McVety said that Robert's Rules only works if the leadership is competent, pointing to the necessity that the people running meetings (at all levels) understand the intricacies of the processes. This often gave the impression, according to Rick Ufford-Chase, that

The system and rules were designed to give a stronger voice to those who were being threatened by the movement of the spirit in the committee [if a big change were being proposed]. This is not just for divestment from fossil fuels, but in this particular case, time after time people played by the rules and couldn't get divestment passed.

Essentially, people who are part of the institutional church have had more experience using Robert's Rules, and therefore are better at managing how a conversation or decision will go. Activists and newcomers (even members of General Assembly committees, who work at that level for only a few weeks) are at a disadvantage because they simply have less experience. This is one of the reasons it became important for people in Fossil Free PC(USA) who were newer to organizing in the denomination to rely on the expertise and recommendations of people who had organized in previous movements in the denomination.

Robert's Rules are used through the process of an overture coming to the General Assembly; they are the default way of managing meetings at every level of the Presbyterian Church (USA), though the rules are often more complicated and intricate at the national level. Recall the process of how an overture comes to the General Assembly:

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<sup>582</sup> Dan Terpstra said that while it has been weaponized, it's also prevented anarchy in the process.

the most common way to propose a policy is to bring a recommendation to a congregation's session to be approved. Then the recommendation goes to the Presbytery (regional level) to be approved. Then the recommendation goes to the General Assembly to be heard if at least one other presbytery agrees to send the recommendation.

Recommendations are then debated at committee levels and, if approved by the committee, are debated at the plenary level. José Gonzolez-Colon says that this process of organizing in the PC(USA) is slow while climate change is fast, and "the PC(USA) is set up to protect the status quo [which is very white]." The speed of change is inadequate in the face of global climate change.

In the face of the status quo, which in this case is a shrinking denomination and expanding global climate change, there is institutional fear, a fear of losing social power and relevance as Gary Payton, one of the activists in Fossil Free PC(USA), described. Losing social power and members is a real fear with material implications for a denomination that has been shrinking for some time. Susan DeGeorge said that as Presbyterians

We're not afraid that we're raising the temperature of the earth or that some of our cities will be underwater... we're worried about if we can keep people in our denomination. [For now], very little of our views on the environment are driven by theology, but by numbers and financial realities.

Similarly, Rick Ufford-Chase notes the commitment to the status quo of the PC(USA) in past movements, like during the movements for full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people:

We didn't change the church to be more bold-- instead the dominant culture changed.... The church didn't change, culture changed. As long as there are people who are stubborn, eventually popular culture will shift and then the church will follow, but the church won't lead.

Here Ufford-Chase is noting that the denomination will only change if the status quo changes. That is, the denomination would not divest from fossil fuels until it was more normal practice or organizers could persuade denominational stakeholders that the status quo (in this case, shareholder engagement) was not working to stop climate change.

## The Role of Money and Capitalism

In all of the research for this dissertation, one of the most fascinating discoveries was a common theme in interviews with activists about money/capitalism and faith. In her article, “The Role of Religions in Activism,” Laurel Kearns writes that “what is interesting is that in a Christian context, the debate over the economic ideologies is masked under competing moral claims over who cares more about the poor and how to do so, so that the frame is seen to be about morality and justice, and not about economic philosophies.”<sup>583</sup> This approach is part of the operative status-quo. The opposite perhaps was true in the interviews as people named the economic ideology of capitalism that is the problem. Bill McKibben said that there is a “Gospel notion that it’s hardest for the rich to do the right thing,” and so it’s hard for the rich to be willing to move money, especially if that money is related to economic and racial dominance.

Presbyterians working on divestment (both in MRTI through building criteria for when divestment would be possible and Fossil Free PC[USA] through calling for categorical divestment from fossil fuels) noted that money is always connected to faith. Rob Fohr said that everything (including money) belongs to God. Kerri Allen, the chair of MRTI, has repeatedly and publicly said that we (meaning Presbyterians) “don’t

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<sup>583</sup> Kearns, “The Role of Religions in Activism,” 424.

believe in pure money.” That is to say, no money is ever completely good or bad: it is always complex and it is never neutral. Even if we are divested from fossil fuels, are we re-invested in something that has no negative impact? How can our impure money, rooted in a total depravity that affects everything, be an expression of faith?

Some of the interviewees talked about capitalism as a religion unto itself, echoing a major theme for liberation theologians. José Gonzalez-Colon said, “We have a religion of consumption and capital and social stratification.... And we have to start to face this hand in hand with how we address climate breakdown.” More pointedly, Fletcher Harper raises the question: what is a religion’s response to capitalism? As Janet Cox said, “A church has a moral responsibility to spend its money in ways that don’t hurt people or the planet” as much as possible. And Pam McVety said that investment in fossil fuels is a sin, that “it’s wrong on any level we think about it.” But perhaps most pointedly, Collen Earp returned to the gospels in our interview in an attempt to describe a theology of anti-capitalism that drives the work of Fossil Free PC(USA): “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.... [for] you cannot love both God and money” (Matthew 6:21, 24-26). Each of these interviews point to the complicated relationship between religious institutions and money as themes with which to continue to wrestle.

## Public Role of the Church

Many of the interviewees articulated the need for the PC(USA) to be a public leader, at the forefront of change and action on environmental care and responses to climate change. They lifted a tension between who the PC(USA) seems to think it is and who it is in the world. For example, Rick Ufford-Chase said that the PC(USA) is part of

the mainstream of U.S. culture and Protestantism. In his book *Faithful Resistance*, Rick says that “we remain timid when we should be bold, fearful when we are called to be unafraid, and beholden to the principalities and powers when both the prophets of scripture and the prophets of today exhort us to rethink our allegiances.”<sup>584</sup> Rebecca Barnes similarly said, “I think the church often thinks of itself as a great influencer of change when it’s often not at the forefront of social change—wish we were the headlights.” Each of these statements raises the common thread that activists perceive that the church is meant to be a public witness to the beliefs of the denomination, even if it is uncomfortable. This is a common Protestant Christian sentiment.<sup>585</sup>

But in order to be an effective public leader, said Neddy Astudillo in our interview, the church needs to teach and preach about climate change. Emily Brewer noted that in a capitalist society, our money speaks. And when our money seems to be at odds with who we claim to be (and here I mean all the theologies, policies, and perspectives previously explored in this dissertation), it can be hard to stay. Gary Payton, as previously mentioned, who had spent much of his personal and professional life in the PC(USA), left the denomination when it would not divest from fossil fuels. There were many reasons related to divestment that drove this decision, and Gary said, “I can no longer live with integrity within the body as it acts like this.” In short, the public witness of the denomination did not match what it said it believed. Gary divested himself from the denomination.

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<sup>584</sup> Rick Ufford-Chase, *Faithful Resistance: Gospel Visions for the Church in a Time of Empire* (San Bernardino, CA: Unshelved, 2016), 12.

<sup>585</sup> See also: Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2002.)

## Conclusion: What is success if the world is on fire?

At its core, my research seeks to understand and articulate how theologies undergirded the grounding of the movement, how Presbyterian polity informed and transformed the movement, and how success in the movement has been defined by organizers and institutional powers. I came to the work as a participant researcher, embedded in the movement I wanted to study, but curious about how to talk about and explore a movement in order to create pathways for other movements to move targets from passive to active allies and activists for climate justice.

This dissertation explores how a Protestant movement to divest from fossil fuels strategically caused institutional change; specifically, Fossil Free PC(USA). It has been a part of a movement that targeted a particular denomination and drew upon understandings of that denomination's theologies around earth care, histories of creating resources and policies, and cultures that organize around making change. I interviewed activists and denominational staff, and pulled together themes that emerged around capitalism, status quo, and sin. I reviewed the history of the fossil fuel industry, particularly how it was supported by Protestant faith communities in the United States by engaging the scholarship of Dochuk. I reviewed how divestment has worked as a tactic in other movements and other denominations, particularly in the UMC, UCC, and Episcopal Church in comparison with the PC(USA).

In the beginning of this interdisciplinary research, I anticipated that success in a comprehensive study of a faith-based divestment movement would be measured by an overall increase in that denomination's resources on climate and environmental justice in addition to a vote in favor of divestment from fossil fuels (based on an overview of

literature in the field and my experience as an organizer. In this dissertation, I have been particularly interested in documenting how a cross-section of organizers in the movement) have articulated a deepening of their theological well (in the language of Jennifer Ayres and how they have talked about success for our shared work.<sup>586</sup> Indeed, I use participant interviews of nineteen people, participant observation, document analysis, and theological reflection suggesting finally that divestment from fossil fuels has been a solidarity tactic used in the PC(USA) to respond to climate change.

To do this, I explore the use of divestment as an economic tool that has been claimed for movement building. I review the ever-worsening climate science that requires that people do more than ever before in order to mitigate the loss of life and increased suffering. I used grounded theory to conduct interviews with key stakeholders, a group comprised of both lay leaders and clergy, grassroots and institutional leaders. I reviewed key foundational documents (“Power to Speak Truth to Power,” its reaffirmation, “The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming” and *Restoring Creation*) especially because these documents were referenced in several interviews. I pulled shared themes (like creation and sin) from interviews and pondered how those themes intersected with measuring success and how divestment has been used in other movements. As I note in the introduction to this dissertation, I argue then a faith-based divestment movement, success can be understood as an overall increase in a denomination’s response to climate change through statements, programs, and campaigns—as well as divestment from the fossil fuel industry—thereby living into a theological ecological vocation.

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<sup>586</sup> Jennifer R. Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 3.

This argument for a guiding ecological vocation has unfolded throughout this dissertation, but especially in chapter 3 where I explore the Genesis stories of creation. Both the Priestly Writer and the Yahwist versions depict a close relationship among God, humans, and the rest of creation. And, I argue along with Hiebert, White, Dochuk, Kearns, and others, these depictions have impacted how Christians have engaged in exploitation and care of the planet and its natural resources. One of the legacies of the exploitations has been worsening climate change (and I note how Dochuk depicts the particular responsibilities that Christian has for this destruction and suffering, arguing that the responsibility for the harm means it is necessary for us to act.). I also review how Protestant environmentalisms (on regional, national, and international levels) have been guided by an ethic of care. In chapter 4, I expand on how Protestant theologies and Reformed commitments around creation, sin, and total depravity have been lifted up by scholars and activists, and suggest that each of these doctrines are examples of how to wrestle with the impossibilities of hope in a time of unstoppable climate change. In chapter 5, I review how divestment has been a tactic used in other social movements as one way for people around the world to bring attention to an injustice in a particular place, using Massie and Love to explore divestment from apartheid in South Africa and Barghouti and others to explore divestment from Israel. And in chapter 6, I review how the UMC, UCC, and PC(USA) used divestment from fossil fuels in their own contexts and polities, showing how insiders who know the intricacies of their denominations are the best suited to move their own communities.

In chapter 7, I revisit whether or not Fossil Free PC(USA) has been a successful movement. While the PC(USA) has voted to divest from five fossil fuel companies,

climate change is getting worse. Does that mean that the movement is a failure? It is not a failure in the context of showing up in faithfulness to a biblical call to an ecological vocation. Ultimately, the work for climate and environmental justice is ours to do whether or not there is a climate emergency. Thus, showing up, agitating, and living into the public role of the church with steadfastness for over a decade—at the end of this dissertation, the question is more about faithfulness than success.

The totality of the problem of climate change and pervasive bad actions of the industry is the gap into which faith communities can step as part of the divestment movement. Climate change devastates creation—which the authors of Genesis insist is created by God and given to humanity to care for it. Reformed theology in Presbyterianism teaches that only God is sovereign over all that is created and that humans are placed on the planet to tend and keep the rest of creation (though other Protestant traditions teach this too.) Though historically some of this teaching regarding the power humans have over the earth has in fact spurred the fossil fuel industry itself (as in the earlier chapter's discussion of Darren Dochuk's *Anointed with Oil*) it has also been the foundation of decades of denominational policies, Bible studies, lifestyle changes in personal and ecclesial rhythms and actions, and worship guides created in the ongoing shadow of environmental and climate devastation and injustice. And all of this happened in the context of other people of faith—and especially Protestants in the United States—creating policies, liturgies, para-church organizations, certifications, and more as detailed in chapter 4.

When the divestment from the fossil fuels movement began in the United States in 2012, early adopters included colleges and universities, and then municipalities and

faith communities joined the movement. While the United Church of Christ was the first faith community in the United States to vote as a faith body in support of divestment (in 2013), it took years for other communities to divest.

Though the PC(USA) had decades of environmental policy to support a radical response to climate change—like divestment from fossil fuels—and was well known internationally for its worship and theological resources, organizing, and policy statements in favor of faith-based responses to climate change— at first, the denomination declined to support divestment as a tactic. Instead, the national decision body sent the request for divestment to the shareholder engagement committee of the denomination, a committee that asked for more time to engage the fossil fuel industry on a company-by-company basis. This request was repeated at two other national gatherings (and was on the docket for 2020 that was set aside because of the pandemic). Before the 2022 vote to divest from five fossil fuel companies, over 50 regional bodies in the denomination had supported the divestment movement, with several congregations and regional bodies divesting themselves, citing theological convictions to have their investments match their moral teachings, as was the case in the Hudson River Presbytery and First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee.

In 2022, the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to divest from Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Marathon Petroleum, Phillips 66, and Valero Energy, the five companies that scored the worst in the criteria created by MRTI. By the end of 2022, the PC(USA) had divested its holdings from those companies as a denomination. After ten years of organizing, Fossil Free PC(USA) successfully won a divestment vote. That success came from understanding a tactic (divestment), the theological/moral ethos of the target they

wanted to move (Reformed Theology/PC[USA]), and the mechanisms through which change happens in the target (polity)<sup>587</sup>. In a time of global climate crisis, economic disparity, and social disconnect, Protestant communities must find ways to grapple with and dismantle systems of oppression and suffering to be relevant in the public sphere. I suggest that in a time of unjust climate change that seems unlikely to end, one way that Christian communities live out their religious leadership is through economic solidarity, using the divestment from fossil fuels movement in the Presbyterian Church (USA) as a case study for faithful responses to climate change.

I keep returning to the core questions of this dissertation: Were we successful? Fossil Free PC(USA) successfully organized people in fifty presbyteries, articulating a vision of a denomination that no longer funded the fossil fuel industry. Over ten years, grassroots leaders organized in their own presbyteries to support divestment from fossil fuels, sometimes getting their own presbyteries to divest even as they were insisting that the conversation and the culture in the denomination had to change. We organized people and we articulated a compelling moral vision that moved people.

Did we win? We have not stopped climate change. Bill McKibben wrote in the spring of 2024 that

the deepest patterns of our lives—the ways our bodies understand the cycle of the seasons and the progress of time—are now slipping away. The fight to slow the warming of the planet is the fight to save billions of people and millions of species, but it's also the fight to hold on to profound beauty and profound meaning.<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>587</sup> These actions happened in a larger context of growing concern about climate change around the world.

<sup>588</sup> Bill McKibben, “As Winter Melts Away,” *The Crucial Years*, last modified February 28, 2024, <https://billmckibben.substack.com/p/as-winter-melts-away>.

The world is still hurting, and we are hurting too. Can we say that Fossil Free PC(USA) has been a successful movement? Janet Cox said, “You have to define success in terms that are achievable, about solving a problem.” So, in the context of global climate change, I asked each person I interviewed what success means for the divestment movement. I asked this question in 2021, before the 2022 vote to divest from five fossil fuel companies. Responses ranged from the simple act of divestment from fossil fuels to the monumental task of stopping global warming. But some also said that the point was to cast a vision and to stick with the long, hard work of moving toward a better world, deepening the ecological vocation that Jennifer Ayres has pointed to in her work, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move* (the name implies how hard the work is to change) and that the creation stories of Genesis call us to.<sup>589</sup> In light of the effort that it has taken for the movement to get this far, the question remains, is that—the struggle—enough? Perhaps, as Mark Engler and Peter Engler write in their book *This is an Uprising*, “judgments about whether or not a campaign is winning can be somewhat subjective... and victory is in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>590</sup>

We could measure the success of FFPC(USA) by a shift in opinion on climate change, by a desire to do more as a denomination. How does one even measure this shift?<sup>591</sup> Certainly, the denomination had/has a history of responding to the needs of the planet, but as climate change has gotten worse, the church needed to respond in kind. In his interview, Rob Fohr said the divestment activity within the PCUSA got climate

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<sup>589</sup> Jennifer R. Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

<sup>590</sup> *This is an Uprising*, 133-4.

<sup>591</sup> We could, for example, use what sociologists call the radical flank effect. Future study on Fossil Free PC(USA) could include how the more radical tactics of the movement encouraged the more moderate actions that the overtures in Appendix C represent.

change in front of people. José Gonzalez-Colon expressed a similar view that success would mean getting attention on the issue of climate change, as did Emily Brewer who commented that success would look like a “shift in how PC(USA) sees climate change.” How does one measure this shift in opinion beyond a more focused engagement in climate change by the denomination? Perhaps by this: between 2014 and 2018, the General Assembly moved from including climate and environmental issues in committees tasked with other issues, to having a committee designated for climate and environmental justice concerns. The conversation has changed from peripheral to more focused.

Organizers for divestment from fossil fuels were also able to escalate the prominence of the issue of climate change, both in numbers of support and in the tactics used in the movement. In 2014, 13 presbyteries supported the overture to divest; in 2016 there were 31 presbyteries; in 2018, there were 40 presbyteries—in four years there was a threefold increase; in 2022, limited divestment was approved. These numbers are a measurable reflection of the escalation in tactics by organizers and show how the movement has lived up to what Sara Shor calls success for a movement: engaging as many people as possible. (These numbers also exist in the larger context of growing awareness of climate change and growing action by Protestants on climate change. The PC[USA]) was, of course, acting in a larger social context.) Tactics in 2014 included following the avenues of Presbyterian polity by sending overture advocates, speaking on the floor of the plenary, and preparing presentations. In 2016, organizers again supported overture advocates, and since this wasn’t seen as sufficient, added daily vigils to the General Assembly. In 2018, 30 people walked for over 200 miles to the General

Assembly and held a die-in when the vote to support divestment failed, as described previously. It's hard to tell what would have happened in 2020 if the pandemic hadn't caused most business for the General Assembly to be postponed until 2022. In 2022, recognizing their success in achieving partial divestment, organizers for Fossil Free PCUSA) contributed to larger movements to divest from fossil fuels by creating a replication guide now dispersed by Blessed Tomorrow (see appendix D).

Many times in the 10 years during which I was part of the movement to divest from fossil fuels in the PC(USA), I felt we had failed. I was so preoccupied with numbers and documenting "success" based on an affirmation of categorical divestment from fossil fuels. And we could not convince the people in control of the money of the denomination to divest from fossil fuels. And then two of my mentors and interviewees in this work helped reframe my thinking. Bill McKibben said that even if a movement does not win, *you* still win because you can educate others on the issues. Fletcher Harper said that Fossil Free PC(USA) has been successful because it has been persistent and has not been afraid to criticize the denomination and show up at scale. We were persistent and we were brave. As I noted in chapter 2, Jennifer Ayres wrote that organizers and practitioners of social justice are informed by theological reflection that then sustains them for deeper practice.<sup>592</sup> The divestment from fossil fuels movement in the PC(USA) engaged in theological and biblical reflection, deepened connections between organizers who had been part of other organizing movements in the PC(USA), and dug into our Presbyterian identities in theology, culture, and practice. So, how does one measure a movement's success? Perhaps this is the simple answer: success is found in work that

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<sup>592</sup> Jennifer Ayres, *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 3.

keeps going and does not give up. Thus, as an activist and a scholar, I now see that the process of showing up, pushing for the denomination to match our money with our history, theology, policies, and people—that showing up itself is a success. We created a campaign (divest from fossil fuels), with clear goals (categorical divestment from fossil fuels decided by General Assembly), targets (presbyteries, commissioners at General Assembly, members of MRTI), tactics (walking across the Midwest as a witness to the work, traveling to Puerto Rico, and die-ins and protests, alongside organizing presbyteries in favor of divestment), and a long term plan, one that made space for people to join together as activists to move the denomination.

And yet: like the agreed-upon science of climate change, Rob Fohr noted in our interview that to save the world from climate change, we can have no more than one degree more of global temperature rise. And while there is, according to Rev. Colleen Earp, a lot of thinking and writing about the need to care for God’s creation, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is still lacking in big policies that would hold us accountable to that one degree of temperature rise. Pam McVety, herself on the frontlines of climate disaster in Florida, says that “success equals cutting emissions.” In April 2022, the IPCC released its regular report on climate change saying that from

2010-2019 average annual global greenhouse gas emissions were at their highest levels in human history, but the rate of growth has slowed. Without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, limiting global warming to 1.5°C is beyond reach. However, there is increasing evidence of climate action.<sup>593</sup>

*Emissions were at their highest... but the rate of growth has slowed.* The work is not done, but more and more, people are taking action to respond to climate change. The

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<sup>593</sup> “The Evidence is Clear: The Time for Action is Now. We can Halve Emissions by 2030,” IPCC, last modified April 4, 2022, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2022/04/04/ipcc-ar6-wgiii-pressrelease/>.

PC(USA) was part of the faithful responses to the growing climate crisis, but the slowness points to the problems that are exacerbating any response.<sup>594</sup>

Has it been enough to constitute a success? In 2010, James Hansen, the scientist who spoke to the US Congress about the devastating realities of climate change to come, published *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* as an effort to educate more people about the science of climate change, to get people to act.<sup>595</sup> The book reviews the ever-changing climate science and the lack of action by governments to slow emission growth. The science, however, has been clear for decades. The need to act has been clear for decades. This need to act also led Sophie Kivlien, one of Hansen's grandchildren, to be one of the filers of a lawsuit against the U.S. government for failing to act on climate change.<sup>596</sup> In 2022, Larry Rasmussen, the Lutheran environmental ethicist whose musical metaphor has threaded its way through this dissertation, published *The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing*. He wanted to write love letters to his grandchildren as they faced the reality of climate change that they did not create.<sup>597</sup> Love to help sustain them as they face the world before them, a world that has been changed because the fossil fuel industry—bolstered by Christian theology and money—wrecked the planet and profited from that wreckage.

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<sup>594</sup> Appendix D is an award-winning replication guide that was created by the leadership of Fossil Free PC(USA) to support other movements to divest from fossil fuels.

<sup>595</sup> Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren*, 2009. Have you mentioned it before in this chapter? I don't think so, and what happened to 593?

<sup>596</sup> See Our Children's Trust, accessed March 16, 2024, <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/>.

<sup>597</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 7.

As I complete this dissertation, I'm aware of how love has sustained me in this work, love for Juniper, my child who came into this world to face the realities of climate change that she did not create. In the end, I think because we have not stopped climate change, we have failed her generation and the generations that follow her, even as we struggle onward. Yet, the struggle is worth doing, even if we keep failing. As my friend, co-conspirator, and musician Matthew Black wrote in his song "Everything is Terrible and No One is Okay,"

I don't know how we're going to do it.

Love is real and we can prove it.

You are not alone.

And so, when the world is on fire, we organize together, maybe without hope but certainly in faith.

## A Litany of Gratitude

In her book *Toward a Better Worldliness: Ecology, Economy, and the Protestant Tradition*, Terra Rowe writes that “a compelling parable of grace for today [is] a profound and agentially empowering sense of gratitude that acknowledges that we belong, body and soul, to a vast and humbling contingency ‘outside ourselves.’” As we give ourselves over to that vastness, “we become liberated from fear and anxiety to accept responsibility for a story larger than ourselves.”<sup>598</sup>

This dissertation started in 2012 with a group of Presbyterians who wanted the Presbyterian Church (USA) to divest from fossil fuels. That activist spark led me to doctoral work at Drew University (a program that was chosen in conversation with farmworkers and their families in California—thank you!), starting in 2016. Seven years later, I’ve moved across the country five times, gotten divorced, cared for over a hundred chickens, bought and sold a tiny house, lived through a pandemic, campaigned and organized for divestment and climate finance on a global level, and welcomed a child into my life.

This project—along with a deep sense of God’s call for my life—has been the throughline for the last eleven years, and it’s been supported by many, many people and places. I am grateful. I offer this litany, with gratitude.<sup>599</sup>

*Gratitude to Fossil Free PC(USA) and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship—and the activists who make up these groups—for years of organizing and campaigning and waiting and dreaming and walking and walking and walking, especially Emily and Colleen and Rick and Matt and Ali and Gary. It is a privilege to tell part of the story of our work in this dissertation. Gratitude to Bob for shared excitement and writing on similar topics and for the push to be a white Christian academic who is also an activist seeking to be antiracist.*

*Gratitude to Nathan, who said yes when it was time to start this adventure and put treasure where our hearts needed to be. Gratitude to Wayne for years of wrestling with method and pedagogy and co-creation, who kept asking the hardest questions, especially “are you done yet?” in order to keep me honest.*

*Gratitude to our friends the Lehns who made bread and soup and drawings, so that precious extra minutes were freed up for chosen family time and writing and joy, and who took over parenting when I needed more time to write, especially at the end of the first full draft. Gratitude to Daniel who reminded me to create with my hands even when I*

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<sup>598</sup> Terra Rowe, *Toward a Better Worldliness: Ecology, Economy, and the Protestant Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), xii.

<sup>599</sup> Ross Gay ends his book *Inciting Joy* with a chapter on gratitude that follows a chapter on grief. His pages of gratitude are a balm in the context of pain in the world, in the context of being in this world. Working on a dissertation through both personal grief and collective grief has been an exercise in perseverance and humility, and finishing Gay’s book as I finished the first full draft of my dissertation was a joyful gift. I had already written this litany when I started Gay’s chapter on gratitude, a reminder of the world’s beautiful synchronicities.

*needed to create with my thoughts. Gratitude to Rodney and Sarah, to Corey and Brendan and Jennifer—each of whom gave a particular lens to this work through reading and writing and labyrinthing. Gratitude to Andy (and Dana) for every day. Gratitude to Kwame and Rob for reminding me to whom I belong. Gratitude to Miranda and Erin who held space with Juniper on Sundays so I could write. Gratitude for Audrey who never gave up (and told me I was not allowed to quit.) Gratitude for Rivers and Roads Cafe, especially big cookies, good coffee, and space for the Cafe Baby to thrive.*

*Gratitude to my financial advisors Kerry Keihn, who helped move my own investments into fossil free funds as a spiritual practice and a clear resistance to a larger narrative that to do so would be impossible, and Pete Krull, who has supported Fossil Free PC(USA) along the way with fiduciary language.*

*Gratitude to Dr. Laurel Kearns for years of advisement, a blessing for the trees that first connected us, and a few days at eco-feminist workshops at a conference in California that made me recognize the privilege it has been to learn from and with you. There is not enough chocolate or tea to express my gratitude. Thank you.*

*Gratitude for Dr. Traci West and Dr. Chris Boesel for their expertise and wisdom. This dissertation committee has required me to listen and stretch and breathe across disciplines.*

*Gratitude to Ted Hiebert, Clare Butterfield, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda—each of whom read drafts and wrestled with framings and told me to just write.*

*Gratitude for each of the people I interviewed, who trusted me with parts of their stories: Bill McKibben, Colleen Earp (who also reviewed the climate science and the hyphens), Dan Terpstra, Dennis Testerman, Emily Brewer, Fletcher Harper, Gary Payton, James Buchanan, Janet Cox, Jenny Phillips, Jim Antal, José Gonzalez-Colon, Neddy Astudillo, Pam McVety, Rebecca Barnes, Rick Ufford-Chase, Rob Fohr, Robert Ross, Sara Shor, Susan DeGeorge, and Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri.*

*Gratitude to Scott Ostlund for hours of coffee and conversation, and to Dawrell Rich for starting and finishing and persevering together. Gratitude to Alice Kim, anna blaedel, and Shardé Chapman who wrote with me. Gratitude to Vilma Franco who told me to go back to my desk and protected my Friday writing time.*

*Gratitude to Tamisha Tyler, Mihee Kim-Kort, Chauncey Diego Francisco Handy, Elyssa Salinas-Lazarski, and Jennifer Aycok, for Fridays and texts and perseverance. And gratitude to Derek: we are your biggest fans.*

*Gratitude to the GreenFaith team, who collectively taught me to be a better eco-theologian and activist, especially Meryne and Sara and Fletcher and fifteen interns. And for the divestment team, including Svetlana who left the group in 2022 to focus on fossil fuels and Ukraine.*

*Gratitude to the communities of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Global South grassroots organizers for climate justice and ecological vocations in dangerous situations.*

*Gratitude for the lands of what is now called Illinois, California, New Jersey, Texas—and for the Pacific Ocean and Lake Michigan. You hold so much life—each part of the beautiful biodiversity of this incredible, extraordinary planet.*

*Gratitude to Susannah for making her home available as a wifi-free writing retreat, and gratitude to Hillary for a careful first edit of chapter 3 and a keen eye on the whole thing and gratitude to both for believing in this project. Gratitude to my parents, Lulu and Grampa, for instilling in me an ecological vocation from my earliest memories, for countless loving hours with Juniper as writing required more time and for more than once convincing their congregation to be the place where I tested out some of the theories and tactics for Fossil Free PC(USA) and this dissertation. Thank you. And gratitude for Jen, Evan, and Cordelia, always.*

*Finally, finally, finally, gratitude to my Juniper who from the very beginning of our life together on this side of the stars accompanied me on walks where I talked her through whatever I was working on at the moment. At her baby shower on the farm, someone joked that her first word would be “divestment.” It wasn’t, but it’s been the framework for much of the first three years of her life, as it’s been for mine for the last twelve. And: the article that frames the first and last chapters of this dissertation was published on Juniper’s first birthday.*

*Juniper, you asked me so many times at the end of writing, “Mama, did you finish your dissertation?” Yes, baby, it’s done. Walking through life with you, Juniper, has been a beautiful adventure, one that makes me a more faithful activist, academic, pastor, and Christian. You are always and forever my greatest treasure. Gracias, amorcita.*

The project—the movement in the Presbyterian Church (USA) to divest from fossil fuels—has always been larger than myself alone, and the writing of this dissertation has been an effort by so large a community that I am certain to have forgotten someone here, though not in my heart. I belong to each of you, and I am humbled by that fact. Thank you.

Together we will build a new framework, putting our treasure in all the new places where our hearts are now and finding the grace of God wherever we can, all of us together. Amen.

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

Please describe your efforts to respond to climate change, as an individual working in a larger social movement and with regard to fossil fuel divestment in particular.

What strategies and efforts do you consider the most successful/important/effective?

How would you describe/define success in terms of climate change? and your organization's or the PC(USA)'s response to it? In terms of divestment?

What is your knowledge of how the PC(USA) has responded to climate change? Do you have an opinion, if any, of that response?

How would you describe the theolog(ies), if any, reflected in the various efforts to address climate change (both your own and of the movements of which you've been a part)? If applicable, how would you describe the PCU(USA)'s theological responses to these efforts? Do you think these theologies played a role in how your denomination/organization has responded?

How have you experienced Presbyterian governance in relation to this movement?

For PC(USA) interviewees only: What are your observations on the role played by your denomination's governance structures in the success or failure of the divestment movement in your denomination? How would you define that success or failure?

Upon reflection, is there anything you answered that you would like to remain anonymous?

## Appendix B: Timeline of Religions and the Environment in Mainstream United States

*This timeline is only an overview that points to major moments and themes, and it should not be seen as comprehensive. I start in the 20th Century, recognizing that this does not reflect the generations of care and stewardship represented in the indigenous communities and nations of the so-called United States of America.*

1939	Walter Lowdermilk, Eleventh Commandment
1950s	Joseph Sittler, Theology of the Earth
1963-1972	World Council of Churches Faith—Nature—Man program
1967	Lynn White's article The Historical Roots of the Present-Day Ecologic Crisis
1968	Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) organizing with Sanitation Workers in Memphis
1970	National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) resolution: 'Today those who thoughtlessly destroy a God-ordained balance of nature are guilty of sin against God's creation.'
1970	Denominational statements and many U.S denominations add staff to work on environment.
1982	Warren County, NCC Protests over toxic waste site.
1983	National Council of Churches Eco Justice Working Group
1983-1991	the World Council of Churches launches the Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation Programme
1986	Assisi Declarations
1987	Au Sable Institute in MI founded to support Christians in responding to environmental issues.
1987	North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology
1987	UCC Toxic Waste and Race Report
1988	Genesis Farm is founded in in Blairstown, NJ, one of many green sister sites for women religious.
1990	Indigenous Environmental Network founded
1990	Pope John Paul II called for environmental concern to be a priority for Catholics in his 1990 World Day of Peace
1991	The Orthodox Christian Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew declared that the wanton destruction of nature was a sin.
1991	National Black Church Environmental Initiative launched

1992	Joint appeal from scientists to religious leadership that resulted in the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which included Catholics.
1992	GreenFaith in founded in New Jersey
1992	Earth Ministry in founded in Washington
1992/3	Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life
1993	Evangelical Environmental Network
1993	National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE)
1995	Alliance for Religions and Conservation (ARC)
1998	Forum on Religion and Ecology
1999	Faith in Place is founded in Chicago
2000	Interfaith Power and Light
2000	Hazon, a Jewish organization focused on environmental sustainability is founded
2007	Green Muslims is founded
2010	Green the Church is founded
2014	Islamic Society of North America created their Green Initiative
2016	Water Protectors rise together against DAPL at Standing Rock
2019	Dayenu is founded in New York.

## Appendix C: Overtures on Climate and the Environment

Below is a table that summarizes the environmental and climate change-related overtures and reports that were brought to the General Assembly between the reaffirmation of the “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” in 2010 through 2018. The full text of all overtures can be found on the website for General Assembly business, [www.pc-biz.org](http://www.pc-biz.org).

<b>Year of General Assembly</b>	<b>Committee that debated environmental/climate change overtures (Number of Overtures related to climate and environmental issues)</b>	<b>Notable overtures (the number of presbyteries that supported it and the decision by the General Assembly)</b>
2010	Social Justice Issues B: the Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World (3)	
		<i>On Lifting up the “Call to Restore the Creation”</i> calling for a reaffirmation of 2010’s “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” and includes the line “Affirm that concern for God's creation is, for every Christian, an essential way of living faithfully in Christ's world that will necessitate personal study of, attention to and engagement with emerging and new environmental concerns that are persistent, acute, and pressing.” (3, affirmed by the committee and the assembly)

		On Making Resources Available Regarding Destruction and Loss of Coastal Wetlands. (1, affirmed by the committee and the assembly)
		Recommendations Regarding Deep Water Horizon Oil Disaster. (written by committee, approved by the assembly)
2012	Social Justice Issues Committee (2)	
		On Endorsing “A Fifty Year Farm Bill”—From the Presbytery of Heartland. (2, approved by committee and assembly) This overture includes this line, “Acknowledge the statements of the 183rd, 187th, 192nd, 193rd, 195th, 196th, 199th, 201st, 202nd, 204th, 205th, 206th, 208th, 210th, 211th, 213th, 215th, and 216th General Assemblies (1971, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006) reflecting the determination of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that protection of the environment is a vital part of the Christian faith.”
		On Support of the United States Environmental Protection Agency—(1, approved by committee and General Assembly) This overture includes this line, ““1. Recognize the statements of the 183rd, 187th, 192nd, 193rd, 195th, 196th, 199th, 201st, 202nd, 204th, 205th, 206th, 208th, 210th, 211th, 213th, 215th, 216th, 218th, and 219th General Assemblies (1971, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1990,

		1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2010) reflecting the determination of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that protection of the environment is vital to the Christian faith.”
2014	Immigration and Environmental Issues (3)	
		15-01 On Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies (11, Committee passed, referred to MRTI by General Assembly)
		<p>On Affirming the Importance of Sustainable Development and the Precautionary Principle (3, approved by committee and General Assembly)</p> <p>This overture includes the line: “to affirm the vital importance of sustainable development through faithful stewardship of natural resources” (here we see the language of “stewardship” engaged.)</p>
		On Affirming a Programmatic Review of the Impact of Expanded Coal Export Projects on Human Health and Well Being (3, committee and General Assembly approve)
2016	Immigration and Environmental Issues (10)	
		<p>On PC(USA) Fossil Fuel Divestment (30, Committee approves, General Assembly sends to MRTI).</p> <p>On an Alternative to Divestment from the Fossil Fuel Industry (9, committee approves,</p>

		<p>General Assembly answers with action on other business)</p> <p>On Faithful Engagement with the Issue of Climate Change (4, committee approves, General Assembly answers with action on other business)</p>
		<p>Mission Responsibility Through Investment Report on Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies (from national committee, approved by General Assembly)</p>
		<p>On Communicating Gratitude for and Study of the Encyclical “Laudato Si” (4, committee and General Assembly approve)</p>
		<p>On Witnessing Against Environmental Degradation and Affirming Public Policy to Support Good Stewardship of Natural Resources (3, committee and General Assembly approve)</p> <p>This overture includes the language of “ With firm biblical foundation and the policies of twenty General Assemblies to build upon, they may give voice to threats to air and water quality; [and to the well-being of humans and all God's creation, including carefully documented] threats from fracking; threats from [crude oil transport and storage and, indeed], all modes of fossil fuel extraction;[, processing, transport, and storage;] and threats from methane [and other destabilizing and harmful byproducts] that results from industrial processes. This empowers both [the] offices to speak for the church to uphold the integrity of creation and</p>

		<p>speak against [emerging or worsening environmental] injustices."</p>
		<p>Collaborative Agenda on Environmental Stewardship—From the BOP, OGA, FDN, PILP, PMA, PPC.</p> <p>It includes this line, "Every reflection on our care for the world we inhabit must begin with this fundamental principle. The earth is a gift from God, the Sovereign Creator, and we, God's creatures, are called to celebrate and honor its manifold glory. Our Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the question: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever" (Book of Confessions, 7.001). There is no more visible way for us to glorify God than in caring for the creation we see all around us, and of which we are a part."</p>
		<p><b>On Amending G-1.0304, "The Ministry of Members," by Adding "Caring for God's Creation" (10, approved by committee and General Assembly).</b></p> <p><b>This overture changed the Book of Order to expand the role of ministry to include care for creation. In the rationale, it uses both Reformed theology through the Confessions and the Bible to support this addition.</b></p>
2018	Environmental Issues	<p><b>95 total presbyteries in support of overtures about care for the environment or stopping climate change</b></p>
2020	Environmental Issues	<p>All overtures were deferred to 2022 because of the COVID 19 pandemic.</p>

## Appendix D: Replication Guide



Fossil Free PCUSA empowers Presbyterians to divest from fossil fuels as a bold witness of our faith. The ten-year old project has organized with fifty presbyteries to move money out of fossil fuels, connect our faith to our investments, and work for climate justice.

**Together, we represent a successful movement of people of faith who live out our values through our investments. Join us!**

In 2013, it was clear that the Presbyterian Church (USA) could use our significant institutional wealth (literally billions of dollars in the pension plan) to send a message to the fossil fuel industry that they need to change their business model. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has decades of experience connecting our faith to caring for the environment and climate. The opportunity has been that we could be part of a global movement for climate justice, and our policies, rituals, teachings, and values, as well as a national committee with a history of value-based investing-- made the project viable.

### OUR AUDIENCE

Our particular target audience has been Presbyterians in the United States. However, we have mentored and learned alongside people of faith around the world and of different faiths, organizing together to connect values to investments that don't destroy the planet. We've expanded to be part of the broader climate finance movement.

### PROJECT GOALS

**Divest the PC(USA) from fossil fuels** at all levels of the denomination- congregations, regionally, nationally.

**Educate Presbyterians about their investments** in order to get them to organize to divest and organizing tactics to strengthen people power.

**Connect the PCUSA to the larger climate finance movement** through webinars, presentations, actions.

### WHAT WE DO

Connect Presbyterians who care about and want to take action on climate justice to each other through building community. This builds a larger base to organize for divestment.

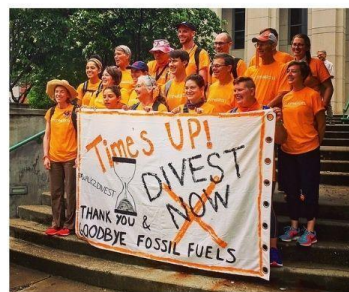
Educate Presbyterians at all levels through webinars and presentations, with slides and resources that are easily reproducible.

Connect Presbyterians to other grassroots, bold climate justice movements through storytelling, bold action, and delegations.

**where your treasure is,  
there your heart is also  
Matthew 6:21**

## ORGANIZE YOUR COMMUNITY

1. **Define your audience:** Who are your constituents/what institution are you connected to that has investments? your church? professional association? college? Make a list and decide which one is most likely to respond. This is your target.
2. **Articulate what inspires you to do this work:** is it your faith? your family? What compels you to organize for divestment from fossil fuels? Write it down or create an image. This is your why, your stake in the work.
3. **Identify your people:** start talking to other people connected to the institution you've chosen-- ask who else is interested in getting your institution to divest from fossil fuels. Get all these people together and get to know each other, particularly what skills and connections each person has. Make those meetings fun and also clear about what's at stake for each of you. These people are your base.
4. **Show me the money:** talk to the people who manage your institutions' money. How much of your investments are in fossil fuels? How hard would it be for the institution to divest?
5. **Build your case:** Gather your research. What scriptures, scientific facts, stories compel you in this work? Have good information and know the pros and cons of the issues. [Check out this FAQs.](#)
6. **Train:** Prep speakers and affected communities to speak in favor of divestment. What story do you want to tell about how your commitment to match your treasure to your faith? [Here's one way to prepare.](#)
7. **Approach:** Ask the institution to divest from fossil fuels: go to a board meeting or talk to the investment committee. Make a hard ask: "We want you to divest from fossil fuels. When will you do this?" Be clear. Be Specific. Be Bold.
8. **Persist:** Repeat steps 1-6 until they say yes.
9. **Remain positive:** release a press release, share on social media, ask others to join in!
10. **Expand your action and stay current:** Pause to consider your next steps: organize your community to put pressure on banks or asset managers to stop funding the fossil fuel industry.



## OUR IMPACT

In 2022, the General Assembly of the PCUSA voted to divest from five fossil fuel companies (Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Marathon Petroleum, Phillips 66 and Valero Energy), with money actually being divested by the end of 2023.

In 2014, the divestment overture was part of a committee at General Assembly that looked at a variety of social justice issues. In 2018, the committee was all environmental issues and this was true in 2022. This means that the denomination has become even more focused on climate and environmental issues in their own rights, engaging more people than ever in climate justice work. This change is a direct result of our organizing efforts and of our partners bringing more overtures to General Assembly, effectively forcing the denomination to create a committee focused on environmental crises.

Our ladder of engagement in the past has been to connect people to our faith (primarily through the lens of the biblical call to love the earth), to learn about divestment as a tactic in webinars, and then to organize in their own regions (by presbyteries). We have a clear track record of being a movement that grows (2014: 13 presbyteries, 2016: 31, 2018: 40, 2020: 25 before the pandemic).



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